It may not be so great, Naruto thinks; that big shinobi career. His friends have intoned that sentiment as well. For example, despite Haku’s concerted efforts to locate and connect with his long lost clan and Hyoton-kin, he is probably going to find out he was meant to be their janitor or something. Gaara is Kazekage now, Naruto also notes, but Gaara said there’s no glamour in 10 straight hours of paperwork a day. The eye-bags are getting worse, his friend claims. Jiraiya is confident they can all be Kage someday. That is, Naruto kindly reminds him, if they can survive the Akatsuki’s next visit.

Continuation of fic "Folorn"
Gaara had taken his first assignment as a jounin very seriously. The details had said that he was scheduled to meet with a medic-nin who had supplies ready for Sand. They were rare supplies otherwise unattainable in either the Fire or Wind Country. They were coming for surprisingly cheap but there was a catch: they could not be sent. Someone would have to go north to retrieve them.

Consequently, Gaara was following a poorly-drawn map and his instinctual sense of direction to navigate the treacherous landscape of the Land of Stone. He was warned to be wary of Iwa ninja who were always slavering for a fight. So far he had met no resistance. Before he had set out he had asked why they had to be picked up in the first place instead of being sent by the Rock village directly.

“Because they aren't coming from Rock,” Baki explained to him, “Rather some backwater mountain in the middle of nowhere. It's close though; that's why there could be shinobi from Iwa getting tangled in this which would be less than helpful.”

Gaara had asked why someone from the Stone Country would be willing to aid Sand.

Baki had shrugged, honestly unsure, “I’ve been told not to question a blessing. She's not from Rock so that helps. Supposedly this medic is as talented as Tsunade-sama but not as famous. Maybe that’s why she refused to come in person. Everyone has their reasons, Gaara.”

It had been about a two day trip through hazy mountains and absolutely no interference before Gaara even began to suspect he was nearing his destination. 'Backwater indeed...' There was a small town nestled on the west side of the mountain but his patron was said to have lived at the peak. More walking was required.

He pressed on dutifully, not complaining or doubting, and ignored the curious looks of the indigenous folk as he passed through the sleepy town. After leaving the village and coming again to thick forest Gaara tossed the map aside. It was useless anyway. He had made his way without it well enough and had the route back to Sand committed to memory. Now it was a matter of finding the client's home.

The mountaintop was fairly secluded and a good place for a recluse to live, he guessed. Gaara marveled at the strange animals that resided in the area and avoided a large wildcat that had pounced on an unsuspecting ewe on the rocky slopes close by. Few people would want to live away from civilization with predators abound, but Gaara again assumed a medic-nin would be able to defend herself well enough.

A small building came into view as he followed a bend in the path. It was built into the mountainside, guarded by tall trees, and out on the porch a large dog laid asleep. Gaara froze at the sight of it.

It appeared more wolf-like than anything: broad, burly features and a muzzle just barely concealing enormous fangs. It would stand taller than he on its hind legs for sure, he estimated. Curiously, its fur was golden blonde, unusual for a wolf. Gaara supposed it was then a dog if it was anything.

He could feel his sand quivering impatiently in the gourd on his back. Gaara knew that at the first sign of danger if the animal attacked it would be crushed even without a direct order. Knowing he
was in no peril considering the circumstances, the red haired nin approached the house confidently.

The dog didn't raise its head to look at him until he was a foot away at the bottom of the steps. It looked down at him, sniffing guardedly. The dog regarded him for a long moment, still waking up from its nap.

“Ah,” It said, its voice was a low rumble, “Sand.”

Gaara nodded, feeling the gesture was ineffective. He waited for the beast to prowl aside to let him pass and then it resettled on the far side of the porch for another nap. Gaara was relieved he was expected, and paused outside the front door which had been left wide open. He wondered if he should enter uninvited, but the dog spoke again after noticing his indecision.

“Go in! You are late as it is,” It yawned lazily, “She will not bite you. Have you noticed already that I haven’t?”

“Courtesy is my issue.” Gaara said flatly, he feared no one and nothing, “I need more practice.”

“You're doing well so far!” The dog's chuckle resonated deeply in its chest, but it then added, “Sand: make sure you don't touch the little one. Touch him and I will tear your pretty face off.”

He entered silently after that, deciding that he didn't want to know what he was being warned of. Business still had to be conducted and there was no time to worry about threats. Gaara walked in, finding the place was dimly lit and it smelled strongly of herbs and plants. After moving in further Gaara noted pots of flowers and other medicinal flora that were placed hither and thither about the room. He passed through slowly, taking in the sights curiously.

It was in a back room lit brightly by a skylight in which he discovered a woman at work butchering a piece of meat. He cleared his throat, not wanting to alarm her, “Good day.”

She looked up, blinking, and then smiled in embarrassment, “Woo! You caught me in the middle of lunch it looks like!” She stuck her knife in the cutting board beside the hunk of bleeding meat, and then wiped her hands on her dirtied apron, “You came such a long way to get here! How about a drink, fellow?”

He nodded, “Thank you.”

She shrugged and then placed the wine bottle back on the counter, and then turned back to watch his reaction to the rice wine. A moment after trying the sake Gaara put the cup down again, his face betraying his disdain.

The woman placed her hands on her hips and laughed loudly at him, “Ha! Not good, eh? I don't like that stuff much either, but my husband likes some now and then...I'll get some milk for you.”

“Gaara.” He smiled back at her, “Thank you.”
“Gaara, huh?” She fished through a refrigerator and retrieved a milk carton, “Nice to meet you! My name is Inuzuka Rin. Please don't be a stranger if there's anything else you would like.”

Gaara accepted the milk from her and listened as she explained the status of his mission, “You've really done great coming up here all on your own, Gaara. Shinobi who travel in groups out here are often sized up by the local Rock ninja. It's safer, believe it or not, to go solo. They tend to suspect only teams...but I'm afraid there's a problem.”

“So soon?” He was not pleased to hear it. Things had gone well so far, “Can I be of help?”

“I think so.” Rin nodded, running a hand through her chestnut hair, “You see the herbs that you want just came into season. I haven't gone out to find them yet and they're out in Rock territory, unfortunately. But I'll go nab them quickly for you. I've dealt with the likes of them plenty of times myself.”

Gaara understood, “I will go with you then, Rin-san. It's the least I can do. I haven't come here to sit idly and do nothing.”

He drank the milk and she grinned at him, amused, “That's fine with me, I'll just have to tell-”

“Mama!”

A small boy bounced up through the back door and rushed to her side. Rin sighed, still smiling, “Speak of the devil...seems he decided to show up even after he's been out playing all morning!”

“Hey, Ma! Guess what?” The child's grin was missing a few teeth, “My shuriken jutsu is perfect now! I hit all of the targets and Sesshu said I was great!”

She patted his head lovingly, “It's in your blood, Yuma.” She turned to the shinobi at the table, “Now say hello to the nice Sand ninja who's stopped by. Gaara-kun's going to help me get some medicine in a little while.”

He blinked shyly at the newcomer, “Er...hullo.”

Gaara took a moment to note the child's appearance. Yuma looked nothing like his mother. He was pale, ebony-haired and his eyes were obsidian like the blackest night. He was cute, like most children his age, “Hello, Yuma-chan.”

Yuma stepped out from behind his mother after seeing the visitor was friendly enough and had his mother's trust.

“I assume that he is the one your dog was talking about?” Gaara inquired, recalling the guard out on the front step.

Rin chuckled sheepishly, “Sorry if Sesshu snapped at you. He's a bit protective is all, but he's a big lug! He wouldn't hurt a fly unless I told him to.” She looked down at Yuma, “You'll have to wait with Sesshu while we're out, okay? No wandering until I'm back.”

He nodded, but then asked, “What about Dad? He said he'd be back soon.”

Her face saddened at the thought, “Yuma...your father won't be back for a few days, you know that. He works very hard to keep us safe. Once he comes home you can show him your shuriken jutsu, what do you think?”

Yuma nodded, then ran back out the door, calling, “Sesshu! Ma's going out so we can practice more!”
Get my kunai for me!"

Rin shook her head in exasperation once he had gone. “Always in a rush...”

“May I ask you something?” Gaara had finished his drink and wore a curious look.

“Of course you can, Gaara.”

His face became serious, “I lived a long while in the Hidden Leaf Village before returning to Sand. You said you are of the Inuzuka, a resident clan of Konoha. How is it that you ended up here?”

“I'm afraid that's my business.” Rin sniffed, suddenly put out by the mentioning of her past, “If you're quite ready we'll be going now, Gaara.”

She moved back out into the hallway to prepare and Gaara also stood, wondering how he had offended her so easily.

After setting out things were tense, for Rin, at least. Gaara followed her in silence out into the unknown wilderness, accustomed to the quiet. He could tell that she was still conflicted with what he had brought up earlier, but he refused to apologize for it since he hadn't meant any harm.

The afternoon dragged on and it became hot on the mountain trail. Rin stripped off her jacket to be more comfortable, and it was then Gaara noticed how she had an armor plate strapped to her chest. It was thin and lightweight, barely noticeable, but she looked ready for battle as far as he could tell. It seemed like she was expecting it. Quivers for throwing spines were laced around her arms, and two holsters of supplies were secured around both of her thighs. She had experience.

“Will Yuma be safe without you for so long?” Gaara thought to ask at length. Though he had hidden it for a while, he was still concerned about the boy.

“He can fight, you know!” Rin said smiling, glancing over to him, “He has special powers. He's going to be six soon.”

He frowned, “You'd trust him to defend himself already? He's a child.”

“He has Sesshu with him. He'll be perfectly safe!” She concluded. It was quiet for a while after that, and then she added, “You want to know something, Gaara?”

The red haired nin gave her a passive look that answered in the affirmative.

Rin went on, “Sesshu wasn't my first ninken. When I was little, just enrolled in the Academy, I had this cute little dog named Piri...” She smiled at the memory, “Just before the Chunin Exams my team and I took a mission on which she was killed. Without her I wasn't sure how I'd be promoted to Chunin...or be able to fight like I used to...”

Gaara thought of Kiba briefly but decided not to mention him, “How did you come by Sesshu?”

“He was a present for me once I became a chunin. He was just a puppy and not bred by my clan either, so at first my father said he'd be useless to me in a fight,” Rin chuckled, half to herself, “But Sesshu was special. One of my teammates gave him to me to reconcile my loss of Piri. It worked, as you can see. I owe him so much...”

He nodded in understanding, somewhat interested in what she had to say. They continued down a steep slope covered in bramble, and the young mother couldn't help but reminisce, “I trained Sesshu as best I could, but I wasn't able to bring him along with me on most of my missions. It was too
dangerous. I was scared of losing him...and instead...I lost one of my teammates.” She smiled, “The gods enjoy taunting me, I think.”

“Is that why you left the village?” He asked and they settled again on a flat road, continuing west.

Rin sighed heavily, “That was one of the reasons. I didn't know how to cope with my losses. And also...I was in love with someone who didn't love me back. I was so tired of the war...of death...I took Sesshu and left once I worked up the courage. Leaf was a place filled with pain for me.” She paused, “But I was blessed after that. Love returned to me in a way I did not expect...”

Her words filled Gaara with anxiety. Now more than ever he missed Sakura terribly. Rin's memories made his spirit heavy, reminding him how he had compromised his happiness by going somewhere far away. He could only hope he would be reunited with Sakura someday.

Rin sniffed the air worriedly, “This smells like trouble...there are four of them up ahead. We're going to have to take the long way around. Keep up with me, okay? We have to get out of sight quick!”

She darted off of the path and onto the jagged slopes of the mountainside, bounding over tangled roots and trees. Gaara followed to the best of his ability, not nearly as nimble in such an environment.

It was a mad dash over a plateau before they turned west again. Rin paused in their descent, regarding the change in the air, “I think we lost them. Good work! Our destination is just over that ridge there, see Gaara?”

His sand shield automatically deflected a brace of kunai that shot out of nowhere. He scowled at the forest ahead, folding his arms, “We didn't evade them completely...”

Three shinobi, all of Iwagakure, from the look of it, had appeared on a tree branch ahead. They were covered in mud, and Rin cursed silently to herself for letting such a simple trick fool her sense of smell.

“We've heard of you! The resident dog-bitch who can scent people coming even before they appear. Not too hard to avoid that little problem, huh?” One of them crowed, “We've been told that you steal from a garden that belongs to Tsuchikage-sama, and he isn't very happy about that...”

“I don't steal! It's my garden! I'm the one who planted it! He's the one who steals from me!” She howled ferociously, “I'm so sick of you all acting as if everything on this land is the property of your beloved Tsuchikage! What about the rest of the people who live here?”

“They aren't from our village. Why should they matter?” Another piped up lowly, “Give it up now, hag! It's about time you learn your place in the Land of Stone!”

A senbon plunged into his eye a moment later and he toppled off of the branch with a shriek.

Gaara smirked sidelong to her, impressed with her speed. She was already on top of the other two, dodging their respective Earth jutsu. Gaara let his sand fly ahead and encompass them as they touched down to the ground, waiting for the chance to strike. Rin wouldn't give him an inch though; she was hot-blooded and determined to show her skills.

With a cry she lunged for one of them while he whipped out a kunai, and Gaara could see flames envelope her as she threw her body into a terrific spin that gouged up a good portion of the cliff side. He thought of Kiba's Gatsuuga briefly, ‘Inuzuka...’ He reminded himself, and then ignored the rest of her deadly technique as she chased her target around the clearing in a vortex of fire.

The third wheel of the team had attacked him head-on, and Gaara decided to get practice in on the
whelp. The Iwa nin's sword strike glanced off of his sand armor and Gaara retaliated, landing a swift kick to the shoulder that sent his foe tumbling. The Rock ninja vaulted with one hand back to his feet, agile like a deer, and kicked out at the Sand nin's head with both feet in quick succession. Gaara recoiled from the blow and his sand rushed ahead to meet his adversary, stalling his follow-up attack.

Aggravated by the swarming sand, the Iwa nin hurled his sword with precision timing, just skimming Gaara's calf as he made a leap to dodge it. His sand closed in tighter, limiting the Rock nin's movement, and he drew his sword back to his hand with the beckoning of a chakra string. A shadow clone twisted over him from behind, and vectored down with a swift heel kick that made an audible crack as it connected with the Rock shinobi's temple. He limply tumbled over, still cocooned in sand.

Gaara looked back over his shoulder, seeing Rin had torn out a good portion of the other Iwa nin's abdominal region. It was the first time he had witnessed disembowelment. The sight of blood made Shukaku roar gleefully inside of him, but he breathed deep, ignoring its demand for more action. Rin glanced over to him as well seeing he had also defeated his foe.

She wiped her bloodied hands (or were they claws?) on her jacket that was still tied around her waist. Her skin was coated with a slick layer of perspiration from the fight. The dreadful heat certainly wasn't helping. Rin sniffed the air again, taking a moment to identify the other scents wafting in it besides the stench of gore, “Hm...looks like the other one is off to limp back to his home in the Rocks...”

“Shall I finish him?” Gaara asked. His sand was still anxiously pacing the clearing in gusts, searching for more prey.

“No. Let him crawl back to his proud leader.” Rin snorted inelegantly, “That way he might be wiser the next time he thinks to send his goons so far out. They weren't even the usual chunin that check into this area...looks like he's starting to give up.”

Gaara crushed the remains of the bodies in the clearing with his sand, and then followed Rin again as she bounded ahead into the tree-line. He asked if it was really her garden they were headed to and she admitted that it wasn't.

“It belongs to a friend of my husband's.” She clarified, “He let us have it once he became too old to keep up with it. It's where we raise all sorts of herbs. We try to help out the local villages with their medical supplies and I think we're really having an impact.”

Gaara caught on that she had not taken her husband's name. Even after marriage and children she still considered herself an Inuzuka, and he was curious if it had something to do with her nostalgia for Konoha.

“When did you meet your husband?” He found the question hadn't come out quite right. What he had meant was who he was but she understood anyway.

“Well...after I left home I ended up here and I lived with an elderly couple who were kind enough to take me in.” Rin recalled distantly, moving like a shadow through the canopy, “Come to think of it...it was way earlier than that when I met him, but...we were reunited after I had started living here for a few years. I was eighteen, I think, when he showed up again. I didn't even recognize him.”

“Is he another Leaf shinobi?” He had a suspicion that it would be true, since she had lived in Leaf most of her life.

“You could say that...” Rin said quietly and then asked, “Gaara...do you believe in people coming back from the dead?”
He stared at her for a moment. They had stopped. The garden was all around them now, filled with rows of different plants and markers, colorful and eerie. Gaara hadn't noticed their arrival because he was still thinking about what she had said.

“I don't.” Gaara concluded, “Too many people die. I have never seen someone rise again to rejoin the living.”

Rin shrugged, hopping over a column of cabbage, “Good point. That's what I had thought too. But...” She smiled to herself, “Sometimes the past isn't always gone for good. Even when it hurts to remember it...there is a rare time when it will return to you with a smile, and suddenly it's not so horrible.”

She plucked a large plant out of the soil by its roots, and wrapped it in a cloth quickly. The material was immediately dyed a ginger color by the oil it produced. Rin handed it to Gaara, “There we go...don't worry! You can hold it a bit rougher, it won't fall apart. I don't think you'll have an allergic reaction to it either...” She moved from one row to the next, selecting and harvesting what was needed.

Gaara held the plants she collected as she piled them high in his arms. Suddenly he found himself talking. He didn't know why. Perhaps because her reminiscing had moved him to speak, or that he had wanted to break the silence while she worked. She was glad to listen.

“There's this girl I know who's being trained by the Hokage...” He began.

It had been one solid, miserable day since Haku had left Konohagakure. Though he had not yet begun to regret it, his heart teetered on the cusp of aching doubt.

The first dim rays of sunlight were warm on his face and Haku opened his grey eyes slowly, adjusting to the morning light. He had taken refuge in an ancient oak tree the night before, desperate for sleep. He had settled himself on a large, steady branch and was lulled into dark dreams by the whining forest.

With dawn breathing new life into the world, Haku awoke gawking at his unfamiliar surroundings. He hadn't the time to plan out his course and he had trusted himself to nature rather than search for a nearby town. The dark haired boy slipped from the tree branch soundlessly and began to stretch the sleep out of his limbs once on the ground. A mechanical routine settled in and he rested at the base of the oak, fetching a bento from his travel bag. He felt somewhat ill this morning and food was undesirable, but he'd need the energy. There was going to be a long day of traveling ahead.

He ate solemnly. Sounds of life called through the woods, none of which were human. He was alone for the first time in a long time and he had done it intentionally. It weighed heavy on his heart now, 'If I had stayed with Gaara-kun I'd be sharing a meal with my friends in the desert, presently...'

The thought was evidence enough of the guilt he had been trying to ignore. Going separate ways with the Sand siblings had taken its toll. Haku had hoped he could have departed from them harmlessly but had known all along it couldn't be that way. He had never intended to upset his friends. He had also never intended to leave Leaf so abruptly either. Everything was strange and uncertain now; he had himself to thank for that. 'But they don't understand...I must go to the Water Country. There's no way to begin searching for my clan if I don't have Zabuza on my side...'

Haku thought that maybe he could have explained it clearly to them earlier, but it probably wouldn't have had the desired effect. They still would have objected and there was a fat chance of getting the nukenin's cooperation anyway. But Gaara had understood what he meant. He knew. He was his
friend; his brother, and knew better than to deny him closure. Even though he hadn't wanted Haku to go (so soon, he supposed) he had still allowed him to leave without a fuss. There had been no major protest from his friend and it was something Haku would be forever grateful for.

He finished eating and returned the empty bento back to his bag. A gravel trail was nearby and Haku began to follow it south again as he had the day before. Chirping crickets and frogs sang repetitive melodies in the trees. The path wound aimlessly through miles of woodland and after being alone with his thoughts for an hour of walking his true emotions surfaced.

'I miss their voices. I've been to very few places without Naruto-kun and Gaara-kun,' He acknowledged the irksome fact and his chest began to tighten, 'I can't falter. I will see them again.' He would endure without his friends for as long as he had to, he decided, because they would never let him give up before he was met with success.

Naruto looked over to Jiraiya from his place on the water's surface. They had stopped by a stream on their passing to the next town and the Toad Sage began a lesson on breaking genjutsu. Naruto found out quickly that it was no simple matter interrupting chakra flow, especially his own. His teacher looked up occasionally from his notes to see how his student was doing. Not much progress from where he had started, as he had expected.

"Why couldn't you just teach me how to cast genjutsu instead of this crap?" Naruto grumbled, unable to concentrate, "If someone else can get me out of it why should I learn at all?"

"Because you're not always going to have others around you, kid." Jiraiya reminded him dully, "When it's just you that's it. You either escape or you die. And besides...you were never the type who would have skill in creating an illusion...maybe Haku, but definitely not you..."

He barked in disgruntlement at his sensei shortly before splashing into the water.

The sennin chuckled in entertainment, "Well, looks like you can stop your chakra flow now...but remember to bring it back up quick or else you give your foe an opening."

The blonde boy stuck his head up through the surface of the river, trying to not get upset. He had fallen in plenty of times before, but at last he was making some headway. Naruto grinned at his minuscule accomplishment.

Later on they stopped in a teashop though it wasn't quite time for lunch. It just happened to have a number of beautiful women in it at the time and Jiraiya you couldn't help himself. While they snacked on a plate of daifuku, Naruto insisted that the sage get him to work on another technique, seeing as he was close to completing his training with genjutsu.

Jiraiya, though distractedly, began to demonstrate to Naruto the helpfulness of summoning weapons into battle. "It's way more efficient, for one..." He told his pupil, "For another, you'll be able to keep more varieties of weapons with you and use them in a fight just as quick. Takaharu's kid is an old pro at it by now!"

"Who?"

"Er...what's-her-mug...Tenten?"

Naruto nodded in agreement, "Yeah, you're right about that Ero-sensei." He smirked inwardly, "Heh...this means I could carry way more fuuma shuriken now...or just about anything I want."
Naruto looked back to his teacher from across the table, “Hey! How about you teach me how to use cool stuff like swords and-?”

“Later, if you want…” Jiraiya cut him off, “That girl over there is inspirational!”

No longer able to resist temptation, the sage stood and crossed the room to where a busty red haired woman sat at the bar. Naruto scowled and followed after him. Jiraiya looked like a fool to have his disciple escort him from the premises by his ear, and people snickered at the sight as they made their exit.

“Way to make me look like an idiot, kid!” He snarled as they traveled down the street. Jiraiya was mortified Naruto had caught him off-guard, “Now she definitely won't talk to me at all since I got dragged off by some punk-ass-”

“You're supposed to be training me, hello!” Naruto yowled, equally annoyed, “This isn't a road-trip, Ero-sensei! For once try to focus on why we're out here in the middle of nowhere!”

Jiraiya stormed down the street ahead of the blonde boy, muttering angrily to himself. Naruto tailed behind him with a sigh. As far as training had gone, he wasn't learning very much. More importantly, the genin reminded himself, was that Jiraiya hadn't yet explained to him why he had been given the Fourth's kunai. The Kyuubi had helped, if only a little, 'Jeez, the fox really hates the Yondaime, but I still wonder how the heck he knows so much about everything. Even if he is a grumpy bastard he's smart…'

They skipped over the sightseeing that was available in the tourist port and looped further west on a sandy trail. Jiraiya didn't speak a word to Naruto, still highly humiliated from the fiasco at the bar. The blonde boy chose to give him space and hung back a ways, thinking quietly to himself, 'Ah…he's old. Let him smolder for a while and pretty soon he'll be kicking my butt again.' Naruto smiled to himself, 'That's the best way to train, hee hee!'

While they walked Naruto stared up at the seagulls overhead, whistling a cheerful tune. The sea air made him giddy, so did the fact that he possessed a weapon that once belonged to the Fourth Hokage, "I have to get serious though! If I'm going to be Hokage I have to be as great as he was…greater, even! Can't be goofing off anymore!' He drew out the three-pronged kunai from his holster and let it spin idly in his palm. The cool metal felt good against his skin. He could feel memories shuddering off of the knife.

Jiraiya glanced back and noticed how his protégée was fiddling around with the historical weapon. He smirked to himself, noticed how his protégée was fiddling around with the historical weapon. He frowned to himself, unable to keep up his bad mood, and then spoke aloud, “Handles well, doesn't it Naruto?”

“Sure does…” Naruto hummed, too distracted to pay much attention to his teacher.

The sage paused on the trail waiting for Naruto to catch up with him. The blonde boy gave him an odd look once he had come to stand beside Jiraiya, “What now, Ero-sensei?”

“Detour.” Jiraiya said shortly. They strayed from the road off to a deserted beachfront. High tide had drawn in, obscuring most of the white sand. The two travelers stopped on a rock outcrop overlooking the waves, and the Toad Sage grinned at Naruto, “Now I'm pretty sure you know what that knife is for, huh squirt?”

“I guess.” Naruto shrugged casually, “But what does it have to do with me, Ero-sensei?”

“The same thing the Rasengan had to do with you.” Jiraiya folded his arms while he spoke, “This
type of kunai was made during the Great Shinobi War between Rock and Leaf. It was used by my former apprentice to make use of the Hiraishin no jutsu. It's one of the reasons Leaf was victorious, you know."

The blonde boy picked at his ear in boredom, “Yeah, yeah...I've heard all this at the Academy before...”

“You should be an expert on it then because I know you paid attention in all of your classes!” The sage snorted in annoyance, “Listen kid, this jutsu...it isn't like the Rasengan. Even I haven't mastered it. The difficulty of this technique is not on par with anything you've ever witnessed before, I promise. There's a great chance you won't be able to master it.”

“I might as well give it a shot though, right?” Naruto suggested and then frowned, “Unless you want me to quit while I'm ahead? Have a little faith, Ero-sensei!”

Jiraiya nodded, “Right. Might as well...have a seat and we'll get started.” Naruto got comfortable on the boulder and listened intently as his teacher went on explaining the origin of the jutsu. It would be a long talk and an even longer attempt at perfecting it.

“Home again at last!” Lee cried joyously as he and his teammates trudged through the village gates, all looking worse for the wear. Their client and his brother had been delivered home safely, but returning to Leaf had proven dissatisfactory when it had been pouring rain for the majority of their journey.

Back in the Fire Country the skies were clear and their clothes were soggy. Shikamaru, the team leader, ordered they go home and rest and not bother him for the next few days, “I feel like shit...does anyone else suspect they caught the flu?”

Neji and Tenten nodded wearily, but Lee popped up between them, patting their shoulders, “All will be well, my friends! Just a bit of rest is all we need!”

Tenten smiled weakly at her friend and allowed him to tug her along down the street when her feet wouldn't move faster than a shuffle.

Shikamaru rubbed his watering nose and then glanced over to Neji. The Hyuga had been exhibiting peculiar behavior ever since they stopped at the inn with Kon. He wasn't sure if it was a good thing and he decided not to bring it up. Neji stalked past him after Lee, as if he had stolen something from him. The Nara called out to him in annoyance as he went ahead, “Whatever. Fine. Leave me to fill out the mission report. That's not troublesome at all...”

At the end of the street Tenten dismissed Lee, asking him to check and see if Gai-sensei had returned. He continued on jubilantly and she hung back to wait for Neji. The Hyuga prodigy studied her face for a moment. The mission had taken its toll on everyone, but she didn't appear to be completely out of energy. He wondered if she was still thinking over what had happened between them at the inn near the Lightning Country. Certainly he still was, much to his annoyance.

“Come train with me now.” Neji offered, assuming she had nothing else to do, “We can meet up with Lee and Gai later on.”

She nodded, smiling, and they temporarily parted ways to dump off their travel gear at home. Tenten flung her bag into her apartment and promptly ventured back out, passing Sato on the way. He waved to her with his usual goofy grin and she sighed, waving back but not stopping to talk to him. She didn't want to waste any time she could be spending with Neji.
'It feels like he's a lot more open these days...' Tenten thought to herself, 'Naruto really had an impact on him, as did Hinata-chan...'. She smiled to herself, 'Maybe...maybe things can work out after all now that his feelings aren't locked up inside as much.'

A weight lifted off of her and Tenten quickly found herself back at the compound searching for him. By instinct she turned left at the mansion's gate, in sync with his habits. He'd be near the garden if he wanted to unwind from a mission. Sure enough she found him there, pale and wondrous in the sunlight, and seated on the porch waiting. She couldn't help the irrational, stupid smile that spread across her face, 'If I didn't know any better...I'd say he liked me too!'

But she did know better.

The heavens made sure to remind her of that when Hiashi stepped out onto the porch as well, and his nephew's expression soured somewhat. Tenten approached cautiously, not wanting to be rude as the Head of the Hyuga spoke to Neji. She had run into Hiashi before on a number of occasions, and she was always polite and respectful to him, (even though much of Neji's own bias against the Main House still made her bristle when they were near) but she had a feeling he had no idea who she was most of the time, 'It's just as well...I'm not that important anyway.'

To her eternal surprise, Hiashi paused while speaking to Neji and glanced over to her. Her smile came naturally, as she always did have a friendly demeanor, and she made sure to bow low to him when he acknowledged her. Hiashi's lip twitched in an almost-smile at her display, and he then turned back to Neji, finishing his announcement. The clan leader nodded to her briefly before returning to the house. After the coast was clear Tenten went up to the porch as well, and gave a hopeful look to her teammate.

Neji blinked at her, his face betraying no trace of emotion. Yet still, she could sense his patience had again been exhausted by his pressuring uncle. Her spirit dropped a bit. There was going to be a change in plan for certain. Tenten smiled darkly, 'Can't make time for me when uncle needs something...' She thought, 'I wouldn't ask you to stick around but if you did anyway, even if he needed you for something important, do you know how happy that would make me?'

"Hiashi-sama has asked me to go train with Hinata-sama now." He informed her, displeasure clear in his voice, "She has become...exceptionally challenging to him now, and he has asked me to oversee the development of her new abilities."

"Oh, right..." Tenten nodded, vaguely understanding, "I heard that Hinata’s Byakugan is different now. That's pretty awesome."

Neji's facial expression finally revealed some frustration, "It's perplexing more than anything. Hinata-sama is struggling to understand its extent for herself." He looked at her for a long moment, "Tenten...come back later. I will wait for you."

She nodded, "Sure thing, Neji."

The kunoichi watched him leave, barefoot, going back into the house. Tenten felt her stomach twist sadly. For some reason she didn't want to come back later, but she knew she would anyway because he had commanded it. If he was going to take the time to wait she ought to take the time to show up.

Tenten raised her chin, refusing to let her disappointment swallow her. She walked back out over the lawn, staying close to the porch because new flowers had been planted there. She admired them as she went on, deciding that she'd pay Hinata a visit later as well, 'Maybe she put all of these here...I wonder how she's doing?'
It was quiet as she loitered outside of the Hyuga household, inspecting the improved hedges. Her limbs still ached from the mission and she was admittedly grateful she would have a chance to rest. Training immediately with Neji would've been a painful endeavor.

“Tenten?”

She blinked, startled, and looked over to where a young man was sitting beneath a blooming maple tree. He had short, bronze hair and gentle, opalescent eyes. It took her a moment to recognize his features, but she beamed when she did, “Hikune!”

He smiled widely and stood up, brushing his pants off. Tenten realized she hadn't recognized him because he was dressed in the traditional robes of the Hyuga. His chunin vest was gone. Hikune greeted her with a friendly handshake and she almost didn't know how to react to it. Her hand in his was an alien feeling.

“Well, I didn't expect to see you around here, Tenten,” He chuckled, his voice was so smooth it tickled her ears, “I would think you'd be busy training with Neji-kun.”

“So would I.” She admitted, sheepish, “I got the boot, though. It wouldn't be the first time.”

Hikune frowned at the statement, “Ah...that's Neji-sama...always so busy his friends sometimes get pushed to the wayside. I was just going to have lunch, why don't you join me since you have some free time?”

Tenten hesitated for a moment. The last time she had seen Hikune was at the hospital when Neji had been bleeding all over him. She wasn't sure if that made them acquaintances, friends, or simply comrades in arms. Then again, regardless of how they knew each other, why decline? 'I am starving after all...and he invited me so I guess it would be alright!'

The kunoichi grinned and then nodded, “If you're willing to put up with me.”

Hikune's laugh made something in her stomach loosen. His presence was soothing; an uncommon trait for a member of the Hyuga. The only people from that clan she had believed she could be comfortable around were either Neji or Hinata, 'But I've been wrong before...'

He led the way back onto the porch, where they entered through an open door into a tearoom. Food was already spread out on the table, tempting her nose with mouth-watering smells. When he asked her to take a seat Tenten gladly did so. Hikune sat across from her and decided to catch her up on what was going on in the Hyuga.

“My little brother graduated from the Academy not too long ago, since his marks were so high.” Hikune said proudly, passing her a bowl of hot soba, “There, I hope you like that, I made it myself. Anyway, Fujita-chan is now training under a man named Nitobe Sawako, a renowned jounin of this village. I actually think he's a friend of your sensei's.”

“Gai-sensei?” Tenten asked, stupefied (that he had a friend of the like.) She did her best not to spit out the noodles she had been ravenously slurping up.

Hikune nodded, “Yes, that's it. I believe they went on a mission together to the Land of Bears, Fujita-chan said.”

“That sounds about right. Gai-sensei said he'd be out there fetching a whole bunch of stuff...” Tenten tapped her chopsticks against her lip thoughtfully, “He never mentioned who was going with him though. That's...really cool. I'm glad for your brother!”
“Thank you.” He smiled back at her, “I was given off these last few days for my leg injury. It was upsetting that my team had to go ahead without me on a mission, but...” His eyes glimmered spiritedly, “Tsunade-sama was kind enough to promote me to jounin rank thanks to the success of my last mission.”

She felt one of the noodles she was chewing on go down the wrong pipe. Tenten hacked inelegantly for a moment, and after catching her breath, congratulated him, “Jounin? That's great! I knew you had it in you! What did Hayate say?”

“He's the one who recommended me, actually.” Hikune admitted, slightly embarrassed, “I owe a lot to Hayate-taicho. He's been a very good friend to me.”

“It's been a while since I've seen him...I wonder what he's up to?” Tenten wondered aloud, helping herself to a skewer of yakitori.

Hikune's smile was a bit mischievous, “I've heard he and Yugao-san are engaged.”

Tenten raised her eyebrows, “Wow! I never thought he was that brave. Good luck to him then, I suppose...”

“He's told me a few things about you, Tenten,” He added thoughtfully, “Though mostly he talks about his former master, your father, if I am not mistaken.”

“You sure aren't.” She chewed, savoring the food. The thought of her father made her chest ache a little so she tried to focus on the meal.

“He said that Takaharu was a man of great repute and not originally from Konoha.” Hikune recalled, taking a sip of tea, “Hayate-taicho was very fond of him. He said that he created the Dance of the Crescent Moon and is also responsible for averting a number of terrible battles that may have occurred during the war...”

Tenten chewed quietly, nodding as Hikune listed the things her father was known for.

“And also I've been told...” His voice dropped a bit, “That your father was one of the shinobi nominated to succeed the Third as the next Hokage.”

She froze, unnerved. It was a fact she had tried to forget.

Hikune gave her a curious look, “In fact, I was told he was in the greatest favor with the council to be the Yondaime and yet he declined. Why would he turn down a chance to be-?”

“That's private.” Tenten snapped, but then relaxed, deciding to explain anyway, “It's just...he and my mother...they were always out on missions together all the time. They hated it when they were apart. He said that he couldn't imagine being away from her when she was going to have a baby.” She sighed at the notion, “Me. If it weren't for me my dad would probably be the Hokage right now instead of Tsunade-sama.”

The explanation helped the young jounin understand her heartache a bit better. He smiled gently, “Does that upset you? That he chose family above a position of power?”

“I...” She frowned, “I'll have to say yes. If I were him I'd take the job!”

“But a very capable shinobi succeeded the Sandaime in place of your father, you know.” Hikune added helpfully, “He was beloved by this village for helping us conquer Iwagakure during the war. In a way, maybe it was better that a hero took power rather than someone who just fit the job...
description, don't you think?"

Tenten stared at him, “Maybe. I've heard plenty of times he was way stronger than my dad...”

He laughed, taking another bite of onigiri in front of him, “That's a matter of opinion, Tenten. Don't let it bother you. The past is done now and all you have to worry about now is who will succeed Tsunade-sama as Hokage.”

“No one deserves to, really, Tsunade-sama is the best!” She declared ardently, but then paused to think, “But...there's this boy named Naruto who is probably going to wipe out all of the competition when it comes time for that. He's hell-bent on it.”

“Why is it that your Dad takes you on all the cool missions? Ugh!” Sato cried, ducking back to avoid a swipe to the head that may have proven lethal. He leapt back from Shino, avoiding each strike of the nagamaki the Aburame was wielding.

It was a shortened pole-arm, in which the blade was made more sword-like rather than a curve, and the staff was less than two feet in length. Much to Sato's disgruntlement, Shino had spent the past few weeks receiving exclusive training from his father on clan techniques and wielding his new weapon. The silver haired genin also had to be wary of the increased population of Shino's kikaichu colony.

He floundered, countering the sweeping blows of the nagamaki with his kodachi, but found it was becoming increasingly difficult. His own training with Kakashi had not improved his sword skills terribly and Sato was quite bitter that his friend was quickly surpassing him in skill. Shino moved only when Sato backed away, otherwise his position was stationary. His weapon arced easily through the air, allowing the greatest range with little need to exert energy.

Sato peeled away in a cartwheel and his leg lashed out during the tumble, his heel connecting with the blade and sending Shino's weapon spinning from his hand. The young Hatake grinned to himself; an opportunity at last.

“How about this!” He didn't raise his short swords when his friend was unarmed, and instead spiraled forward, clipping Shino in the head with a reverse kick. The Aburame's glasses flew off from the impact, and he stumbled over sideways, granting Sato enough leverage to plant a second hit as his other leg swung around in the same direction.

Shino crumpled, and the silver haired nin leapt back again, seeing he had inflicted plenty of damage. 'What the-?' Sato balked as his friend separated into a swarm of insects that rushed back at him. Sato flailed for a moment, ready to flee from the cloud of kikaichu insects, but Shino was quicker. He reappeared behind the Hatake and pressed the flat edge of the nagamaki's blade to his throat in warning. Sato instantly halted in response.

“Aw damn...” He grumbled, but then nodded, “I concede, Shino.”

The blade was withdrawn from Sato's neck and the boy rubbed the spot tenderly, annoyed, but was unwilling to act childish about his loss. It was something he had been working on. He found the less he goofed off the easier it was to get Shino to cooperate. Shino respected when he made an effort to be mature, and Sato was beginning to find the same proved true for Kurenai-sensei and Kakashi as well.

And yet still he could feel his insides boiling at the fact that his teammate was clearly stronger than he was. It had never bothered him before in the early days of their team; they had all been equals with
their individual strengths. Now he felt his place on the team was being questioned. Sato breathed deep, sheathing both of his kodachi and keeping his emotions under control, *Easy there...don't freak out. Can't make chunin if all you do is keep complaining about everything.'*

“You're fast.” Shino told him at length, concealing the nagamaki in his coat, “Very fast. You've changed while I've been gone.”

Sato scratched his head, “You think so? I've just been running around after my uncle is all. Maybe you should give it a try and see if you improve too!” He laughed at the idea, *Heh! Shino-kun chasing Kakashi around! Where's my camera?*

“Maybe some other time.” Shino had said it in all seriousness. Sato took it as a trivial answer, simply because he wasn't the type to give chase to anyone. He made foes come to him, Sato knew.

“You've got some place you need to be, don't you Shino-kun?” Sato asked pointedly, frowning, “Let me guess...your Dad is hauling you off on another mission, right?”

The Aburame adjusted his glasses on the bridge of his nose, “Your assumption is correct. We should be returning in a day, approximately.” He could sense his friend's discontent, “If you would prefer, there could be negotiations with the Hokage so you may join-”

“No, please, it's fine!” Sato interrupted, his brow furrowed, “Since when have you gone out of your way for a lame-ass like me, huh? Just don't worry about it. I bet old Kakashi wants me to keep working on my jutsu anyway...” He trudged off across the training field, “Kick some butt then, buddy! I'll see you around!”

Sato promptly left, feeling that if he stayed any longer the rage he had been concealing would explode out of him. Shino waited for a short while in the field, considering his friend's odd behavior, and then moved on to locate his father.

The silver haired nin's mouth was a thin line on his face, trying to contain all of his frustration, *When did I become so weak? Shino was tossing me around back there! What's the matter with me? Once my uncle started training me I thought I'd improve but, I just...’*

He descended from the tree tops and followed the forest path, burying his hands in his jacket pockets, *I'm such a loser. Naruto was right after all!’*

Sato looked off to his left where a cedar tree was twisted into an impossibly ugly form. The trunk was constricted by disobedient branches that coiled around it in braids, *Oh yeah. I know how you're feeling Mr. Tree. You and I are both hard on the eyes and not good for much. And you know what's worse? I'm talking to a tree I'm so miserable. That's messed up.' Sato snapped a picture of it out of habit. Just another item to log away into the countless disappointments he had been witness to.

He pressed on while fighting off depression. He honestly didn't feel like training with his uncle for a second time that day. He was tired enough as it was, and lacking motivation. *Maybe I just need a distraction...like a good movie. Pocky maybe.' Sato thought to himself, 'I'm sure Shikamaru would be glad to woop my ass again in a game of shogi...’*

Sato strolled out into a clearing in the forest where, he quickly realized, there was a training area for another team. He had not run across it before but he was glad he had, because a beautiful, black haired girl was hard at work beating the daylights out of a training post.

“Don't you work in the afternoons or something, Tama?” He called out, walking across the field towards her.
She paused in her forms and faced him, smilingly widely, “I do. I'm on break right now.”

“And on your break...you're out here getting sweaty and beating on a training dummy?”

“That's right,” Tama confirmed it, “Call it an old habit. This is a way I can really be at peace so I'm not running around doing what people tell me to all day. Minimum wage doesn't build muscle.”

“Ah.” Sato said succinctly, standing beside her as she turned back to her taijutsu practice, “No wonder you punch like a guy...”

She chuckled quietly, slamming her palms forward in a deadly one-two combination that Sato was sure would've hurt if he had been the dummy. Tama asked him if he was alright, “You look pale again. Is something wrong?”

Sato admitted to himself that Tama was his lifelong friend, his intended and an all-around trustworthy person. There was no reason to hide his feelings from her. He broke down, his face wracked with anxiety, and explained how Shino and Hinata had surpassed him in terms of skill. He had no idea how to correct such an imbalance or if he should even bother trying.

Tama stopped his rambling after a minute and asked, “Does it really bother you that much that your teammates are improving? You're getting stronger too, Sato-kun.”

“Yeah, but...it just doesn't feel like it’s enough.” He muttered, still distraught.

“For what it's worth, you're still an excellent ninja who I feel deserves the rank of chunin.” She told him, smiling faintly, “And me? Look at me if you want an example of failure. I'm so far behind I never made genin. Isn't that a bummer?”

Sato's expression lightened out of curiosity, “You never did explain that to me why you dropped out of the Academy.”

Tama glared at him for a moment, stopping her taijutsu forms completely, “You think I chose to quit? That I gave up? Jeez, Sato, I thought you knew me better...”

He took a step back, fearing the ferocious right hook she had displayed earlier, “N-No! What I mean is...I still don't understand. I was always under the impression that you were fantastic in the Academy...but you never told me why you left. You just moved on with your life like you were fine.”

“Not exactly...” She said quietly, “You see I was doing pretty well. But...there weren't many people who were willing to hang around me when I was in school. It was pretty lonely there.”

Sato nodded, “So you didn't have any friends?”

Tama shook her head, “Nope. All the other girls thought I was a weirdo because I didn't mind getting bruised or dirty. I was always out training with boys. But even then, they started to dislike me too...” She chuckled, “I wasn't a prodigy, you know. My marks in basic ninjutsu studies and tactics were average. Taijutsu was different for me. My family always has been a bit off the deep end in hand-to-hand combat.”

He took a seat on the ground, deciding to listen to the entire story, “I believe that alright! So you were good with taijutsu in school, but what does that have to do with you leaving?”

Tama sat beside him, wondering how to phrase it, “Try to imagine being the best at something. Some people are book smart. Some have the best aim. My teachers didn't think I was being challenged
enough by the other students in my class when we did basic taijutsu forms. They started pitting me against students from other years who were closer to my level.”

“Like who, may I ask?” Sato prompted, smirking slightly at the thought. He had a good idea already.

“Hyuga Neji was in the year behind me.” Tama admitted, “He was also the best in his class. We sparred a few times. I lost a few. I won a few. I think... that's when I started to realize what I wanted to be.” She turned to Sato, “Specializing in taijutsu just like my uncle would have been unusual for a woman, they told me. I didn't let that discourage me. I kept on being strong.”

She passed a canteen to him after taking a drink of water and Sato took a sip as well. Tama went on, “I remember one day that there was this kid in my class who never stood up for himself. He just let some pig-headed idiot beat the crap out of him because he was too afraid to fight back.”

“So you wanted to set an example of righteous fury?” He quoted her uncle, laughing, “That must have been something. Did you even do the pose?”

“No. I just grabbed the kid, wiped his bloody lip, and told him to go home and stop being a coward.” Tama explained shortly, “But the jerk who was picking on him was second best in my class and wanted to remind me of that. He stuck around to fight me.”

Sato looked at her for a long moment, “And you beat him...right?”

“I guess. I returned all of the punches he dished out.” She told him, accepting the canteen back from him, “Once he tired out I just warned him to leave the other kid alone. He didn't want to hear it...”

“He kept fighting?” The silver haired boy asked.

“You could say that. I was already on my way out of the courtyard when he decided he wanted to get the last hit in.” Tama rubbed her aching knuckles at the memory, “And at first I wasn't sure what had happened. He wanted to be all high and mighty and toss a kunai at me...but I didn't see it. Too bad his aim was awesome. He was just being an idiot.”

Sato's eyes were wide, “He hit you?”

“That's what they told me. Square on my back somewhere serious and it knocked me out.” She recalled the incident in fragments, “They had to drag me to the hospital and remove it so there wouldn't be some spinal injury or whatever it was...and my parents were horrified. All I remember when I woke up was a lot of screaming at my sensei. I hadn't even realized I had been hurt so seriously.”

“What about the asshole who hurt you?” He snarled, “Did they bust him up good?”

“No. It was an accident really. Just kids fighting...even if it was with deadly weapons. We're ninja you know, it can't be avoided.” Tama chuckled at the thought, “But the bottom line was that he never meant anything by it. He was angry. And my father didn't want to hear it either. Even before I was out of the hospital he had me pulled out of the Academy.”

“That's bullshit! They didn't even tell you first?” Sato stood up after hearing what had happened, “What were they thinking?”

“They were afraid for me. They panicked and did what they thought could keep me safe.” She recited the excuse, “Don't get me wrong, I was upset. But they distracted me with all different sorts of things so I wouldn't have the time to say how miserable I was. I was always at some class, working somewhere or competing for something. I made them happy so they could forget how
unhappy I was."

He looked down at her, his face solemn. He wondered how he hadn't realized it sooner. Tama had never been the type of person to go out and enjoy normal civilian life on a whim. Her parents had pushed it upon her after the first sign of danger; *Didn't they realize when they first enrolled her in the Academy what it means to be a ninja? That we get into fights constantly?*

Though he agreed with their wish of keeping their only daughter safe, Sato thought it was unfair they had taken her dream away from her.

“If they wanted to keep you safe then they should have become ninja too.” Sato announced icily, “You can protect yourself; there's no doubt about it. There's no need for them to intervene.”

“But they don't think that I'm like Uncle Gai. I don't look tough enough to them.” Tama informed him, “No matter how I try to explain it to them they just can't understand. It's not their fault, Sato...”

She stood up and patted his shoulder, telling him not to worry about it. Tama felt better after having gotten the truth off of her chest and she went back to practicing against the training dummy. Sato watched her for a short while, and then asked, “But if you could become a ninja now...would you go for it?”

“Sure I would.” Tama admitted, “But I'm too old for the Academy. You can't do that over. And my parents would definitely have a fit if they heard of me becoming a Genin.”

“You can do it, I think.” Sato scratched his chin, “What if I found a way for you to graduate to genin without the Academy or your parents finding out?”

“Then I'd be impressed.” She shrugged, not getting her hopes up.

He frowned, seeing she wasn't interested. Sato grabbed her wrists and tugged lightly so she turned to face him, “No really, Tama, I can pull some strings. This can work!”

“With who? And how?” She snorted incredulously, “My chance came and went. Even if I'm hanging on to a dead dream, that doesn't mean it can come true if you weasel a deal out with Tsunade-sama.”

“I'll tell you what, give me a day to talk to some people. If something comes up that can help you out I want you to cooperate and start brushing up on your basic jutsu, alright? Fair?” He offered, grinning, “And if they tell me to take a hike then you can go back to being a cashier in that charming little shop of yours.”

“You're such a jerk.”

“Is that a yes?” Sato smiled at her, his midnight eyes lively again.

“Alright. Go ahead. But nothing drastic, you hear me?” Tama agreed lowly, “If my parents hear about this they'll kill you first and then me.”

“That's usually how it works...” He sighed and then darted off into the forest again. Tama stood quietly for a moment, wondering what the chances were that he would succeed. She turned back to the dummy and resumed her forms.

By noon Haku had passed several rice fields ready for harvesting, and then broke for lunch in a small village in the shadow of a mountain. The local specialty was a foreign, fish-based dish, which
he took a liking to, though Haku suspected that the owner of the tavern was making him overpay for his lunch because he was an out-of-towner who didn't know any better.

The past few days his endless walking had brought him to a number of different towns dotting the Southern trail. The money he had with him went a long way, and at night sometimes he would rest at an inn, or if he was still on the road when night descended he took shelter under a tree or ledge.

A week into his journey Haku was reduced to using the scarf that he had received as a gift when he was a child. The cold grew with each passing day, biting at his skin. It was proof enough he was nearing the cooler climate of the Water Country and winter, it seemed, was fast approaching. The first night it snowed was miserable. The small fire he had made didn't last long during the squalls.

The tree he had been sleeping in was bereft of leaves to buffer the silent snowfall, so for a while Haku blearily remained awake to consciously relocate the white flakes with his Kekkei Genkai. After a time he would nod off and so would his power. The snow would build up quickly and blanket him with cold. He would wake up shivering violently. It happened several times during the night, before Haku finally resorted to creating a small dome of ice mirrors for shelter. The mirrors stood obediently while he slept.

Once morning arrived his joints ached terribly from sleeping curled up during the night. Haku could see his breath in the frigid air and knew that the only way to stay warm was to keep moving. He walked across the deeper snow-drifts with chakra until he reached the trail again.

He stopped to eat at another village after a few hours of walking, and enjoyed the temporary warmth of being indoors. 'It won't be long before I have to cross the bay out to the island chain,' Haku thought, aware of the local geography, 'Once I reach Kuro I can continue south.' He smiled at the notion, 'I wonder if Hiroshi will be there...'

It didn't seem likely, though. With Hiroshi being a merchant it was conducive to travel far and wide to sell his wares, rather than being restricted to one area. 'I would like to see him again though...maybe I can find him before Zabuza and see how he is.' Haku speculated. It wasn't out of the question but it certainly wasn't probable.

After he finished his meal he paid the owner of the establishment and stopped in a store across the street. He had decided the night before he was in desperate need of warmer clothing if he was going to risk the wilderness so often on his journey. 'That and I cannot be too conspicuous... a Leaf ninja wandering the Water Country would attract more attention than I need.' With that thought, he removed his hitai-ate and slipped it in his bag.

He took the clothing available into consideration before deciding on the attire he preferred. Haku selected longer pants over the shorter, dark pants he had worn frequently in the Fire Country. The black sweater he had chosen fit tightly to the skin, but was made with insulated material that he knew would be helpful.

The girl who owned the shop observed him, “Well, you certainly are cute! But wearing all black makes you look like you're up to no good...” She paused thoughtfully, “Are you a murderer?”

He didn't answer, but he did take her advice and slipped his blue gi back over the sweater, breaking up the dark colors for a more friendly effect. Once the girl approved of his appearance and had been paid he thanked her, and bought a parasol to shield himself from the snowfall outside.

Haku wrapped his scarf around his face and neck and set out on the main road. He looked back as the shop girl poked her head out the door, shouting, “Grandma! Come and get some lunch while it's hot!” When no response came the girl looked up and down the street; her grandmother was nowhere
in sight, “Now where did she go?”

She disappeared back into the shop and Haku continued on out of the village, viewed only as a stranger with an umbrella. He estimated the time it would take to reach Kuro, "Since it's the next town over I can reach it by late afternoon if the weather doesn't get worse.'

The entire journey was rapidly becoming dependent on the climate. He wondered how different it would be if he had lived his whole life in the Water Country and was accustomed to the weather. 'If I had continued my life here all by myself...would I have lived as long? Would I be a Mist ninja instead?" Haku shuddered at the thought of not being brought to Konoha. Even now he was not certain how he would manage life outside of his village. Without Naruto or Gaara he felt his confidence was strained, or maybe even nonexistent.

A few minutes outside of the village Haku spotted an elderly woman crouched on the side of the road. He suspected she could be the missing grandmother the shop girl had been calling for, but he chose not to jump to conclusions. The dark haired boy moved to the opposite side of the trail, curious as to why she was inclined to stay out in the cold.

He noted a small shrine at the base of a tree that was dedicated to someone who had died. 'Perhaps she is grieving over a lost loved one... ' Haku surmised.

The old woman stared at the grave with nostalgic eyes, immune to the snowflakes beginning to crown her head. Being the morally-disciplined person that he was, Haku knew better than to leave a heartbroken woman in the cold of a snow shower. He cleared his throat and she was finally alerted to his presence.

She looked at him blankly for a moment, drinking in his beautiful face and then blinked in puzzlement when he handed her his parasol. She couldn't think of anything to say and watched as the mysterious boy continued on down the trail. The falling snow magically avoided him as it drifted down.

“An angel?” She wondered and then turned back to the shrine to pray, shielding herself with the umbrella she had been given.

Neji had a new nightly habit of light reading before sleep. A pillow was pressed beneath as his chest as he spread out on his stomach in bed, his chin propped up with one hand, and the gifted novel balanced in the other:

*The Tale of the First Shinobi, Chapter 5*

Yuanjia learned quickly and showed surprising wisdom as he trained under Tian Tian. Her dislike for him faded with time; yet she still viewed him as a child when he had only been alive for eighteen years; a mere speck in the grand scheme of the world. She had six years' experience over him and he asked if that really made such a difference.

“Enough difference for me to be the teacher and you to be the student.” Tian Tian reminded him, “Your form is sloppy! Hold that sword straighter!”

For two years she trained Yuanjia, watching proudly as he excelled in ninjutsu. Tian Tian had to admit he had become proficient in swordsmanship, though he was still nowhere near as talented as she.

They roamed the country as an unlikely pair: the best of friends who always concluded arguments with laughter. Sometimes they would go away for weeks on end, leaving Ukigaru to imagine what
The master and student’s favorite pastime was breaking up groups of bandits and upholding the law in her father's land. Policing through the mountains together, their names were feared by thieves for miles. Tian Tian gave up her hostilities completely for her pupil and soon returned the loyalty that he felt for her. One day their friendly adventures were cut abruptly short.

Yuanjia was summoned back to his home where he was expected to take over family duties in his clan. Tian Tian was hesitant to release him, but he sadly insisted that he return to help where he was needed. She cast aside her bitterness for his sake and presented him with a parting gift: her sword, Taige, and he humbly accepted it. Tian Tian felt he was the only person she could trust to wield such a powerful weapon.

And so Yuanjia returned to his clan, leaving his teacher alone again and Ukigaru did his best to raise his daughter’s spirits. He knew that for all of her discipline and strictness, Tian Tian was an incredibly emotional creature. Without her student she suddenly felt vulnerable to the world again, unsure if she was willing to share her experiences with others as she had with him. Though Yuanjia had helped dissolve the shell that kept her withdrawn from people, she supposed she had no reason to not continue her adventures. She informed her father that she would be out on another journey for a while and he wished her health and a safe return.

She set out through the mountains, keeping bandits in check and small towns safe from raids. Though guarding her father’s land brought her great pride, Tian Tian still felt a horrible loneliness without her pupil by her side. During her travels, however, she encountered a man named Seto who was irresistibly charming and he captured her heart. Seto adored the beautiful princess and asked her to stay in his village with him rather than continue on through the mountains alone. Eyes clouded with love, the lonely kunoichi relented and agreed to stay with Seto.

She told him stories of her youth in the Realm of Stone and how she had mentored a fine ninja. Seto, though fascinated, never really understood what it meant to be a shinobi for he was not one himself. Tian Tian loved him anyway, tamed by his presence, and soon grew fond of the small village they lived in. It was not long before they became lovers and dreamt of marriage and children. By year's end things had changed.

Tian Tian would pass long nights on her own waiting on word from her beloved. Sometimes he would disappear for days on end and return disheveled and hurt, and she feared for his life since he so often hunted in the treacherous wilderness surrounding the mountain. “Let me accompany you, then, so I may know that you are safe?” Tian Tian suggested, willing to guard him in the night if she had to.

Seto shook his head in response, “You needn't worry for my safety, love, this mountain shall never conquer me.”

So she waited faithfully, grateful for every morning he returned alive and well. Though there were times she wondered why he dared hunt in the darkness of night or why, sometimes, he returned without a kill. Her naivety persisted for a long while until one day Seto confronted her.

“I am leaving you,” He informed her, “I am in love with someone else.”

Tian Tian was shocked by his decision. Not once had she ever questioned his loyalty to her and she felt her heart break as Seto explained, “Her name is Nyi and she is the most beautiful woman I have ever met. You are to leave this place by nightfall so she may come and live with me.”

Tian Tian didn't understand his change of heart. They were to be married in the coming fall. She
pleaded with him, her eyes tearing, “How could you abandon me like this, Seto? I've sacrificed so much for you, told you only the truth and I have given you my heart and soul. Yet you would cast me out for another woman...how has your love for me so suddenly ended?”

“You were a princess of noble blood, so naturally I was taken with you at first,” Seto admitted, “But you are just so strange! It isn't natural for a woman to carry weapons and fight! I just don't understand an enigma like you. You are beautiful, Tian Tian, but not as beautiful as Nyi.”

Her heartbreak quickly turned into rage. Her lover's betrayal had reawakened her hatred of men. Tian Tian stormed out of the house and left the village, never to return. She wandered aimlessly for months, consumed by her heartache, and remained withdrawn from society. The trust she had felt had only existed with Yuanjia and he was long gone. She would never again be so foolish.

Tian Tian's father had sent scouts to retrieve her while he was sick with worry, but all of those who were able to find her she turned away. She had willingly chosen the path of a rogue and she would have it no other way.

Neji put the book down, highly disturbed. He had thought that Tian Tian, as the protagonist of the story, would have at least been given a bit more dignity. But the terrible deception she had endured after it taking so long for her to learn to trust another person was quick to ruin it all.

He could not help but feel that Takaharu had not given the name to his daughter simply because it was "in fashion." The Hyuga heir pondered if perhaps Tenten was feeling the same things that her namesake had felt in her lifetime, if it was any explanation of her odd behavior as of late.

Neji stared at the cover, not trusting the words that lay on the pages beneath it. They were cheating happiness and he disagreed with it. He tossed it aside, aggravated, and snapped the light off to go to sleep for the night.

Konoha, 17 years prior

Riei awoke with a sudden jolt, startling the nurse in the room who had gone in to check on him. He relaxed after seeing where he was and apologized, “I'm sorry, ma'am, I didn't mean to scare you.”

“It's alright.” She answered, checking his pulse while she was at it, “Good. You're doing much better now. You nearly died, you know. How could you wear down all of your chakra like that?”

He blinked at her meekly, “I've been running for a week and a half. I guess I'm just used to being tired.”

“Exhaustion like that is dangerous to your health.” The nurse sniffed, “Don't let it happen again, sir. You may not survive the next time...” She walked to the door and Riei sprang up from the bed.

“Wait!” He cried, “Where are you going?”

The nurse stopped to stare at him, her hand still on the doorknob, “This is a hospital, sir, and I have rounds to make with other patients.”

“So...you're just leaving me here?

“No...until you are well enough to be released to your family.” The nurse explained, frowning quizzically.

Riei's eyes dulled, “I don't have any family..."
She blinked in confusion, “You mean to tell me that you don’t have any family or friends here to visit you?”

“I’m not from here.” He admitted, as if she hadn’t already realized it.

The nurse took a moment to think and then told him, “Stay here. I’ll send someone up to keep you company then.”

Riei thanked her and watched as she closed the door behind her. He had never been in a hospital before and already it was making him feel claustrophobic. The nurse ventured down to the ground floor and then swaggered into the lobby. She tapped her nails on a desk. The rapping sound caught the attention of a silver haired woman who looked at her.

“Semi,” The nurse droned, “There’s some guy up on floor two who you should go talk to.”

“Alright,” Semi pushed her papers aside, smiling, “What’s his name?”

“I didn’t ask, he’s a real weirdo.” The nurse replied snippishly, “If he starts scaring you or anything you can just leave. He’s up in room 210.”

Semi nodded and then stood from her desk, making her way through the lobby. As a volunteer at the hospital she was often sent to act as a social worker for patients. She had seen all sorts come through, and in her opinion there was no one weirder than her younger brother. She wasn’t intimidated by him either.

Once on the second floor she knocked politely before entering. She slipped inside quietly and was greeted with a strange sight. A young man with a mop of snow-hued hair sat cross-legged on top of his bed, staring out the window on the wall beside him. Semi assumed he was anxious from being alone, but when he noticed her a dazzled look appeared on his face.

Eyes like night and hair like starlight: she was an angel he could have only seen in his dreams. She couldn’t have looked any more beautiful, even though she was in a plain white hospital outfit.

“Hi.” He gave a short greeting, hoping he wasn’t staring rudely.

“Hello,” She did her best not to laugh at his childlike behavior, “My name is Hatake Semi. I’m a social worker here. I thought you might like someone to talk to.”

Riei smiled, “Thank you, Semi.”

There was a strange silence.

“Um...why don't you introduce yourself?” She suggested, taking a seat in the chair beside the bed.

He sat up a bit straighter, slightly embarrassed, “Sorry! My name is Riei.”

“Riei, huh?” She smiled, “Good. And you don’t live in the Fire Country, Riei?”

“I've lived everywhere at least once,” He answered distractedly, glancing around the room in alarm, “I...I think I've been robbed!”

“What?” Semi laughed.

“I wasn’t wearing these clothes last I remember!” Riei declared, pulling suspiciously at the shirt and shorts the hospital had provided, “All of my things have gone missing...”
“No they haven’t!” Semi crossed over to the closet and opened it, “We keep your things right here.”

He blinked, seeing all of his belongings had been stowed away. It dawned on him that he had no need to feel threatened anymore with Nisa gone, but old habits die hard. Riei made a rabbit-like leap over to the cupboard and snatched up his bag. He marveled at how all of his clothes had been washed and he settled back on the bed contentedly, his possessions splayed out in front of him on the sheets, “That was weird. I’ve never had my things put in a closet before...”

The amusement that had been flickering in Semi’s eyes morphed into curiosity, “You’ve never used a closet?”

“No. Not once.”

“So then...what about your house?” She asked him.

“I haven’t lived in a house since I was a baby,” He laughed at the thought as if it were preposterous, “I told you before we lived all over the place.”

Semi was intrigued, “You mean you and your family were nomads?”

“You could say that.” He agreed, fishing through his bag to see if anything had been stolen, “We didn't want to be. We had no place to go after the war and...a lot of people gave us a hard time.”

“Is that how you ended up in the Hidden Leaf Village?”

“Gosh...is that what this place is called? I just needed to get away. I wasn’t paying attention to which village I was running to...” Riei admitted sheepishly.

Semi frowned, troubled by his situation, “So when they let you out...where will you go?”

“That's a question I ask myself everyday...” He sighed, “But I'm safe now. Nisa and I were the last of our clan and now that he's gone I can finally rest easy.” Riei smiled as an afterthought, “Maybe I can stay here. This village is one of the best I've seen and those faces on the cliff are pretty cool!”

“The Hokage Monument.” Semi informed him, “Once you're all better I'll take you there if you want.”

Riei blinked, “You don't have to do that. You barely even know me.”

“Well, that's why I'm trying to get to know you!” She smiled amiably, “I think you could use a friend if you want to live here.”

He grinned at her, “I appreciate it but you know I'm going to have to start from scratch. I haven't got a lot of money and I don't think you'd want to be seen with a hobo like me around here. Lots of people look down on people like me. I've learned.”

“I'll decide for myself, thank you.”

Riei shrugged but was truly grateful she could care less about his economic status. He fished a large scroll out of his bag and showed it to her. “See this?”

“Yes.”

“This is one of the few things that was left in my family after the war. It's my clan's summoning contract. I've been saving it so Nisa wouldn't get his hands on it.” He elaborated, rolling it from one hand to another.
“Summoning contract?” The phrase was relevant to her, “You're a shinobi?”

“Sure I am!” He made a childish face, “Maybe not an orthodox one, but my dad taught me how to fight.”

“I can imagine,” Semi agreed, “And you keep talking about someone called Nisa?”

“Yeah, he was my cousin.” Riei replied sourly, “He's the one who killed the rest of my family.”

“Oh...I'm...I'm so sorry...” She felt she had touched upon something that was none of her business, but Riei was more than willing to talk about it.

“Don't worry, it was his fault not yours. And he didn't do it alone either...” He sneered, “His dad and his big sis helped him. They all thought they were entitled to the scraps that were leftover. My dad was the leader of our clan but after we lost our home he just couldn't keep those three in check...”

“That's why you were protecting the scroll?” Semi asked, pointing to the contract.

Riei nodded, “That's right and it wasn't easy. He nearly got it from me once, but he only managed to sign it. He's also stolen my pole-arm from me...I let him have it because I was just so sick of fighting.”

Semi watched him with sad eyes, empathetic.

“Now that he's dead I guess that means my naginata is lost for good...” He mumbled, shoving all of his belongings back into his bag, “At least I'm alive though. I can't complain about that!”

Before Semi could respond there was a brief knock on the door and Takaharu entered, smiling pleasantly, “Ah, room 210, the dwelling of our mystery ninja! May I ask your name?”

“Uh...Riei.”

“Well it's nice to meet you, Uh-Riei!” He beamed, “Listen up! Your medical report says that you're well enough to be discharged. Hokage-sama would like to speak to you and, oh! I figured you might want this...” He reached out into the hallway and retrieved a naginata he had propped up against the wall.

Riei hopped up and took it from him happily, “Thank you sir! But...how did you know it was mine?”

“Your opponent didn't wield it so well and since it's such a handsome thing I wanted to keep it for myself,” Takaharu explained, “But it wouldn't be fair of me to not check with you first.”

“Thank you.” Riei repeated, slightly overwhelmed.

Takaharu then turned to Semi, “Hey, Semi-chan. Why don't you come with us to the tower?”

“I really should get back to work...”

“Nonsense! Kakashi would be thrilled if you attended the meeting with us.” Takaharu smirked knowingly and Riei watched as mischievousness crossed the woman's expression.

“Alright then.” She agreed.

Takaharu glanced back at Riei, “Good. Now Riei, get dressed and then I'll take you to Sarutobi-sama.”
Immediately the white haired nin complied and stripped off his hospital clothing. Semi turned away with a shriek, startled by his abruptness. Takaharu paid little mind to his lack of modesty, finding his shamelessness comical, 'He's definitely lacking a few social skills. We'll have to work on that...'

Shino’s mission, unknown to his good friend Hatake Sato, had him reassigned to a team led by Gekko Hayate. Lee and Sakura were also in attendance for the C-rank assignment as they set out to guard a young man named Shibuki, of Takigakure. The young ninja was actually (allegedly, Hayate muttered) the leader of the Hidden Waterfall Village. At first Sakura had believed that he commanded an air of confidence, what with his solemn face and his well-kept attire and weapons. It was not very long into the mission that Shibuki’s true mouse-ish nature was revealed.

“Ahh!” He leapt in surprise when a crow fluttered unexpectedly from a bush. Shibuki ducked down behind Sakura, generating puzzled looks from his companions. After trekking down the road for most of the morning they soon grew accustomed to his nervous behavior. Lee told Shibuki fantastic stories about Leaf, mainly regarding his team's achievements. Sakura considered his missions with Neji and Tenten head and shoulders more difficult than what her team undertook regularly. Shibuki only acknowledged the triumphant endings with a distracted snort.

By the afternoon they had come upon a beautiful waterfall that cascaded down from a mountaintop. The village was concealed within it, and the team stopped to admire the scenery for a few minutes before moving on down the hill and following the river's edge. Small voices in the distance carried through the air, “Shibuki-sama!”

Two small children, a brother and sister, ran up to him, “Welcome back, Shibuki-sama!”

“Now, now, keep some distance will you? Show some respect for your village leader!” Shibuki reminded the youngsters, “I'm sorry, but I don't have time to play with you right now.”

“But that's not why we're here,” The boy answered, his eyebrows were close to Lee's in thickness, “We're supposed to clean up the trash by the shore.”

“Mother's making us pick up every bit of it!” His sister added in a squeak.

“I see,” Shibuki folded his arms, smiling down at them, “Well look! I've brought you some help!” He turned, gesturing to the genin behind him, “These ninja have come from Konohagakure! What do you think of that?”

Lee grinned at Shibuki’s rather abrupt proposition, “Yes! This is another opportunity to aid our comrades of the Waterfall!” Sakura and Shino remained less enthused.

“Pick up garbage? I'm tired though...can't we just go home?” The pink haired girl sighed. Shino made no comment but sided with Sakura. He wasn't keen on wasting any more time when there were other, more important missions he could be partaking of back home.

“We'll pay you for your time.” Shibuki offered Sakura with a smile, “Just think of it as part of the mission!”

“Thank you brave ninja!” The girl squealed and her brother joined in on fawning over the foreign shinobi.

Hayate watched in amusement as Lee moved ahead to interact with the children, while Sakura and Shino stayed back, bored and irritable. He, as leader of the group, had no reason to protest an extension on their mission if they were going to be paid for it.
“Move along then. Since Shibuki-san has been returned home safely, your body guard duty is over.” Hayate had to prod the rest of his team into action, “Time for phase two. Stop those faces, huh? Look lively, please…”

Sakura moved ahead to join Lee as he waded through the water with the children. After a long, silent moment Shino did as well. Hayate sighed at their lack of conviction and then rested on a nearby log. Lee cheered as his teammates assisted him in scooping litter from the river bottom, and Sakura cracked a smile at last, reminded of Naruto's equally bubbly attitude. She missed her friends, but she found she wasn't as affected by it as she feared she would be.

“Actually, it's a good thing we've decided to stick around for a while…” Hayate mentioned as Shibuki took a seat beside him, “That way we can investigate these rumors.”

“Rumors?” The young village leader gave him a quizzical look.

“It may be nothing, but there have been indications that some rogue ninja have certain plans for your village.” Hayate explained vaguely, drawing his sword and then proceeding to polish it.

“Well, there are always rumors like that going around…” Shibuki replied shortly.

The jounin worked methodically on the blade and then asked distractedly, “Come to think of it, your father once had to fight off a bunch of troublemakers like that didn't he?”

Shibuki remained quiet, recalling his father, and then ducked with a cry as a hawk swooped just over his head. It vectored in its course with a beat of its wings, and landed gracefully on Hayate's outstretched arm, “Not to worry...it’s just a messenger from the Hidden Leaf Village.”

He took a moment to read the note, “Someone's looking for me...”

“Does this mean you're leaving?”

“Yes, but don’t worry. The others can stay and finish up here,” Hayate informed him, and then turned to his laboring team, “Listen! I'm needed back at the village so I'll be going now.”

“Did something happen?” Sakura asked with her arms piled high with cans.

“They've called an emergency session at the jounin council.” Hayate answered, standing up and stowing away the message, “You will all follow as soon as you are done here.”

“Understood.” Shino's voice was low.

He suspected that something had occurred back in the village that put Tsunade on edge. There would be no other reason for her to summon all of her jounin to her so suddenly. He was curious as to what the situation was, but it would have to wait until later. Hayate bade them farewell and disappeared swiftly into the surrounding forest. The genin watched him leave and then turned back to their work.

They finished a short time later, but Lee was too busy chasing after the laughing children to realize their task was complete. Shibuki watched irritably as the oblivious nin horsed around with them, “Are you quite done now? Why don't you just go already?”

“Oh.” Lee paused, looking back at him quizzically, “Is it time to leave already?”

“You heard me,” The village leader snapped, “There's nothing keeping you here any longer so beat it!” The children gave him a somber look, and then reluctantly trudged back to Shibuki's side.
Lee still didn't get the hint. Shino, on the other hand, heeded the warning, “Very well then.” He turned to go and Sakura followed, confused.

“Shino, wait a minute. What's got his underwear all bunched up?” She asked quietly, again annoyed by his defensive nature, “We could stay a little bit longer, right?”

“The secret entrance to the Hidden Waterfall Village must be near,” Shino surmised keenly, “It's logical that he would not want us to see it. We have no business remaining here.”

“What a trusting guy...” She muttered, her pink brow furrowed, “I thought our villages were allied.”

“Yes, but what if that changes one day? What's to keep you from betraying us?” Shibuki bit back after overhearing their exchange.

“Again, a logical point.” Shino repeated. His objective point of view at least gave Shibuki more credit than he was probably due, but the offence still sunk in quickly.

Sakura scowled at the leader of the Waterfall and Lee also looked troubled, “Shibuki-san, there really is no need for your doubt us. We will go now if you wish it, but we never meant any harm by coming here!”

“Will you please just get out of here?” Shibuki growled again, his patience was wearing thin.

Lee sighed and then gave a short goodbye to the children before moving ahead to join his teammates. A shriek from the little girl followed shortly after, “Oh! Mother!”

They looked back, noting a rather plump woman staggering towards them. Her face was wracked with pain, and her children scuttled forward to meet her.

“Shibuki-sama...” She rasped, her legs quaking, “It was awful!”

Tension crossed the young leader's features, “What is it? What happened?”

“They attacked without any warning...” She collapsed shortly after that. A kunai had been lodged in her back. Both the children and Leaf shinobi backtracked, rushing to the injured woman.

Sakura knelt down and immediately examined her, “It doesn't look fatal, but she's lost consciousness. I'll handle this.”

“Let's go!” The little boy cried, “We have to get back to the village!”

“That would be foolish.” Shino interrupted him, his sharp eyes were briefly visible above his glasses as he looked down at the victim, “Judging by this, the village has already been infiltrated and taken. Rushing back to counter now would be costly.”

“She said that there was no warning...” Lee repeated softly, his expression grim, “Who exactly is responsible?”

“It isn't possible...there's no way anyone could even find the village...” Shibuki muttered, his eyes narrowed in thought, “This doesn't make sense.”

Shino looked to the kunoichi of the team, “Sakura-san. Guard the children and their mother. Look after them somewhere out of sight.”

She nodded in agreement, “Right. What about you and Lee?” She didn't have to ask, though. Sakura already knew that Shino was planning to investigate and retaliate, if possible. Lee would be with
him, but there was still the issue of finding the village. His kikaichu insects would not be able to thoroughly investigate the area with so much water inhibiting them.

“We must go now while we can!” Lee cried ardently, “Shibuki-san, you must show us the way to your village so we can challenge those responsible for this!”

“So you will huh? I'd like that! Just how do you expect to help us anyway?” Shibuki snapped back at the glaringly green ninja. Shino darted ahead of them suddenly, and they turned to watch as four enemy ninja blew their cover hidden in the waterfall. He was out on the water, ready to meet their volley of kunai.

His nagamaki appeared and he swiped, deflecting the storm of knives that rained down. Lee quickly moved ahead when there was an opening and met one of the ninja head-on. His fist cracked upward, catching one in a flying uppercut that threw him back into the waterfall, his face a bloody mess. Shino raked through another with his weapon and Lee soared over him, rotating in the air and clipping the third in the gut with a downward kick. His foe crumpled, stunned by the blow, and was finished by a swift heel-bash to the side of the head before Lee even touched the ground again.

The remaining ninja saw he had miscalculated and halted when Shino approached. “So you've got help with you, huh?” The rogue spat furiously and then dove back into the cover of the falls.

Once the immediate threat had passed, Shino concealed his nagamaki again and turned back to shore with Lee. Shibuki was cowering in a ball on the ground while the children crowed for him to have courage. After seeing the fighting had been dispelled, Shibuki stood awkwardly, “Oh...it was nothing...I just got a little excited.”

“That should be proof enough of our intentions,” Shino announced, coming to stand in front of the village leader, “I planted one of my kikaichu insects on the last rogue. She will stay hidden on him and keep me informed on his position, that is, if you will grant us entry into the village to finish this.”

Lee nodded fiercely, “Yes! A new mission! We can defeat these wretched ninja and further preserve the Hidden Waterfall Village.”

Sakura sighed to herself, lost in thought, ‘Oh boy...this isn't too much different from something that Naruto and his team would get into...but I doubt Shibuki will be very willing to cooperate even now.’

Shibuki stared at the ground for a long moment, weighing the prospects. After a while he stood and ushered for them to follow. They proceeded closer to the falls while Shibuki explained, “These natural surroundings have served as a barrier that have protected our village from most of our enemies. The only way in is through the waterfall...”

The group paused on top of a ledge overlooking the falls and once near enough, a cavern behind the veil of water became visible. Lee and Shino regarded the cave entrance, and Shibuki spoke again warningly, “Let me make one thing clear...you must never reveal this secret to anyone.”

“Of course, Shibuki-san,” Lee promised gladly, his smile glinted in the sunlight, “You have our word as honorable Leaf shinobi!”

They moved ahead after that, following the ledge behind the cascading water and entered the mouth of the cave. Pools of eerie green water were corralled by stalagmites all throughout the cavern. They continued through the echoing cave, wary for enemies as they occasionally stopped behind boulders. Shino's insects remained alert for danger.

“This way!” Shibuki went ahead and they followed after him as he came to the lip of a large, green
pool, “If you're helping me then this is the only way to get inside.” He dove into the water a moment
later and Shino, seeing the means of progression, had his colony retreat back into his body to escape
harm from the water. He and Lee also plunged in after the young leader.

Outside of the waterfall Sakura finished tending to the woman's wound. Her children sat nervously
beside her even after Sakura had assured them that she would be alright. The girl cried to herself,
mewling for her mother to wake.

“Don't cry, Shizuku.” Her brother said softly, “Sakura-san is here to help and I know Shibuki-sama
will take care of this!”

“I'd be surprised...”

The children looked up in fright when a ninja appeared behind Sakura and landed a knockout blow
to the side of her neck. The kunoichi's eyes rolled back and she toppled over bonelessly. The
children squealed in terror as the rogue ninja chortled, “Her reactions are a little slow...and she calls
herself a ninja?”

“You bet I do!”

They all looked far off to the right, where a large fireball was soaring forward from the underbrush.
The newcomer leapt back promptly to avoid the flames, but blanched when knives darted ahead that
had been hidden within it. He strained to make another more panicked leap backwards, landing a fair
distance away from the helpless children and their mother.

‘What the hell was that? I thought-!’ He looked back and saw that she had substituted herself, having
anticipated his attack. Even worse than that, was that a fog had descended in the woods that had not
been there earlier, 'Some kind of genjutsu, huh? I'll just have to release it then!'

He didn't do it quickly enough.

“Doton: Inner Decapitation Jutsu!” She had ambushed him from underground, blind-siding him, and
pulled the rogue by his heels beneath the surface of the soil. It was a technique her sensei had first
used on her and her teammates as a practical joke, but now she found that after having learned it she
could apply it. He had not found a way to escape the technique fast enough; unable to believe a girl
has bested him.

She loomed down over the hissing, struggling rogue, and pinched a nerve at the nape of his neck. He
flopped over inertly after that. The children's faces lit up with relief after seeing she had been
victorious. Sakura smiled over to them, “Don't worry, I've been in tougher situations before…and
sheesh! Give me a little more credit! I'm the Hokage's apprentice you know!”

The pink haired girl hefted the unconscious ninja out of his earthy prison and splayed him out on the
ground. Sakura methodically disarmed him of all of his weapons and supplies, taking them for
herself, but noted how she would have to be more thorough, 'Once he wakes up he'll make a bee-line
for his cohorts...I better make him useless so when he does get back to them they won't learn
anything from him.' It made her shudder a bit at how she was starting to think like Tsunade.

With her chakra scalpel Sakura severed the tendons in the flunkie's arm to start, disabling his ability
to wield weaponry and perform jutsu. She moved to his throat and then damaged his vocal chords,
knowing that without speech his communication would be thoroughly limited. And just for good
measure she tied him up, wondering if later when he woke, he'd be able to free himself, 'He'll
definitely have crappy motor functions in his hands. I'd be impressed if he pulls it off.'
Sakura stowed away her newly acquired weapons and then turned back to the children. They were ready to leave and she hadn't even asked them to prepare. They had slung her team's travel bags on their backs. All that was left was their dozing mother at their feet. Sakura bent down and easily lifted the injured woman and then said, “Listen you two...I need you to show me the way to get into your village. Once I'm in I want you to hide with your mother somewhere safe while I go find Lee and Shino, alright?”

“You got it, Sakura-san!” Shizuku's brother cheered, leading the way out of the tree-line and back towards the falls. With a huff Sakura followed the children, hoping they wouldn't have another ninja encounter anytime soon.

Lee and Shino surfaced silently after Shibuki, coming up just in front of a massive tree that shaded the entirety of the village beneath it. They went to the shore and stopped just outside a row of houses. They looked around the empty town.

“What a stunning place...” Lee remarked, wide-eyed, “It is no wonder you would so fiercely defend it.”

Shibuki hovered in the water for a moment, a listless look in his eyes. After a moment he dove back under the water and set out again. Shino spoke sidelong to Lee, “My insects indicate there will be an attack. Go follow Shibuki-san and guard him.”

Lee looked hesitant when his teammate was willing to fend off an ambush by himself. It felt like something that Neji would choose to do. Yet he had grown to trust people who trusted their abilities in a fight. He nodded to Shino, “I will hurry back!”

He leapt in after the village leader, moments before the hidden rogues descended like vultures.

They leapt for Shino together and he let his kikaichu colony attack for him, swarming his assailants and feasting on their chakra. He knocked them aside while they flailed about, but cursed once a blue rope tangled around him. The ninja who had escaped him earlier had an accomplice with him; a woman who was at the other end of the rope, pulling fiercely as if to snap him in half.

“Ooh, you're not bad at all, kid!” The woman jeered.

“You didn't think it would really be as easy as last time, did you?” The other rogue crowed, “I say we thrash this punk, Hisame!”

“Gladly!” The woman pulled tighter in unison with her partner, tearing the trapped genin in two.

They balked to see that bugs had made a clone of their master and they scuttled off once their distraction had succeeded. Hisame snarled furiously, tossing the cable back at her partner, “Great! He's loose! What is Suyin-sama going to think of this?”

“He doesn't have to know,” Her partner supplied darkly, “We'll nab that kid! We can look for him while Suyin-sama keeps tabs on that idiot-leader of this village. Where do you suppose Kirisame is? I wish he'd get his crazy ass in gear and get back here already!”

Hisame leapt up onto a rooftop, tailing her partner. “Who knows? Maybe that little girly he went after finished him off?” She speculated and then smirked, “Or maybe he wanted to have some fun with her...”

Shibuki surfaced in a tangle of roots beneath the great tree. He scrambled to the shore and opened a
large cabinet. He sighed in relief to see that the precious item he was charged with guarding was still
there, *The Hero's Water...it must be protected!*

He untied it from its suspension and took the bottle down, holding it carefully, *I can't let them have
it...no matter what!* Shibuki placed the Hero's Water in his hip-bag and then dove back into the
water. Now that it was safe he needed to find a place to avoid his enemies. It was a fight he knew he
could not win.

“Shino!” Sakura hurried through a thicket of bramble, thanking the small kikaichu insect that had met
up with her and lead her directly to her teammate, “The kids showed me in. Where's Lee?”

“He went to guard Shibuki-san. The situation has become even more perilous.” He informed her,
and then sent another small swarm of his colony to go check on their teammate's position, “I
encountered two jounin-level ninja after arriving here. They intercepted a clone since they were so
eager to fight. Where did you leave the children?”

“I dropped them off near that big tree with their mother,” Sakura replied, and then frowned, “But I
really hope they don't go looking for Shibuki with so many ninja running around. They could get
hurt or...” She shook her head, “No, they'll stay. I told them to. By the way, this guy tried to ambush
me earlier. From the look of it he was a nukenin from the Rain Village.”

“Rain…the others bore that symbol as well. It is strange that they should want to interfere in this
village,” Shino said pointedly, “It is very unlikely that they infiltrated this village on their own.
Someone from the inside must have showed them in if their interests were aligned in some way.”

“You mean that someone from Waterfall betrayed their own village?” Sakura asked quietly,
“Wow...this is bad. What a time for Hayate-sensei to leave!”

“We move out now. Unfortunately I attracted the attention of the other two Ame ninja before. They
are looking for me and my insects can sense them getting nearer.” Shino reported calmly, “It would
be best to see where their base is, that way we can organize an ambush of our own.”

The pink haired girl agreed completely and followed him back out into the town. They stayed in the
treetops to remain out of sight, and it didn't take long for them to find a congregation at the center of
the village just beneath the ancient oak. Civilians and ninja alike were tied together, watched by the
opposing ninja guardedly.

“They've taken the villagers hostage!” Sakura hissed furiously as they observed from a lofty branch,
“Just what is it that they're after?”

“They probably intend to gain whatever it is they are seeking by threatening Shibuki,” Shino
predicted, “They will kill the villagers if he doesn't comply. Now we should intervene.”

He paused and then leapt abruptly, Sakura mirroring him. Shuriken *thacked* into the branch they had
been perched on and the Leaf genin scrambled to right themselves before they landed on another tree
limb.

Before Shino could again substitute himself with a bug clone, the blue cable that his opponents had
tried to snare him in earlier looped around him and Sakura. Once they were knotted Hisame and her
partner howled in triumph, pulling down and sending them crashing to the ground together.

“Oh look at this! Looks like he's got a little friend with him this time!” Hisame chortled, grinning,
“Let's show Suyin-sama what we caught...” She and her partner dragged the two struggling ninja out
into the open where an older, bearded man looked at them in amusement.
“Have a look, Suyin-sama! Meddlers!” Hisame’s partner laughed, “Shall we kill them here in front of everyone?” The rope tightened around Shino and Sakura, squeezing threateningly. The pink haired girl fought desperately not to cry out in pain and Shino remained dutifully silent.

Suyin stood from where he sat near a shrine, “Not yet. They might come in handy when we negotiate.”

Hisame and her partner heeded his command and sent an electrical current through the cable without warning, stunning both of the struggling genin. They tumbled to the ground on top of each other. The cable went slack once the job was done and the villagers looked on in terror at the vicious display. A few of them voiced their disagreement.

“How Suyin? You were once our most respected shinobi! How could you betray us this way?”

“If Fuu were here she’d rip you apart!”

“Are you planning to take over the village?”

“Fuh!” Suyin snorted at the thought, “What would I want with this pathetic collection of huts? No, I’ve come for the Hero’s Water…”

“Are you insane?” One of the captives cried, “Do you really think Shibuki-sama will just hand it over?”

“If he were a different sort of village leader then he may be content to hang on to it, yes. But you forget I am the one who taught him the ninjutsu of Waterfall.” He grinned, pleased with himself, “I know your Shibuki better than anyone!”

Shibuki looked on from his hiding place in a tree gap. Everything Suyin had said was true and Shibuki grimaced to himself, fearing what would become of his people if he didn’t surrender. Or more importantly, what would happen once Suyin possessed the Hero’s Water. Either way he had already lost, ‘It’s over…I can’t hope to defeat so many enemies. I should give up now...’

“Ah-ha!”

“Stuff it!” Shibuki stumbled backwards in shock, slamming into the other side of the gap. He realized his panic was wasted when it was only Lee who had found him and not the enemy, “Y-You! How did you get here?”

Lee hopped down from the top of the gap, grinning, “I was looking for you down near the roots of this fine tree, Shibuki-san. But as it so happened my searching led me here, straight to you! Is that not fantastic luck?” He looked back over his shoulder, “But I wonder...who are those people outside and what is it that they want?”

“Their leader is named Suyin.” Shibuki told him quietly, “He used to be a shinobi in this village.”

“He used to be?” Lee parroted him, “He is now a rogue ninja, then?”

He nodded, “Yes.”

From outside Suyin's voice reverberated through the air, “Hey Shibuki! I know you can hear me wherever you’re hiding! Now don’t be shy, come on out here and bring the Hero’s Water with you! Don’t make this village suffer anymore because of you!”

Shibuki shook in violent fear against the wall, clinging pitifully to the bottle in his hands. Lee took
Shibuki-san...what you are holding...is that the Hero's Water that he is speaking of?"

“Yes...” He answered weakly, “And making sure it's protected is the most sacred duty of the village leader...”

“It just looks like a jug of water.” Lee pointed out, puzzled.

“It is,” Shibuki said softly, “But this water is drawn from the trunk of the ancient tree only once every hundred years...and whoever drinks it will have his or her chakra increased tenfold, maybe even more!”

“Tenfold or more!” Lee cried. To him it sounded like the ability to use chakra gates, but without the price of laborious training and meditation.

Shibuki nodded to him, “There are no shinobi remaining in our village that are as strong as your Hokage...so in times of trouble we've had to rely on the Hero's Water to defend ourselves.” He took a shuddering breath, “In the last Great War the water was the only thing that saved us from destruction, but the Hero's Water exacts a terrible price...”

Lee listened intently, seeing why it was so important that the water be kept safe, especially from Suyin.

“Whoever drinks it has his or her life shortened by the same degree to which his chakra was increased. Many of our shinobi have not died in battle, but from the water's effect! Ever since then the Hero's Water has been hidden away to keep it out of people's hands. And it was made the duty of the village leader to guard it.” Shibuki explained and then said sadly, “Some years ago we were attacked by shinobi from a distant land. As leader of the village my father did what he felt he had to do to defend us. He drank the water...but he was not a young man.”

Lee lowered his eyes, understanding what had happened.

“The increase of his chakra was too great. My father was a fool!” Shibuki cried at the memory, “He performed his sacred duty and was hailed as a great leader because he drank the Hero's Water and died!”

“Shibuki!” Suyin called out again, “You wouldn't be foolish enough to be thinking of pouring it out would you? No...if someone ever attacked the village again you know you wouldn't be able to defend yourselves without the Hero's Water!”

Shibuki cried pathetically where he sat, torn on what he should do, “I know I'm the leader of the village and I must guard the water at all costs...but if I let them take it I will have betrayed my peoples' trust and doomed my village!”

Suyin's voice was impatient, “Time's running out! There's a limit to how long you can just sit out there hiding away! So hand over the Hero's Water now or I'll start killing your villagers one by one, very slowly and painfully!”

Shizuku and her brother, unfortunately, had earlier been apprehended by the rest of Kirisame's team (though he proved to be useless to them by that point.) They called out, begging Shibuki not to surrender. Their captor kicked them back into silence.

“I will not stand for this!” Lee closed his eyes, distraught, “Shibuki-san...you must act!”

“Leave me alone!” Shibuki yowled, turning his gaze away shamefully.
“Those children...they believe in you, even if you do not believe in yourself. They believe that you are strong and worthy of admiration!” Lee reminded him, “They talk about you as if you are a hero!”

“That's because they're only kids and they have it stuck in their heads that the village leader has to be a hero!” He rebutted guiltily, “I am not my father. All I did was inherit his title...”

Down below Shino and Sakura began to stir and were greeted with the sight of Suyin untying Shizuku and pressing a blade to her small neck.

Sakura thrashed in her place beside the Aburame, “Put her down you son of a bitch! I'll kill you if you touch her!”

Shino looked on darkly, seeing things were then beyond their control.

“Hey Shibuki...I warned you before that my patience is limited! I'm giving you one more minute. If you don't come out by then we'll start with this little one here and then pick off all the rest of the children!”

Suyin's threat infuriated the adults being held captive. They demanded to be killed first, but Suyin assured them the children would be a more effective argument, “Shibuki has always had a soft spot for the kiddies...”

“I may not know entirely what happened...but it sounds to me that your father was a great man.” Lee said, looking back at Shibuki.

“Who are you to say that? You don't know anything about my father!” Shibuki snarled defensively.

Suyin counted down the remaining time from outside, torturing the young leader.

“I know that he was willing to sacrifice his life for his village and that is not something an ordinary man would do!” Lee told him, looking back to the villagers.

“What are you going to do?” Shibuki asked, watching Lee move to leave.

“You give up so easily, Shibuki-san, but I cannot!” Lee declared courageously, “I simply do not know how! There is always a way to win! To save the people you care for! To never give in, no matter the circumstances: that is my nindo! Your father is the kind of person who would not be swayed by fear or doubt...and neither am I.”

Lee disappeared from the entrance a moment later.

Shibuki stared in astonishment at the empty space the Leaf ninja had once occupied. He couldn't believe Lee was willing to fight when he was not. Then again, he could believe it.

Suyin's countdown drew into mere seconds, and his eyes crossed as an exploding tag thudded to the ground just in front of him. Startled, he jumped, and Shizuku bit down on his hand during the tumble. She rolled away from him when he recoiled, and hurried back to her family in the confusion of the blast.

The smoke cloud had temporarily confused the rogue ninja. Suyin scrambled to his feet furiously, 

'There's no way a coward like Shibuki would show his face to fight!'

Sakura was well aware that Lee had created the diversion, even before he slashed at the ties around her wrists, “Lee! It's good to see you! Where did you learn a strategy like that?”
“Tenten says that the best distraction is the one that explodes!” He chuckled. He didn't have to free Shino; his kikaichu insects had already chewed through his bonds and the Aburame disappeared into the smoke cloud to ambush their foes.

Lee and Sakura moved back into the clearing prepared to defend the helpless captives. Shizuku hopped from one group to the next, cutting people loose. It was mayhem as ninja began to dive at each other, slashing and punching. The smoke cloud dissipated and their wits returned.

Shino had gone directly for Suyin, drawing his nagamaki and commanding his insects to drain his foe of chakra. Sakura and Lee charged Hisame and her partner, avoiding their cable, and also defending the captives from odd-ended projectiles.

Sakura threw a monstrous punch that missed Hisame's partner, but gouged an enormous crack in the ground. As her opponent leapt up, Lee caught him, “Leaf Hurricane!” Three consecutive kicks had both knocked a number of his foe's teeth out, and sent him crashing into an upraised tree root. Sakura rounded on Hisame and attacked with her chakra scalpel, wanting to sever whatever she could to disable her foe.

Hisame lashed out with her cable-like a whip, snapping at Sakura and leaving an ugly welt on her shoulder. It didn't delay her as the pink haired girl barreled ahead stubbornly and swiped her muscle-severing hand across Hisame's chest. It was a fatal hit but it merely destroyed a water clone, ‘No! I had her for sure!’

Hisame was positioned behind her and plunged two kunai into the younger kunoichi's back. Sakura made a strangled noise before dropping to the ground.

“Sakura-chan!” Lee dove at Hisame, chasing her away, and then returned to his teammate's side, “Sakura-chan! Are you going to be alright?”

She sat up, her knees quaking with the effort, “Sure...but I've got to get these out of me. Lee watch out!” The cable snapped forward and snared him tightly. Hisame and her partner had regrouped and used the same electrical jutsu they had on Shino and Sakura.

Lee howled in response to the shock, but he remained conscious for the punishment. Unlike his teammates, his stamina and endurance for pain was greater. Sakura screeched at them to release him. Shino, on the other side of the clearing, had been testing Suyin's abilities to the extreme. The cunning leader eventually resorted to snatching up Shizuku's brother and drew out a kunai, “Now...let's say we calm down a bit, hm bug-ninja?”

Shino lowered his nagamaki, not willing to endanger the screaming child's life.

“You certainly did put up a valiant effort, but face it; you are outmatched and outnumbered!” Suyin called to the Leaf ninja, “Give up! I only want Shibuki...there's no need for you to be involved.” He turned to the ancient tree, “I know you're hiding there, Shibuki! Why don't you come out and save your precious little friends?”

A vortex of water abruptly shot-gunned passed Hisame and her partner, knocking them aside violently. Lee tumbled free and leapt back to Sakura, where she was mending her injury. Shino also moved to his team as the twisting current blew away the rest of the rogue ninja, before stopping ahead of their leader.

The water cleared and Shibuki stood in front of Suyin. A visible corona of chakra surrounded him and a hateful look was on his face, “Let the villagers go you traitor! You've been waiting for me, right?” He glared at his former teacher, “Well here I am!”
His villagers cheered together to see their leader had descended at last. The Leaf ninja, especially Lee, were also pleased he had joined their cause.

The rogue ninja regrouped, leaping at him. Shibuki raced through hand signs, “Suiton: Water Dragon Blast!” An enormous current shot up from the water's surface and swallowed the incoming nukenin, dragging them back into the water before they could even land a hit.

Shibuki stared down Suyin, and his old mentor spoke at length, “Well Shibuki, you haven't changed a bit! Heh heh! What impressive chakra! I take it that you drank from the Hero's Water?”

“I did.” His answer was plainly for show. He had no real reason to answer to traitorous slime like Suyin.

“But not all of it, surely!” Suyin added, grinning, “Where's the rest?”

“It's too late for it to do you any good. I am going to defeat you right here and now!” Shibuki declared confidently.

“Quite the little hero...you're aware of what happens to someone of your limited abilities when he drinks the Hero's Water?” Suyin reminded tauntingly, “You of all people should know that…”

Shibuki looked on, his chakra radiating off of him, not swayed at all by Suyin's chatter.

“It will do little good for you anyway you fool! You are so far out of your league…” Suyin warned, “If you multiply your chakra even by ten times or twenty, it's still no match for the chakra I already possess!”

“We'll soon find out!” Shibuki retorted, “Alright take this! Hidden Waterfall style: Water Slicing Blade!” He reached out his hand and formed a jagged ice sword that he had made with chakra.

Suyin tossed his captive aside and also created his own water sword, ready to counter the leader of the Waterfall Village.

They leapt at each other, slashing wildly, as fast as wind. Suyin sneered at Shibuki's display, “Your chakra may have increased but your moves haven't gotten any better! You've left your guard wide open, just as you used to!” He pushed ahead, getting leverage on Shibuki. Suyin cut down the center of the leader's ice blade and snapped it, reducing it to a splash of water.

Shibuki was stunned by the tactic and could not counter in time. Suyin ran him through with his own blade, skewering him like a stuck fish. Screams of children and adults alike filled the air. Lee looked on with horrified eyes as Shibuki stumbled and then fell in defeat.

Shibuki's chakra faded and his body convulsed, desperately trying to obey his brain's commands, ‘Get up...I have to do this for the village...for the children! I have to protect them!’

“You really haven't changed all that much, Shibuki,” Suyin sighed, kicking the man and rolling him over while he bled and shuddered, “You never did show much ability. You were weak then and you are weak now.” He reached into the young man's shirt and drew out the bottle, “How convenient! You've brought it with you!”

Suyin raised it above his head victoriously, “Now I have it at last! The Hero's Water! The world is mine for the taking!”

“Give it back!” Shibuki rasped and Suyin stomped on his wound to silence him. The treacherous rogue uncorked the jug and raised it to his lips, drinking a generous portion.
His chakra grew more potent and visible with each sip and once he stopped Suyin again stomped down on Shibuki, grinding him further into the ground, “Oh ho ho! Sorry! I guess I don't know my own strength!” He laughed loudly, “Did I just hear a rib crack? You should be honored, Shibuki! You'll be the first demonstration of just how strong your old teacher has become!”

“Enough!”

A kunai whipped past Suyin's face and he turned, seeing Lee had not backed down. The Leaf genin stood ready, challenging him in an offensive stance, “I have met foes like you before. You feel that simply because you say something makes it so, but I will make you eat those words!”

Shibuki smiled from his place beneath Suyin's foot, “You tell him...Lee.”

“Prepare to face the wrath of the Lotus!” Lee cried, racing forward, “Take this! Leaf Hurricane!” He lashed out with the strike that Suyin instantly blocked, something that was rarely done. Lee raced around him, attacking at random and searching for an opening. Suyin retaliated, and hurled the genin up into the high limbs of the tree, crushing him against the trunk.

'Such power!' Lee acknowledged that he was not on the same level as his opponent, 'If I am to defeat him then I must match him! I must surpass him!' He blinked in shock when Suyin immediately reappeared next to him, 'He is fast!' Lee, also quick and alert, jumped forward before Suyin could land another hit.

He landed on a lower branch and quickly snapped his leg weights off. Without the enormous restraints on him, he could emulate Suyin's speed even without the use of chakra. Lee zipped away from Suyin's blows, frustrating the veteran ninja. Lee threw his own punches, but found none of them had an effect when Suyin's chakra was great enough to absorb them.

'I am not strong enough to hurt him...' Lee avoided a fearsome swipe to the head, and then tried to trip his foe with a sweep-kick, 'So I need to become stronger!'

He only had time to open two of his chakra gates before Suyin had descended upon him again, hurling a punch that devastated part of the tree and snapped one of its gigantic roots in two. Lee charged forward when there was an opening, and kicked Suyin into the air. He was inspired to use a move that he had once seen his sensei perform. Though he could not himself use it, he could mimic it.

Lee reappeared above Suyin, faster than the eye could trace and vectored downward with a storm of wicked punches, “Fledgling Peacock!”

The blows connected brutally and Suyin gave a small cry before he crash-landed on the ground, tearing up earth from the force of the attack and his own chakra.

Though it had caused damage it had not been enough. Lee moved ahead to attack again, but Suyin had recovered remarkably fast and met him with a massive blow. He kicked the genin so hard he was sent skipping like a stone out over the water, before violently splashing into it. Lee disappeared after that.

“Is that the best you've got?” Suyin chortled madly, “Shibuki and his little Leaf friends set an excellent example, don't they? Selfless bravery! Selfless stupidity!”

Shino hacked at him with his nagamaki and carved a vicious gash down Suyin's left shoulder, “Did you forget someone?”

Shocked that he had been injured, Suyin retaliated. He created another water sword and dueled with
Shino on the shore. He was unaffected by the Aburame's swarm of insects; he was exerting more chakra than they could devour and moving faster than either they or Shino could match. Sakura joined the fray shortly after, not fully recovered, but too stubborn to let her teammate struggle alone. She could only hope Lee was alright.

“Stupid little pups! You don't know when to give up!” Suyin thrashed, fighting them off, but found that their attacks were progressively becoming more effective and his own progressively less effective, *What's this? The water must be wearing off...very well then.* He leapt back and took another drink. His chakra grew again and he met them, blowing them away with blasts of water from the shore.

From beneath the water's surface Lee was busy opening his chakra gates. He had figured the best place to avoid conflict was underwater, where Suyin would assume he would stay if he had been defeated...but five chakra gates open was hardly defeat. Lee exploded out of the water, catching Suyin from behind at the surface. The rogue moved to dodge, barely able to do so, and Lee's punch ripped past him and connected with the container of Hero's Water, shattering it.

“No!” Suyin couldn't believe he had been so careless. He lashed out but his strikes barely even nicked the genin. Lee's force and speed far exceeded the traitor’s and he had done it without the help of the sacred water of the village.

“Time to finish it!” Lee declared, plowing into Suyin, sending him hurtling across the wide lake to the lower-district homes. He met Suyin there and hit him again, his speed and strength so heightened that he tossed the nukenin back and forth across the lake like a helpless rag doll. Suyin was no longer a match. He was finished.

“Reverse Lotus!” Lee appeared beneath Suyin and hammered him in the gut with a kick that had all of his pent-up chakra channeled into it. Suyin hacked and then disappeared, thrown clear over the rocky edges of the village and out into the falls beyond. Sakura found the sight similar to a rocket-launch.

Lee landed and then fell to his butt.

It was not what they had pictured for when they defeated Suyin, but his teammates were relieved to see Lee's divine youthful energy had triumphed once again.

“Success!” Lee cried joyously and then fell over, exhausted.

By day's end peace had been restored and Hayate had returned to pick them up when they hadn't shown at the village. After hearing the story he was not as enthralled as his team had expected him to be, “You don't say? Good work then, all of you. I would expect no less of shinobi of the Leaf Village.”

They thanked him and Sakura then turned to Shibuki, who was looking worse for the wear: heavily bandaged and bruised. He was still smiling, “Is everything alright now, Shibuki? Are you feeling any better?”

“I'll be fine.” He told her quietly.

“That is the best part about this, Shibuki-san!” Lee grinned at him, “You drank the Hero's Water and still survived! Your youth has shielded you from its harmful effect! You truly are the hero of the Hidden Waterfall Village!”
“I’m afraid I’m just as much of a coward as I ever was...” He admitted sheepishly, “I was scared out of my mind the whole time.”

“Of course! Anyone would’ve been scared, Shibuki-sama!” Shizuku mewed up at him, “But you didn’t let it stop you and it made all the difference!”

He smiled at the children clinging to him, “Thanks for that...”

“It’s time for us to be on our way.” Hayate announced and his team gave a short farewell to their Waterfall companions. As they walked down the path into the sunset Shizuku and her brother called after them, offering for them to visit again sometime.

Shibuki smiled as he watched them leave, *Thank you, Leaf ninja. Perhaps we can be allies after all...’*

The following afternoon, Naruto found himself and his sensei in a new city, large and glorious by the bustling seaside. He was itching to try his luck with the new jutsu he had been briefed on, but while they trekked along the outskirts of the tourist town Jiraiya halted suddenly, setting his student on edge.

“What's wrong, Ero-sensei?” Naruto asked him, seeing it was a serious matter.

Jiraiya glanced over to his pupil, “Naruto...make sure you stay quiet. They're coming this way but they won't bother us if you keep your mouth shut.”

The blonde boy immediately thought of the Akatsuki, ’No way! How could they have found us? And how does the Perv expect us to-?’

A moment later he realized it wasn't the Akatsuki at all. A suspicious group of ninja, however, did approach them from down the road. They were leaving the city and Naruto and Jiraiya would have to pass them in order to enter it.

The leader of the platoon was not a subtle man. He was dressed in armor that looked to be from Jiraiya's time. He was garbed in dark, rich colors, and his face had a single, muted scar that ran from above his left eye diagonally down across his nose and right cheek. His hair was a copperish color, now graying. He was old and clearly wasn't aging as gracefully as Jiraiya. His face was wrinkled and his eyes were lit with an intensity that could have only been gained from years of fighting.

Instantly Naruto knew that the shinobi ahead of them was someone not to be trifled with, “Hey...Ero-sensei...just who is that guy over there?”

“Him? I don't blame you for asking, Naruto. That there is the most talented murderer in the history of the shinobi world.” Jiraiya warned him darkly, “His name is Dintei Bi. I hoped I could have lived out the rest of my life without ever seeing his face again...”

The description didn't sit well with Naruto. Suddenly he was sorry he had asked.

Once the two parties were on opposite sides of the street, though it was much to Jiraiya's disdain, Bi's party halted when he held up his hand. He looked to Jiraiya and smiled a sickly-looking smirk, “Oh, well, if it isn't Jiraiya-sama, one of the Legendary Three! Fancy seeing you down here.”

“I can't say the same about you, Bi.” Jiraiya answered coldly, “I wonder what it is that an old man like you could possibly be scheming these days?”
Bi chuckled, “Now, now, Gama-sennin, no need to be so rude! These days I no longer hold a quarrel with Leaf. My village is prospering again, at long last.” Contradictory to what he had said about Leaf he looked down at Naruto and then scowled, as if he actually recognized the boy.

“I'm not going to make nice, Bi. Don't forget how many innocent Leaf ninja you slaughtered during the war...” Jiraiya wasn't picking a fight, but if one started he would be sure to finish it, “That isn't something that can be forgiven.”

“I would hardly call them innocent,” Bi smirked and then added, “And certainly they weren't Leaf shinobi at all, if you ask me.”

Naruto didn't understand, 'What is this guy talking about? How can he talk like that when he killed so many people in Konoha? Of course they'd be-!'

“Confused, kiddo?” Bi noted the blonde boy's perplexed expression, “It's really quite simple. You see, I only eliminated those who called themselves Leaf ninja under false pretenses. They were really ninja from my village, Hidden Rock, and they ran away and hid in Leaf during the war. Cowards like that deserved to die.”

“No. They were all brave people who I was honored to call my comrades.” Jiraiya corrected the false statement. He wanted Naruto to know the truth, but also know the moral behind it.

“You are entitled to feel however you like,” Bi shrugged dismissively, “Although...it's a good thing that there are no more traitors hiding in Konoha, right Jiraiya-sama? Or else I wouldn't be able to retire!”

He laughed in entertainment at the thought and Jiraiya grimaced, as if he knew something that Bi didn't. Or perhaps did know. Bi's small troop of underlings waited behind him silently, their expressions vacant or hidden. It was as if they couldn't hear the conversation at all.

Bi decided to move on, “Well then, it was good seeing you again, Gama-sennin.” He glanced down at Naruto and added, “And good day to you too, Namikaze-san.” He said the name with great revulsion.

“This boy is an Uzumaki!” Jiraiya immediately corrected Bi, “You shouldn't assume so much, Bi.”

“Hm. Uzumaki.” Bi had great familiarity with the clan names of ninja, “That sounds like a Whirlpool name...I suppose that makes him less disgusting.”

He and his platoon left after that, moving on down the sandy road. They were so confident and unafraid of other ninja that they traveled out in the open, or at least, made it appear that way.

“That was a genjutsu...” Jiraiya muttered, troubled, “Those guys are good...there's no error in their formation.”

“Uh...Ero-sensei...” Naruto spoke up after they continued on down the path, “Just what was that back there? Why did you get so mad at what he said to me?”

“Because Bi mistook you for someone that he hated very much.” Jiraiya told him succinctly, “I corrected him. I'm not going to let his hard feelings rub off on you, you hear me?”

Naruto nodded, not fully understanding, and they continued on into the city in silence.
“So he’s dead, hm?” He flipped his blonde hair out of his face for a moment, “That’s no good. Who’s supposed to keep watch over Orochimaru now that we’ve lost Kabuto, do you think?”

Across the hall Zetsu’s face appeared, half-melded with the stone wall. His gold eyes blinked listlessly above the other man’s head, trapped in his own thoughts. The blonde man scowled when he was not acknowledged.

“Hey! Are you listening at all, Zetsu-san?”

“Your chatter is distracting...” Zetsu separated from the wall completely, independent again, and walked down the hall, “Your concern is unnecessary, Deidara. There is already a replacement for Kabuto to take over his duties.”

Deidara stalked after the former Grass ninja, disgruntled, but not yet angry. Being new to the organization he had yet to gain the respect the veteran members possessed. Often he'd go ignored in conversations and meetings, or be excluded from more significant missions. What was more frustrating was that his partner, Sasori, always made sure to criticize his art. He wondered why he put up with such treatment when he was fully capable of blowing the hideout to hell in an instant.

The dark hallway opened up into a pleasant courtyard that resided above the building. There were occupants in the garden. Deidara blinked over to his left where Kisame sat contentedly, wrapping up Samehada in cloth. The old wrappings had been torn off during a recent fight. He found that the strange, bluish ninja irritated him less than the others. He wasn’t in the habit of annoying his peers.

Zetsu stopped nearby Kisame and looked up into a sumac tree, “Come down from there.”

“Oh! Of course, Zetsu-san!” A skinny figure garbed in dark clothing shifted on a branch, and then ungracefully tumbled from his perch. He quickly stood and brushed himself off. Deidara observed the newbie suspiciously.

His attire consisted of blacks and grays that were offset by a conspicuously orange mask that hid the man's face. He wore no cloak that showed his affiliation with the Akatsuki, and to Deidara he appeared to be the sorriest excuse for a ninja he had ever laid eyes on, ‘There’s no way that’s a daisy-chain that’s hanging around his neck?’ The poorly linked flowers fell out of shape and drifted to the ground a moment later.

Deidara furrowed his brow, “...what is that thing?”

The masked person looked over his shoulder expectantly, not realizing he was the one in question.

“He is called Tobi.” Zetsu answered, his gaze again aimed nowhere in particular, “He is one of my subordinates and does errand work for the Akatsuki. From here out he will act as our spy on Orochimaru.”

Deidara snorted in disapproval. Dressing ridiculously was one thing, but daisy-chains were another matter.

“All right.” The masked man gave his attention to his superior when he spoke, “You have been assigned to do reconnaissance for the next 24 months. Keep a low profile and report back to this place every
month with status on Orochimaru. If you are successful in this task you will be given more challenging missions.”

Tobi nodded ecstatically, “You got it, Zetsu-san! The snake-man won't suspect a thing! I'll get this done for sure! You just say the word and I'll get out there and dig up the dirt on that guy...”

“Go now.”

“Woo!” Tobi darted out of the garden at Zetsu's command, and his cheers could be heard even as he stumbled down the nearby hill that led out of the valley. Deidara was thoroughly appalled with the selection.

“Orochimaru will probably kill him on sight.” The blonde man mused, “There's no way a fool like that could get the job right.”

Zetsu stared out into the garden but answered, “His stupidity is what Orochimaru will ignore. His success in this will be greater than past operatives. Tobi has a curiously high success rate, despite being easily distracted.”

“That's the biggest load of garbage I've heard since I got here, hn!” Deidara said snippishly, “Where did you even dig up an idiot like him anyway, Zetsu-san?”

“From a rock pile...long ago.”

The explanation still didn't satisfy Deidara, “That was a real waste of energy on your part then...I bet he won't last a month out of the 24 you assigned him!”

“I don't know...” Kisame spoke up abruptly from his place on a tree stump, “There's something about that goofball I kind of like.”

Tobi's departure for the Hidden Sound Village was prompt. It would be, overall, his third total visit to the Rice Country ever. Seldom did he get lost despite the rolling plains of wheat and murky swamp-forests littering the landscape. There was a subtle geography to the land that he was keen to.

He toted an unconscious man on his back. It was no one he knew, but he had been requested to nab and bag a person before he landed in the Sound Village. The young farm-lad on his back gave a soft groan, stirred, and was limp again a moment later.

“I'm sorry fellow...” Tobi muttered, lugging along his helpless captive, “They asked for a young person so you will have to do. I really am sorry. But remember: we owe respect to the living; the dead we owe only truth...so in this case I need to give you both!”

Sunlight illuminated the surrounding forest in sharp, geometric patterns of green and bark. Tobi scuttled along the forest floor, careful to not trip on snaking tree roots. He knew already he was in Sound, not because he had remembered the location exactly, but because he was greeted at a rendezvous.

A slender man dressed in dark garb stepped up from a gap between two monstrous tree roots. His violet hair was groomed meticulously and his eyes, cruelly gold, were focused on Tobi.

Tobi stumbled while trying to give a bow, which came out as half-professional. The teen on his back sighed heedlessly in his sleep. Tobi stood straighter, slightly intimidated, “Uh...hello, Koinyu-san! I came on time again, right?”
"A bit earlier than I anticipated..." Koinyu droned, already familiar with Tobi's scatterbrain habits, "I see you've brought a present for me, Tobi. Give him here. I've run out of subjects for my experiments and I was afraid I'd have to go fish for some myself..."

The transfer of the helpless farm-hand was made silently. Tobi slipped the boy from his shoulder and Koinyu received him, slinging him up again like a sheep intended for shearing. Tobi winced at the greedy look in the other man's eyes. What experiments he performed on people he did not know and he felt guilt weigh his chest down.

He was dead for sure, as promised. Tobi suddenly felt the irrational urge to save the child he had helped doom, but Koinyu walked ahead without a moment's waste. Tobi sighed resignedly. He had always had to remind himself that he was a good person who worked with bad people. And by working with bad people he was made to do bad things. But he always knew deep down that his goodness was always the strongest feeling inside of him. He took no pleasure in harming others.

"Get a move-on, then, you swirly wretch..." Koinyu snapped, "The entrance is right here, if you've forgotten again. Come in but don't follow me. Go straight down the hall and you will find Orochimaru-sama. And I mean straight: no turns for the fun of it to get lost. Go to Orochimaru-sama for a debriefing."

Tobi nodded as he ducked down into the metal, storm-cellar entrance that was one of the smaller ways into the snake-sennin's hideout. He followed the violet haired man down the stairwell until it opened up into an antechamber, and then paused, saying, "Well it was nice seeing you again, Koinyu-san! I thought that maybe next time I could-"

Koinyu stalked down the hall with his new test subject, completely ignoring the lackey.

Tobi sighed again behind his mask. It was always easy infiltrating the hideout, because everyone within it chose to ignore him. A fool who favored orange masks and playing games was not someone the shinobi in Sound were willing to take seriously, 'And thank goodness for that...'

Tobi traipsed down the hall, not taking any unnecessary turns, and at the very end of the echoing, stone corridor he peeked into a large auditorium with occupants.

Sasuke wheeled around the room with great speed, and Tobi did a double-take when he observed the young ninja lash out with a tangle of dark snakes in midair, as Orochimaru moved ghoulishly to counter. The scuffle was brief and could scarcely be followed by the untrained eye of any non-ninja. Tobi managed, gawking at the grace and mystery of their snake summoning techniques.

Orochimaru's attention was drawn to the neophyte lurking in the doorway. His expression soured, and he turned back to the Uchiha prodigy, "That will have to do for now, Sasuke-kun."

Sasuke silently stalked out of the room after he had been dismissed. Tobi fidgeted as the young shinobi passed him in the doorway, unable to keep quiet, "Oh, Sasuke-san, what a marvelous Sharingan! So red and so shiny you'd think that-"

“What? Were you the village-idiot wherever you came from?” Sasuke snorted, barely sparing Tobi a sideways glance. Tobi nodded half-heartedly, a bit confused. The young Uchiha exited, slinking like a shadow into the empty corridor and chose not to even begin questioning Orochimaru's reasons for inviting a dunce such as the latter into his hideout.

“Well?” Tobi turned his attention to Orochimaru when the snake spoke, “Report if you have any information of consequence.”
“Oh right!” The masked man nodded in understanding, “You see, the organization doesn't tell the likes of Tobi much so I have to sneak and listen to what Zetsu-san and Kisame-san say to each other...”

Orochimaru's expression betrayed no amount of patience. If he had been paying attention at all Tobi missed it. He continued rambling, not dissuaded in the slightest, “It has been mentioned a few times that the organization has two biju for sure! They know it and I know it. I guess...and they are preparing to collect the Ichibi and the Nibi sometime...uh...well, maybe three years. I didn't really hear that part...”

Orochimaru was somewhat pleased with the meager scraps of knowledge that had been gathered. After having been a member of the Akatsuki himself some time ago, he was previously aware of their intentions. Their status, however, would need surveillance. They were more of a threat to his goals than most, even Leaf. Orochimaru had reasoned that the best way to foil the Akatsuki from further advancement would be to kill the jinchuriki before they could capture them, 'What a fun game! It seems they're still floundering to catch them all on schedule...and their hired help isn't exactly quality either...'

“Tell me, Tobi...” Orochimaru droned after a moment, smirking, “Has anyone within the Akatsuki even remotely realized yet that you are not truly on their side?”

“Well...” His response required some thought, “Even I haven't figured out what side I'm on yet...it's anyone's guess, Orochimaru-sama!”

An irritable mutter sounded, “...it was a great mistake operating on you those years ago...”

“You mean when you and Zetsu-san found me in the Land of Rocks?” Tobi asked for clarification and then paused, “Or was it the Land of Geodes? Hm...”

“Neither. It's called the Land of Stone you imbecile...” He sighed in heartfelt exasperation (twas the price paid for a spy with no poise,) “Even to this day I still wish you had amnesia.”

“ Nowadays it's upgraded to short-term memory loss,” The masked man informed him helpfully, “Hey...that must mean I'm getting better!”

“Leave before I begin considering a replacement for you...”

“Yes, certainly, Orochimaru-sama! I'm a good boy,” Tobi nodded again, “Tobi is a good boy.” He scuttled out of the auditorium a moment later, dutifully, and began the tormenting journey down the hallway again, wishing to take a turn to explore and knowing Koinyu would give him hell about it.

Orochimaru stood in the echoing dimness of the room, regretting his investment in the blockhead who was responsible with the intelligence gathered about the Akatsuki.

Tobi, no longer wanted by either of his two affiliations, decided to return home for some rest. Night had settled and blanketeted the sky in a cowl of endless stars. Tobi moved with great speed beneath them, looking up now and then for their guidance in direction.

The moors and farmland of the Rice Country melted away into dense blocks of woodland. Tobi disappeared into the gloom of it all, moving up the clear incline as rolling hills morphed into the spine of a monstrous mountain chain. He was like a ghost in the dipping valleys. Animals sipping cautiously near stream-banks would scatter at the sight of his unearthly mask. An orange whirlpool in the black; even wolves cowered into the bramble.
Tobi continued contentedly, unafraid of the night and its inhabitants. A fragment of the moon glimpsed through clouds that had lingered from that evening. It blinked silver on and off on the land below. Tobi made a sharp turn left onto a worn trail, leapt a gap (even though it provided the convenience of a footbridge,) and began his approach to a nearby village.

He didn't count the hours it had taken to get there. He hummed to himself pleasantly, entering the sleepy village, which was lit by only a few lanterns and smoke whispered from chimneys. Tobi stopped outside a darkened home's door and knocked expectantly. He waited until an elderly man answered the door.

The wrinkled old-timer blinked up at him, scrutinizing his appearance in the darkness, and then smiled in familiarity, “Ah, Tobi-kun! Back again I see! To what do I owe this late visit, eh?”

Tobi bent down and lifted a basket that sat forgotten outside the door, “Really, Char-san, when you pick these you shouldn't just leave them out here. Do I have to remind you every time?”

Char accepted the basket of radishes sheepishly, “Again? I was so sure I brought them in this time...thank you anyway, Tobi-kun.”

“Goodnight, Char-san!” Tobi moved back out onto the dark street and Char bade him farewell before closing the door after him. He passed through the slumbering town and back out into surrounding forest of the mountain.

Rin, much to her displeasure, arrived home later than usual. She had been caring for a severely ill child for most of the day and the family lived in a nearby village. She hadn't stopped working until she was sure he was stable, and before she knew it midnight was near. Rin packed her things and accepted the payment the parents offered for her trouble.

Rin trudged home wearily. A sigh escaped her when she noted that Sesshu was not out on the porch waiting to greet her, 'I don't really blame him...it's late and he needs sleep just like everyone else.'

She shuffled up the steps and into the house. Rin set her bag down and blinked in puzzlement to see her ninken pacing the halls anxiously, or rather, excitedly. She shut the door behind her, “Um, Sesshu? What's wrong boy? Are you feeling okay?”

The golden dog took a seat in front of her, tail wagging wildly, “He's back! He looks very tired, though...and skinnier too. You should go feed him I think.”

An elated grin spread across her face and she patted Sesshu on the head, “Good! Now go to sleep boy. It's late and you'll need your energy if you're going to babysit Yuma tomorrow.”

Rin moved down the hall, her heart fluttering. She could still hear Sesshu pacing anxiously behind her. Truthfully, the event was nothing exciting since it was totally expected, but Rin always felt a bit lightheaded when her husband returned from his missions.

She sniffed the air, scenting him, and then peeked into the bedroom. He was seated on the bed with his hands on his knees, exhausted. Rin sauntered into the room, smiling, “You're late again...but only just. You had us a little worried you know.”

His voice was soft, “I'm sorry...”

“Aw, don't worry about it...and why don't you take that mask off now, huh?” She crossed over to where he sat, nodding in approval as he removed the orange guise, “There we go! I'll go get you something to eat now.”
He chuckled at her liveliness, “Thanks, Rin, but you know...it is late. You should really rest-”

She was already out the door. He relented and then stood up again, undressing in order to change into more comfortable clothes.

Sesshu, still too antsy to get some sleep, bounded into the room a moment later. Redressed and too tired to prevent it, he let the dog leap up and lick his face adoringly, “I'm so glad you're home...we were wondering when you'd be back!”

He patted Sesshu on the head, “I'm back now so relax Sesshu! And have you been protecting everyone while I've been gone?”

“But of course,” The dog backed away, satisfied with the greeting, “Though there hasn't been any trouble really.”

He was glad to hear it and after telling Sesshu to get some sleep, he looked across the room to where a mirror had been hung on the wall. Rin was the one who used it. He often tried not to look at himself whenever it could be avoided. Two black eyes stared back at him, ebony hair spiked in all directions. He would've been handsome, he supposed, if not for the scars running down his right cheek. He ran his fingers across them in disappointment, 'It's not like the rest of my body is any better off...'

After a moment he looked away from his reflection, fed up with it, 'My image in the mirror and my soul look nothing alike.'

He snapped out of his reverie when his wife returned with a bowl of leftovers. He noted her chewing a bit and was glad she had thought to feed herself as well. Rin handed him a warm cup of sake along with the food and he thanked her for her thoughtfulness. She took a seat beside him, cross-legged, and stared at his face with more intent than he could bear to muster for himself.

“So...” Rin began quietly, “How did it go?”

“Well, the only fight I got into was with a few Rain ninja before meeting with Zetsu-san.” He recapped while squinting his eyes thoughtfully, “I finished them quickly but I suspect one of them must've knocked a joint loose...”

“Let me see,” She shifted to sit behind him on the bed. It was especially clear in the tank top he was then wearing that his right arm was artificial. The same prosthetic material ninja used in the making of certain puppets. Rin glanced down at her husband's leg, considering it, knowing it was also automail.

Her practiced hands skimmed across the arm he offered up, and Rin searched for any abnormalities that she had grown keen to detecting over the years. Her eyes hovered for a moment over one spot in particular before she could confirm it, “You're right...this will only take a second...”

He stopped eating on cue and held his breath, aware of what was coming.

With a swift motion the flat of her palm snapped his forearm back into place, connecting it with the elbow properly. The pain passed quickly, mostly due to experience with previous injuries. He took a sip of the wine and relaxed, closing his eyes briefly.

“How's the leg then?” She thought to ask.

“Functioning,” He smiled at her, “Talking like this makes me feel like a robot.” He paused, glancing down at the meat and rice in the bowl he had been eating out of, “What kind of fish is this?”
“Catfish.”

“It's good.” He decided aloud, “How’s Yuma been?”

Rin fiddled with her hair as it hung messily over her shoulders, “His aim is perfect now...the little bugger has a harder time missing than hitting a target. Oh! And a nice Sand ninja paid a visit a few days ago to pick up some medicine.”

He gave her a concerned look, “You let a Sand shinobi come up here?”

“He was so great! He was just a kid really.” Rin recalled with a smile, “He played with Yuma and Sesshu before he left. Quiet like most jounin...but he's pretty good with children. At first I couldn't believe it...”

“Kakashi made jounin when he was young.” He reminded her.

“Let's not talk about that, please.” She frowned sadly, “Are you finished with that?”

“Yes, thank you.” He let her take the empty bowl from him, and declined politely when she asked him if he wanted more sake. He watched Rin leave, highly irritated at the mentioning of Kakashi.

He felt terrible that he had again upset her. He was aware that talking about the past always made her defensive while he, in contrast, welcomed it with open arms. The only way he knew how to lighten her spirits again was to focus on the present and its positive aspects.

He stood up and slinked into the hallway, curious. Sesshu was fast asleep on a couch inside at last, and he turned down another hall, slipping into another room without a sound. Yuma was curled in a ball in his bed, asleep. He grinned at the sight of the child, bubbling over with euphoria. After a few steps he took a seat beside the small boy. He grinned down at him, “Yuma is a good boy. My favorite boy.”

He kissed him again out of habit, but Yuma was by then too hyper and fussy to even begin considering sleep again. His father resorted to an Induced Sleep Jutsu to help him along. Yuma sank carelessly back down to his pillow a moment later, allowing his father a means of escape.

He chuckled wildly to himself as he left the boy's room, practically hovering down the hall. There was no better feeling than having someone so small and alive to cherish, he thought to himself.

Once back in his own bedroom he found Rin there on the bed. She looked sleepier than she had earlier let on, and was busy changing the pillowcases with a muted grace. He clambered over to her, tossing aside the unwanted linens, and pressed up against her flank, “I've missed you so much, Rin...I really hate playing dumb all the time.”

She nodded in understanding, “I know...but it's your best cover. Besides, it takes a truly brilliant
person to appear that stupid.”

He chuckled at her compliment, “Yeah...I guess I have them all fooled...as for my dignity I've learned to go without it.”

He helped her stuff a pillow into a new cover and then set it aside. There was a peaceful silence between them for a while, and he watched Rin settle beneath the blanket and curl up against his back. She breathed in his smell and was comforted by it. Her brow furrowed after a moment as a painful thought crossed her mind.

“Obito...” She mumbled, slightly muffled by the blanket, “The Sand ninja...he said he used to live in Konoha. He told me that the Sandaime is dead now.”

“Yes, I know.” He confirmed it sadly, “Sarutobi-sama did his part...Orochimaru is also planning to kill Tsunade-sama as well.”

“You won't let that happen...” Rin said softly.

He rolled over and let her settle her cheek on his chest.

“I won't.” He promised and then blinked down at her, smiling, “So are you ready to go to sleep now, Rin?”

“Well, since you just got back I thought I'd stay up a while,” She admitted, despite her desperate need for some rest, “Just in case there was...you know...anything that you wanted.”

Obito smirked at the thought, “There are plenty of things I want. It just depends on how long you're willing to stay awake...”

Rin rolled her eyes at his implication, and was then caught off-guard by his sudden movement. She leapt up, throwing the blanket off, but knew she was too late to match his speed. He descended and she writhed, instantly knowing it was impossible to avoid one of his tickle-attacks. Both she and Yuma had tried countless times to escape it and never succeeded.

She bucked, laughing so loudly that she feared she'd wake their son up. Her toes curled in feathery anguish, and she managed a good head-butt that knocked him back a few inches. Obito laughed at her effort, skillfully tracing her rib cage with his fingertips, waiting for her to beg for mercy.

Rin gave a bark of annoyance that was typical of any Inuzuka, and Obito quickly ended his antics. He was accustomed to the fact that a fearsome nip always followed her warning yelp, although sometimes he provoked her merely for the effective biting. That was an entirely different matter, however...

“You are...so juvenile...” Her breath was ragged and she stared up at where he hovered over her, wearing a childish grin. That look melted her heart, though. It was the same look he had offered her when they were children and she wondered how she had managed to ignore it then.

She felt him shift, laying belly-down beside her and Rin relaxed, assuming that he had given up his buffoonery.

“I'm not juvenile,” He assured her, kissing her tattooed cheek, “I just like this kind of foreplay.”

This time she did not roll her eyes.
“You're too tense; loosen up just a bit,” Tenten instructed, turning Fujita's wrist at a slight angle, “There you go! Throw now, you're all set!”

The nervous genin hurled a senbon across the courtyard and finally hit a target (that Tenten had set up for him earlier,) and followed it with three more throwing spines in quick succession, all relatively near the middle of each mark. His smile was one of pleasant surprise.

“What did I tell you, Fujita?” She chuckled, clapping the boy on the back, “You're getting the feel for it now so just keep at it.”

“Thank you, Tenten-san.” He said quietly, “My Aniki always tried to demonstrate how to use throwing spines but I just...I never really understood. I was terrible.”

Tenten walked across the garden and plucked each senbon from its respective target, “It's not about understanding, you know...it's the technique. Throwing a needle isn't the same as a shuriken or kunai. The motion should be fluid and quick, and follow the arm's guidance when you cast it. Any idiot can learn to throw a knife but these require more patience than brawn to use.”

Fujita blinked helplessly at her and she added, “And your brother...I'm sure he was just teaching you the way he learned. Everyone perceives things differently, am I right?”

He nodded in quiet agreement. Fujita accepted the senbon she handed back to him and did his best to veil his embarrassment. His own brother had sent a tutor to help him hone his skills with projectiles. Had it been necessary? Yes indeed. Had it been abrupt? Even more so.

Fujita obeyed her instruction and hoped she wouldn't notice his curiosity, 'She's so clever and friendly...I thought no one else could teach that way except for sensei...or my Aniki...'

His shy shell had been thoroughly cracked. Tenten set him to work, observing and correcting his form while he imagined the targets to be an opponent's face or throat. His strikes were becoming progressively more accurate.

Hikune stepped out of the Main house and into the courtyard, smiling knowingly as his little brother hurled rounds of throwing spines at a row of dummies. He came to stand beside Tenten, and ran a hand through his russet-hued hair, “What an improvement...and it's nice to see a smile on his face for a change!”

Tenten folded her arms, sneaking a glance at the jounin beside her, “I think it helps that he has a great older brother like you. He draws a lot of inspiration from you, Hikune.”

Fujita continued practicing after giving a brief wave to his sibling. Hikune laughed quietly to himself, glad that things had worked out for his rabbity little brother.

After a moment the kunoichi spoke up again, “By any chance have you happened to see Neji while you were in there, Hikune? I told him I would be a bit late today, but he's even later than I am at this point.”

“I saw him. He was...” His voice lowered a margin, “He was training with Hinata-sama.”

Tenten's eyes met the ground with the news. Hikune then added, “I'm sure he remembered his appointment with you though! He only does as Hiashi-sama asks, you know. He'd never deliberately-”

“It's fine.” She smiled with as much aplomb as she could gather, “I'll catch up with him later if he's not busy. I'll just help out Fujita until then.”
Hikune gave her an uneasy look, “You're asking a little much of yourself, Tenten. You've been working with Fujita for hours now and you expect to continue on to train with Neji-sama? I suggest you take some time to relax.”

Tenten blinked up at him, considering it, 'I am tired...but I like working hard. Besides the assurance of improvement and purpose it provides, I guess I'm just too used to being occupied.'

She blamed Lee and Gai; always running around with some agenda, mission, or aphorism that promoted health and youth. She looked over to Fujita and saw he was still focused on training. He'd be fine without a supervisor for a while, she guessed.

She nodded, somewhat defeated, and followed when Hikune led her out of the courtyard. Fujita hadn't even noticed their departure.

Tenten walked beside the quiet jounin and beheld a new part of the Hyuga estate that she had not been to before. It was a large garden full of boisterous colors and smells that stretched from one end of the property to the other. It was fenced off by a wall so naturally she had never noticed it on any previous occasion. She walked beside Hikune, wondering if she should say something.

Tenten frowned inwardly, at odds with herself. Hikune was unusually nice for a person of his particular breeding. It was strange that she felt like she was being rude simply because she had nothing to report to him.

Neji, on the other hand, she spoke with even when the whim struck her during complete silence (which often happened while she was near him.) There were times she didn't have to say anything to him at all either. He didn't have to verbally communicate a thought for her to understand, most of the time. The slightest facial expression, movement, or grunt spoke volumes to her. After years of training she nearly considered herself a full-blown translator of his silent language. The silence with Hikune, however, was one of the most uncomfortable things she had felt to date.

‘Is it because I can't read him? His face is so calm...’ She wondered briefly and then concluded, 'Or maybe is it because I don't have to? He's pretty effusive for a Hyuga. I'm just reading too much into what should be obvious. Is that it?'

“You know...this garden belongs to the Main House. Only members of the Hyuga clan are permitted to enter this place...or the guests they invite,” Hikune spoke at length, much to her relief, “Ironic how the Branch family is charged with the care of it, don't you think?”

“They deserve better.” Tenten announced tersely, “They shouldn't be treated as inferiors or servants all the time. So many of them have potential that gets overlooked...”

He nodded, saying, “I agree. But I wonder...if any of your opinion has anything to do with Neji-sama's bias?”

“Of course I came to my own decision!” She snapped, but then after a moment added, “Well...Neji certainly did have some influence over what I know but I really meant what I said. That's what I believe.”

“That's perfectly fine.” Hikune chuckled, “Because your teammate has the right idea. I myself wish the Branch house was treated with more respect.”

“If you really believe that then why hasn't anything been done to change it?” Tenten asked pressingly, “If there are people in the Main house who feel that way then they should be willing to intervene. It could work!”
He looked off the side of the path, staring sadly into the lines of azalea.

“It isn't that simple...” He said quietly, “Though I would do anything to help if I could, my family and I really have no say in the matter at all. You see, it is up to the Head of the Hyuga and the Main house to guide and maintain this clan. It is our elders, however, who determine its structure. They have the final say.”

“Oh right...elders.” Tenten muttered, “But why are they left in charge?”

“Because of moral and respect issues, I suppose. Their use has long since expired anyway...” Hikune admitted lowly, “Old views prolong old feuds. The elders are strict enough to penalize anyone and everyone who tries to tamper with their control over the Branch House.”

She frowned, understanding and yet hating the truth of it. The hopelessness of it all ate away at her gut, and the terrifying thought struck her a moment later, "Does Neji know this? Has he realized who's really behind the Hyuga's decision-making? And when he does become the leader of his clan...will there be anything he can do to change it?"

She had never questioned it before. Once he had succeeded Hinata as heir, Tenten had automatically assumed all of his problems were solved. He would take power once his uncle retired and repair his clan's damages. The Branch Family would be freed and he would never again feel imprisoned by his own blood…but in the end he was not really the one in control.

"Has anyone ever challenged your clan's elders, Hikune?" Tenten asked, somewhat panicked.

He looked at her for a long moment before he answered, “Yes. Hiashi-sama often used to cause a great fuss over the Branch House's treatment when he was younger. But back then he was a young, naive leader and he was threatened to be demoted if he didn't stop his antics. He had no choice but to give into them or risk the elders instating a new leader who would have a harsher method of coping with the Branch Family.”

'Being the leader of the Hyuga...it's all...it means nothing. Just a figurehead role...’ Tenten paused on the path to think, 'What will Neji do? His uncle even tried and couldn't change a thing!'

She put herself in her friend’s place and rage bubbled up inside of her. Hiashi may have tried, she noted, but just how much? 'How long before he chickened out? Maybe if he did give it all he had and was punished for it, it would've sparked something. But now everyone assumes things are the way they are because he made it so...'

The image of Hiashi that was painted for her was morphed into something a bit more cowardly than what Hikune had intended. Tenten caught up to Hikune, and then said, “Okay. I know Neji's uncle meant well, but if he really wanted to help the Branch that badly why did he still use the seal to subdue them? Neji's told me stories about how his uncle-”

“Using the seal can't always be avoided.” Hikune cut in sadly, “I was once reduced to using that jutsu, you know.”

Tenten fell silent. She had not even remotely considered Hikune to be capable of such a thing.

He observed her paling face as they both stopped, surrounded by magnolias. Hikune's voice was quiet, “Do you think less of me because of that, Tenten?”

She shook her head in the negative, but it was clear enough for him on her face how it wasn't sitting well. He attempted to explain, “I take no pleasure in demonstrations of control, especially within my clan. Fujita...he was three at the time, I think. He had been attacked by a drunken Branch member. If
I didn't react sooner my brother may have been killed, do you see?"

Tenten nodded, gulping hard.

“\textit{It is a defense from our own mandate.}” Hikune informed her of the paradox, “\textit{Create a seal to protect ourselves from it! It is a circle, Tenten, that's just as preposterous as it is unavoidable. The elders see it as tradition...}”

“\textit{There must be some way to change it...}” Determination replaced the anger in her voice, “\textit{Neji would do anything to fix it...I would do anything, if I could!}”

He smiled at her, motioning for them to keep walking. “\textit{Your hope is well invested, I think. Recently...I suppose it must be because of his daughter's displays of courage...Hiashi-sama has been appealing to the elders again at last.}”

Tenten was surprised by the tidbit, “Really? But...wouldn't they threaten him like last time?”

“\textit{There would be no point in that. Even my own father is standing by Hiashi-sama in his endeavor.}” Hikune mentioned thoughtfully, “\textit{Yet even now...the stubbornness of my clan's elders keeps them from budging on the matter.}”

She had figured as much. Tenten glanced over to a koi pond beside the path, “\textit{The Branch...they'd be so much happier and more peaceful without the seal. There's no reason for anyone to support it.}”

“\textit{The elders prioritize order above the emotional health of this clan. That's why we've lasted so long.}” He reminded her darkly, “\textit{And just what is it that constitutes happiness? Will their freedom instantly make them happy people? How can they let go of all the humility and suffering they've endured, Tenten...how can they forgive?}”

“\textit{There's always a way!}” She declared fiercely, “\textit{Neji suffered too and he pulled through it...he was able to rise above his pain!}”

“\textit{And he had help doing that, I bet.}” Hikune smiled again at her, knowingly, “\textit{Even though Neji-sama is now a part of the Main Family and heir to this clan, do you think that he is happy?}”

Tenten fell silent again. It was obvious wasn't it? ‘\textit{Of course not...he may be happier than he was but Neji...his pain is still there.}'

Hikune gave her a soft word of apology, interrupting her thoughts, “\textit{It seems my leg is acting up again...let's stop for a moment to rest.}”

Tenten followed after him, finally noting the limp he had long concealed and sat down beside him on a nearby bench. ‘\textit{Looks like he isn't over his injuries just yet...}'

She turned to him, “\textit{Neji isn't all that happy, I have to admit. He's frustrated and pressured by being the heir to the clan, even if he doesn't say anything about it, I can still tell.}”

He nodded, “\textit{I believe Hinata-sama had the same problems.}”

“That's true,” Tenten agreed, but then added, “\textit{And Hinata-chan...she recovered and grew out of it thanks to Naruto. Maybe I can help Neji more? I know I'm not much good to him, but I want to see him happy.}”

It was quiet for a moment, and Tenten took the stolen time to fully appreciate the beauty of the garden they had ventured into. She felt that she would not be visiting it again anytime soon unless
Neji gave permission, but something told her not to push her luck. He might decide to inquire how she had learned about it in the first place.

“I think you're just the person Neji-sama needs.” Hikune informed her, “Healing this clan must be taken one step at a time...” He stood up again, rested, but wobbly, “Ah...and I guess I could say the same for myself.”

Tenten merely laughed and helped him adjust, hoping he wouldn't collapse. Being the strong person that he was, however, he remained upright. He started off down the path with her again at a slower pace than earlier, “Tenten, thank you for helping a poor cripple like me. At this rate the Hyuga clan will be indebted to you.”

He definitely had a sense of humor. Tenten cracked a wide grin at him, nearly tripping over a honeysuckle bush after receiving his praise. It was an ego-booster to hear herself being named an ally of the Hyuga family but she decided not to take it too seriously.

'Once I hear those words come from Neji's mouth then I'll believe them.'

Hanabi hovered a few inches away from her sister's face, scrutinizing her up-close with her Byakugan. Hinata sipped her tea calmly, unabashed by such behavior. Neji sat across from the two at the table, his eyes narrowed in annoyance.

Hanabi's blood limit faded after a moment, seeing that there was nothing visibly abnormal. She had suspected that there would be if it was any explanation for her sister's abrupt advancement.

Only twenty minutes ago, Hinata had used the Hyuga's famed Eight Trigrams Rotation for the first time. It was a bit too full of gusto she later realized once she had accidentally obliterated a tool shed on the side of the courtyard that was helpless and within range of the technique.

Neji told her it was nothing to be embarrassed about. Hinata vouched for their training to cease until her anxiety passed. She'd have to apologize to her father about the damages later. Hanabi hadn't even touched her tea the entire time she had been with them. She was too busy giving her elder sibling an envious stare that had some suspicion etched into it. Neji grew tired of it fast.

“Hanabi-sama, your sister's power is still a mystery to everyone in our clan.” He announced stiffly, trying to strike a tone of annoyance rather than disrespect, “No amount of glaring will reveal her gift's secret to you, I'm afraid.”

Hanabi shot a fiery look at him, “Talk all you want, Neji-niisan, but she's changed how everything is supposed to work around here! Father doesn't have the time to train with me now because he's always busy with Onee-san!”

“Don't say that, Hanabi,” Hinata answered softly, “If you would like, you may train with Neji-niisan and I when you come home from school from now on. What do you think?”

Her younger sister was silent for a long moment. Agreeing with Hinata would mean she would be sacrificing some amount of her precious Hyuga-dignity. Then again, her sister had changed so much she figured she could afford to risk it.

She lifted her tea cup to her lips and muttered, “I suppose that'd be alright...”

Neji relaxed a bit once Hanabi had ended her rude ogling, but not a moment later, a rabbit-sized toad hopped up beside him on the porch, looking a bit lost. It regarded the three young Hyuga for a very awkward second before speaking up, “Hey there! I'm lookin’ for the Lady of the Hyuga if she's
Hinata stared at it blankly for a moment. That title was her's, as far as she knew. The toad was vermilion and grinning. Without a doubt, its arrival could only mean one thing...

“Naruto-kun sent you?” She asked, her voice rising in pitch excitedly, “Oh! How is he, Kichi-chan?”

“You remembered my name!” Gamakichi squeaked joyously, “He said you were pretty too! Words don't do justice, my lady...”

Hanabi snorted at the statement.

Neji merely observed the interaction interestedly. He then recalled how Naruto was an experienced summoner of toads, albeit he had never seen one so small before, it was certainly affiliated with his blonde friend. He didn't hide the smile that came over his face at the thought of Naruto. Such tidings were too good to frown at.

“The boss is good! He's way busy though and just as chatty as ever.” The toad went on, hanging pliantly between her hands, “He told me that he wants me to give this to you...” Gamakichi held up a scroll to her, “He wrote a lot which is unusual. He's not the literary sort I'm sure ya know already!”

Hinata kissed the toad between his beady eyes, “Thank you so much, Kichi-chan...” She set him down and accepted the message, eager to read it.

Gamakichi sat in an infatuated daze beside the tea table and Hanabi regarded him with a disapproving look, “It seems that they don't turn into princes after all.”

Neji only smirked.

Hinata read silently to herself, fumbling with the scroll that had traveled so far, carrying the voice of her beloved.

**Hey Hinata!**

_I hope you aren't missing me too much! Right now me and Ero-sennin are out somewhere west in this weird carnival town. I've been learning plenty of new jutsu and I've fought a few bozos who were stupid enough to pick a fight. But there was this one guy we ran into who even Ero-sennin wanted to avoid. He's this old ninja from the Hidden Stone Village, Dintei Bi, and he killed many shinobi from Leaf a long time ago. Not that I'm paranoid, but I don't know if he's going to try to pull something like that again. I want you to tell Baa-chan that he's up to no good. Make sure she knows. And also I want you to stay out of trouble, alright? No unnecessary fights, even though you are tough as nails. I trust you and I miss you like crazy. Tell Neji that the next time I see him we'll have a rematch!_

–Naruto

She looked up a moment later and noticed that Hanabi had up and left while she'd been reading. Gamakichi still hovered dreamily beside her, waiting for further instruction.

Neji gave her an expectant look, “What did he say?”

Hinata smiled, tilting her head while she reported, “Naruto-kun says that the next time he sees you you'll have a rematch, Neji-niisan.”

He laughed quietly at the notion, “Next time...I will win.”
A joyous grin was plastered to her face, *'I'm so glad that Naruto-kun stayed in touch! I was so afraid that he'd be too busy. I guess he misses home more than I had thought he would.'*

“Uh, I'll take your reply to the boss when you're ready, milady!” Gamakichi chirped, beaming up at her, “You just let me know!”

“Thank you, Kichi-chan.” She patted the toad on the head and then stood up. Gamakichi hopped after her as she walked down the porch with Naruto's message.

Neji looked up midway through pouring himself more tea, “Where are you off to now, Hinata-sama?”

She regarded her cousin thoughtfully, “I must go to Hokage-sama now. There is something important that I must tell her.”

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Iruka regarded his surroundings with a content and passive wonder. He stood and watched dutifully as his class romped around the courtyard. Their laughter and blissful play brought him back to times of his childhood. The most prominent memory of his youth, sadly, was the attack of the Nine-Tailed Fox on his village.

A frown subconsciously crossed his face. He was unsettled by the fact that these children, who he was charged with training to one day become shinobi, would eventually face the true horrors that ninja were confronted with. There was no real way to explain it to them. So carefree and innocent, he couldn't imagine any of the children ahead of him entering battle. He couldn't imagine them drawing weapons and resigning themselves to harm a fellow shinobi, but that was their initial purpose. It was up to them how to justify what they would be made to do. He had experienced it and found he was more comfortable with teaching.

*’But this is just how they are now...they still have two more years of schooling left...’* Iruka reaffirmed the idea, *’By then they'll be sure whether or not they're cut out for this type of work. Many of them will have matured by then.’*

He gazed across the playground to where one of his students had pelted his friend in the gut with a soccer ball, shouting, “Wow, you've got no reflexes you big dummy! What if that had been a shuriken?” They then proceeded to wrestle furiously in the grass.

*’Well...maybe not all of them...’* Iruka smiled again. If one class in particular had left its mark on him certainly it had been Naruto’s generation. Something about that group had promised excellence, and though many of them had been naive slackers just like any other Academy class he had seen, Iruka had to admit they had all morphed into highly efficient ninja in a matter of months. It was difficult to recognize them once they had stopped jabbering and learned to focus on tasks at hand.

*’I wonder how Naruto is doing right now...training with Gama-sennin.’* He wondered briefly, *’Him and his teammates for that matter. Teaching here has never been quite the same since they graduated...’*

He was keen to the intruder who had entered the playground because he stood about a foot taller than the other children. He also had trademark hair that nearly always made him mistake him for Kakashi.

Sato didn’t look to be goofing off at that time. Other Academy students halted in their play to take a moment to gaze at him critically, trying to discern whether or not he was a notable shinobi. Certainly not. They went back to their games and the quiet, grinning ninja strolled up to Iruka amicably.
“It’s good to see you, Iruka-sensei!” He greeted his former instructor with a short wave, “You’ve still got your hands full.”

Hardly. He had been standing on the side of the yard almost catatonic in his contemplation for over ten minutes. But if Sato hadn’t noticed it by then it wasn’t something that needed to be brought up.

“Nice to see you too, Sato-kun.” Iruka greeted him in response, “How have you been?”

“I’m good, thanks, but there’s something I’d like to talk to you about.” Sato answered, looking expectant.

Iruka considered that his former student hadn’t stopped by to waste his time. He may as well hear him out. “There’s still 20 minutes left before recess ends,” Iruka reasoned, “What’s on your mind?”

“You remember Tama, right?” He asked for clarification, “Maito Tama. She's my...er...she's...” He trailed off in his speech. Her formal title did not roll off of this tongue so easily.

“Yes, how could I forget?” Iruka thankfully saved him the trouble, “She was an excellent student while she was here.”

The past tense irked Sato a bit, but he soldiered on with his explanation, “It’s like this, Iruka-sensei. You see, Tama never really wanted to leave the Academy even after she got hurt. She's been training all this time since she left, which is more than most people can say. She still wants to be a ninja. I was hoping that if you evaluated her, even though she's not a student, you might be able to promote her to genin.” He paused, “Does that sound too far out, or no?”

Iruka looked thoughtful, “Wow...you present a pretty controversial case...”

“That's not a bad thing is it?”

“Well...no. But...” The Academy teacher sighed deeply, “Sato...I don't know if I could credit her with genin rank even if I wanted to, and I do want to. This is where lines of jurisdiction are blurred.”

The silver haired ninja wasn't satisfied, “Why?”

“She may have to meet the approval of the Hokage as well. How can we be sure that her skills are as sharp as they once were?” Iruka supplied an example, “It's risky for me to assume that much.”

“I swear she's loads better now than she was then!” Sato testified loudly.

Iruka hesitated for a moment, thinking it over, and then said, “Alright then. Later on I'll go to Tsunade-sama and see if it's in compliance with regulations. If it is then I'd be glad to give her the graduation test.”

“It's a deal then!” Sato grinned, shaking his hand animatedly, “I'll swing by tomorrow so you can let me know how things worked out!”

As he turned to go Iruka spoke up again, “Sato...”

He stopped and looked back at the instructor, “Just how much does this mean to you? I'd like to know. It's likely that Tsunade-sama will deny this request and I don't want you to be upset if she objects.”

Sato's expression grew more serious, “This means a lot to Tama, Iruka-sensei. It means so much to her that I won't stop until she's recognized as a ninja. I'll bug Hokage-sama until she makes it
Iruka chuckled at the proclamation, distantly reminded of one of Naruto's ideals.

By that night Haku had retired in a tavern for rest once he had reached Kuro. While enjoying a plate of fried eel, he discretely eavesdropped on a pair of Mist ninja the next table over while they shared a bottle of sake.

“Mizukage-sama has really been out of it lately.” One of the ninja pointed out.

“It's hard to say if he was ever sane to begin with.” His friend replied matter-of-factly, “If you ask me you can never trust a jinchuriki. Besides, he’s the one who enforced the to-the-death-graduation exam when I had expected him to eliminate it!”

The other shook his head in exasperation, “Tell me about it. He's been changing the training program every other year. I'm not risking enrolling my son in the Academy...it could get dangerous.”

“Just train him privately, then. That's what everyone does these days.”

“But wouldn't doing that make it look like...like he was from a clan or something? Private tutoring?” He asked nervously.

His partner snorted, “Hell no. Even if it did, no one cares about the clans out here anymore. They've only weakened over time so they aren't a threat these days. All they do is hide in their castles and count their money.”

Haku stopped listening after that. He could only wonder how much of what they said was accurate. Probably most of it, he thought sourly. A capricious Mizukage did not bode well. Neither did the risks of genin training within Mist. It also appeared clans were more of a fairytale after they had been massacred in the war all those years ago. He was troubled by how very little he did know about what was going on in the Water Country. In Leaf no one ever gave the place a second thought. It was hardly ever mentioned.

'I must learn quickly if I'm to survive here.' Haku noted. The easiest way to do that, he figured, was to listen to the people he encountered along the way. They would be his source and he would pay attention and adapt accordingly. After finishing his meal he returned to his room and collapsed onto the bed, glad to sleep comfortably.

The following morning he rose earlier than he normally would have. Haku could not abide sleep with all of the haunting dreams he'd been having, so he set out just as dawn blinked her rosy eyes over the horizon.

He bought dumplings for breakfast from a vender outside who had also risen early and decided to make small talk, “Excuse me, sir, but have you happened to have met a man named Hiroshi while you were doing business out here?”

The vender shook his head, “Can't say that I have. Most people head north when the weather gets bad like this...or they just head home to Mist.”

“I see,” Haku said quietly, “Thank you for your help.”

They parted and Haku ate as he walked. It was bizarre passing through the town he had first met his friends in. Everything seemed so much smaller now than how he had viewed it as a child. Once outside of Kuro he crossed over a bridge that connected the road to farming districts. He felt a chill
drip down his spine.

'South of this place...is where I was born.' The thought made him curious and ill at the same time. Haku then recalled the bridge in the Land of Waves and Zabuza's parting words to him, 'You already know where to find me.'

At first he believed that he hadn't known what the nukenin was talking about. But after some darker thought processes, he realized that what Zabuza had said made sense. 'He remembered somehow...that day I saw him at the bridge...' Haku couldn't understand why Zabuza had not forgotten him, but he knew that if he would find him anywhere it would be where they had first seen each other.

Though it was the whole object of his quest Haku was honestly not looking forward to being reunited with Zabuza. He tried to push the thought to the back of his mind while he still could.

By noon he had passed several farms, all of their crops stripped from their fields long ago. He followed the winding hills to a quiet, forested area where an eerily familiar place came into view. The fields on the farm ahead of him were smaller than the others and completely baron. A house stood pitifully beyond that with its roof caving in and the front door missing.

It didn't look as he had envisioned it to. As Haku crossed the tillage he watched wild hens flock together and peck for morsels on the frostbitten earth. He stopped just outside of the decrepit shack.

'I used to live here. I was a child here.'

Haku could acknowledge the facts but he felt utterly disconnected. There was no warmth that filled him after returning to his birthplace.

He ventured inside and saw that many belongings and pieces of furniture that had once been there were missing; probably plundered by robbers long ago. His parents' bodies were not evident either and he was grateful for it. He fumbled around, remembering sights and smells from his childhood while his heart ached with the weight of his memories.

Gaps in the thatched roof let gray sunlight filter into the dusky cottage, illuminating the emptiness. Haku exited the house silently, filled with painful thoughts, 'Father...why were you so afraid of us? Didn't you know that we loved you? That we'd never harm you, even if there was a war raging?'

A lone drop slipped down his cheek, 'We could have protected you and kept our powers secret. I wonder...when you intended to kill us, did you really stop loving us then? Did you kill your own heart when you did it?'

Haku had never admitted it to Naruto or Gaara in his time living with them how much missed his mother and how he felt responsible for her death. At times he had missed his father too, 'He had a kind face before that day...'

He was surprised to find their graves in the garden beside the crumbling house. Maybe after they had died neighbors had discovered them, he figured. Haku decided he would come back in the future with offerings for them to appease their restless souls.

He crossed over the ice-flecked field back to the dirt path and headed in the direction of the nearby town. When the bridge came into view at the far side of the village he stopped, thinking it over, 'What are the odds that he's even here at this very moment? What other sorts of places would he hide out in?'

Haku had confirmed Zabuza was nowhere in sight when he had crossed the bridge and entered the
heart of the town. 'Where am I supposed to look now that I've reached my destination?'

Naturally, he had no idea. The last time he had ever ventured so far south was on his mission to the Land of Waves and that was still a fair distance away. Being the logical person he was, Haku followed the thought through to the end of obtaining more information from someone else. 'A person who would know where to find Zabuza would be a tracker-nin.'

Despite their promotions in rank, Gaara and his siblings could not escape being assigned as instructors for young children who were beginning their ninja training. There was a shortage of teachers, and anyone with credible experience available at the time was called upon. The children rarely, if ever, had the same instructor twice in a row.

Temari and Kankuro agreed that they wanted to outline the use of special weapons as their first lesson. They had set up a display table with a variety of weapons from swords to clubs. There was something to meet every ninja's want or need. Gaara, all the while, was terribly distracted. Occasionally he would help them organize the armaments when he wasn't staring off into space.

"Gaara...would you mind telling us now if you're about to have an anxiety attack?" Kankuro asked playfully, "You've been acting weird all morning you know."

"I'm alright." He answered quietly, but then added, "I've learned from my last assignment that solo missions are...unusual. They are not the sort of thing I excel at." He also omitted how he had fallen back on Rin's help a few times, finding that he was without his "sea-legs" when he wasn't surrounded by teammates.

"You're a jounin now." Temari reminded him, "Team assignments are fewer and you should really start thinking about a career path soon, Gaara."

"I want to teach."

They looked at him oddly. 'Where did that come from?' Kankuro wondered, 'He hasn't seemed interested in anything like teaching before...'

"I thought that you didn't like big classes of scrambling little kids, though." His brother wanted to test the waters, "You changed your mind, Gaara?"

"I don't like classes." Gaara assured him, "Genin students are manageable."

"Couldn't you wait until you're, you know, older?" Temari asked, somewhat bothered by Gaara's decision, "Think about it. You're so young and in your prime. Training kids seems kind of a waste doesn't it?"

"Teaching is hardly wasteful." Gaara concluded the discussion right there. He knew it would be difficult and that he was still one of the youngest jounin in Suna, but something in the back of his mind urged him to pursue it.

The class arrived a short time later and they began their lesson.

Temari gave a brief explanation of the exercise and then said, "Each of you select a weapon from those we've provided to begin combat training. You will then divide into groups to train with an instructor. Any questions?"

One girl raised her hand and Temari looked at her expectantly, "Um...are we required to pick a weapon?"
"That's the point of this lesson." Kankuro sighed in response, "Yes. You must pick one."

The girl fell silent, slightly embarrassed as her classmates snickered at her air-headedness. Temari gave the go-ahead and the students rushed up to the display, excited to take their pick of weaponry. Those who had snatched up their preference quick enough then decided on which instructor they would file off with.

The majority of them flocked to Gaara, in awe of his cool demeanor. Few of them realized that he was the same person who had Shukaku sealed inside of him so many years ago. After he had left the village, he supposed, the scary stories parents told them ended. They were too young to remember anyway. Ignorance is bliss, Gaara thought.

It wasn't long before the vast majority of the class began bombarding Gaara with questions. Seeing how quickly he was overwhelmed, his siblings intervened and divided the rest of the students amongst themselves. Once their groups were evened out, Gaara had an easier time critiquing their form.

Most of the children were terrible. Few could lift the weapons they had picked, but it was the effort that counted. One by one he corrected them, trying to be patient as they squawked excitedly. After he had most of them settled, he looked across the courtyard to where one student stood by herself. It was the same girl from before who had asked a question.

She was a small girl: brunette, with chocolate eyes. She reminded Gaara of a mouse. A quiet creature like herself was obviously reluctant to join in the noisy banter of weapon training. He understood that feeling all too well.

Kankuro followed his brother's gaze across the yard and also noticed the shirker. He called out to her, "Come on, Matsuri!"

The mousy girl scurried over to the display table after Kankuro had barked at her. Three weapons remained and neither the sword nor the club looked feasible, so she hurriedly grabbed the small rope-dart before joining the rest of the class.

The other students didn't willingly invite her in to practice with them. Rather than ordering their cooperation, Gaara abandoned his group to see to the mouse. Matsuri looked at him with an insecure expression and he wondered if she was afraid of him. He did his best to seem sociable, "Your name is Matsuri?"

She nodded, clinging to the rope-dart, "Yes, Gaara-sensei!"

He gave her a measured look before taking the weapon from her, "You have picked the jouhyou. It is a suitable weapon for you."

"Jouhyou?" She blinked at him, having never seen or heard of one before.

Gaara leapt back and demonstrated, whirling the rope-dart around thoughtfully, "The tooth at the end of the string is not so much for attacking, as it is for preventing the opponent from getting too close."

Matsuri watched with wide eyes.

"And with the rope...render them unable to attack!" He added, casting the dart and sending it streaking across the yard. It tangled around a training post with a painful-sounding thwack. Gaara turned to her, "Practice with this weapon until it feels like another part of your body."

He handed the jouhyou back to her and she accepted it jumpily. Gaara then returned to his group of
clamoring trainees, and did not hear when Matsuri let out a belated, "Thank you..."

She straightened the rope-dart in her hands and let it wheel around her, getting the feel for it. Once she was comfortable with the motion she cast it, letting it fly in a straight line as Gaara had earlier. Though her aim was quite good, she still felt like a complete novice compared to her instructor. Her chest clenched anxiously as she continued practicing. She did not know at the time that it was Gaara's first real use of the jouhyou as well. His knowledge was simply obtained from lecture.

For a while it was organized chaos with students rushing about with their weapons. After watching the trainees spar with Temari, Kankuro was struck by a thought. He turned to his brother, looking clever, "Hey Gaara...I just had an idea."

"Of what sort?" His younger brother asked, plucking a sword from the hands of an impudent child who had been threatening his fellow students.

"Since you were thinking about training up a cell of students you could pick from the kids available here," Kankuro notified him, "It'll be more convenient, don't you think? They're near graduating anyway."

Temari looked over to him, agreeing, "Wow. That actually is a good idea, Kankuro."

Kankuro sulked, upset that his sister was surprised by his thoughtfulness. Gaara, however, was reluctant about the idea. The children before him didn't strike him as those truly devoted to becoming shinobi. It appeared that they just got caught up in it like it was some sort of fashion craze. He doubted most of them would even become ninja to begin with.

After shrugging off Temari's unintentional insult, Kankuro went ahead and made the announcement, "Attention!" All of the trainees looked up in unison, "Gaara here, I should have you all know, is interested in personally training a team of students!"

They all twittered enthusiastically at the news.

Kankuro grinned at his brother, feeling helpful, but Gaara was only annoyed that he had to meddle. Rather than shoot the idea down Gaara went along with it, sensing a loophole.

"This is true." Gaara confirmed it, stepping forward, "But before I decide there will be a test."

Temari and Kankuro looked at each other, puzzled. They did not know that their brother was drawing on inspiration from his own trials of getting on a genin team. His test had been conquered thanks to teamwork, but he had a feeling that the trainees in front of him had little sense of camaraderie.

Gaara proceeded to explain, "Those who seek my training should be able to catch me. It will be a footrace. You may use your weapons if you wish, but you should be more concerned about keeping up than tagging me. Only those who succeed will I accept as my students."

There was an uproar among the more chatty students who boasted about their speed. Temari smirked at them, warning, "Don't get cocky, guys. He may not look it but Gaara is faster than most of you could even hope to be. Watch your step."

They quieted down after that.

"Begin." Gaara's voice was low and upon the command, a few of the rowdy students immediately rushed at him with weapons raised. They skidded to a halt after seeing they were fooled by a sand clone. The rest of the class gasped in shock, before turning in all directions to look for him. Kankuro
merely shook his head in exasperation.

Gaara finally reappeared on top of a high wall on the far side of the courtyard. "You must think like shinobi in order to succeed." He told them.

Temari laughed, "You all better hurry! He'll be gone in no time." The entire congregation sped after the jounin, weapons flailing, and Kankuro wondered if it was wise of Gaara to invite such a free-for-all unto himself.

Gaara pelted along the wall's edge with a class of prideful students howling after him. For once he was actually having fun and he'd make it a point to embarrass most of them. He didn't have to exert much energy to avoid their weapons either. They missed by a number of feet with every throw and his sand shield wasn't even necessary.

The chase moved from the barrier to rooftops, and still the class moved like a school of fish, tightly packed and synchronized. He could see that some of the students moved much faster than the others, but no one yet had chosen cunning to defeat him.

'If they combine their efforts and ambush me in a pincer movement, I'll easily be overtaken.' He noted, although not acting on that knowledge would mean he would be letting them win; yet it was enough for him to recognize their determination. He and his teammates had done just that to prove themselves a worthy team long ago. All Gaara saw pursuing him was a gaggle of uncreative youngsters playing tag, "These are not ninja..."

At the back of the group with the slowest bunch Matsuri called to her peers, "Listen! I...I think that if we work together we can catch Gaara-sensei! We outnumber him, so it's would be much easier than just following him!"

"That's such a dumb idea," A boy had sneered at her, "No one would work with you anyway! You're way too slow and afraid of weapons!" He darted ahead after that, drawing out a dagger to try his luck on the jounin as others had.

Matsuri, still at the back of the procession, continued on, 'Slow and steady can win the race!' Even when no one was willing to work with her, she was still forming strategies on what could be done to achieve victory.

Gaara began taking sharp turns, nearing the outskirts of the village. A few of his pursuers were confused by the sporadic motions and began to fall back. He leapt down from a rooftop and headed out to the surrounding desert, a windswept blur through the gateway.

After seeing his course half of the group stopped, discouraged by Gaara's route.

They didn't want to risk the perils of the desert if they didn't have to. The more motivated students continued on, rushing into the sand wasteland surrounding their village. Matsuri also plunged ahead into the dunes, amazed that so many of her classmates had given up that easily.

Farther ahead, two boys came dangerously close to Gaara. One of them hurled a chain-scythe with a cry, barely missing his target. The other threw a volley of shuriken as a follow-up but was foiled by the sand shield. Gaara feinted left and flickered to the right. The pair of trainees moved left, and before they could correct themselves they tumbled down a steep dune as Gaara had intended.

The rush proceeded with fewer and fewer participants, many growing frustrated by Gaara's relentless speed. Matsuri thoughtlessly pressed on, far behind, and following the trail of footprints that faster students had left. Gaara leapt up onto a jagged rock formation and the trainees scrambled up the cliff
after him. At the top the path evened out, but the climb up had exhausted a good number of them. They stopped to rest.

Matsuri observed how the pursuit had trickled down from the remaining five (all recovering, unknown to her) to herself, and she feared she had fallen too far behind to catch up with Gaara. Despite her panic she did not stop. She wanted to know just how far she could go before giving out, *I'm not fast...I'm not talented...but I can still endure.*

She caught a glimpse of Gaara. He was moving quickly. The hair on the back of her neck rose and she gave chase even though he was far ahead. The afternoon sun began to sink in the sky. Matsuri hopped from boulder to boulder, searching for any sign that she was on the right path. The altitude of the cliff was also a bit unnerving. *Did I lose him? He just disappeared. I don't even know where I am right now...'*

She trudged up an incline, wanting to get a better view of her surroundings. Her limbs ached and sweat had matted her short hair to her neck. She jumped in surprise to see Gaara was just a few paces ahead of her at the hilltop. In addition to that he had stopped running. Matsuri stared tactlessly, wondering if she was hallucinating.

Gaara inclined his head just a bit, finding it ironic that the mouse-girl had prevailed. "The race is over now." He told her. He watched as Matsuri stumbled to the dusty ground and tried to catch her breath.

"You were the slowest of the group." Gaara informed her.

"I'm...I'm sorry..." She rasped, her lungs aching.

"Don't apologize for what you are. You are the only person remaining." He observed calmly, "You may not be as skillful as the others, but you persevered and did not give up when the task became more difficult."

She sat with her hands fisted in her skirt, staring at the ground, "I...wanted to see if I was capable. Even though no one wanted to help me because I was weaker...I thought I should see it through to the end."

"That is why you succeeded. It is that quality that is needed of every shinobi." Gaara announced. Matsuri hesitated to meet his eyes, humbled by her triumph and yet feeling as though she didn't deserve it.

"Because you've proven yourself I will train you." Gaara offered, walking over to where she sat. "We'll go back to the village now and you may rest."

"Thank you, Gaara-sensei, but..." She hobbled to her feet, "What about the others?"

"I had my shadow clones bring them back already." He assured her, "They weren't going to continue anyway." He gently held her about the shoulders and teleported back to the village in a whirlwind.

Once there, they could see how Temari and Kankuro had already sent the rest of the exhausted trainees home. They were surprised that Gaara's only student happened to be the underdog of the class. Kankuro laughingly congratulated her.

"Keep practicing with that jouhyou, alright?" Temari reminded the girl, "It's a reliable weapon. Stick with it."

"I'm bringing Matsuri home now." Gaara informed his siblings, "I'll join you shortly."
They parted and Gaara picked the shorter girl up before she could set out. She squeaked in embarrassment, wondering if it was necessary. "Keep off of your ankle," He told her as he walked, "You were limping earlier."

Matsuri stole a glance at her ankle which was, indeed, swollen and unpleasant, "Oh...I must've twisted it..." She hadn't noticed it before when she was so focused on the chase.

"Take care of your leg," Gaara instructed after dropping her off at her house, "Your training starts tomorrow."

She nodded in understanding and watched him leave. Though she looked a mess and was in pain, Matsuri was feeling a great sense of wonder, *I'm so lucky. I promise I will do my best as a student...and make mother and father proud."

"Here you go, boss! This is for you!" Gamakichi hopped up to Naruto, waving a scroll in his face, "Boy you should have seen her! She's got to be the cutest girl I've ever seen and she even kissed me! You've got to send me there more often!"

"Quit it will you?" The blonde boy growled, shoving the toad down onto the bench, "I already know how great she is so you don't need to tell me! Let me concentrate." He read over Hinata's reply and was glad to see that she had given his message to Tsunade. More importantly he was glad that she was safe.

Gamakichi helped himself to the dango that was on a plate in front of Naruto. The blonde nin sat at the picnic table idly, thinking about Hinata. *I wonder...she's fine now...but the fox said that she really did die. If she hadn't found that power of her's she wouldn't be alive right now.* He knew that was the kind of grief he would be unable to live with.

The toad on the bench beside him noted Naruto's troubled expression, "Hey boss...you feeling okay?"

Naruto relaxed, patting Gamakichi on the head, "Nah! I'm fine! And..." He blinked down at his lackey, "Hey...I think you're getting bigger."

"Yeah! I grew eight inches since last time! Soon I'll be tall like Dad! Cool, huh?"

"Keep dreaming..." Naruto muttered, "Thanks for your help, though. You can go home now."

Gamakichi departed in a puff of smoke and Naruto looked down glumly at the empty plate, *Lousy toad! Eating my snack!*

With a deep sigh he left the picnic table he'd been seated at and set out down the street. He acknowledged how he had not missed Hinata terribly after first leaving Konoha. Once he was made to start thinking about her, however, he felt truly homesick. Even if she had said that she was fine in her letter Naruto couldn't help but worry. There was no way to know for sure unless he was there and it irked him.

He wondered if it was unfair of him to say that he was far less concerned about Gaara and Haku than he was for Hinata, *But...they're different. They can protect each other. Hinata gets into trouble a lot more than people would think...* At the thought of Gaara and Haku, Naruto recalled, "That reminds me...I'll have to write to them soon to check up on them!"

The road led just outside of the city, where he arrived at an area shaded by tall conifers. Jiraiya had told him to meet him there for noon. After seeing his pupil's late arrival, the sage frowned at him,
"What took you so long, huh? We need to get a move-on with your Hiraishin training."

"Sorry, but I'm here now, okay?" Naruto folded his arms behind his head, "I won't keep you waiting next time, Ero-sensei. So...what sort of training is this?"

"One doesn't just dive head-first into this sort of thing. In order to even come close to understanding how Hiraishin works, you must first be a master of the Body Flicker Technique." Jiraiya informed him, reciting the information as if it were a speech.

Naruto scratched his head, "A master. Huh. Body Flicker...but what does that have to do with anything?"

“It is a preliminary phase, you could say. It will get you familiar with the physical portion of the Hiraishin technique.” Jiraiya informed him, “The technical portion comes later, when you’ll learn more about jutsu formula, which happens to be one of my strong suits.”

Naruto folded his arms and nodded.

"Let’s see, well, I'd imagine you've already tapped into this jutsu in past fights. Most ninja are familiar with it but certainly not adept users." His teacher speculated, "The Body Flicker fundamentally starts as an intense exertion of chakra. That's why when you use your Kyuubi Chakra, you'll often speed up and get stronger."

"Super-speed is pretty cool." Naruto recalled smilingly.

"But the speed your excess chakra affords you is a small stepping stone in the scheme of things. Your body needs to be physically able to move like that on a whim. You have to get accustomed to moving fast." Jiraiya added, "So fast, in fact, that you won't even be fully able to see your surroundings."

The blonde boy leaned against a boulder as he listened, beginning to see just how serious the matter was. This training would certainly not be anything like the Rasengan. Naruto knew his own body better than anyone, and he was aware he was not the quickest shinobi on the market, 'This means I'm gonna have to work my ass off! Yeah!'

His sensei continued the explanation, "It's dangerous but it's necessary. This is because the Hiraishin's speed is considered teleporting. That means that you have to be comfortable with it, or your own technique will backfire on you."

"Backfire? Like how, exactly?" Naruto asked curiously.

“I don’t want you to unintentionally kill or maim yourself.” Jiraiya told him.

"So...it's really important that I don't mess this up."

"You better believe it..." Jiraiya sighed.

Rather than getting upset by the news, Naruto was quite inspired by it. All the more reason to train and work hard until he knew he was ready for it. 'If I take it easy and pay attention I can totally make this work!'

"Let's have a trial-run, Naruto." The sennin suggested, "Draw on enough chakra so that you feel your speed increase, and then attack."

Naruto had never been expressly told to call upon his red chakra before. He was a bit sluggish in
complying with the command, but after a moment he had summoned up a tail of the Kyuubi's chakra, and was staring at Jiraiya with a ruby gaze. After a moment he disappeared.

Though Jiraiya could just barely see Naruto zipping around the forest clearing, he was able to anticipate some of his attacks. He blocked a few hits before a tremendous tackle broke through Jiraiya's defense, much to his bewilderment, and sent him streaking like a bullet across the clearing.

Dizzy, the sennin stood and held up a hand, "Okay...good. You're fast as hell. But me? Well, I'm sadly as slow as they come, so I'm afraid I can't be all too helpful when it comes to intense speed training..."

"Which is weird, because you sounded really believable earlier." Naruto told him, back to his usual, grinning self, "You know what you're talking about, but you sure can't demonstrate. Don't worry, Ero-sennin, I think I can figure it out myself."

"Even though you at least grasp the concept, Naruto, you weren't moving nearly fast enough!" His teacher informed him grimly.

"What?" The blonde yowled, "B-But! It's absurd to go any faster!"

"And do you know why that is?"

Naruto fell silent. He was honestly clueless, but he felt quite certain he had done his best.

"The physical limitations of your body can't accept the changes that your Kyuubi chakra offers. It's time for you to build more stamina!" Jiraiya announced, and then went to the side of the clearing where he had left a box. He extracted two weights from it, with much strain, and then said, "Ta-da! Once you can use the Body Flicker in these, you'll be all set!"

Naruto stared at the training weights, "Are those...some kind of torture device?"

"Well, practically, no, but you could put it that way." Jiraiya hummed unflappably, "Here, lift your pant legs, will you?" Naruto grudgingly obeyed and his teacher went about fastening the new weights to his legs. "I'll be increasing the resistance on these periodically so you adjust to the change."

"Jeez...it's like you picked up few tips from Fuzzy-Brows..." Naruto muttered grumpily, feeling as though gravity had multiplied five-fold.

"It's a very old training method that's rarely used anymore," The sage admitted, "And that's why so many ninja have forgotten what an effective training tool it is."

Naruto gave Jiraiya a sour look, although he remained silent. To complain was to show he did not want to improve, which meant he did not want to learn the Flying Thunder God Technique. He endured the weights and Jiraiya patted the boy's head affectionately, "You'll thank me later, kid. Good news, though! We're only spending two more days in this town before we keep heading west. There's plenty more sight-seeing to do!"

**Hatake Household-17 Years Prior**

"And why can't he stay with us, Kakashi?" Semi's voice carried through the walls of the apartment, "He has nowhere else to go! We can't just leave him on the streets!"

"He's an outsider, he's not our responsibility."
Riei stared out the window of the living area, unable to ignore the loud argument in the other room. He felt like such a burden. Even after the Hokage had granted him citizenship in exchange for his participation in missions, not many viewed him as a true Leaf shinobi. Semi had already volunteered to prepare living arrangements for him, but apparently they weren’t sitting well with her younger brother.

"I already told Hokage-sama that he's going to live here," Semi informed Kakashi, "And don't think just because you're one of his ANBU means you can change his mind."

"You don't even know this person!"

"I know enough. He deserves a home more than anyone I know..." She said quietly, "Honestly, little brother, when did you become so cold? Father was always glad to help people even if they were strangers."

"Our father is dead."

"Yes, Kakashi, he's dead." Semi assured her brother, "But did your compassion die with him? Or with Obito? He needs help!"

Kakashi promptly stormed out of the apartment and Semi yelled after him, "Stop being such a coward and face the truth for once!"

It was quiet for a long moment and she wiped the frustrated tears from her cheeks. She would not chase her brother anymore. He was stubborn and filled with grief. There was simply no reasoning with him. Semi left her room and trudged through the hall, trying to relax. She still had to be hospitable.

"Please...never mind Kakashi," She told Riei after finding him in the living room, "We rarely ever get along anyway. It's not your fault."

"Yes it is." He said softly, "I am sorry for causing you so much trouble, Semi. Maybe it would be better if I went somewhere else..."

"You aren't leaving Konoha!" Semi cried, "You've been traveling all your life and you deserve a place to settle. Don't apologize for anything because Kakashi has always been like this."

Riei relaxed marginally. He thanked her for her kindness but he still felt guilty that he was causing such uproar. The whole concept of a home was so new to him that he didn't know how to react. He merely stood in front of the window staring at the outdoors, wondering what to do now that he was inside of a building for a change.

Semi led him through the hallway she had come from and brought him to a bedroom at its end. The space was plain and fairly empty, "Sorry if it's a bit dusty in here. This used to be my father's room, but it's yours now." She gestured to the bed, dresser, desk, closet and bathroom; mostly because he seemed unsure of what they were, "They're all yours, so don't feel shy about putting them to use."

Riei set his bag down in the middle of the floor, observing his surroundings, "Thank you very much. This place is so big..."

"It's actually kind of small." Semi admitted with a chuckle, "So...is there anything else I can do?"

He smiled gratefully at her, "Yes, actually."

Before she was certain what he wanted Semi found herself following Riei down the main road. She
figured she wouldn't be able to keep him indoors for too long, she sensed it made him a bit nervous. Outside again, he looked far more calm and bright. On the way she pointed out notable shops and establishments he should know about. It was only after they were halfway across town she thought to ask, "Um, Riei...do you even know where you're going?"

"Sort of...there it is, I see it!" He moved ahead and it was then she realized what he had been searching for. They were on the viewing platform just beneath the Great Stone Faces and Semi remembered how he had been fascinated by them.

"What are they?" Riei asked her curiously.

"It's the Hokage Monument." She told him simply, "It pays tribute to all the leaders and past leaders of our village. You see now only three faces: the First, Second, and Third Hokages...but one day soon Sarutobi-sama will retire, then we will welcome our Fourth Hokage and add his likeness to the cliff!"

Riei was impressed with the tradition as well as Semi's knowledge, "You know quite a bit, Semi. Are you a ninja? When you aren't on hospital shifts, that is."

"No." She answered shortly, "I'm not physically capable of that sort of thing...though I wish I was."

He didn't bother pressing the matter and neither did he know how much the idea bothered her. Riei offered to buy her lunch so she could tell him more about the Hidden Leaf Village.

At breakfast Kankuro was busy complaining to his sister while simultaneously preparing their food. "It's not fair! If I had known then I would've done the same thing..." He grumbled, "Why do they excuse Gaara from instructor work just because he has an apprentice now? Sheesh! I might as well make you my apprentice so when can both get out of it!"

"I'd sooner apprentice myself to Naruto..." Temari snorted, "Besides, you know that Baki allowed it because it's Gaara, not just anybody. Gaara is a capable teacher but big classes put him under a lot of stress, which is not something he needs when he's still trying to adapt to Suna."

Kankuro agreed lowly, pouting, and set bowls out on the table. His sister again told him to suck it up, "Once new instructors are trained up we can get back to mission work. It'll only be for a week or two, you big baby..."

Gaara arrived to eat with them a minute later. He had a scroll with him that neither of his siblings had seen before. He set it on the table, unconcerned with it, and thanked his older brother for the food.

While Gaara ate, Temari thought to ask, "What's that you have with you? An important document? New jutsu maybe?"

"It's a message from Haku." He told her calmly.

His siblings were stunned into silence.

"He's alright for the time being. Still heading south, he said." Gaara repeated what he had read. He handed the scroll to a very bewildered Temari, "You should look at it. He wants you to."

Temari remained quiet but took the scroll from her brother.

Gaara finished eating quickly and stood from the table, "I'll meet up with you both later. It's time for Matsuri to begin her training."
He left amiably with his spirits unusually high. Kankuro suspected that Haku's letter, combined with Gaara having a new student could create such an effect.

Matsuri was just leaving her house once Gaara had arrived. She looked a bit a sheepish at the sight of him, but smiled shyly after she had locked the door behind her, "Good morning, Gaara-sensei!"

"Good morning." He replied and then asked, "Your ankle. Are you feeling any better?"

"I'm doing much better, thank you." She reported, "I think I can train today."

"Then follow me." He led her off of the side street and behind a warehouse. His destination was an empty playground on the far side of the village. He remembered playing there (or at least wanting to) as a child, but now the place was utterly abandoned.

Matsuri blinked over at him, slightly unsettled by the silence hanging thick in the air. Gaara looked to her expectantly, "Your jouhyou."

"Oh! Right!" She drew it out, fumbling, feeling like an idiot. A slide was across the way, and the jounin told her to aim for it when attacking. Matsuri nodded shyly and whipped the rope into motion, emitting a soft howl from its circular path.

He watched for a while, occasionally correcting her stance, footing, or casting. Eventually there was nothing he could help her perfect, and he waited and observed as she lashed out at the ladder of the slide ahead. She improved with every suggestion he offered. Though she was doing well, Matsuri would sometimes hesitate before casting her dart. The behavioral anomaly made him wonder if she was still uneasy around him.

She flinched as her wire snapped back unexpectedly, missing her face by inches. Gaara told her to stop, "You're troubled by something. You need to focus." She looked down at her feet and he then added, "What is it that's bothering you?"

Matsuri nearly supplied an immediate, 'I'm fine!' but indeed she was not. Her talent was unappreciated when she could barely stand holding a weapon at all. Instead of denying her problem she muttered, "I...I do not like weapons, Gaara-sensei."

"That much is clear." He replied, "Why?"

"My parents were killed by countless weapons before my very eyes." She explained quietly, "These instruments are for killing. I wonder...is that all ninja are made to do? To kill?"

Gaara stared at her for a moment and then looked across the courtyard, "Many ninja do kill. Some do it for the sake of killing. Some do it because they have no choice. Though this is true, weapons are not solely for taking lives. They save lives as well."

Matsuri listened as he went on, "Your weapon's function is defense. What you do with it is up to you. But when you have precious people that you want to protect a weapon will be your tool. Do you have precious people, Matsuri?"

She bowed her head sadly, "I don't. I have no relations here after my parents passed on."

"Someone like you will find more people to care about." He told her, "You will find your precious people one day, wherever they may be. Then you will build strength as a shinobi."

His reasoning made sense to her. It brightened her spirits and Matsuri wondered how he knew so much, 'He must have gone through the same things...he must be strong because of people who are
"Who are your precious ones, Gaara-sensei?" She asked. She stopped herself after a moment. It was hardly any of her business. If she was going to learn anything she had to treat her teacher with respect. She bit her tongue when Gaara remained silent.

"I have many people to protect." He said after a moment, "My close friends are traveling abroad now. I protect my brother and sister when they are in danger...and people in Konoha...there are those there as well..." He paused, "There is a person there that I love deeply. That makes me stronger."

Matsuri felt her face heat up. She hadn't expected him to answer something so personal. Then again, she was glad that he had and she then had a precedent to go on. "Someone you love deeply...who is this person?"

"No one for you to worry about." He cut her off there and she realized that it was then she had gotten too personal, "I think that's enough distraction for now..." Gaara set her back to her practicing and the whistling of Matsuri's jouhyou again filled the playground.

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After searching the innards of the city Haku was surprised to see just how well he blended in. Most people roaming the streets were also dressed in dark colors. They shuffled about busily, trading and arguing with each other, typical of any free-market village.

The snow had let up and the clouds temporarily parted, allowing warm sunshine to reach the earth. Haku pulled his scarf down, daring to show his face, and entered a pub in the hopes of finding a ninja who knew something of consequence.

He had gone from tavern to tavern and was frustrated that no one had any useful knowledge. Restaurants that did house a few ninja occupants he chose to linger in, and Haku listened intently for any words that may have aided him. Most spoke of politics and recent missions and a few complained about family life. None were the sort of shinobi he had been hoping to come across.

After happening over a small bar, he heard something that made him freeze in his tracks. "After the assassination attempt, Mizukage-sama has been raising the bounty on their heads every year..."

Haku, not wanting to be conspicuous, sat nearby after buying something to eat. He felt his insides hum triumphantly as he listened in on the bounty hunters. His luck was finally improving.

"I hear that Momochi-san is back in the area as well, from the rumors." One of the three hunters mentioned, "He's still slippery as a shadow, though. He's the most elusive of the lot of them...let's nab someone easier."

The leader of the group smirked, the scars on his face evidence of his experience, "Not necessarily. I heard one of the big dealers in the next city over is only hiring A-rank ninja to guard his stores. The bastard's rich as hell too, so no doubt he'll look into that..."

'The next city over?' Haku had finished his lunch quickly, 'I suppose I should get there before they do if I'm going be successful...' After eavesdropping a bit more and seeing they held no more valuable information Haku silently left the pub and set out.

He went east over another bridge that connected to a larger island. The predicament at hand was then navigating the city which was, by far, larger than any of the villages he had been in previously. It was bustling with business even in the frigid winter air. In a way it reminded him of life in Konoha, but Haku knew better than to let his guard down with so many shady characters about.

'I have to locate the area that this dealer operates in...' He noted, memorizing the street layouts as he...
went, 'But I can’t get involved. I’ll have to observe from a distance if I want to be nondescript.'

Haku paused outside of a convenience store to think. He honestly had no idea where to start looking. He supposed that he’d have to witness a drug deal before he could even begin to trace them back to their leader. To his surprise, it didn’t take him long to find one at all.

In a dim alleyway off the main road he spotted a man paying for something that had been hurriedly handed to him. Once he had walked away, Haku followed the dealer as he stalked off down a street at the opposite end. He pursued his unsuspecting target from the rooftops, wondering how exactly any of this would lead him to Zabuza, *He may not even be there when I find this place. What if this entire search is in vain? Where then would I look?*

The dealer unlocked the side door of a warehouse with a spare key and then slipped inside after he had not been followed. Haku perched on a water tank on top of a residential building, scheming on how to infiltrate his targeted building and go about his search. A few minutes later he realized he didn’t have to.

There was an abrupt commotion and a number of people he observed fleeing the warehouse. Two of them were shinobi. The man that had recently entered the building was hollering to his boss as they fled, and stumbled down to the ground once several shuriken sank into his back. The boss cowered on the ground ahead, but the scuffling ninja ignored him completely, as if they were uninterested in him.

It was then Haku recognized that the antagonists were the trio of tracker-ninja he had discovered in the last town, *They got here so quickly! And if they’ve found this place too then it must mean-!* He could see the three shinobi move uniformly as they pursued their quarry up to the roof of the warehouse. Without a second thought Haku followed, unsure of what he intended to do.

When Haku had descended upon the fight scene there had been an explosion from a detonating tag. The dust and debris clouded the vision of the combating shinobi. They regrouped, blinded, and Haku remained unseen behind an air vent close by, picking pieces of tiling from his person after the tag had blown half of the rooftop away.

There was a guttural snarl that was all too familiar to Haku’s ears, and he could see one of the three trackers reeling away in pain with a massive gash across his chest. The other two attacked while the third left to recover.

"Suiton: Water Fang Bullet!" At the expense of an old water tower on the next roof over, the jutsu shot several jets of icy water at Zabuza. He dodged backwards, and then raised his zanbato to defend against the second ninja’s sword strike.

"We’re taking you in!" The Mist tracker hissed, slashing sideways for the nukenin, "Dead or alive your head fetches a hefty sum!"

"There’s a reason for that." Zabuza warned, keeping an eye on the ninja prowling behind him. He relaxed. It was melee combat from then on, he noted. With the only water source nearby spent, they couldn’t perform any more water jutsu.

"Suiton: Suishoha!"

Or...that’s what he had thought at the time. There was a moment of confusion in which water began to condense in the air, and the three fighting shinobi could not tell who amongst them was responsible for it. The airborne current froze into ice, and rained icicles down on the scuffling ninja. They tumbled away like pincushions, bewildered.
The leader of the trio teamed up with his injured teammate against Zabuza. The third tracker had not reacted quickly enough when Haku appeared, piercing his neck with two precisely aimed senbon. The Mist tracker fell and Haku leapt over the unconscious ninja, throwing senbon for the foes ahead of him.

The injured Mist ninja was quick, though bleeding, and landed a fierce punch after avoiding Zabuza's blade. He was struck down on the sword's returning arc, however, and red splattered on the roof tiles. The nukenin rounded about, seeing the leader was closing in. The last tracker abruptly tumbled before he reached Zabuza. Three needles connected with the back of his neck.

After it had grown still again, Haku stood warily on the edge of the rooftop. He watched silently as Zabuza replaced his sword on his back and Haku was at a loss as to what he was supposed to do then. He had never expected to succeed. Now that he had, he was uncertain of what he was going to do with his accomplishment.

Zabuza had looked different from what he had remembered. He too was dressed for the cold weather in dark grays, but he still possessed the same terrifyingly detached look in his eyes as he had the last time Haku had seen him. Something in his gut was screaming at him to run.

"It's about time you showed up," Zabuza remarked, "You're later than I thought you'd be."

Haku felt some horrible dread in the back of his mind set in, 'Was he really that confident that I would seek him out?'

He followed the nukenin to the ground level, astonished by how passers-by on the street didn't recognize Zabuza at all; ignorant and unafraid. It was strange.

"Well? You've got something to say or what?" Zabuza grunted as he walked ahead of Haku.

"I've fought against them a few times, but they're better at hiding than they are at fighting," Zabuza recalled them distantly, "Don't bother with cowards like them. They're barely even fit to be called shinobi anymore."

"But they're the only blood I have left in this world," Haku admitted, "Regardless of their skills I still want to meet them!"

He fell silent when Zabuza had stopped and turned to face him. They stood outside of a bookshop, and Haku noted their reflections in the front window of the store, seeing how radically different they were.

"Knowledge such as the kind you're asking for isn't cheap. Few others know anything about the old clans of the Water Country. You really think that I'd give information like that to a whiny brat like you?" Zabuza's eyes narrowed, "I need collateral. Give me something in return and you may just get what you're asking for."

Haku hesitated, not wanting to fall into his trap, "What do I have that you could possibly find valuable?"
"Give me your powers."

He was confused, "How do I–?"

"Be loyal to me and serve me. Your ability will be at my disposal and you will obey." Zabuza clarified darkly, "In exchange you will learn, and more importantly, you'll survive."

Haku took a moment to observe the absurdity of the request. He had no reason to trust Zabuza, or to believe that devoting his Kekkei Genkai to a nukenin would be used for only just purposes. 'But if I don't agree he'll just leave and I won't have gained anything out of this journey...' Haku thought despondently, wishing there was another option. It was silent for a long moment.

"Very well then." He agreed, "What is it that you want me to do, Zabuza-san?"

The nukenin smirked beneath the bandages concealing his face, "We leave. Once we reach our destination you'll get some real training, not the soft, spoiled exercises they give you in Leaf."

Zabuza walked ahead after that and Haku followed obediently, pulling his scarf up over his nose. The air seemed to have grown colder since he had joined Zabuza. Haku walked silently beside the nukenin as they moved into the forest outside of the city, wondering if what he had done was wise in the scheme of things.

In two days’ time both Jiraiya and his pupil had landed in a town, much farther west than Naruto had ever been in his life. The cultural differences became clear, as did the language gap. Many people spoke a foreign language that Naruto couldn't decipher a stitch of, so they relied on Jiraiya's skills of picture-drawing and charades to communicate with the people around town.

Eventually they found someone who had lived in the Wind Country long ago, and managed to ask him a few questions with little difficulty or misunderstandings. With the directions they had been given, they moved on to the center of the city and checked into a drab hotel nearby a local reservoir.

"I'm going to have a look for an old friend of mine," Jiraiya told his student before leaving their room, "She lives around here...somewhere. There are some things I need to ask her, so you hang around town and stay out of trouble while I'm out, got it? I'll be back later in the afternoon."

"Gotcha, Ero-sensei."

Jiraiya left promptly, wearing an oddly serious expression. It appeared to Naruto that he wasn't out to womanize anyone, but rather seek vital information just as he had said. 'Who knew?′ He thought. He abandoned the hotel room, bored, and set out on the streets to find some sort of entertainment. 'While I'm at it I can also work on the Body Flicker if I find some space...'

By then he had grown completely accustomed to his leg weights because he slept with them at night and hadn’t even taken them off to bathe. Jiraiya had requested it. He grudgingly complied and found it worked. He ambled around the dusty town, fascinated by people in colorful silks and headpieces. It was all much different from the atmosphere of Konoha.

He stopped outside of a corral at one point, marveling at a fantastic beast slobbering on the railing. He stopped by the caretaker of the pen and asked, "Er...what is that thing?"

The owner looked at him for a moment, trying to understand. He glanced over to his creature and pointed to it, "Hm? Gamal."

Naruto blinked in confusion and the owner tried again, throwing his common pronunciation out the
Naruto nodded, "Yeah! It's co-ol."

He patted the camel's whiskered nose and then reeled back in fright when it snapped at him with flattened teeth, "Gah! Bad camel-thing! Bad!" He stalked off down the street, ignoring the caretaker's laughter that followed. After that he knew better than to approach any other camels he ran into.

As he continued on down the street there were all sorts of acts he had never seen the like of. Snake charmers on the side of the road would call to him, holding up cobras as if they were the family dog. A sword swallower further disturbed him with his painstaking antics, and when he had finished his routine Naruto informed him, "Look, that shit's really dangerous. One time I was carrying a kunai in my mouth and I nearly choked on it when I wasn't paying attention. If Haku hadn't been there I might've killed myself! So please, sir, don't risk it. Swords aren't that cool!"

No one had any idea what he was rambling about.

There was one display that actually didn't bother him. A fire breather called out to passers-by, sipping back oil and spitting flames onto the sidewalk. Naruto grinned at the display, "Hey! I can do that too! Want to see?"

He made hand seals and breathed a massive fireball that nearly took out a street sign and bicycle stand. He stared sheepishly at the people watching him, apologizing for his reckless act, but was then cheered by people who had never seen such a feat. He thanked them laughingly, "Hee hee! Nah! It was really nothing! We do that kind of stuff all the time back at home!"

He reveled in the crowds' praise, seeing that because there were few ninja at all so far west he could really strut his stuff. As far as they knew, magic and not chakra was responsible. In the midst of his entertaining he felt someone bump into him. He turned to see a small child skittering away, and he would've thought nothing of it if he hadn't caught the kid pocketing his wallet.

Naruto leapt from his ring of admirers and made haste down the street, howling, "Hey kid! Give that here or you'll be sorry! You don't know who you're messing with!"

The child took off at top speed, frightened, and turned down an alleyway in an effort to escape. At the end of the passage he hurtled straight into a waiting shadow clone. He planted a fearsome nip on the clone's wrist, and was released as Naruto's duplicate shrieked in pain. Naruto ran past his kage bunshin, cursing it for its uselessness.

It was a good chase through town and out into the bamboo wastes beyond the city before the child ran out of gas and collapsed on the side of a hill. He took shelter behind a boulder and peeked over it to see if he had lost his pursuer.

"Are you done running now, kiddo?"

The child gasped, looking up in shock as Naruto scowled down at him from on top of a shack. He closed in on the hooligan and snatched back his wallet from the cowering thief, "Don't you know that stealing is wrong, kid? You can't just do that sort of thing and expect to get away with it!"

The child flinched away from his booming voice.

Naruto, seeing the boy's fear, calmed down a bit, "Ah well...do you have a name? Er...do you even understand what I'm saying, I wonder?"

"Ismi...er...I'm Gadil."
"Whoa! He speaks!" Naruto threw his hands up in the air and rolled his eyes, "Now...would you mind explaining why you stole from me? If you understand what I'm saying than you should at least know that what you did was wrong."

"Samehni! I'm sorry for what I did. I know that it's very wrong to do..." Gadil squeaked fearfully, "Aasif...er...how do you say? I am...sorry, mister. Mother's hungry and we have no money..."

"Just because you have it rough doesn't mean you stoop that low, kid." Naruto told him, his voice etched with sympathy, "You've got to earn things honestly...even if it's hard."

"Aasif...I understand. I only picked you because you're from a faraway place...you wouldn't have noticed..." Gadil droned sadly, "Oh! The punishment for stealing at home is horrible! I know better after big brother did it...now he can't work so well anymore."

Naruto cringed at the thought. This place was indeed radically different from Hidden Leaf.

Gadil shrunk away from Naruto's sapphire gaze in humiliation, but Naruto sighed deeply, seeing that there was someone with a desperate need in front of him. He handed the boy a few notes, seeing no harm in it, "Careful with these, Gadil-chan. Look after your family, alright? You're a good kid. Sorry about scaring you..."

Gadil looked up at him in disbelief, "Really? Shukran! Oh, I must do something for you, mister!"

"No really, I don't need-" Naruto was cut off when the boy yanked on his arm, and began looping a necklace of beads around his wrist. Gadil looked intensely proud of his gift. Naruto blinked at him, "Uh, thanks. But...what's this for?"

"Ahlan wa sahlan. It'll keep you safe. This land is a gateway to the spirit world, my momma says. Wearing that keeps them from stealing your soul." The boy explained, as if it were totally normal, "Thank you, mister! Ma'assalama!" Gadil tottered off down the hill after that, heading back into the town.

Naruto stood beside the boulder with the bead bracelet, completely perplexed. He shook off the strangeness of his encounter with Gadil, and continued up the hill instead of returning to town. He wanted to train in the quiet of the forest while he could. Jiraiya would be back late in the afternoon, and he had already seen most of what the city had to offer.

He observed his surroundings uncomfortably as he pressed on into the thick of the forest. Any trees that weren't of the bamboo sort were still too short and lanky for him to take cover in. No branches to stand on or leaves to hide behind. It was another thing he missed about Leaf, 'The environment is kind of crappy here...down the mountain trail it's drier near town...and up here it's full of dinky little shrubs. Bleh.'

Naruto glanced down at his bracelet curiously, thinking about what Gadil had said, 'Hm...he said spirit world. Well, people believe in all sorts of weird stuff. I sure don't see why a dump like this would be connected to another world!' He was skeptical and yet wasn't fully sure what to expect from such an unusual place.

"Hey-loo!"

"Wah!" Naruto leapt backwards in surprise and wheeled about to see an elderly man chuckling at his reaction, "Yeesh, gramps! Don't scare me like that!"

A very old, very wrinkled man watched Naruto from his seat in a clearing. He grinned goofily at the blonde ninja, "I apologize for breaking your concentration, young man...but your face was so
serious...I just couldn't resist!"

"Yeah, yeah..." Naruto grumbled at the jokester, "Who the heck are you supposed to be?"

"Me? I'm a holy man, and it's my duty to watch over that village down there, see? But I'm so old and creaky now I'm afraid I can't perform my sacred duties as well as I used to..." He rambled cheerfully, "Your hair is quite yellow, by the way."

Naruto rubbed his aching temples, "Thanks, gramps. I'm a natural blonde."

"Lovely. Oh! And did you know that today is a special holiday? It's celebrated throughout this entire province!"

"No one in town is celebrating, you know." Naruto informed him, "Are you sure you have the right date?"

The old man scratched his head, "I'm quite certain that it's today. They don't celebrate because they've all forgotten the old traditions...I'm the only old person who can remember such nonsense anymore." He pointed over to a gap in the bamboo thicket, "Now look over there, lad. What do you see?"

In the yellowed grass there sat a football-seized stone all by its lonesome.

"It's a rock." Naruto observed unhelpfully.

"Yes! It's a rock!" The old man nodded merrily, "Go pick it up if you will."

Naruto stepped over to the opening in the thicket and lifted the blasted thing. He found that it was not as ordinary as it had first appeared. It was a tinted a pale blue and had what looked to be a calm, slumbering face carved into it. It made him relax for some reason.

"Bring it over here, lad." Naruto returned when the old man asked, and the geezer then reached out and tied a piece of red yarn around the stone, "There! What you hold in your hands is called the Guardian. It is used to keep the balance between the human and the spirit world, because sometimes humans and spirits get a little lost and confused. They wander into the wrong world on occasion, so we use Rock-chan here to keep everyone where they belong."

"Jeez...everyone's so superstitious around here." Naruto sighed, "So...eh, what should I do with this rock, then?"

"Deliver the Guardian to the shrine on the other side of that mountain." The man replied simply, and pointed to a mountain further up on the trail, "You must get it there before sundown. If you do, it will keep the village safe for another year!"

Naruto, though certainly not spiritual, figured he should help out anyway. 'It doesn't look like there's anyone else to help this old fart out...'

"I'll do it." The blonde nin agreed, tucking the rock beneath his arm, "But...what happens if I don't make it in time?"

"Spirits will come out. Good and bad. It's the bad ones we worry about." The old man replied.

"Pft...alright. But I still don't believe in any of this supernatural crap! Everyone here is so jumpy, they need to chill out!"
"You have every right to think that way, lad." The old man smiled goofily, "But you might as well do an old man a favor whether it's silly or not!"

Naruto chuckled at the idea and then set out. As he proceeded north along the trail he did vaguely wonder how the old monk could speak more fluently than anyone else he had met. Perhaps he had been a shinobi, or at least been to his homeland at one point. He shrugged it off, acknowledging that other people had managed to communicate with him too.

'Hey...now that I'm out here I might as well work on my Body Flicker!' Naruto thought to himself. The weights were bothering him less by then, so he gladly built up speed and zipped along the trail like an orange cheetah.

The mountain wasn't far off, but the climb would be steep. As he flew down the path Naruto pondered if what he had set out to do truly held any significance. Certainly it was an opportunity to train, but if so many people believed in ghosts maybe they could exist, 'Yeah, it sure isn't that freaky, I mean...if crazy things like demons are real who knows what else there is! Just because I've never seen one doesn't mean they aren't out there...'

With that thought he snickered to himself, 'Heh! It's funny...I must be some kind of legendary thing myself since I have that crazy Fox inside of me!'

**Only I am the legend, you twit, you are just the vehicle. Don't get cocky.**

Naruto slowed down a bit, startled by the interruption, and replied with his mind, 'Wah...how did you do that? I'm not near your cage or anything!'

*Communication is a two-way street, boy,* The Kyuubi informed him, *For me it's slightly more difficult because you are always so loud you can't just shut up and LISTEN for once...*

'I still don't get why you have that much control...I'm the one who calls the shots here!'

The fox chuckled, *Be warned: as time goes on your chakra mixes more with my own. As our chakras merge, so do our souls. This seal will not separate us for much longer.*

'Eh...I don't like the sound of that.'

**Oh, don't fear! One day I promise I'll overpower you and break out of this puny little body...then you won't have to put up with me anymore, or I you.**

'Can it you mangy furball!' Naruto screamed as much as his thoughts would allow and he heard no more from the Kyuubi after that. He picked up speed again and tried to focus on the mountain that was rapidly nearing. The silence was golden.

The path began to wind sporadically and he followed the incline, his stomach growling in protest, *It's past lunchtime already...maybe I should've eaten before I left.* Though it had not been one of the things he was concerned with after chasing Gadil out of town. He pressed on anyway, not wanting to waste time as dusk drew closer.

Naruto ascended the wooded slopes with ease, his ninja-legs accustomed to long jumps, and for a while he was totally focused on climbing and nothing else. A woman caught his eye, however, as he came closer to the top. He watched in puzzlement as she ran hurriedly down the slopes. He called out to her, "Hey lady! Careful! It's dangerous to go like that-!"

She stumbled and careened down the remainder of hill, and by the time he had dashed forward to
help she had vanished into thin air like smoke. She was nowhere in sight and Naruto stood in a bramble of ivy, very unnerved. Wanting more knowledge on what he had just witnessed, Naruto voluntarily called upon the 'newly established, short-range transmission wave' to speak to his demon, "Hey Fox...what was that just now?"

*Leave me alone.*

'That's awfully helpful...' Naruto thought glumly. He couldn't count on the Kyuubi for much other than chakra. He continued on up the hill, trying to relax, and wondered if he was looney or had in fact seen a ghost.

He leapt a gap that was cut into the trail and on the other side he observed a large procession of people ahead of him, making their way down the slopes. A few of them phased in and out of view as he watched while others passed through solid objects. He felt the hair on the back of his neck raise. 'Fox come on! Are these really apparitions? Is this for real!'

*_No, of course not. They're dandelions._*

'I don't need sarcasm right now,' Naruto bit back impatiently, 'If they're ghosts then...where are they going all at the same time?'

*Have you been paying any attention at all? I shall reiterate that these spirits are wandering, as the old scab said. Like any moronic human, spirits seek out their civilization: towns, homes, whatever...but they're too stupid to realize that they've strayed into the wrong realm. Hence your task, delivery-boy. Put the Guardian where it is needed before the bad characters arrive.*

With the situation a bit clearer Naruto barreled ahead through the lopsided woodland, moving past ghosts who didn't pay him the slightest bit of attention, 'Fox...if humans can see ghosts then...ghosts can see us too right? If that's how it works then why are they ignoring me?'

*The holy beads dissuade their interest. To them, you look like one of them rather than a human. The fox answered snippishly, If you were to take the bangle off they would see you for what you really are and fear you. You would panic them because you would be their first clue that they're in the wrong world...dunderheads.*

'Now I really want to help! I'm gonna get this rock to that shrine for sure!' Naruto figured that the only difference between humans and spirits was where they were from, so aiding them was the gentlemanly thing to do. He passed them by calmly and admired the view once he had reached the top of the mountain.

Judging by the sun there was still time to reach the shrine. Naruto observed how vast the valley was as he began the trek down the opposite side, minding his step. Another congregation was ahead of him and he was comfortable to pass them harmlessly by until they called out to him, "Tawaqqafa! Stop right there!"

'Wow...they're actually people.' Naruto thought oddly, 'I almost couldn't tell the difference...' He stopped a few yards short of the gathering on a bamboo-filled plateau. He wondered what they could possibly be doing out at a time when ghosts were plentiful, "Uh...are you guys lost? There's a city back over that way-"

"I'm not impressed with this year's Guardian..." One of the band snorted, "Hand over the rock, kid, and you can go home safe and sound."
'Guardian? They mean me? I thought the rock was the guardian...' He decided not to get frazzled by the idea and instead played along as if he understood, "No way I'm giving it to you creeps! Why would you want it anyway?"

Another spoke up, "It'll fetch a pretty sum back at home. A relic with special powers like that interests all sorts of collectors!"

"Too bad." Naruto smirked pithily and once he refused the gang drew out weapons.

"We'll take it by force, then!" A few of them agreed, but they reeled back in shock when Naruto, or his shadow clone, rather, rushed at them fearlessly. Their knives didn't even near their mark as Naruto and his clone circled around the troop at high speed, dizzying them. He paused as they spun in circles. Head count: 10 bandits, 1 Guardian. They odds were favorable.

He toyed with them, laughing at how sluggish and confused they were. Using a jutsu on non-ninja dolts like themselves should be considered a crime, he thought. While Naruto hurled the bandits left and right, the Kyuubi piped up, **Pay attention! Another one is here.**

'What do you mean? Another thief?'

**An apparition, you dunce, over there.**

Naruto looked off to the side of the clearing where a darker-looking ghost watched in wait. It was different from the others he had seen; a giant, amorphous sort of creature, oozing black. If it resembled anything closely, it was nearest to a rat.

'What is that? That one's not like the others!' Naruto pointed out frantically as the thing reared up on its hind legs.

**Not all spirits are the same. Just as humans come in a disgusting variety, so do they. That one there is a foul being...one that humans fear.**

The rat spirit charged for the combating troop recklessly, and struck Naruto's shadow clone with a sludged paw-swipe. The clone was destroyed easily by the blow, and Naruto tried to concentrate on avoiding the bandits while keeping an eye on the new spirit. None of his attackers seemed aware of the dangerous apparition circling the plateau. If it attacked them anytime soon they'd be sure to find out, he thought.

'Fox...that thing can hurt me, it looks like! And why can't they see it too? I thought people and ghosts could see each other no problem!'

**Some fools only see what they want to see...they remain blind to the truth.**

Naruto leapt, avoiding the oozing rat as it rounded about like an agitated bull, and sweep kicked a bandit who had come at him with a club. He turned around a bit too slow, and one of his foes managed to lash out at him with a dagger, but only snapped the beads secured around his wrist. The bangle fell to the dirt in pieces, and Naruto snapped his elbow back and caught the blockhead in his jaw. He tumbled away in pain.

Naruto made note that without the beads he was as visible to the spirit as the others were. He looked over his shoulder, seeing it, and raised his eyebrows when the shadowy thing began to cower away at the sight of him, *That's weird...it was pretty brave before.)*

**It sees the both of us. I am the one it fears, you simpleton.**
With the threat of the charging spirit gone, Naruto created two more shadow clones that quickly finished off the rest of the thrashing troop. They scrambled to get away, aware that they were hopelessly outmatched. Naruto watched as the rat apparition skittishly sulked away into the bamboo of the mountainside and he saw no more of it after that. He bent down and collected the pieces of his ruined bracelet, *This thing is really helpful...I'll fix it later.*

In his head he could still hear the Kyuubi bragging, *It's no surprise that both humans and spirits cower at the sight of me...in both worlds I am recognized as the terrible force that I am!*

*Shut up already, will ya?*

Naruto stumbled down the slope in a horrible race against the sinking sun. His run-in with the thieves had cost him precious time. He stared up at the sky as he ran pell-mell down the mountainside, "Hey sun! Don't set yet! Don't set yet!"

With the massive speed and momentum he had gathered Naruto shot down to the bottom of the mountain in no time. It was a dangerous descent, but once at the base he scrambled around in confusion, lost, 'Eh? Wait a minute! Just where is there shrine anyway? I don't know where I am!'

_Turn around, fool!_ The Kyuubi howled in annoyance, _An idiot like you can't be expected to have any sense of direction..._

He allowed the fox to 'back-seat' drive and in moments the altar was visible on the hillside ahead. Naruto was frantic, scrambling, hollering, and the sun bled red and pink into the sky.

The shrine was large and he wondered how he had missed it. He rushed up the steps, tripping over his own feet, and collapsed at the top clumsily. Naruto held the guardian rock in his hands, panting, wondering what exactly qualified as finished work. _Is it good that I'm here or do I have to do something else?_

"Oh my!"

Naruto looked up, blinked, and observed two older women approaching him with disbelieving expressions. They grinned joyously when he stood up and brushed himself off.

"Thank you, young man." One of the priestesses accepted the stone from him, "I didn't know that Ramadi Village had remembered to send a guardian this year. We feared the stone was lost for good!"

The other nodded in agreement, "This is a great blessing. Thank you so much for sealing the spirit world!" Her friend set the rock down on an altar filled with wildflowers and offerings, and Naruto stared stupidly, unable to understand.

"Wait...I'm not from, er, Ramadi, or whatever you called it." Naruto admitted, "Some old monk I met in the forest told me to bring it here. He said I'd be doing him a favor..."

The women stared tactlessly for a moment and Naruto became uneasy, "Er...did I say something?"

"A monk? You mean...Utt-sama sent you?" One of them asked in shock.

"I guess. I didn't hear his name, though. Is something wrong with that?" He asked.

"Utt-sama...died last year." The other priestess told him in astonishment, "He must still be protecting the village even after his death."
Naruto shuddered. He had spoken with a ghost, but it made sense to him then at least, "Wow...that's freaky. But I saw other spirits on my way here too! Tons of them! Everywhere!"

"Spirits cannot be seen so easily...even we cannot detect all of them so quickly." A priestess informed him, "If Utt-sama sent you...it must have been because you have special powers."

"Not really..." Naruto chose to be modest even though he suspected his ninja training had something to do with it, "Well...I'm just glad I could help. I hope you two ladies have a nice evening!" He left promptly after that, not wanting to get further into detail about the creepiness of the mountain.

The far side of the mountain was different from the side containing Ramadi Village. The northern part of the valley had a different climate. Bamboo was less and forests full of larger, stronger trees were visible just across a long footbridge opposite the shrine. 'It wouldn't hurt to explore a bit...'
Naruto thought, indulging his curiosity.

He stepped off of the path and crossed over the footbridge, thrilled by the sight of large, deciduous trees again. He leapt up into the canopy, familiarizing himself with the feel of woodland again. Suddenly Konoha seemed a lot less far away. He skipped from branch to branch, chattering joyously, and stopped on a small plateau that overlooked a large hill across the way. At the top of the hill sat a monstrous, lone-standing temple. It was strange enough for him to suspect the people or Ramadi, or any nearby village, had been responsible for its construction.

'What is that? It's like a...palace or something. I don't know...' He ventured closer, staring up at the bizarre building, 'I wonder what's in it-?'

Go back to the village now, fool!

Naruto frowned to himself, not gladdened by the fox's return, 'What's the big deal, eh? It's just some temple or whatever! Let me have a look!'

The Kyuubi persisted. You cannot go there! That hateful place belongs to the Uchiha. It is an evil place that must be avoided.

'Evil, huh?' Naruto decided to take the demon's word for it, 'Alright then...if it scares you that much we'll leave now...'

The fox fell silent again once Naruto turned around. As the sun finally flickered beneath the horizon, Naruto wondered how the Kyuubi could know about a place that was built by the Uchiha. Or why, for that matter, the fox feared the place.

Obito sat out on the porch watching Yuma hurl shuriken at targets he had set up for him. Sesshu napped lazily beside him.

It was the kind of evening that was typical of his family: peaceful and undisturbed on their mountaintop. He stroked Sesshu's golden mane while he thought, This won't last long. Pretty soon I'll have to go back out and watch Orochimaru. If I don't get more information soon Zetsu-san won't be pleased.

Keeping up his act as the organization errand-boy was taxing. The time he could spend with his family was always uncertain and sporadic. Though he was good at playing the idiot and parading around for both Zetsu and Orochimaru he was most entranced by his family. They were fascinating and sane, and the only thing that really kept him from turning into 'Tobi' forever. With them he was simply Obito.
Yuma had struck every target in the yard perfectly. It was all done in rapid succession as well, which was even more merit on top of his accuracy. He turned to his father, beaming, "Did you see, Dad? Did you see? I got all of them!"

He rushed up the steps and plopped down beside Obito who patted him affectionately, "Good job, kiddo! Now if those targets were people they'd be shaking in their boots!"

Yuma, still exceedingly proud, demanded that his father spar with him, "Come on Dad! Fight with me so I can kick your butt!"

"Kick my butt? That's not very nice you know..." He told the boy and then grinned, "But why not? You might as well go a round or two with your old man!"

Obito stood up and leapt off the porch abruptly and Yuma gave chase. The small boy ran circles around his father, swiping and yelling, avoiding mock-blows. Obito couldn't help but laugh at some of his son's antics. Yuma attacked ferociously, but his punches were feather-light compared to his father. He grew frustrated by his weakness.

Yuma's attacks grew more aggressive and he began using shuriken and kunai, watching his father hop away to avoid the sailing projectiles. A kunai ricocheted off of a tree and Obito snatched it, blocking the rest of the incoming weapons with it.

He smiled at his son, "Concentrate, Yuma. Getting angry doesn't make you stronger. In a real fight you have to keep your focus."

"Gah!" Yuma crouched down, stretching out his hands, "Awoo!"

He leapt forward, throwing himself into a spin that was a miniature version of his mother's Gatsuuga. Obito figured that Rin would have taught him a thing or two while he had been away.

Yuma shot across the yard, barreling into his father, but Obito threw his weight to the side and diverted the boy's inertia so that he was sent flying through the air. Yuma went a bit higher than he had meant him to and Obito watched from the ground, cringing, 'Yikes...looks like he was going faster than I thought!'

Yuma's spinning stopped and his eyes locked onto his father below as the air whipped past his ears. Rather than screeching to be saved, he tucked his limbs close as if to somersault. His father hurried ahead, prepared to catch him. Yuma flipped suddenly and connected with a tree on his way down.

He leapt from it, reversing momentum, and bulleted back in the direction of his father. Obito skid to a startled halt, and Yuma sailed over his head again: a scrawny little beast. He lashed out with precise timing and hooked onto Obito's shoulder. The force was enough to flip his bewildered father backwards and drag him to the ground by his arm. Obito hit the dirt and the wind was knocked out of him.

Yuma crouched over him with an intense stare. His father did a double take.

The boy's eyes were red and the tomoe orbiting his pupils made it all too clear. Obito was speechless.

Yuma grinned down at him, much prouder than before, "Are you alright, Dad? You went flying! I hope you're not hurt..." His eyes returned to their normal obsidian hue a moment later, and Obito stood up, hoisting his son to his feet as well.

"Yuma, believe me, I'm fine." Obito chuckled, dusting himself off, "You...uh...just keep demolishing those targets, alright? I'm gonna rest for a bit."
"You got it, Dad!" Yuma was inexplicably energized, and dashed around the yard picking up his scattered weapons. Obito watched him for a moment before crossing back to the porch, still stunned.

Though he had suspected he possessed it, Obito had never dreamed that his son would be able to awaken his Kekkei Genkai at such a young age. It had taken him thirteen years and some-odd dangerous missions before he could achieve it.

He trudged up the steps and Sesshu raised his head to look at him, "Is everything alright, Obito? You look paler than usual."

"Keep an eye on Yuma, okay boy?" He instructed, patting the dog's head. He continued on into the house after that, unable to keep himself from grinning.

Inside he found Rin watering plants in the sunroom. She looked over to him and smiled, "There you are. Would you mind helping me?"

"Not at all." He picked up a pitcher of water that sat on the table, and walked over to the unattended plants. He tipped water into each pot carefully, all the while marveling at how a true Uchiha had been born outside of his clan. 'It's been so long since I last saw my family...I wonder how they're doing?'

Yuma, since birth, had always taken after his mother, an Inuzuka. He glanced over to where Rin was hovering from one flower to the next like a hummingbird. He felt love swell up in his chest, and he was grateful to God that they were able to find each other again. As a teenager he was thoroughly convinced that he would never be with her, especially after he found himself at death's door on a past mission.

There were moments when he feared that if he had the misfortune of continuing life without her he would have turned down a very dark path.

He walked over to where she stood and wrapped his arms around her from behind. Rin laughed at the gesture, glancing over her shoulder, "What's up, Obito? Are flowers too boring for you?"

He kissed her neck and then asked, "Do you really think that it's right to live here? Do you think that maybe...at one point...we should go back to Leaf?"

She sighed, "Obito...I just don't think that's possible. It's been so long and we have a life here now. I don't know if I could handle going back or if Yuma could."

He kissed her again and then agreed, "You're right...it would throw everyone for a loop."

"Why did you bring it up, though?" Rin asked curiously.

"Well..." He smirked to himself, still holding her, "There's no way that I could've mistaken the Sharingan in his eyes. I saw it myself! Yuma has it now."

Rin was quiet for a long moment and then muttered, "That would explain why he's been advancing so rapidly..." She turned suddenly to her husband, grinning, "He sure is your son then! An Uchiha! That's really great!"

He could only laugh at her and then peeled away, turning back to the plants still in need of watering. "I brought Leaf up because I think that Yuma deserves to be socialized in a clan." Obito admitted to her, "And you too, Rin...I want to feel like I can offer you guys something...like a family, or-"

"Don't worry about it, you hear me?" Rin snapped suddenly, "We're fine, we're happy, and we have
each other. It's alright..." She turned to hug him comfortingly, hating how easily the mentioning of Leaf could set her off.

Obito sighed, relenting, "Alright. But then...just promise me that if anything ever happens to me...you and Yuma will go back to Konoha."

Temari paced around the inspection area watchfully, keeping an eye on her client. She had been assigned a mission to protect a wealthy aristocrat who had been targeted by a group of thugs. Her client was going to board a ship at one of the Wind Country's coastal sea-ports. It had been a long journey to the harbor and she arrived at the same time her charge did.

He was there with his family, and though his wife was friendly enough the business tycoon was none too thrilled to trust his life to a female shinobi. She ignored his bad attitude and promised to keep watch for the rest of their wait.

Temari watched the crew scamper around as they loaded all of her client's luggage. As far as she was concerned they were sitting ducks with things going so slowly, and it would only be a matter of time.

She was perched on top of a huge stack of cargo crates, vigilant as a hawk. By the time the three hit-men did arrive she had spotted them sneaking along the shipyard towards the boarding dock. Since they were not ninja she chose to flaunt rather than ambush.

Temari leapt from her roost and opened her fan fully, using a massive wind jutsu that smashed the three unsuspecting thugs into a concrete wall beside the dock. They fell together, bloody, and her client stared at her in shock after the display. His children twittered in panic at the sight of their pursuers even though they were unconscious.

"Relax, all of you..." She sighed, disarming the thugs one at a time, "When they wake up they'll be as harmless as the worms they are." She told them that she would stay until the ship set sail, just in case.

A short while later the family had boarded safely and Temari stood on the dock, watching the glimmering ocean water. It reminded her of Haku and she felt her heart ache for him. She realized that she had said things that she hadn't meant, but there was no taking them back now. She retrieved the letter that Gaara had given to her from her bag.

She had not yet read it and had been debating over whether or not she should. Temari stared at it, frowning to herself, 'He may not have meant any harm...but what he did was stupid. He didn't tell anyone that he was leaving, because he knew that what he was doing was wrong...' It was then she acknowledged that she was still angry at him, even if she did miss him slightly.

Temari stalked back to the shipyard, her grip on the scroll tightening. She didn't want to read a list of his apologies when she still couldn't bring herself to forgive him. 'Jerk...I just hope he hasn't done anything stupid...'

She tossed the scroll into a garbage can and left the harbor.
Neji's hair was increasing in length at long last; reaching discretely for his shoulders. No one had said anything about it since it had been lopped off during his surgery after the disastrous Retrieval Mission.

Lee failed to realize there was a reason for that. He made a harmless comment to his friend one morning when they met to train, "Ah, Neji, my friend! You are looking more and more like your usual self as time goes on!"

"Care to elaborate on that?" Neji had been paying attention to what Lee had said, even if it had appeared as if he had been fully focused on re-wrapping his hands in tape.

"Your lovely hair is-

"Where's Tenten?" Neji skipped over the topic completely after sampling it, "It isn't like her to be late so frequently."

Lee let the idea die and went on to speculate the whereabouts of their missing teammate, "Hm...Tenten was with me this morning, as a matter of fact..."

Neji gave him a chafed look. Lee smiled sheepishly in response and explained further, "She told me that she would stop by later since she expected to be busy. Tenten and I eat breakfast together often, you see!"

It was something Neji had not been aware of. Not that he usually cared to know how his teammates spent time together, yet there was an unexplained and inexorable feeling of being left out. He had been working on repairing the frail, thread-thin friendship he had with them since the Chunin Exams, but Neji found it was tedious. They were unpredictable, annoying and totally unlike him. Happy people were perpetually difficult to understand at times.

'It's true, then. He is her best friend and I certainly am not.' Neji had not wanted to admit it, but as long as it was not said aloud then it troubled him less. Lee was surprisingly tolerable. The main complaint he had with his teammate was that he was his near polar-opposite. So it left Neji deliberating where he stood in the genin community. A genius or a snob? Either category fit, he guessed.

Back on the subject of Tenten, Lee added that she had declined a mission that Shikamaru drafted her for the day before and suggested that Ino go instead. When Neji snorted in distaste Lee grinned, having gotten the desired reaction out of him. The Hyuga heir acted outwardly normal after that, hiding signs of discomfort.

It had been Gai's request that they train together. Not only because Neji had solely depended on Tenten for nearly two years, but because Gai sensed (though without verbally admitting it) that Neji and Lee were nearing a plateau in their skills that would balance them both. They could test each other more at such a critical point. Tenten would divide her time to each of them equally, since it had been a mutual concern.

Another request was made by their sensei. Neji's advanced ability in Jyukken would actually benefit Lee's techniques. A few pressure points would be enough to awaken Lee's long-buried and unexpectedly destructive Drunken Fist abilities, without the use of alcohol. The drawback was that
he was not nearly so limber when he wasn't drunk so he'd have to learn to loosen up. Gai had faith in his protégée.

Neji offered assistance as asked and drilled minuscule amounts of chakra into tenketsu linked to Chakra Gates. Three points along both arms, one at the base of the brainstem, and two beside each shoulder blade. Lee did a double take when his teammate was finished, "Are...you certain you are through, Neji?"

"That should be enough."

"That was only nine spots..."

"Yes, I know." Neji fell into a threatening offensive stance, "The only way to be sure it worked is to fight, don't you think?"

Lee gave a small, uneasy nod and then mirrored the gesture. They fought for ten minutes and it was clear that Neji had been quite successful. Lee was bending away from stabs of Jyukken, and as time went on his teammate was unable to land a hit, and Lee became giddy and confident.

The way things were when their team had first formed had been simple. Neji won every fight against either of his teammates. Their team was going through a phase of radical change, thankfully. Tenten had recently become a tumultuous challenge for the prodigy and Lee, ever hopeful, felt a victory coming his way.

Neji lashed out with an open-palmed uppercut after weaving around Lee's defense, and when his friend raised an arm up to counter, the Hyuga spun in a half-mimic rotation, quick as wind, to land a hit to the rib cage after the feint.

Lee could see the attack was too fast to be blocked. There was a bizarre, instinctual command, however, that allowed his body to bend backwards some 90 degrees and avoid the strike entirely. Neji paused in spite of himself, bewildered. He and Lee leapt apart to regroup, but it was clear to Neji that his teammate had truly improved. It was only natural that he should attack with no restraint, in that respect.

Lee was laughing, glad to enjoy an evenly matched spar for once. He darted around Neji, who was racing through Jyukken forms almost in fast-forward, not trying to land any destructive hits of his own because he was only just getting accustomed to such fantastic, limber motions. After a failed attempt at 64 Palms, Neji fell back and Lee, slippery as an eel, bobbed between offensive and defensive stances.

Neji's tolerance faded and he took a new footing on the lawn that Lee had not seen before. It was a swift attack, and Lee had not thought it possible from twenty feet away, but indeed it was.

Neji's hand shot forward and a force akin to a bullet resulted, "Eight Trigrams: Empty Palm!"

It was an invisible Jyukken strike that moved even through air, and Lee was hurtled off of his feet and down to the mud. A silence followed, and it was mutually understood that the spar was put on hold for the time being.

It was not nearly as painful as it was unusual. Lee stood shakily to his feet, brushing specks of dirt from his outfit. It felt like he had received a running head-butt to the gut. He decided not to describe it to Neji, and instead commend him for the cunning attack, "That was fantastic, Neji! Wherever did that new technique come from, I wonder?"

"My training with Hiashi-sama and Hinata-sama has helped me improve." Neji clarified what was
pretty much apparent, "It still needs work, though. I won't consider that a finished technique." Such news was sad to Lee's ears: if something so abruptly lethal needed tweaking he didn't want to be on the receiving end of it when it was complete.

They continued training afterwards, more on an equal footing. It was the first time in a long time Lee had not heard a single critique from his teammate, and he was grateful that they were able to get along so well even in the absence of Tenten. Usually her arbitration was needed to keep the peace, but even up until their break an hour later, both friends were completely unruffled. Three hours more and still there was peace, but impatience set in with the kunoichi of their team.

"We'll have to find her later, then." Neji reasoned, displeased with Tenten's tardiness, "She still doesn't know that we have a mission tomorrow and she needs to be prepared."

"Agreed!" Lee chirped in reply and then suggested, "Perhaps we can catch her for lunch? I know she is a slave to one dango house downtown..."

Neji sighed good-naturedly. For once, rather than being perturbed by Lee's closeness to the kunoichi, he decided to rely on it. He followed Lee out of the courtyard and compound, and into town.

Tenten, unknown to her teammates, was in actuality at the Hyuga compound the entire time. She had been out of sight. In fact, she would have been embarrassed to have been spotted on the grounds by either of her friends after saying she would be busy. There were Hyuga matters of another sort she had to attend to.

Hikune had told her that he would be waiting for her at the innermost courtyard of the mansion. This posed a bit of a problem in terms of avoiding a quite-possibly-suspicious Neji, as well as other nosy clan members. Tenten avoided the threshold of the mansion altogether, refusing to be seen walking the halls by herself and made for the roof. It was an easy solution to a rather stinging problem.

She leapt down from the height of the second floor with bird-like agility, already safe and presumably sound within the specified courtyard.

Tenten could only wonder, 'Gee...this really isn't such a big deal...but why do I have this scary feeling like I have to sneak around all the time when Neji's not around?' Maybe it was the atmosphere of the place. It was a home of security that was walled off from the rest of the village, and the people that lived at the estate also came with an intimidating reputation.

Tenten strolled leisurely through the courtyard, marveling at all of the Hyuga about. She realized they were mostly servants of the Branch House, tidying up the porches and side-gardens. Her heart wrenched for a moment, but she knew offering help would only insult them more. Tenten stayed off the wrap-around porch to let them work in peace, and crossed over to where Hikune was sitting on the far side of the yard. He smiled when he saw her approaching.

"Uh, you wanted to see me, Hikune?" Tenten began awkwardly, hoping she had not misinterpreted what he had told her the day before.

"Yes, I'm glad you could make it." He gestured for her to sit, and she took a seat next to him. Hikune offered her some of the tea he had been drinking and she turned him down politely. "I really wanted to thank you for all of your help, Tenten," Hikune told her, "Because of your instruction Fujita has improved vastly. We are both very grateful to have met you."

She shrugged with a smile, "I was just happy to help. It's what I do."

"I'm sure, but I really must do something to show you my thanks." Hikune told her after a sip of tea,
"Repay a good deed with another, that is my nindo. Do you think it would be alright if you stayed here a bit longer, if you have time to spare?"

Tenten thought for a total of two seconds. Her reasoning was quick, 'I already told Lee that I wouldn't be back until later. How much later remains unspecified, so I have time to kill, I suppose!' She grinned at the jounin, "I can hang out for a while, I think."

"Excellent." Hikune stood up, looking dutiful. "I decided that I could repay you for helping my brother by examining your taijutsu. I also haven't trained in a while so it would be nice to stretch my legs."

She took immediate offense and she knew there was no reason to, so she hid it with an innocent, "Oh no! That's not necessary."

"It isn't?" He asked shortly and then made a sudden move. Tenten sprang back in surprise to avoid the jab, but didn't put up a defensive stance quick enough. Hikune seized her arm, tugged her forward and pinned it behind her back, showing no amount of smugness, "My...that was fast wasn't it?" He released her promptly and she rubbed her arm tenderly, "Forgive me, Tenten, I only meant to make a point."

"You made it alright..." She muttered, slightly miffed, but he was no braggart like Neji, which relieved her a bit.

"I'm sure your taijutsu is above average for a kunoichi because you are on a melee combat team," And he said this very carefully, aware of her sensitivity to bias against her sex, "But I can give you a few pointers on what to do if weapons, by some cruel chance, become unavailable to you."

Rather than snapping defensively, claiming that her taijutsu required no improvement, Tenten agreed sulkily. It hurt her pride, but in the end, she knew it could only help. She followed him out to the center of the wide, dusty courtyard and Tenten goggled at how quickly the servants had finished their work and disappeared. They were the only ones left outside.

Hikune took a Jyukken stance, predictably, and went through a form that demonstrated a balance between blocking and effectively using a counterstrike. Tenten stared at him dumbly. He smiled uncertainly at her, "Well...it would help if you looked a little enthusiastic, Tenten. If you please, try to copy this form-"

She hoped she didn't sound too discouraged when she interrupted him, "As you already know, I have no Kekkei Genkai. I doubt there would be any point in me attempting to use Jyukken when I don't have the Byakugan, Hikune, no offense..."

"Did Neji feed you that idea, or is that defeatism I hear coming from you?" He chuckled.

She glared in humiliation.

"Let me remind you of the major difference between a bloodline talent and a fighting style, madam." Hikune said matter-of-factly, "Of course one should complement the other: Byakugan and Gentle Fist, Mokuton and sealing techniques...there are many abilities that are naturally compatible in this village, but that does not mean their effectiveness is destroyed when one is without the other."

"But my ability is weaponry!" She whined, hoping that would be enough to deter him, "I doubt anyone will ever sneak up on me at a time there isn't a knife on me somewhere."

He laughed playfully, "I agree, but what could it hurt to improve your stature and muscle memory?"
As long as you know the vulnerable areas of the human body, which you already do, you won't necessarily need the Byakugan, Tenten."

"Hogwash."

Hikune laughed again, "But you certainly won't be able to use 64 Palms either..."

She realized that she was only declining the offer because she was afraid of what Neji might think. He had never encouraged her to acquire a new skill in her time knowing him, moreover, had never told her she was capable of learning his clan's fighting style. He was always on a pedestal and seldom descended from it. 'But I don't have to tell him...I could show him when I think it'll be most prudent...which may be never. Aw, what the hell.'

"Alright then, I concede to your point." Tenten declared, her chin raised, "I guess it wouldn't hurt to try."

"It really wouldn't." Hikune agreed, beginning to repeat the form he had showed her earlier. After a moment he paused and asked her, "Though really, Tenten...who says hogwash anymore?"

She finally laughed in spite of herself.

Rain was coming down in buckets that afternoon. The only available shelter that Naruto and his mentor could find at the time was within the hollowed-out trunk of a giant sequoia. They had settled comfortably in-between the musty roots and bark, grateful to dry off. Since the opportunity was available, Jiraiya had his student continue with a lesson from earlier now that the weather was no longer an issue.

The sage watched Naruto study a scroll. He noted mentally just how quickly the boy was maturing during their rigorous training. He was able to be quiet and concentrate more quickly, making wise decisions that he normally wouldn't have been able to. 'He absorbs information pretty fast. The kid's no sponge like Haku is, but he's brighter than he leads people to believe.' Jiraiya smiled proudly at the thought, 'He's taking to sealing techniques like a duck to water...'

The scroll that Naruto happened to be reading was rather complicated. Jiraiya had been saving it for later, but he figured he might as well oblige Naruto's rapid advancement and had given it to him anyway. The scroll explained how seals were formed, special properties that they possessed, and how they could be combined into larger more complex systems.

Jiraiya was taking a drag on his pipe as he watched his pupil practice writing seals. Occasionally he would stop and correct Naruto if he was off, or if what he wrote would not suit the expected function. For the most part, Naruto did very well and hardly spoke up unless he had a question.

"Hey...Ero-sensei..."

"Hm?"

"All this has got me to thinking...what's up with my own seal." Naruto said quietly, his eyes still stuck to the parchment he had been painting on.

Jiraiya took the pipe out of his mouth for a moment, impressed with the thought, "Well, that certainly is a very pertinent question, kid. So how do you think it works?"

"My seal has an even number of locks so that makes it balanced. It looks like a pair of Four-Elephant seals...if I read about them right..." Naruto scratched his chin while he picked apart the mechanics,
"Really balanced...and really hard to break. Also, there are some gaps that help the Fox's chakra mix evenly with mine...but because of those gaps this seal gets weaker over time."

His teacher nodded, "Right on the money, Naruto."

"But Ero-sensei...the Fox said...that our souls are merging too. Does that mean...I'm going to become evil?" The blonde boy asked urgently.

Jiraiya stared at him for a long moment and in those endless, silent seconds Naruto's anxiety grew, 'Could it be true then? Will I become a monster?'

"You will only become what you want to be: what you make of yourself." Jiraiya answered with a sigh, "I can only teach you and give you the tools you'll need to keep the Fox and yourself in check. In the end, when you're as strong as I know you'll be...it's up to you whether you're good, bad, or something in the gray zone. All I can tell you, Naruto, is that it won't be much longer now..."

Naruto went back to his studies after that.

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Gaara had taken Matsuri on a total of three missions since he had first begun training her. Though all were D-rank, he chose tasks that were less common and more challenging. With each mission his student showed great improvement. One morning they met at their usual training area just outside of the town playground to be briefed for a new assignment.

"It's standard D-rank, mainly information gathering," Gaara told her, "We've received reports of geologic activity southwest of Suna. Earthquakes aren't uncommon in the desert, but this sort of activity is unexplained since there are no reported fault lines in that area."

"So...it's just random tremors?" Matsuri asked, "Could ninja be responsible?"

"Unlikely. We'd be aware if it were something like that." He told her, "We should be back by noon so we will travel light."

They gathered what few supplies they needed, mostly water provisions, and then left the village and headed south towards the coast. Matsuri kept up well during the trip. Her speed had more than tripled that of her former classmates' after leaving them.

The sun beat down onto the shadeless dunes, creating mirages on the buzzing horizon line. The sweltering heat did not very much bother either student or pupil.

After nearly three hours of travel they reached the specified location. It was a small, rocky gorge just a mile away from the coastline. Seagull screeches echoed in the distance and Matsuri was tempted to go for a swim at the beach, but she checked with her sensei first.

"If we finish early we can go swimming." Gaara decided, not immune to the wide smile on her face, "The way I see it...no Sand shinobi can afford to waste a resource of water."

He told Matsuri to stay put while he looked around.

It was hard for her to stay alert. She whirled her jouhyou around in boredom while she waited for Gaara to come up with an assessment. She thought about all of the stories he had told her about his genin days while she paced aimlessly alongside the fissure, 'I want to meet Naruto and Haku one day...they sound so funny.'

Gaara, a further distance up along the crevasse, tested the sand laying atop the sedimentary rock. It
had definitely been disturbed recently, by the look of it, 'It's as if it's been churned by something. Not an earthquake. Something else...' A large wave off the coast? No, there would be evidence of water hitting and there was simply no sign. 'If there was no external contact then it must be coming from underground...but this does not look like a quake to me...'

"Gaara-sensei!" Matsuri's cry caught her teacher's attention. He looked over to her, down where she had been waiting near the beginning of the gorge. Both shinobi were stunned to see sand that had once been still, shudder, and start slipping into the mouth of the pit.

'It's too abrupt. No earthquake could be so regular, could it?' Gaara's eyes scanned over the expanse of the area, trying to spot a trigger.

The loose grit along the lip of the fissure gave away suddenly with striking speed. Matsuri made an impressive leap to avoid the vacuum, but landed again into sand that was quickly being swallowed up. Desperate and unable to free herself, she screamed for her mentor's aid. Gaara descended swiftly, staying on top of the current, "Do not struggle, do you understand? If you do you'll sink in faster. I will get you out."

He hadn't realized there was no rock base supporting the edge they were standing on. One tug of the jounin's chakra accidentally ripped the crack open more. His eyes went wide when he realized his mistake, and he was then also incapable of escaping. They tumbled unexpectedly, Matsuri hollering, and Gaara grabbed her before he could lose sight of the child.

Sand piled in on top of them. He knew better than anyone what an instant death sentence it was, and he made a tremendous effort to slow the falling debris so they would not suffocate. Gaara's power over sand broke their fall, offering them a soft landing with no injuries. Unfortunately, they had found themselves at the bottom of the chasm once the tremor had passed.

The top of the gorge had caved in, cutting off all light. All was still and dusty in the dark. Matsuri's shriek notified Gaara that she was still conscious.

"Sensei! We're trapped! We won't get out! B-Both of us are done for!" She rambled in fright, and Gaara could tell she was about three meters to his left. He brushed some rubble from himself and groped around his travel bag for a flare and then struck it. A red hum of light illuminated the cavern and he could then see his student on her knees, shuddering violently.

Gaara walked over to her and with one hand hoisted her up, "Calm down now. This actually might help us. Down here we might be able to find out just what is causing the quakes."

"B-But-!"

"Relax, Mouse." He patted her head soothingly and then set out. Her pet name, Mouse, from her Academy days had stuck and Gaara used it affectionately.

Matsuri followed closely behind, trying to unwind as best she could. Gaara looked up at the makeshift ceiling of boulders, 'We fell a good 30 meters. If another tremor hits we won't survive it once it caves in again. We should find an exit quickly and be alert for anything that's generating the slides.'

Gaara sighed heavily as he walked, sweeping the light of the flare from left to right. He took a drink from his canteen and passed it to Matsuri, quite certain her mouth was as dry as his at the moment.

She accepted the flask and asked, "Um, Gaara-sensei? H-How do you suppose we can escape?"

They kept walking while he answered, "We can follow the bottom of this fissure until we find a gap
or a weak point we can break out of. There should be enough air for us, I think."

His student quieted down after that and kept close. The ravine floor was oddly smooth. It was hard
for Gaara to guess what kind of erosion was responsible. After a few minutes, Matsuri squeaked
again, "What may have caused the earthquake, do you think, Gaara-sensei?"

"Without a doubt it came from this place, but it still makes little sense. There's no stress between
landmasses in this area." Gaara answered switching the flare from his right hand to his left, "There
could be another explanation...but it wouldn't be comforting."

"Then maybe I won't ask, if that's the case..." She said softly.

A short while later Gaara called for them to stop. Matsuri took another drink from the canteen while
her teacher inspected the jagged wall of the cavern. He ran his hand over the craggy stone, his mouth
forming a thin line, "This is as I thought..."

Matsuri looked over to him, "Eh?"

"This tunnel was carved out by something."

She blinked uneasily, "By...s-something?"

"Yes." Gaara said, turning back to her, "And I think we're going to find out what, one way or
another." He motioned for her to keep moving and she tagged along close behind him, her knuckles
turning white as she clung to the flask.

Matsuri kept a wary eye open. She was not terribly surprised that her sensei had kept his cool for so
long, and she suspected he would for the remainder of the mission. She wished, for a moment, that
she could emulate bravery like her mentor's. Matsuri took a deep breath and then pocketed the
canteen, resolving to get a grip. In her peripheral vision, in that moment, there was a creeping
movement that she could not ignore. She twisted around to get a better look, but saw only shadows.

"Gaara-sensei! I...I think I saw something over there!" Matsuri announced, pointing to the wall, and
hoping she wasn't overreacting because of childish fear.

He gave her a sideways glance before he paused, and then waved the flare so its light fell upon the
spot she indicated. There was nothing. Gaara, suspicious, moved the torch a bit more to the right. A
spindly, jointed leg could be seen retreating into a crack.

Matsuri's gasp bounced off the rock walls with a high-pitched echo. The courage she had managed
to gather before instantly vanished.

Gaara grabbed the genin by the wrist when she refused to budge, and tugged her along as she began
to hyperventilate. The last thing he needed was for his student to get hysterical. He didn't know
precisely how to comfort her when he couldn't guarantee that the, whatever it was, would not appear
again.

Their pace increased and as they rushed along the bottom of the gorge click-like noises began to
reverberate. Skittering motions became clearer among the shadows, and Gaara asked that Matsuri
keep her eyes open, "Just look at me, Matsuri, keep looking ahead."

She did her best to obey, but couldn't help a peek off to the side, and saw something that made her
blood turn to ice-water. A giant scorpion, Gaara estimated it to be anywhere from eight to twelve feet
long, was skirting from the ceiling to the floor of the cavern in their direction.
"Ky-aaa!" Matsuri's scream was cut off by her sensei, who clapped his hand over her mouth.

She immediately squeezed her eyes shut, terror-stricken, and was unable to move. Gaara grunted in annoyance upon seeing her reaction, and then scooped her up onto his back (his sand gourd was absent.) He ran further down the ravine, easily avoiding the scuttling arachnids. Gaara made it a fair distance before the cave's inhabitants encircled them in an impenetrable crowd of legs and stingers.

He dropped the flare to the floor, letting it burn at his feet, and then attacked. Sand, naturally, was plentiful. Gaara knocked the advancing scorpions away with ruthless blasts of sand, sending them tumbling and sliding over each other. Even when he ought to be overwhelmed he was still not frightened. He tried to snap Matsuri back to her senses as he defended.

"Just because you look like a mouse does not mean you act like one." Gaara told her, as she shivered fearfully, her arms laced around his shoulders, "Matsuri, listen, this is the essence of a shinobi: this place. The ability to battle and resist danger...don't fear your destiny. If you truly value anything that I have taught you then you must fight!"

Slowly but surely she became lucid as she listened and watched her teacher fight. He was completely unafraid. Matsuri knew that she could not be any more grateful for Gaara's teachings. She drew out her jouhyou and shakily stood with her back to him, facing the onslaught, "I...I do value what you've taught me, sensei...I do!"

She lashed out with her weapon, pushing the approaching cavern-dwellers back with the tooth of the jouhyou. It was rather abrupt when the scorpions scattered a moment later, as if in defeat. Gaara looked around quizzically, wondering what had discouraged them. A tremor soon followed.

Matsuri looked over to her teacher, "Sensei? What...happened?"

The flare's light weakened slightly. It only had about another ten minutes of life. Gaara frowned at the advancing shadows as light dwindled. It was as if they had been examined. None of the scorpions that had appeared were really hostile, he had noticed. That didn't mean he had wanted them to get too close, however. Something was still amiss.

"There's a saying I once heard..." Gaara told her, "The bigger fish follows after the small school."

"I don't think they come any larger than that..." She mumbled uncertainly. Anything with eight legs, she believed, should never exceed ten inches, let alone ten feet. Her sensei's fish analogy was not helping her relax.

Another quake followed, but it was brief. Fragments of rock shook loose from the ceiling and bombarded the floor of the cavern. Gaara guarded himself and his pupil with a thick sand shield during the rain of debris. When all was still again, the light had dimmed even more. The whole place seemed to have grown smaller, somehow, and when Gaara thought to look upward, he noticed why.

Looming above them were the lateral eyes and twitching jaws of the most massive scorpion of all. Matsuri gave a look of dread to her teacher, hating how he could so easily predict doom.

Its body filled the entirety of the tunnel, almost crammed into it like a sardine in a tin. Its legs, tall and armored, were uncomfortably wedged up against the walls. The tail seemed to have been caught in the tunnel it had entered from, much too long and heavy to be squeezed in also. Gaara found this unusual, considering scorpions were not by nature clumsy, although size seemed to be an issue for this one. He wasn't shocked at all when it spoke.

"I came here to see what had my family so riled up..." The voice was stippled with clicks and
rumbles, "How did you get into this nest?"

"We fell in by mistake." Gaara answered unflappably. Matsuri stared dumbly at him, wondering at what point he intended to panic.

"Fell in? We could only be so fortunate to find an opening these days!" It said hoarsely, "We have not seen humans in a long time because none of us have been to the surface."

The jounin figured a conversation would be the best distraction, "Why?"

"Here the stone is too thick and the sand too turbulent for us to dig through as we used to. We came here long ago, not knowing we had dug our own graves, trapped. We are too weak from starvation to free ourselves now." It sounded genuinely upset, "Our hearts break in this place. We eat our own young to survive now...it is cruel how our home has betrayed us!"

Matsuri relaxed slightly, seeing there was some humanity in a creature that was far from human. She stood beside Gaara, curious, and hoping the monstrous scorpion ahead of them was their ticket out, "Do you think it can help us, sensei?"

"It can't." He reminded her, "They are weak. That is why they were no match for us. They're useless while they're here."

"There is still not enough food..." The boss groaned, "I apologize for this, human, but you may perhaps be our salvation..."

"What does that mean?" Matsuri squeaked, watching nervously as huge pincers neared from the right and left.

"We are dinner." Gaara said, "In theory."

All of the scorpions that had earlier attacked returned in a swarm, again circling around both ninja so they could not escape their patriarch's grasp.

A vicious fire jutsu erupted in the darkness and sent the crawlers reeling, stingers aflame and eyes singed. Matsuri, terrified by the change of attitude, wheeled her jouhyou, forcing back those that got too close. She smiled when she noticed a sand shield rise around her that Gaara had created for good measure.

Her teacher was already on the far side of the cavern, lunging through the onslaught of clumsy arachnids. The boss was slow and weary, and it had no hope of avoiding the four shadow clones that attacked. In unison, Gaara and his copies blasted the lumbering giant with fearful amounts of sand. He was in his element.

The boss toppled over pitifully and its offspring immediately backed off. Any damage to their leader marked danger to the group.

"I was once a great warrior and now I am merely a shell of what I was." The boss lamented, "I did not know you were a shinobi, human. I am sorry. I have the greatest respect for your kind. I once had friends like you long ago."

"I don't think that not knowing I was a ninja is a good enough excuse to try and eat us." Gaara remarked bitterly, "If you were but a thousandth of your size would it justify me crushing you with my foot?"

"Hardly." The boss agreed, "Though it seems were are at an impasse; both trapped in this void."
"Trapped? You mean the quakes were caused by you? You were trying to get out?" Matsuri asked, finally understanding.

"Indeed." The scorpion said, "I, Dosojin, was once the strongest being in the desert. Now I am so weak I cannot even free the smallest of my children. It is a wonder that I could make a ripple in this earth at all."

Matsuri put her jouhyou away and exchanged a glance with her mentor. Currently everyone within the crumbling gorge was done-for, human and beast alike.

"You are gifted, though, young shinobi. Sand obeys you without fail." Dosojin observed, "You could be the one to free us...you are salvation of another kind!"

Matsuri blinked, "Eh? That's crazy!" She turned to Gaara, "You don't buy that, do you sensei?"

To her eternal surprise and horror, the jounin agreed, "I will free you, but on my terms. If you refuse any of my conditions I won't hesitate to crush you all right now."

"Then I suppose I have no choice but to agree." Dosojin reasoned, "Name your price."

"The consumption of humans, ninja and civilian alike, is expressly forbidden." Gaara clarified, "Once you are out of this place your allegiance immediately goes to Sunagakure, understood?"

The boss agreed without much fuss, though the touchy subject of limiting food options had his stomach grumbling louder.

"One final term..." Gaara added, "When you and your family are well and healthy again, you must aid me in battle whenever I send for you. If you are so fond of shinobi, I'm sure you won't mind an alliance like that?"

"We have an accord." Dosojin told him, and then pointed with a large pincer to a point on the ceiling, "There is a weak point here. You can break through, but it will be dangerous for one as small as you if there is a collapse."

"There won't be." Gaara raised his hands up, focusing on the conglomerate of boulders up above. There would only be another cave-in, he noted, if sand on the surface was weighing down on what was scraped away below, That is why Dosojin could not escape. He has no control over what is on the surface."

He targeted the debris on the surface first. Sand parted in waves, forming a shallow but wide sort of ant-hole in the surface world. Gaara felt the real strain when it came time to tunnel further down. Sand below the light grains he had so quickly parted was much heavier, mixed in with rocks and huge slabs of stone. It was evident that there was progress. Another quake resulted, but the shaking was minimal and less violent, unlike the desperate head-butts the scorpions were responsible for.

His chakra was stretched thin just peeling away the gargantuan weight of the surface debris, and Gaara knew he could end up seriously injuring himself to do much more. He had no choice, he figured.

"Matsuri." He rasped, a bead of sweat ran down his face, "Get out now. The opening is small but you can make it."

"What about you, sensei?" She squeaked.

"I'll follow you once I free Dosojin." Gaara told her, "Leave now, Mouse."
Matsuri obeyed, clambering up the unstable rock wall, and was assisted by the more sure-footed scorpions that were exiting alongside her. She was not very comfortable around them even though she was aware they were friendly. Matsuri scrambled out of the pea-hole opening and found herself in the center of some sort of sandy whirlpool. It was at least eight meters from the bottom of the funnel to the top and her escape. There was no solid land to step out on and for a moment she despaired.

"You need help." A scorpion passing by scooped her up, causing her to shriek, and carried her out to safety along with the rest of its cohorts, "There you go, girlie!"

They walked easily on top of the sand, scuttling around, clicking and rejoicing. Matsuri stared at the horse-sized bug that had helped her, "...uh...th-thanks."

Scorpions began to file out of the exit by the hundreds, small and large alike, and as time waned so did the jounin's chakra. 'It will take more than this...' Gaara thought, 'More than I am giving...I have to use it.' He leapt atop Dosojin's head, telling him to be prepared.

Gaara felt mobility cease as he dipped into chakra that was not his own. The weight he balanced above him threatened to cave at any moment. Shukaku was not thrilled by his intrusion.

You little twerp! You think now that you're a high-ninja means you have the right to disturb me? I own you! I inhabit you! You belong to me and not the other way around!

"That's where you're mistaken..." He muttered aloud. His irises were stained amber after making contact. Sand that had dipped into the gorge gathered and materialized a bestial appendage around his arm. Dosojin was not much alarmed by the transformation. Gaara heaved upward with a sudden deluge of biju chakra, ripping open the ceiling of the cavern completely. Sand and rock debris tumbled downward and was knocked away by a demonic claw.

The behemoth of a scorpion staggered out into the sunlight clumsily with the jinchuriki still on his head. Once all were out with certainty, Gaara relinquished what he had stolen, dispelling his more monstrous features, and let the whole gorge collapse inward again. It was the biggest tremor overall, as well as the last. An army-sized congregation of arachnids skittered about the dunes surrounding Dosojin in celebration. Gaara joined Matsuri on the ground, a bit shaken, but otherwise unscathed.

He sat down tiredly, patting down his sides in confusion, "Hm...where is that canteen..."

"Oh! I have it, Gaara-sensei!" She passed it to him, ecstatic, "That was unbelievable! You did it! We all made it out and no one was hurt!"

Gaara was disappointed how there were only a few sips of water left. He drank them down quickly, and then looked to his student, "Notice how you said no one instead of just we."

"Well...they are kind of nice."

He sighed and then stood up, facing the giant scorpion, "Our agreement is now in effect, Dosojin."

"I am aware and though we are free we are still weakened from hunger, young ninja." The boss answered.

"My name is Gaara." The jounin announced and added, "Though you cannot eat humans, I do recall a beachfront just south of here that is home to sea lions. There you may feast to your heart's content."

Dosojin was pleased with the news, "That place will be our first destination."
"I will expect you at the gates of Sunagakure in three days so we may have another discussion."
Gaara told him, "Until then, rest well."

"Thank you." Dosojin then promptly turned south with his entire legion in tow, and proceeded to the coast. His silhouette was still visible on the horizon line as he shrank into the distance.

After teacher and pupil had finished recovering they stood up and also set out for home.

"I guess we won't go swimming since we finished late." Matsuri decided, "Also, there will be scorpions all over the beach for a day or two..."

"Good point." Gaara agreed tiredly, "It's evening already. Time really flies when you're trapped in an underground labyrinth."

She laughed, trying not to drag her feet in the sand, "That's true, sensei...hm. I really don't think anyone back home is going to believe our story, though."

"They don't have to." He smirked, "Give it three days and they'll change their minds."

During the course of two hours of traveling Haku had learned several names of Mist ninja he was to avoid, areas he and Zabuza would be frequenting, certain jutsu he would be useless without knowing, and that his identity had to be kept secret while he was in the Water Country.

"A pretty face like yours will be recognized too easily," Zabuza told him, "That'll be a problem."

Haku understood that if he was recognized near Mist while he was supposed to be in Sand, word might get back to Leaf that he had defected. Though he was certain that Gaara would cover for him and tie loose ends until he returned, Haku knew that if anyone else discovered the truth he would be labeled a traitor just as Sasuke had been.

It was an exhausting trip across the bay to another island in the archipelago and they reached their destination as dusk set in.

"We'll be staying at this lodge for the next week," Zabuza notified him before they entered the inn, "Don't get cozy. Tracker-nin have been watching this area so we'll be finding another location soon."

"I understand." Haku followed him inside and then asked curiously, "Zabuza-san, why did you abandon the warehouse after the tracker-nin were defeated? Would that be passing up a good job opportunity?"

For a moment he cringed at how ignorant his question sounded. Haku truly knew very little about the missing-nin lifestyle, and more importantly, how he was going to survive while adapting to it himself.

"No. In fact, it was a job not even worth looking into," The nukenin answered with an annoyed tone, "It isn't something you should be concerned with presently. Now don't bother me with any stupid questions: sleep. Your training starts tomorrow at dawn."

Haku watched Zabuza stalk off down the hall. It had occurred to him then that Zabuza had already checked into the hotel and was by no means going to accommodate him. Haku paid for a room for the next week and then proceeded down the corridor to his right. 'Even if Zabuza intends to train me he doesn't plan to be responsible for me as a student. I still have to look after myself during this time. He's a missing-nin, he's not a person who I can look for companionship with...' He mentally slapped himself.
The dark haired boy slid the door shut behind him after finding his quarters. It was fairly empty with the exception of a futon and a gas lantern. He dropped his belongings near the lamp and let his eyes stray out to the view of the crescent moon that greeted him outside the window. It leaked silver light into the darkness of the room, and in that moment he had never felt more alone in his entire life.

His friends were long behind him in distant lands. He feared he may never be able to return home. The girl he loved was angry with him because of his rash decisions and he didn't blame her for it. 'Zabuza was right about one thing…I don't know anything about this land. It's far more dangerous than the Fire Country and I won't last long unless I acclimate myself to this place.' Haku thought to himself, settling onto the futon for some rest.

The only thing that kept him from turning tail and running back home was the hope of discovering his long-lost clan and what could possibly remain of his family. Haku doubted that Zabuza would be able to tell him much even though he had devoted himself as an underling to the nukenin. The deal he had made, Haku knew, could soon be something he would regret.

His troubles drifted out of his thoughts as his mind wandered into a calm realm of sleep, and he dreamed of Naruto and Gaara and his joyful days spent beside them. Days lost to history.

Being the habitually early-riser he was, Haku woke as the first rays of sunlight gleamed on the horizon. He tossed off his blanket and balked at the frigid temperature of the air in his room. Muttering sleepily to himself, he dressed quickly, shivering while he pulled his clothes on and prepared his armaments.

Haku left his room and wondered if perhaps he had beaten Zabuza in terms of waking up. The inn was completely silent with all of its occupants fast asleep, so the dark haired boy ventured outside to pass the time. The morning air was frostbitten but filled with the songs of small birds saluting the sunshine. Haku basked peacefully in the winter music for a long while, heedless, until he noted a presence a fair distance behind him.

"If you're just going to stand there like an idiot for the rest of your life don't waste my time," Zabuza barked, "If you intend to grow stronger then follow me."

Rather than apologizing, which he was apt to do; Haku remained silent and tailed after the nukenin into the thick of the forest surrounding the lodge. Even though Zabuza was blatantly rude and impatient, Haku was still compelled to show him respect. Not that he owed much to someone he had fought against on a past mission, admittedly; and perhaps not because he deserved reverence, but because crossing the jounin could be the last thing he may ever do.

'He's much stronger than he was when we fought in the Land of Waves,' Haku thought to himself, 'I have grown more powerful as well. I cannot contend with his skills at all, though. It may do me good to learn from him while I can.'

Zabuza stopped in a small clearing and Haku mirrored him. The Leaf ninja was quick to notice all of the trees in the area bore the scars of brutal treatment and slash marks. A number of them had even been cut clean in half and were toppled over each other on the muddy ground.

"I can understand that you train on your own, but don't you think that leaving evidence like this place behind could get hunter-nin on your trail?" Haku asked keenly, "Don't they look for clues like these?"

"There's a simple solution to that." Zabuza grunted in irritation, "Don't stay in the same place for long if you don't want to get caught. You'd think an ex-ANBU would know how those morons
"You were in the Mist Black-Ops?" Haku was truly surprised.

"Long ago. I had been a captain in Mist, but I moved on to better things." The nukenin replied, "They can't think for themselves: always doting on the Mizukage's wishes. The lot of them are fools chasing ghosts."

Haku had wanted to ask why the Seven Shinobi Swordsman had been more preferable to him, but was hushed in fright after seeing Zabuza draw his zanbato.

"Your training starts now." He said simply and then he lunged.

It was a matter of minutes before the nukenin was dangling the dark haired boy in the air by his wrist, shaking him disapprovingly.

"You're flawed." Zabuza growled, dropping him to the ground, "You're weak."

"I cannot defeat someone with such a monstrous weapon..." Haku said quietly, rising to his knees in the dirt and he tried to catch his breath.

"Weapons have nothing to do with it." The nukenin retorted, "You were on the defensive, so I broke your defense. Not once did you try to attack. Two good senbon would be enough."

"But you block them like they're nothing!"

"Because you don't throw to disable, you throw them just to throw them," Zabuza told him, "That's wasteful. Who the fuck was training you in Leaf anyway?"

"The Toad Sage: Jiraiya."

The nukenin snorted, "Psh! Could have fooled me."

Haku stared at the ground sourly, upset that he was so impossibly weak against Zabuza. He felt like using one of the forbidden jutsu he had learned or activating his cursed seal, but he was aware that by going that far to prove himself he would not learn anything. 'Maybe I should just listen to what he has to say, even if he is intolerably wretched...'

"Come at me with the intention of eliminating me. Hesitation against the foe is weakness," Zabuza ordered, "If you don't, you'll lose a limb this time."

Haku vanished, having hidden several ice mirrors behind the surrounding trees already. He reappeared suddenly with a drop-kick from above Zabuza. The nukenin countered but was hit with a number of senbon from behind. A shadow clone emerged from another ice mirror. Haku and his double worked in perfect synchronization against the opponent. The clone attacked to create an opening in the nukenin's defense and Haku landed a swift hit.

Every attack that connected, however, Zabuza appeared to shrug off. Haku hit hard and fast, recalling his training with his comrades in Leaf. He moved faster, more thoughtfully, avoiding Zabuza's counterattacks while delivering his own. After a long volley, Zabuza hurled his sword in a great arc, cleaving through the two shadow clones Haku had assisting him. The dark haired boy retreated to one of his mirrors, but the zanbato swept past, smashing it into thousands of frozen shards.
Haku leapt from a piece of falling glass into another mirror and watched as the massive sword hacked into the side of a tree and hung suspended there. Zabuza held out his hand to his weapon, which shuddered from its place embedded in the bark, and then promptly flew from the tree and back to its waiting master. The nukenin made no move to continue the fight, so Haku stepped out of his ice mirror, walking over to him. "You were not able to do that last time..."

"No, I wasn't. You pick up a few tricks after a while." Zabuza responded smugly, "Do you know what a Soul-Forged weapon is, Haku?"

"I'm afraid that I-"

"Then never mind." He completely dropped the subject, much to Haku's disgruntlement, and then continued with a drill on proper taijutsu forms.

By noon Haku had mastered the Mist Hiding Technique as well as the Water Prison Technique that had been introduced to him. Zabuza was not surprised to see that Haku could even perform both jutsu without hand seals if he concentrated.

"That's just the perk of your Kekkei Genkai," The nukenin warned him, "A fast learner like you may get supplementary jutsu easy like that, but even you have a long way to go before your water clones fool a jounin."

Haku assumed that meant he had to practice until it came as second nature to him. For the rest of the day Zabuza critiqued his taijutsu, correcting his stances, and taught him a number of brutal, more powerful tactics. They stopped only to eat and by nightfall Haku could feel resonating aches all throughout his body. He parted ways with Zabuza after he had been belittled for his lack of stamina at dinner.

'He's surprisingly chatty...' Haku thought to himself on his way back to his room, 'Maybe he just likes to hear himself talk.'

Once in his room Haku laid on his futon fully clothed, too tired and anguished to change out of his sweat-soaked garments. He stared at the ceiling for a long while. The lantern cast deceptive shadows that kept his eyes entranced. 'Even if he is a missing-nin...and certainly one of the most horrible people I've ever met, I've never learned so much in such a short span of time...ever...'

Light and darkness danced hypnotically above him as he thought. 'Maybe it is good that I came here...while I search for my clan I will become stronger and train harder, and at least that way my coming here will have had more significance.' Haku closed his eyes. 'I just hope...that I will see Naruto-kun and Gaara-kun again sometime. Everything in this world seems less bright when they aren't with me.'

With a heavy sigh Haku rolled over and blew out the flame of the oil lamp. Darkness swallowed up the remaining light.

The following day he received a healthy beating from his new teacher. Using strictly taijutsu Zabuza was a fearsome opponent, and Haku was grateful that he was not being assaulted by the extensive repertoire of ninjutsu the nukenin possessed.

At noon they stopped to eat and the dark haired boy stole a moment to spit all of the blood out of his mouth. Ruby saliva gleamed on the frosted grass. Haku frowned at the sight of it. Zabuza's training was merciless. If it kept up, he would soon be crushed into a bruised, unrecognizable pulp.

'That's the point of learning, isn't it? If I don't improve soon I'll just be a waste of time...as well as a
bloody mess...' Haku thought critically, swiping his thumb over his bottom lip and staining it red. He walked after Zabuza silently into the lodge. Haku was lost in his thoughts as they waited to be served lunch. 'Without a doubt, Gaara-kun would be more suited for this training than I am. He'd keep up well and advance quickly...' He was rather envious of his friend's tough exterior and focus, 'And Naruto-kun as well. He'd survive this training easily...but he'd probably be arguing with Zabuza over his harshness...'

The image of the blonde boy yelling at the missing-nin indignantly brought a subconscious smile to Haku's lips.

"What's got you grinning like a schoolgirl?" The nukenin's gruff voice snapped the young shinobi out of his thoughts. He was annoyed with Haku's stubbornly innocent attitude, and yet somehow was still able to tolerate it.

"Just a memory..." Haku responded absently.

With a disinterested huff Zabuza looked away, not caring to know about the boy's daydreams. Their food arrived and was spread out on the table before them. Haku ate quietly, trying to ignore how his hand trembled in pain as he lifted his chopsticks to his mouth. He was not going to let his wounds inhibit him.

Zabuza watched through lidded eyes as he chewed, bored, finding Haku's mannerisms bizarre. The boy's presence was agreeable. He listened. He obeyed. He absorbed new jutsu like a sponge. 'But he's stubborn and talks back, the little brat...looks like he got more pig-headed since I last saw him,' Zabuza noted in annoyance, 'I'll beat the arrogance out of him...'

The day continued as scheduled once they finished eating. The close combat drills pushed Haku to his physical limits, but he understood what he was learning. When Zabuza attacked him he attacked as an enemy would, and not a teammate who was engaging in a friendly spar. Though Haku believed that Zabuza could quite possibly kill him with such a harsh training regiment, he was silently surprised to see that the nukenin never did push him too far.

He matched his training with Haku's learning pace and rate of fatigue. Haku found it curious that Zabuza was so skilled and aware of another's learning ability, so he asked about it casually, "Have you ever trained a genin team, Zabuza-san?"

"Hell no. I had an apprentice while I was with the Seven Swords, though," Zabuza gave him an odd look, "Why do you care?"

"You're a good teacher." Haku found it strange that he had discovered a positive quality in such a despicable criminal. He left it at that, not wanting to elaborate.

Zabuza smirked, "Too bad my last student didn't last long. It's no good when all that training goes to waste."

"What happened to him?" Haku was truly curious, and was glad to get a taste of history while on a break from being beaten bloody.

"He disappeared in a fight." The nukenin replied, his voice was distant, "He was probably killed by Sound. It's a shame since he was so great with a blade...you don't even compare."

Haku lowered his chin a margin and fell quiet. He knew he had no reason to expect or want Zabuza to be proud of him, especially when the Mist ninja was only interested in polishing his Kekkei Genkai. Something did sting, though, at the mocking of his ability.
He wanted to know who it was Zabuza had trained and why he had been killed by Oto nin. Haku remained silent, deciding that it would be a question for another time. Their break ended shortly after that and they began the practice forms over again, methodically progressing to more lethal combinations.

Haku did his best to ignore the painful hum in his ribs where he had been kicked numerous times, as well as the aching bruises then dotting his arms. Though he was not conscious of it, Haku stopped fretting over the training at that point. He attacked more fiercely, boldly, knowing only how to fight in the moment.

It was the exact change in attitude Zabuza had been waiting for.

"When am I going to have friends?" Yuma asked his mother, pouting, "I've been waiting real patiently like you said, so...do you think maybe sometime soon?"

Rin, preoccupied with grating an aconite root, glanced down to her son, "Eh? What the heck are you talking about? You have friends already, sweetie!"

"I don't."

"Then what about Sesshu? Or Char-san? Or Fumitake-kun, huh?" Rin insisted, dumping the shavings into a crucible along with other herbs, "Why don't they count?"

"Sesshu is a dog and he's my friend, but I want a human friend, and Char-san is too old to play with me, Ma, he just tells me stories!" He explained, fiddling his hands, "Fumitake-kun moved away a few days ago...and he was a lot older than me so he didn't like to hang out with me so much."

"He moved away? No kidding? I thought it was a lot quieter around here..." Rin recalled the loudmouth of the nearby village, "But Yuma you always have Dad and me, and...you know what it's like out here. It's so dangerous for people like us. Heaven forbid someone from Rock saw you playing with the local children; do you know what they would do to you? To an outsider?"

"Then when can we go somewhere else? Where you and Dad are from?" The boy questioned, "It would be safe there, I bet! Can we please just go?"

Rin didn't speak for a moment. She stood at the counter, grinding the contents of the bowl into a salve. To her eternal guilt, she was fully aware of how her son was deprived of companions in such a backwater place. Her own heart, however, could not stand the thought of returning to the village she had fled from. Her eyes glazed over with memories.

"I just thought I should check with you first..." She said softly.

Minato watched his student with sad eyes. He had been busy with a mission report all evening, and by the time Rin had stopped by to see him it was nearing midnight. She had told him that she was leaving.

"Did you talk to Kakashi, I hope?" He asked worriedly, "You know he's going to miss you very much if you go, Rin."

"I talked to him a while ago." She forced a smile, and a lump formed in her throat that made it difficult to speak, "I...uh...well...I did something kind of stupid."

"Stupid? Like what?"
"I told him that I loved him, sensei."

"Oh...Rin." Minato eeked out a small breath before he spoke, "That...that wasn't stupid at all. It's just that...I wish that I'd had the chance to speak with him before you had worked up the courage to do something like that."

Her smile, due to it being forced, became bitter, "You and I both know, sensei, that even if you had pep-talked him earlier it wouldn't have made him handle the situation delicately. I am appreciative that you did not tamper with that rejection. Really."

"I'm so sorry, Rin. Do you want to talk about it?" Her mentor asked quietly.

"Sure." She said stiffly, "I'll sum it up. I told him and then he looked at me like I had sprouted another leg or something. He said that he could never encroach upon, what the hell was it? Obito's claim, he said? Whatever that meant...he said he would be ashamed to love me...ashamed, sensei! He said ashamed. How much worse does it get?" Rin laughed, "I've had it with this place to begin with, but I guess there isn't much left for me to look forward to if the guy I'm hung up on says he's ashamed of me!"

"He's sensitive about things pertaining to Obito and he knows that Obito cared for you very much, Rin. It isn't your fault. You shouldn't give up when there are so many other opportunities to be had, you know." Minato admonished her gently, "I wouldn't want you to leave over something like this..."

"You're lucky, Minato-sensei." Rin told him, "Everyone that you love, all of them, even Kushina...they love you back. At least let me try my luck somewhere else before you ask me to go fishing for love here again."

He looked so incredibly sad that she almost regretted having opened up to him. Rin never had the intention of upsetting her teacher because he was one of the few people who genuinely cared about her. At the present time she was tactless and could only hope he wouldn't overreact.

"What about your family?" Minato asked after a long silence.

"I'll write to them. They'll be alright...I'll be alright."

"If you go I don't want you to be listed as a nukenin, considering the circumstances of your departure." He warned her, "Leaving without permission or a formal explanation could get you in trouble...or they may also take the easy route and just file you among the dead, and I don't want that for you either, Rin."

"I want this, sensei." Rin insisted, "Let me give it a shot. I think I'll be okay. For my mental health, I think I really need to get away. I can't explain this to anyone else but you because no one else will listen, you know?"

It was silent again.

"No one knows what you need more than you do." Minato admitted, "I will miss you. You were always my brightest student, and I mean that. Rin. Kakashi may have been talented and Obito may have been from a prestigious clan, but you were always the pillar. Of the three, you were always aware of what mattered most...so I must thank you."

"Thanks...sensei." She choked on the words, hugging him gratefully. She knew that he would smooth things over. Her friends would know she was safe and the village council wouldn't brand her a traitor. She did wonder, however, what Kakashi would think. She suddenly stopped caring.
"Write to me too, alright?" Minato smiled sunnily a moment later, "Tell me all of the neat things you see and don't get into trouble!"

"I won't." Rin walked down the street slowly, wiping at her eyes.

"Oh! And don't talk to nukenin or get into fights!" He added.

She kept walking, feeling a bit better, "Of course..."

"...wait! Do you need any money?"

"Bye, Minato-sensei!" She was already around the corner.

Once back at the Inuzuka residence Rin put on a facade. It would be tricky to get her family to approve so instead she opted to say nothing about her intentions to avoid an argument. It was late and she hoped that the rest of her family was asleep so she could avoid trouble. She tip-toed down the hall, hating how every floorboard she stepped on created a monstrous creak. It had been easier to sneak around when she had been young, but she was seventeen and almost six feet tall. Times had changed.

It was her misfortune to pass by her elder sister's room while the door was still open. Her sibling noticed her scent and called out to her, "Sissy? That you? You're out late..."

Rin sighed in defeat and entered the room. She frowned to see her sister playing with Sesshu (a young dog at the time) on the floor. Dogs of the family were a community resource, though, so she decided not to get irritated at such a critical time. Rin leaned on the door frame, trying to look casual, "Hey Tsume...why are you up so late?"

"I could say the same to you." Tsume smiled, rolling onto her belly, "I just got in from a mission. Sesshu kept me up! Make sure you take him with you to bed so he stops making a fuss."

"Okay then, goodnight-"

"Hold on a minute, where have you been anyway, eh?" Her sister asked suspiciously.

"I was talking to Minato-sensei. Ask him if you don't believe me." Rin answered shortly.

"Oh. Okay then..." Tsume stretched and then sat up, yawning. "Wow...I'm beat. I think it's about time we both get some shut eye..."

"I couldn't agree more." Rin then looked to her ninken, "Come on, Sesshu, let's go."

The golden dog gave Tsume a lick to the face before trotting over to his owner. Rin bade her sister goodnight one final time before sliding the door shut and continued down the hall. It was eerily quiet in her room. She could feel the entirety of her clan settling down to sleep. It felt strange to Rin. She would be leaving them at a time when they were vulnerable and unable to stop her.

She went into her room, unattached to it somehow. The belongings in it held little value to her those days. Rin quickly packed a bag full of necessities and a few sentimental keepsakes, and Sesshu, very confused, watched her work without saying a word. When she finished, she extinguished the light of her room and returned to the hall, whispering for her dog to follow, "Time to go, boy."

"What's happening, Rin?"

"Shh! You've got to keep quiet." She snuck down the corridor, out through a door attached to a
supply shed. They crept through it unnoticed, across a garden lit with fireflies, and over the east gate of the household. Sesshu had not objected at all, obeying Rin completely. It had felt almost too easy to get away, she thought.

There was a full moon and she found herself glancing up at it occasionally as she followed a road North, away from her village. She wondered if she felt like crying, but her eyes were dry and her breathing was still. She truly felt better than ever.

Sato bought lunch for Iruka after receiving the good news. The boy had known that Tsunade would not make a scene about the request, but Iruka had told him that the Hokage did not have much faith in Tama, "She's never met her, you know, so she doesn't expect anything exceptional."

The truth was that Konoha was in dire need of more shinobi after defending against the previous invasion and suffering casualties. Tsunade could not refuse the thought of possibly rebuilding the number of ninja in the village in any way possible. Iruka left that tidbit out in his conversation with Sato, however.

"Good, that'll make it more awesome when she kicks ass." Sato answered, smirking, "Now eat that ramen before it gets cold, Iruka-sensei, I paid good money for you!"

Iruka could not help but be vastly reminded of Naruto and how they shared ramen in the past.

He missed the boy terribly, and after mentioning him Sato admitted to it too, "Yeah...Naruto-kun and his team...the lot of them are my kind of guys: they know what's important. Poor Sunshine's been a bit down lately, though."

Iruka have him a confused look, "Sunshine?"

"Oh! Yeah, Hinata-chan, I mean." He explained quickly, "Ever since those two became a thing, which I knew was going to happen, they've been two peas in a pod. Now that Naruto-kun's abroad she misses him a lot, I can tell."

"A thing?" Iruka smiled widely, "Well, isn't that an interesting match? A quiet princess and the village loudmouth...perfect. I know that's made to last!"

Sato laughed loudly and Teuchi, who passed by to make sure they were enjoying their meals, also couldn't help but reminisce about Naruto. Afterwards Iruka tried to get back on task, "Listen, Sato. Tama's examination has been scheduled for the end of this week, that's when I won't be busy. She'll be reviewed on the fluidity of supplementary jutsu, trap and combat skills, and her accuracy with weapons. Please bear that in mind when you tell her."

"Of course, sensei." Sato made sure to make a mental note, "I'll see you around then!"

He left tab money out for both his meal as well as Iruka's before departing. He melted into the crowd of mid-day shoppers on the street and headed uptown. For some reason he could not help but grin felicitously.

He had known the idea was more than likely to be approved of, but all the same, he felt that it was imperative for people to realize that Tama was more than a pretty face.

Sato knew she was a brilliant thinker, fighter, and gifted in general, but only because he spent most of his life growing up with her. Few others could see what he already knew. *Opportunity is knocking, though! She is going to be so stoked!*
He forgot to knock again. He barged in through the front door of her house with a parade of triumphant babble, and marched past both of her startled parents who were indulging in some sake that afternoon. They blinked at how he had disappeared down the hall and then went back to their drinks.

Sato leapt the staircase and exploded into her bedroom, cheering, "You're going to love meeee!"

She had been trying to fill out a birthday card for her father with little success. It was a bad habit of Sato's to enter her home uninvited and hollering, but most of the time she found it entertaining. Now was no exception. Tama gave up on the card, signing her name with love, and then shoved it aside on her desk. Sato was still rambling about his success.

"Yes, yes, that's great! Now will you keep it down?" She asked urgently, "You'll wake the dead."

"Oh! Right." He quieted down, "Well, I'm sure you will be pleased to hear how your exam is at the end of this week and then you'll be a real ninja!"

"Shh! Yeah, and though that's wonderful you have to remember that my parents can't find out." Tama reminded him with a hiss, "So what's the deal?"

"Iruka-sensei is going to be your examiner, so there's no pressure," Sato explained with a smile, "Today is Sunday, so we have all of this week to get you into shape."

"But...I have work."

"Take off then! You need this training," Sato demanded gently, "Your boss loves you anyway, so she'll cut you a break, right?"

"Possibly..." Tama sighed, and then added, "Alright. We should go quickly before my parents get suspicious. Try to act normal, okay?"

He nodded in compliance and she grabbed her bag, hoping the look of going out for the day would be enough to convince her parents they intended nothing more than common, teenage frivolity. Once on the ground floor again, they passed the kitchen where her parents had been loitering. Tama doubled back to find suitable shoes, and her mother followed her around like a duckling, asking her if she was going on a date.

"Yes Mom, a date, now please, can you help me out here?" Tama answered, her patience wearing thin. She and Miako hunted for the missing pair of heels.

Sato, very much alone with Tama's father, gulped hard when a threatening hand clapped onto his shoulder. He looked up rigidly, trying to appear normal as Tama had instructed. The look on his face was more of constipation rather than relaxation.

"Can I talk to you inside for a second, Sato?" Ken asked with his wine still in hand.

The boy nodded feebly and followed him through the archway into the dinette. Sato knew for a fact that there was a very fine line between love and hate, and that he was tight-rope walking constantly around Maito Ken. Seldom was he ever on the man's good side, and he could tell now was one of those times again. Once out of sight of the women, Ken's facial expression melted into a slate of disapproval.

"Listen well, because I will only say this once," Ken uttered in a threatening hush, "Arranged marriage does not mean that you are entitled to any sort of inappropriate contact with my daughter while you're out. Got that? Dating, boyfriends, girlfriends…these terms do not exist with me. You
are a hoodlum and until you clean up your act I will not begin to see the validity of your family's tie with mine, understand?"

"Eep."

"Good." Ken refilled his cup with sake at the counter, "Now go have fun, kiddo."

Sato walked out of the kitchen mechanically. His stomach had taken on the shape of a polyhedron in a matter of seconds and it was both painful and terrifying. Tama ushered him out of the house after she had retrieved her shoes, knowing they'd never escape her mother if they didn't leave quickly. Once out on the street, Sato's nervousness began to ebb away.

"Was it my dad again?" Tama asked apologetically.

"Yeah." He chuckled, "I know he means well but I would never dream of...doing stuff like that."

"I know." She patted his shoulder and the last of his anxiety died out. They stopped into the bakery briefly. Her boss was sweeping flour up off the floor that had been spilled from a bag earlier. Tama explained, in partial truth, what was going on, "Yes, so, I'll need the week off so I can focus on this career project. Is that okay?"

"Sure thing, Tama-chan." Her boss smiled sweetly, "My son is actually coming in. I was going to have you train him but I guess Ami can do it. He needs to try his lazy hands at shop-work for once."

Her boss glanced over to Sato who stood reading a list of specialty muffins, "Oh, hey Sato-kun! You're looking as handsome as ever, I see."

He was sheepish, "Wow, really? I didn't even brush my hair this morning."

Tama blushed terribly. She was aware that Sato was maturing, but she felt abashed that her own boss had to point it out in front of her. She thanked her boss with a red face and then hurried out. Sato followed promptly after her to his team's training field.

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*The Tale of the First Shinobi, Chapter 6*

*Tian Tian traveled far and wide and found new freedom in her detachment. She turned away beasts and warriors of all sorts who challenged her. She did take great care not to be tracked down. As time went on, powerful ninja clans pushed further and further into her territories. She was careful to avoid Tasaisha and Juranda, the sons of the Sage of the Six Paths, for they possessed terrible power and many followers.*

*She came by a new sword, which was not nearly as fine as her last, and performed hired work for lords in need of protection. Though she was paid well her victories in their names it was never as fulfilling as her service to her father.*

*Instead of money and accolade, Ukigaru had always shared love and wisdom with her. Tian Tian struggled to fill the hollowness of her spirit. It echoed painfully inside of her as she wandered.*

*After some time she journeyed back to the Land of Stone, curious to its condition. She hid herself in a cowl, not wanting to be recognized, and found that her country had changed far more than she had thought since her departure. Many ninja clans had since pledged fealty to the daimyo of the region. They obeyed his word and proudly went to battle for him. Tian Tian grew suspicious of them as she watched.*

*An elite group of shinobi in the lord’s service had hired peons to carry out lesser tasks. She found*
out quickly that many of them only acted on their personal interests.

"All of them are men..." She sneered in addition, doubly disgusted by them. Their lack of discipline and honor had gone unnoticed.

Though tempted, Tian Tian made no effort to punish or correct them. She moved on, observing the neighboring villages in the mountains, and the disturbing acts that took place there. Shinobi threatened civilians with their skills to get their way, often attacking without provocation.

Though she had suffered much and wished to be uninvolved, the common people's treatment was more than she could stomach. Tian Tian confronted a band of corrupt ninja while they were passing over a mountain trail.

"Certainly none of you will confess your crimes to your master, will you?" She asked them, careful not to give away her identity, "Boneless cowards like you wouldn't have the heart to take responsibility in front of Ukigaru-sama!"

"There's no need for any confessions, madam" One of them crowed, "We plan to overthrow that man and the daimyo so we can do what we please!"

"Traitors..." Tian Tian hissed, "Filth! What loyalty do you have? To the ones who trained you all and gave you land? Take them for granted and you will pay with your throats!"

They laughed at her. Their leader piped up a moment later, "Look at Miss Hag who hides her face and boasts for her generous, caring lord! Who would be sent to punish us, eh?"

They balked when she charged at them, drawing her sword from beneath her cloak. A few raced ahead to meet her, not underestimating the kunoichi after her furious tirade. They were no match, as she wheeled like a falcon through their ranks with strokes of terrible speed. The startled ninja gained their wits quickly, joining together and avoid her vicious attacks.

Tian Tian, though a fearsome contender, admitted their numbers had weight. Her advantage of surprise was wasted when twenty some-odd warriors began to organize and fight. She kept up her guard, too stubborn to back down. By the time she had dropped a half dozen of her foes, she realized she had help.

One amongst the crowd suddenly turned on his own, raking his leader's neck with a sword, and then sending the rest of them scurrying. Leaderless and terrified, the remaining ninja fled while they could.

Tian Tian, still distrustful, pointed her blade at the oddball, "I don't take too kindly to charity, sir. You will run with the rest of your flock if you are wise."

"How could I do that when my loyalty is to Ukigaru-sama?" The man smiled at her, "I police these lands for him daily. He knows how rowdy it gets out here, and I can say that in all my days of patrolling you are the worst renegade I have seen yet."

He sounded honest enough and peculiarly familiar. Tian Tian relaxed, glad that at least one ninja was still loyal to her father. She figured then she ought to explain who she was, and that she was no criminal, but she was hopelessly distracted by the sword the man was carrying with him.

"That sword is called Taige...and it was once mine." Tian Tian said quietly, confused, "How is it in your possession?"

"I kept it, sensei, as you asked," He told her, "I suppose you don't remember me...it has been a long
Strange feelings rose up in her. Tian Tian regarded her companion with a look of distant recollection. Her past seemed less evil to her then, and she laughed softly, "Oh...it is very good to see you again, Yuanjia."

"Would you like some?"

Neji looked up from his book to see Lee offering him food. He had diced peaches on a plate and there were only a few left. He thanked his teammate and helped himself to a slice of fruit. The Hyuga went back to his reading a moment later.

Lee observed his friend curiously, "Is that book you are reading interesting?"

"It's good." Neji answered shortly.

"What is it about, may I ask?"

Neji looked at him, slightly irritated by the prodding, "It isn't as if I'm preoccupied or anything, Lee."

"My apologies, Neji, I did not mean to interrupt!"

Neji relaxed, reminding himself that being snappish with his teammates would not build a healthy relationship. "I'll tell you what it's about later if you really must know." The Hyuga conceded, "Or you can read it yourself when I'm through with it." He took a bite of peach and went back to his book.

Team Gai was currently deployed on a mission, and a terribly boring one at that. It mostly required their teacher to negotiate clearance with a state official into a restricted building (which Neji found to be a mismatched task on Tsunade's part,) and once inside, apprehend a low-level fugitive hiding there. It had been an hour since Gai had left and they were still waiting for him to return.

Neji had a feeling they would be going on two hours before Gai-sensei could gain anyone's cooperation. He and his teammates made themselves comfortable on the roof of a tenement while they waited. Lee, seeing Neji was not interested in conversation at the moment, looked over to Tenten. From the look of it, she was also not interested. She was on the far side of the roof, nearly out of sight behind a row of air vents.

Lee blinked disbelievingly at the kunoichi. If he was not mistaken he would swear she was practicing Jyukken forms! It was hardly feasible considering her specialization and lack of a Kekkei Genkai, but all the same, she moved with poise and focus. He goggled for another moment, and then turned to the boy across from him, "Um...Neji?"

The Hyuga heir looked up at him expectantly, but Lee suddenly dismissed his question. Neji went back to his reading, but not after snatching another slice of peach. Lee looked back to Tenten, deciding not to draw Neji's attention to her.

The look on her face as she went through the kata was sheer happiness. She looked accomplished and calm, and Lee then suspected that the only way that she could have learned such a style was from a master of it: their very own Hyuga prodigy.

He smiled to himself, 'But maybe there is more to it than that. Of course he would teach Tenten since
they are so very close...but Tenten loves him very much! Could it be that he has finally realized? Is that why her spirit is so light today?

He glanced back to Neji who still had his nose buried in his book. Lee could not tell from his expression whether or not anything had sparked between his teammates. He was not about to put himself in an embarrassing position and ask either. Lee hoped that whatever the case was that his two friends could end up happy.

His speculation was interrupted when Gai returned looking fatigued, but had finally gotten permission to proceed with their mission. All three genin gathered, disposing of their previous distractions, and followed their teacher across town.
Shizune knocked tentatively before entering the Hokage's office, "Tsunade-sama? How are those documents coming?"

She entered with Ton-Ton under one arm and a collection of new documents in the other. Her heart broke yet again to find the industrious Hokage fast asleep at her desk.

She set Ton-Ton down and slammed the door just a fraction too loud behind her. Tsunade jolted awake, sitting up straight, and pulled another slip of paper forward, "Let's see...this one is about agricultural investments...no problem..."

Shizune cleared her throat to get the other woman's attention, "Tsunade-sama?"

"Yes, Shizune?" She didn't even look up from her work, scribbling away as if her catnap had never even taken place.

"You have a bit of drool," Shizune told her, gesturing to her chin, "Just there, you know."

Tsunade ran her sleeve across her mouth, mortified, but she continued her work grumpily.

"What do you want, Shizune? I've been here all morning working on these damn proposals." She eyed the new load of documents that Shizune had with her, "Oh how lovely...are those for me?"

"Yes," Shizune smiled widely and dumped the pile onto the Hokage's desk, "And this came too," She held up a different scroll, "This message is from the Land of Waves, it looks like."

"The Land of Waves, huh?" Tsunade accepted the scroll and opened it curiously, "This village has worked with that country in the past...I wonder what they could need now?" She took a moment to read over it while her former apprentice tidied up the chaotic desk.

Tsunade glanced up after a minute, looking thoughtful, "How interesting...it seems that a village within the Wave Country is solely interested in Leaf ninja...but the team they requested is not available..."

Shizune looked to her quizzically, "What do you mean, Tsunade-sama?"

"Naruto and his teammates are not present to take this mission. It seems one of their past clients is asking for their help again, only it's a bit less urgent this time." Tsunade smiled at the thought of the boys, "Not to worry, though, I think I know who I could send in their stead..."

An hour later the Hokage had assembled a substitute team to venture to the Wave Country. Inuzuka Kiba, Hyuga Hinata, Hatake Sato, along with Aburame Shino as their leader had packed up and set out immediately. They were a group that would work efficiently together just as well as Team 2, Tsunade figured, since it was merely a C-rank mission. They headed out on a road that took them southeast, the quickest way to their destination.

On the way Sato was particularly chatty. Hinata was more than happy to talk to him because she had not seen her teammate for a few days.
"I've been preparing Tama for her graduation test at the end of the week, but she's so good already I don't think she has much to worry about." Sato said, opening up a bag of pocky. "Want some, Sunshine?"

"No thank you, Sato-kun." She said softly, "And I am very happy for Tama-chan. I know that she will do well."

Kiba, nearby with Akamaru, was surprised by the news. Of course he was inwardly happy that Tama was getting the chance to prove herself as a shinobi, but he was aggravated at the same time, 'Great...just another excuse for him to spend time with her...I don't see how Sato is going to help her succeed."

On the way, Shino recapped the details of their mission, "This was a special request for Leaf shinobi. Apparently, this village does not have as much faith in any other ninja, even Mist. This is unusual because the Hidden Mist Village is much closer and would be less expensive to hire from."

"How do you figure that, Shino-kun?" Sato asked.

"It wasn't long ago that the village was suffering economically while it was being controlled by mobsters. The bridge that was built there recently helped restore wealth and morale, and the people intend to celebrate the anniversary of their liberation." Shino explained the gist of it, "The village has settled on a date in which they intend to commemorate the people who helped bring revolution there."

"Revolution? Wait...you mean Leaf shinobi saved them?" Kiba asked, "Who was it?"

"Hokage-sama failed to say. She believed it was unnecessary that she tell us when we will soon find out for ourselves." Shino repeated, slightly annoyed, "As for our objective; guards will be needed to keep the public safe and orderly during the parade. We will be supervising the celebration."

Two days of traveling brought them to the coast where they boarded a small ferry to cross the bay. Shino advised his team to rest while they could, because they were likely to be busy for the next few days. Time passed slowly on the waves. The surrounding water made Kiba feel restless and he sat anxiously on the side of the boat, watching foam crash up against the side of the vessel. He stroked Akamaru's fur in boredom, wishing to set foot on land again.

Down the bench from him, Sato sat watching Hinata and Shino with great amusement. His goofy expression only irritated the Inuzuka all the more, "What are you so smug about, eh?"

He glanced over to Kiba, "Hm? Oh, well, since I started training more with my uncle he's told me to keep my eyes open for subtleties in the people around me. So far I've noticed that Tama sneezes a lot in-between our training sessions; so maybe there's some kind of plant on our field that she's allergic to..."

"Take her somewhere more comfortable, then."

"I already did." He smiled, adding, "As for Hinata and Shino over there, I can tell Shino-kun's actually asleep for once. You can tell even with his glasses on because his head lolls a bit, but more importantly, he suggested that we all rest because it's what he wanted to do. His dad pushes him hard when they train and Shino doesn't like to show fatigue in front of other people."

"Cool. So you actually pay attention..." Kiba muttered and laid back. He pulled Akamaru onto his chest as the dog began to doze off. He could not deny that such keen perception was an unexpected quality in the Hatake, but he dismissed it because he and Shino were already close friends. Things
were never like that between Sasuke and me...' He thought bitterly.

Sato observed Hinata after that. She was also napping and had her head leaned against Shino's shoulder, 'Her hair is getting longer. I guess she just doesn't want it short anymore...' The silver haired boy pointed out how Akamaru had also grown significantly, "Everything around us is changing...just like Kakashi said."

"I hope I've changed." Kiba said quietly before standing up. He let Akamaru sleep on the bench while he took a walk around the deck. The dog woke up in his absence, sensing his master was not feeling well.

"What do you think then, boy?" Sato asked the dog, "Do you think Kiba's improved?"

Akamaru barked solemnly in response. Sato nodded in agreement, "That's what I thought."

They arrived late in the afternoon and got off of the ferry along with civilian passengers. Though they hadn't exerted themselves much, the long journey across the sea had made them a bit weary. They waited on the dock to catch sight of their client. It wasn't very long before an old man happened across them expectantly.

"So the Leaf ninja have arrived! Right on time!" The man laughed, walking up to them. Shino greeted the man respectfully, but before he could introduce his team the man's face dropped a bit.

"Is something wrong, sir?" Hinata asked him quietly.

"Everything is fine, it's just that...I was expecting some friends from a previous mission to be with your group. No matter though," The man cleared his throat, "My name is Tazuna and I'm glad that you all could make it."

"Thank you. Tsunade-sama sends her apologies; the team you asked for has disbanded. We will do our best in their stead." Shino assured him.

Tazuna's eyebrows raised, "Naruto-kun's team? Disbanded? I thought those boys were closer than brothers!"

Kiba and Sato exchanged a confused look.

"Naruto-kun helped you?" Hinata asked but her surprise quickly wore off, "Oh yes...I remember...he told me that he came here once. He and Gaara-kun and Haku-kun are all fine. They're training separately now, but I believe they will be back together soon."

Tazuna relaxed after hearing the news, "I'm glad to hear that those boys are well. Please, all of you come with me."

He led the group away from the harbor and into town. Tazuna explained his past encounter with Leaf ninja, "They didn't have to stay and help but they did anyway. They stood their ground against a jounin and an army of hired thugs all for the sake of this village."

The streets were bustling with people and commerce. Tall, refurbished buildings were lined with gardens and shrubs. Shoppers dabbled in a number of businesses on the way, not paying much mind to the shinobi who had arrived. Tazuna stopped near a water-gate overlooking half of the village, "If you'll all look across from here, at the far end of town, you'll see the thing responsible for all our prosperity."
Kiba blinked quizzically, "Er...it's a bridge."

"Exactly." Tazuna agreed simply, "It's boosted trade here and saved our village, ultimately. People here call it the Great Naruto Bridge."

There was a unified sound of shock from the group.

If there was ever a clear reminder of Naruto's lasting contributions to justice and the good of mankind, this was one of them. While Sato and Kiba gawked at how a monument had been named for Team 2, Shino and Hinata had more of a silent reaction of wonder to it.

"The parade will end on that bridge to signify the end of the people's struggle." Their client added, "It means a lot to everyone here."

Hinata found herself overcome with emotion. Naruto had certainly told her how he had fought off a jounin with the help of his friends in the Land of Waves, but he had failed to mention how he had liberated an entire village.

'Naruto-kun, you want people to respect you and look up to you...that's why you want to be Hokage, you said. But you never brag about accomplishments like this...you do what you have to because you want to help people: you want to be needed.' She sorely missed the blonde boy and wished that she could have talked to him about it right then.

Before she could snap herself out of her thoughts the group was moving again. They crossed town into a more rural area near the beachfront. "You'll be boarding with my family while you stay here," Tazuna offered, "It'll be a lot cheaper than renting hotel rooms for the next few days."

They treaded up a sandy path towards Tazuna's home and came across a young boy playing fetch with his dog. Akamaru's ears were suddenly alert to the sound of playful yapping and his tail wagged in response. The dog ahead of him was easily twice his size and jet black, but appeared to be a promising playmate. Akamaru leapt out of Kiba's coat and raced along the path, leaving his master frowning in disapproval.

The boy, seeing the congregation approaching, went to greet them and his dog followed. Tazuna patted the boy on his shoulder, "This here is my grandson, Inari. Inari, we have new friends who'll be staying with us. What do you think?"

"Aw...Naruto couldn't make it?" Inari grinned in spite of himself, "Oh well, it's nice to see fresh faces, I guess, so hey there!"

"Aw...Naruto couldn't make it?" Inari grinned in spite of himself, "Oh well, it's nice to see fresh faces, I guess, so hey there!"

Akamaru caught up to Inari's dog and the two circled each other, sniffing the other's backside. Kiba sighed at the tactless display, "Come on, Akamaru, have some manners. You can get to know each other later..."

Sato laughed quietly at the remark as Akamaru dutifully returned to his master's side. Inari knelt down and scratched between his mutt's ears, "This is Chokaro and she's the bravest dog in the Land of Waves..."

Kiba smirked, "Was the bravest...until now."

Inari was affronted and ready to retort, but Shino cut in before an argument could break out, "Now is not the time to deliberate such matters. Impressions can wait until later."

Inari, after getting a reassuring look from his grandfather, ushered the Leaf ninja along into their home. He greeted his mother and alerted her to the new arrivals. She herded them along into the
dining room, "Welcome, brave Leaf shinobi! You may call me Tsunami and I would like to know if any of you are interested in some tea."

Hinata and Sato thanked her for her generosity.

Tazuna came in behind them, "Feel free to sit down and relax. Inari and I will be back in a bit." He and his grandson took the ninjas' bags from them and proceeded to haul them upstairs. The genin were glad to have the chance to rest, and Hinata was especially awed by the hospitality of the family that had employed them. The tea was set out a short time later.

Chokaro had been circling lovingly around Tsunami's legs until she was pet. Afterwards the dog moved on to the occupants of the table, cheerily greeting each new face. Chokaro had stopped by Shino, taking a liking to him, and refused to budge until the Aburame patted her head, even if it was somewhat mechanical. Kiba and Sato snorted in barely controlled laughter at the sight, but their team leader was less than pleased.

Tsunami sat down beside Hinata, pouring tea for her guests, "Well, I'm sure you can all tell that Inari is my son. My father and I have lived here our entire lives, and we owe much to the Leaf village for helping restore peace to this land." She glanced around, "Hm, so...why don't you tell me a bit about yourselves, then?"

They found no reason to object and Kiba introduced himself first, "I'm Kiba from the Inuzuka clan and this is my ninken, Akamaru." He ruffled his dog's head affectionately, "I specialize in tracking and hand-to-hand combat." The introduction progressed clockwise around the table.

"I am Shino of the Aburame clan...my teammates are here with me," Tsunami noted how both Sato and Hinata's faces lit up at the recognition, "My specialties lie with tracking and disabling foes, as well as studying insects." Chokaro was still sitting beside him, wagging her tail amiably.

Sato followed pleasantly, "I'm Hatake Sato and I specialize in tracking, traps and genjutsu. Hm...I'm probably the best dancer in this room, I've got a dependency problem on sweets and I'm pretty into photography. I think that sums me up!"

Tsunami laughed at his cheerfulness before looking to Hinata. The pale eyed girl smiled, "Hinata of the Hyuga clan. I also specialize in tracking and the divine art of Jyukken. I'm fond of gardening, pressing flowers and toads." Kiba gave her an odd look after hearing her last interest but he said nothing.

Tsunami took a sip of her tea before saying, "Well...I personally think that toads and insects are the most honorable animals to be found. They fill the nights here with songs!"

Hinata was surprised to find someone who thought that way.

The tea was delicious and refreshing for the worn-out group. All found it amusing, as they got to know each other, how Akamaru followed Chokaro around the house with his tail wagging happily. A short while later Tazuna and his grandson returned and sat down with their company.

"Um, Tazuna-san, when should we be on alert?" Hinata asked thoughtfully, uncertain of the extra details of their mission.

"You all have a day before the festival actually starts." Tazuna answered, helping himself to some tea, "So feel free to make yourselves at home here until then."

"During this time it would be more judicious to get a thorough grasp of the area." Shino was not voting for rest anymore, "We should all have some knowledge of the town's layout, as well as the
route planned for the parade."

Kiba and Hinata agreed but Sato, unfortunately, had not been paying attention to the strategy. He had been making friendly small-talk with Inari instead, "Hey, that's a nice hat you've got there, kiddo."

"Uh...thanks." The boy muttered before he sipped his tea, aware that Sato probably should have been paying more attention to his team leader.

The planning continued on anyway. Tazuna explaining how the first day would mostly be devoted to preparations as well as vendors setting up in the market, "Day two is the actual parade, though, and it might be the most hectic. Day three wraps everything up with music and a banquet. It's probably the best medicine this village can get after enduring all of the reforms and back-breaking work to get where we are now."

Sato was beaming, "Well hey! It sounds like it's going to be one hot shindig!"

Shino gave him a measured look and the silver haired boy chuckled to himself before falling quiet again.

Tazuna stroked Chokaro's back when she came to sit beside him, "Remember, we owe a lot to you Leaf ninja. Being vigilant is one thing but don't stress yourselves out, because this is in honor of your village's contribution to our own. We want you to enjoy yourselves." Kiba found the idea paradoxical since they were sent to do professional work, but then again, even he could not resist slacking off and having fun for a change.

The tea was finished quickly and Tsunami went to fetch some more. Inari, after waiting for a while, could no longer contain himself, "Hey! Could you guys maybe give me a demonstration of your skills? Not like your jutsu and stuff, because I know you're supposed to keep those secret...but it's been a while since I've seen any action!"

Tazuna admonished the boy promptly, "Inari, they just got here and I'm sure they're all worn out from the trip."

"Actually, we're well rested." Hinata answered sweetly, "I'd be happy to oblige Inari-kun."

"Me too, kiddo!" Sato agreed cheerfully. He stood along with his teammate to go outside with the excited boy.

There was an awkward moment when Tsunami returned to the table with more tea, only to find half of its occupants missing. She only smiled knowingly and refilled her father's cup. Kiba chuckled to himself, glancing over to Shino, "We might as well stretch our legs since we're here, eh?" He gave a look of apology to their hosts before standing up, "Come on, Shino."

Shino also rose without a word of objection and followed the Inuzuka with both Akamaru and Chokaro at his heels.

Outside they happened upon Inari who was wielding a kunai (though it was older and looked worse for the wear) and threw it expertly at a mark on a tree in the side yard. It hit the center of the scratched-out 'X' spot on. Both Sato and Hinata had not expected a feat from someone without any ninja background.

The Hatake whistled, impressed, "Wow...not bad. Do you think that you're going to be a shinobi one day, Inari?"
"I don't know..." The boy admitted glumly, "There aren't any ninja in the Land of Waves. No legitimate ones, anyway..."

"You shouldn't let that stop you." Sato said, fetching a pair of kunai from his leg holster, "Here, I think you've earned these. Put them to good use!"

Kiba watched from a short ways away, finding Sato's nurturing attitude odd. Often he was too goofy or hyper to even slow down and consider the needs of another person, or, that's what he believed. Kiba moved to the nearest patch of grass that he could find and spread out on it, calling Akamaru over to him. He and his dog relaxed on the small stretch of lawn together.

Inari gave a cry of startlement to see Hinata strolling out over the surf. His shout had surprised her, though thankfully she had not lost any surface tension on top of the water.

"How are you doing that?" The boy crossed over to the edge of the beach, watching the Hyuga, "That's like a miracle or something!"

"It's basic chakra control, really." Hinata told him while hopping over gentle waves, "Oh! Maybe we can teach you!"

"We cannot." Shino interjected, "That would be a direct violation of this mission's parameters. Sharing knowledge outside of the village is forbidden."

Sato hardly agreed, calling over to his teammate, "Come on, Shino! Lighten up!"

"No. He's right, so just listen for once you ingrate. He's the leader so he knows what's best!" Kiba barked in response.

Shino gave the Inuzuka an inquiring glance, feeling that his additional reply was not necessary. Even more strange was how Kiba went back to his sky-gazing peacefully, having only spoken up to berate Sato. Shino made note of the behavior.

Sato relented, seeing that the idea had been shot down thoroughly. Disappointment was clear on Inari's face as well, but the Hatake quickly voiced his finding of a loophole, "Well...if we can't teach you directly then we'll just train a bit and," He lowered his voice, "Make sure you pay real good attention, okay?"

Inari nodded and observed as Sato walked out to join Hinata on top of the waves. The kunoichi was thrilled with the idea of an impersonal demonstration, and thanked Sato for his help. He had not thought much of the accomplishment before he took the Hyuga by the hand and whirled her around on the water's surface. She squeaked in surprise. Hinata had danced with her friend on a few occasions, but it had been a while since the last time.

Her embarrassment passed quickly after she had gotten into it. Hinata kept a relaxed guard over her chakra and Sato paused in his frolicsome antics. He wondered if she was aware of how the seawater had evened out and began mimicking her movements, "That's pretty cool, Sunshine. I didn't know you could do stuff with water."

"I...I don't know." She wore a look of slight uncertainty, "I've never tried to before...it's very unusual."

"Well I say you stick to it. By the way, you're a natural. Tama would be proud." Sato congratulated her on her dancing ability before letting her go. Hinata laughed quietly while she followed him ashore.
Once on land they could see Kiba had taken over, as he was showing Inari tricks he could teach Chokaro by using Akamaru as an example. Sato went to stand beside Shino and told him quietly, "See? We can still teach him as long as we don't teach-teach him, right?"

"It's not a matter of learning, but of location," Shino explained to him, "There are strict laws about teaching techniques to those outside of Konoha. It is automatically assumed that outsiders with ninja skill become nukenin or thieving criminals. With no village loyalty to curb their impulses it would bring more trouble than good."

"Could it hurt to tutor Inari a bit, though?" Hinata expressed her opinion softly, "He seems genuinely compassionate, Shino-kun. He is a bright boy worthy of learning, no matter where his home is."

"It simply cannot be permitted." Shino told her, "I apologize."

Both Sato and Hinata still disagreed with the theory, but could never bring themselves to disobey Shino. They silently relented and while Kiba spent time with Inari, the rest of the genin dozed comfortably on the warm beach. Time passed in a slow, breezy lull for the shinobi. Sato gave a startled jump at one point after a curious seagull had taken a snap at him.

Sunlight was shrinking by the time Tazuna invited them in for dinner. They ate gratefully and it was clear to Tsunami just how happy Inari was to have ninja around again. Admittedly, the entire family was fond of shinobi, and would sorely miss their guests when it would be time for them to leave.

"We will depart early in the morning to survey the town." Shino informed his team, "We should not expect to be back here until noon so bring what you need."

"I will stay behind to wait for Inari so he may show me notable areas around the village." Hinata offered and the boy thanked her for her thoughtfulness.

After everyone had finished the evening meal they helped clean up. A short while later Tsunami guided the Leaf genin upstairs, directing them to where they would be staying for the night. Shino, Kiba, and Sato were to share the guest room on the immediate left of the hall. The three of them retired to bed promptly and Hinata followed Tsunami down the corridor.

"I didn't want to cram you all into one space like sardines, so I hope you don't mind if I keep you separate from your team?" She asked the Hyuga girl.

"Not at all." Hinata was fine with it, as she was with most things.

"Good." Tsunami smiled, "You'll stay with Inari in his room, alright? A futon was laid out for you already, so you rest easy, dear."

Hinata bowed politely, "Thank you very much, Tsunami-san."

The light snapped off in the hallway after Tsunami had left and Hinata slinked into the dim room she had been assigned to. From the look of it Inari was already asleep; laying askew with Chokaro nestled beside him. She sat down on her futon, admiring what a warm night it was. The window had been left open, allowing a gentle sea breeze and the symphony of crickets to enter.

Hinata retrieved a hairbrush from her bag and combed through her lengthening hair. It had already reached a good distance halfway down her neck, and she expected it would be at least shoulder length by next spring. She had kept her hair short as a way to rebel against the traditions of her clan, both their long hair and their stinginess. Now she felt she had new reasons to change her appearance as she saw fit. No one had given her a critique about it either.
"So...how do you know Naruto, huh?" Inari spoke up from his bed, "You seem to know that guy pretty well."

Hinata glanced over to him, seeing he was fully awake and sitting propped up against Chokaro. She finished brushing her hair and laughed lightly at the thought of the blonde haired boy, "Well...I'm not sure where to start, Inari. He and I have been friends for most of our lives."

Inari nodded, "He's pretty easy to make friends with."

"That's very true. He, Haku-kun, and Gaara-kun have been friends since their childhood. They've grown up together and have always been very close. I've always admired their friendship, and spending time with them was something that always made me happy." Hinata had summed it up, but knew her explanation hardly did it justice.

"No wonder you're so nice." Inari said, stifling a yawn.

Hinata blushed, aware that her compassion was probably her most forthcoming quality. She then thought it would be prudent to add why she and Naruto were so close, "You see, Inari, Naruto and I have been friends for a long time...but these days...it's much different. Naruto-kun and I have strong feelings for each other and want to be together."

Inari was pleasantly surprised, "Oh...well jeez! Of course that guy would pick the cutest girl out there! You're his girlfriend then?"

"Well...um...yes."

"Ha! How cool is that?" The boy was thrilled to hear it, "A hero and his lady! Do you think that you two will get married one day?"

She was glad it was dark because her face was bright scarlet. It was a thought that had crossed her mind several, if not hundreds of times. It was a topic so worn and frequented it was almost like beating a dead horse. Hinata was already aware that Naruto had no intentions of letting her escape, much to her delight, but she also knew there were many obstacles that would need to be overcome beforehand.

Hinata sighed heavily, "Oh...if heaven and my father permit it, Inari...but it's much too early to be taking something like that seriously."

"I'm not so sure." Inari said quietly.

"Why is that?"

"Well...if I had a girl like you on my arm, I'd marry you as soon as possible before any other guy could..."

Hinata could not help but laugh softly, "That sounds like something Naruto-kun would say..."

The following morning the genin all rose at the same time. Shino instructed Hinata to stay and wait for Inari as she had suggested while he and their teammates set out without her.

Hinata played outside on the beach with Chokaro and the rest of the Leaf ninja ducked into a forested area nearby the outskirts of the village.

While in the canopy Shino divided the team up.
"Sato, you will go with Kiba and trace a path through town that will be used to observe the parade." The Aburame instructed, "We will meet back in this area in two hours, understood?"

"You got it, Shino!" Sato chirped energetically and Akamaru answered with an affirmative bark as well. Kiba merely nodded, trying to mask his disdain.

The last thing the Inuzuka wanted at the moment was to work with the silver-haired twit. Kiba wished he had stayed behind in Hinata's stead, but once they had split up and moved into town, there really was no other choice. He silently endured Sato's cheerful observations and inquiries, hoping he could get through the remainder of the mission without having an outburst.

Further north in the fishing district of the village, a collection of ninja roosted on top of a packaging warehouse. They looked down on the town from the roof of the building.

"Tokuja-taicho, it appears a team of Leaf ninja has arrived." A man with auburn hair said, "Will this complicate things?"

The captain of the team was tall and lanky, dressed in deep indigo and gray. He was older than his subordinates and had wise discerning eyes that scanned over the people on the street below.

He glanced over to the young man who had addressed him, "Relax, Taiho. It won't be difficult to avoid those genin. I don't think they're here to make trouble but...just in case..."

Tokuja turned to his other two subordinates on his right, "Jito! Konoei! Be on your guard! Keep watch over those two Leaf nin who are exploring the city. I'll investigate their leader." The kunoichi and her partner nodded to him and Tokuja went back to his vigilant surveillance.

They split up on Tokuja's command and streaked across the rooftops in diverging directions.

Inari woke up later that morning with a start. A strange feeling had settled in his gut, as if he were being watched. The boy shrugged it off and got dressed before romping noisily down the stairs, calling for Chokaro. He found his mother and Hinata enjoying breakfast together at the dining room table. He sat down to join them and Tsunami asked him how he had slept.

"I slept okay, Ma. Oh! And good morning, Hinata!" After pulling the milk jug towards himself, Inari paused, remembering his previous night's conversation with Hinata. He looked at the Hyuga girl, grinning, and then added, "Hey, Ma! You want to hear something awesome?"

"What's that dear?"

"Hinata-chan here is Naruto's girlfriend!" Inari announced, laughing to himself, "Isn't that great?"

"Oh!" Tsunami had not expected such news, "Well that is a surprise! How nice! Do tell me, how is Naruto doing?"

"Um...Naruto-kun has gone away to train for two years with Gama-sennin." Hinata informed them solemnly, "But in his last letter he seemed to be doing very well."

"I'm glad to hear it." Tsunami also poured herself some milk, "Though I wonder...how are you fairing without him, dear?"

Hinata fell utterly silent.
Tsunami and Inari exchanged a glance, then realizing that Hinata must have been taking it very hard. Tsunami quickly regretted that she asked and apologized to the kunoichi, but Hinata told her not to worry about it.

"I do miss him terribly." The Hyuga girl admitted, "And...there are times that I am unsure if he will feel the same way when he finally returns..."

Tsunami did not want her to doubt, "No, dear. I don't believe that Naruto would ever do that. He is the kind of person who stays loyal to his loved ones forever." She turned to her son, "Right, Inari?"

"You got that right!"

Hinata relaxed a bit after listening to their assurances. Inwardly, however, it was still something that she feared. Time and distance had a good chance of changing his mind. Then again, time could also have that effect on her, 'But I would never abandon him! Never!' The only time she felt better was when she did not think about it. She let the fear return to the recesses of her mind and finished eating breakfast.

Afterwards she and Inari ventured into town with Chokaro, and it was much easier for Hinata to keep her mind off of negative thoughts with the distraction of the city. They prodded around, touring interesting shops, and Inari was especially fond of pre-existing establishments that had improved.

"See? That over there is the hospital! It's way better now than it was. Do you know what else? We have three schools now! Everyone can go, even the kids who don't have as much money." Inari marched down the street beside the Hyuga, bubbling over with pride, "Oh yeah, there's more than enough food for everyone too. It's the bridge that really saved our village, that's why everyone can't wait to celebrate!"

Hinata was glad to hear it, "I'm just happy I was able to come here, Inari. It would have been a shame to miss such a wonderful time in your village." She was hoping that she could also come again next year, if Tsunade did not mind terribly.

Inari stopped by a bicycle rack and his voice dropped down to a whisper, "Since the fight on the bridge, my grandpa has been the one in charge...kind of a leader, I guess. He knew that once the bridge was finished things would get better...but there's the big question now..."

"What question?" Hinata asked, her voice softening as well.

"My grandpa is wondering if...if we should make our village a shinobi village." The boy told her.

Her eyebrows knitted into a small frown, "That would be difficult...it would require ninja from an outside village to intervene and organize the people here to be trained. This place was not originally settled by ninja..."

"But we can do it now!" Inari chuckled, "We have money and resources so we can do just that! It would be a great way to finally learn to protect ourselves! Grandpa says it's only a matter of deciding which village we outsource from."

"You mean like Konoha?" Hinata guessed.

"Yep." The boy nodded in confirmation, "It's gonna take a lot of thought, though. Grandpa wants everyone in the village to be in agreement before we decide anything big."

She nodded, smiling, "Then...I have faith that you will all make the best decision."
Kiba and Sato combed through the town together, getting along well for the most part. Kiba kept his temper in check while observing which street corners looked the most treacherous, as well as a number of smaller bridges that would need to be guarded. Sato followed the Inuzuka's lead without complaint, keeping a wary eye open and committing the town's layout to memory.

"Are you really training Tama?" Kiba asked Sato abruptly.

Sato confirmed it, "Yeah, but we're just brushing up on basic techniques like Replacement and Transformations...though she hasn't really lost her edge at all."

They stayed out of the public's way as they turned onto a busier road.

"And...is it true that...you two are engaged?" Kiba asked carefully.

Sato raised his eyebrows and then hesitantly admitted it, "Er...yeah, that's true too..."

"Do you want to marry her?" The Inuzuka pressed.

Sato felt he was being awfully pushy, but then again, he found such questions agonizingly relevant.

"I...I don't really want to, if that's what you're asking. It's because...we're friends and it would get too weird. I don't want to lose her friendship. I'd hate that." Sato confessed, and then sighed to himself, feeling almost ashamed that he could be selfish that way.

"Are you kidding?" Kiba scoffed, narrowing his eyes, "Friendship is ideal for marriage! You should be thrilled!"

Sato was stunned by the Inuzuka's point, and ended up staring dumbly as Kiba continued, "You don't deserve such a wonderful person if you can't truly appreciate her!"

Sato felt that all focus on their task had then been obliterated.

"I do appreciate her!" He retorted weakly.

"Clearly you don't." Kiba growled edgily. They stopped near a grand water fountain in the center of the town, hoping to conclude the impromptu discussion.

"You don't know anything about us, Kiba." Sato snapped, folding his arms, "We go way back. My life was crappy until Tama came around, I get that. The same still proves true today!"

Kiba smirked, "That's all you have to say? Then let me tell you something...Hatake..." He stared the other boy in the eyes, issuing a challenge, "I love Tama and I want her to be my girlfriend. Hell! I want her to marry me! The last thing she needs is an air-head like you."

Sato could not believe what he was hearing, "You can't do that! She's my...er...well...you just can't! Stay away from her!"

"You can't even say it, can you?" Kiba gibed, "You're ashamed because you don't really care about her! You only see her as a babysitter!"

"You know what? You're an even bigger asshole than I thought you were!" Sato snarled.

The silver haired boy received a brutal sucker punch to the face that sent him crashing into the fountain. All restraint and camaraderie was lost, and the two boys battled furiously, drawing attention from passers-by who stopped to watch in confusion. Akamaru sat by on the sidewalk: uninvolved and whimpering. Even he knew when his master was out of line.
Kiba was eventually successful in snagging the Hatake by his shoulders, and raked vicious claws down his arms. He was surprised to see that he was only slashing at water. Sato had escaped with a genjutsu, and quickly countered with a flying kick that sent the Inuzuka back out onto the street again. Akamaru yapped pleadingly for the two to come back to their senses.

Sato also left the fountain, just as soaked as Kiba, who was shaking the drops from his coat in aggravation.

"You can keep going by yourself!" Sato hissed, wiping the blood from his nose, and he then departed.

Kiba was no less angry than he had been before. "Go! That's right! Run back to Shino you chicken!" He howled after the other boy, bitter that he had not gotten a decisive hit in on him.

He called to Akamaru and they continued on without the Hatake, completely unaware that a ninja had been watching discretely from inside of a nearby café.

Shino had gone to inspect the outskirts of the village after sending Kiba and Sato into the heart of the city. He wanted to be sure that the wooded area he was in was secure.

While perusing the treetops the Aburame was keen to note a number of broken and bent branches. 'A clear sign that someone has recently passed through...most likely shinobi.' He observed, less than pleased with the situation. It was suspicious enough that other ninja would be around when the villagers were celebrating. He also doubted they wanted to get in on the frivolity.

He planted a few kikaichu insects at the scene and sent a few dozen more to scatter and investigate. If there were any other disturbances or sightings of other shinobi, Shino was certain there would be strife. He moved back in the direction of the town guardedly.

Later on they all met up for lunch and Sato did his very best to avoid Kiba. It was not so much the physical torment as it was the verbal abuse that the Hatake could not stand. In addition, he had failed to say anything to Shino about their little spat, 'I don't want to get Shino-kun involved in this...I want him to trust that I can handle things.'

The shinobi were all too lost in thought to participate in the excited chatter of Tazuna's family. They ate quietly, conversing briefly with each other, if at all. Inari was beginning to wonder if his friends were feeling well. After lunch they took a break from their reconnaissance work to relax.

Kiba and Akamaru played with Inari and Chokaro outside, and Shino remained on the porch with Tazuna, going over the plans for the next day. Hinata had helped Tsunami tidy up the house before joining the others outside, and she found it odd that Sato was nowhere in sight. A quick glimpse with her Byakugan immediately pinpointed him near the back of the house.

She ventured around to the opposite yard and found Sato sulking on a dock by himself. It was unusual for him to isolate himself in such a way, Hinata felt, and she took a seat beside him on the platform, "Sato-kun? Is something bothering you?"

"Kiba thinks that I'm an idiot." Sato explained shortly, "But I don't think that guy has any business judging me!"

"What happened?"

"He said...he said that..." The boy's face screwed up with anger, "He wants Tama to be his
girlfriend! Can you believe that? He also said that I'm stupid for not wanting to marry her!"

"You should not let what he said upset you." Hinata advised him. "He only says those things to you because he has frustrations of his own that are left unsaid, I think."

He nodded slowly, "I get it, but it's just that...my worry is that he might have said something right about me..."

The Hyuga girl hugged his shoulders, "There's nothing wrong with you, Sato-kun. I know Tama-chan is fine with how things are."

Sato smiled slightly, and clapped his arm around her in response, "Thanks for being such a good buddy, Sunshine."

The following day people were busy embellishing the town and the genin set out to help and supervise. Sato had found he was most comfortable with Hinata for the time being, and he aided her and Inari while they were hanging streamers and lanterns from telephone poles. Kiba kept his distance from Sato, not keen on getting into another fight with him in front of their teammates.

Shino called him over while he was in the middle of helping a man set up a display. The Inuzuka and his ninke crossed over to the team leader expectantly, "What's up, Shino? More instructions?"

"One of my insects has confirmed the presence of intruders in this village. You and I will investigate." Shino told him, "Let the others continue their work here."

"Yeah, I got it." Kiba agreed quietly. The two Leaf nin separated from the rest of the people hard at work preparing for the coming festival. Akamaru had picked up an unknown scent and Kiba reported it as they followed the trail through town, "Akamaru says that it smells like shinobi, but there are so many other smells mixed in it's difficult to pick out..."

They stopped on a rooftop where, to their shock, they were swiftly confronted by those they were seeking. Both shinobi, a man and a woman, bore the symbol of Rain. The kunoichi was strikingly beautiful with strawberry blonde hair, and she smiled at the genin amiably, "Hello boys! It's nice to see you two cooperating so nicely. I suggest you go back to work though, that way you and the townspeople don't get hurt, okay?"

"Why are you here?" Shino demanded lowly.

Konoei spoke up calmly, "We are here to help the reformation of this village so it may become a shinobi province. It will take a lot of work, but we will do our best."

His partner, Jito, added, "Because this lovely city is now thriving again economically it will be a prosperous change! Doesn't that sound nice?"

"Yeah, really nice. So have you talked to the villagers about your intentions yet?" Kiba asked.

"They will find out tomorrow." Konoei answered.

"Your project sounds more like an attack." Shino informed them, "Be warned, there will be conflict between our parties if you do not reconsider."

"Well then...let the conflict begin!" Jito laughed, and she charged abruptly with a chain-dagger.

They evaded, dodging sideways, and she swiped at Kiba in amusement as he righted himself in the
air. There was barely any time for him to deflect her blade with a kunai. The Inuzuka leapt over to
the next roof for some distance while Shino singled out Konoei.

The Aburame's nagamaki appeared after being concealed beneath his coat, and he forced the Rain
ninja back with a high-speed slash. Konoei seemed disinterested, but summoned an ornate spear to
counter Shino's attack. The blades arced through the air, caroming off each other with a metallic
hum.

Both Ame ninja were incredibly fast. They did not attack with sincerity and darted in circles around
their respective adversaries. When their normal assaults were so easily avoided, the Leaf ninja chose
to change their strategy.

Akamaru had transformed into the likeness of his master to distract Jito, and while she fought off the
disguised ninken, Kiba attacked from behind with Gatsuuga. Jito tripped the dog and landed a brutal
kick to the gut before ducking down to avoid the Inuzuka's sneak assault. Her chain lashed out after
him, catching him by his right arm, and Jito thrashed the weapon so the dagger came wheeling down
after Kiba as he struggled. He evaded it, barely, getting a nick on his shoulder in the process.

Shino, a short distance away, was beginning to overwhelm Konoei with his swarm of Kikaichu
insects. In a wise move, Konoei chose to retreat, "Kirigakure no Jutsu..."

Mist descended and both Konoei and Jito disappeared into it. It was preferable to finishing the fights
they had started.

Kiba lost their scent in the fog, and cursed loudly after they had escaped, "They got away too easily!
We've got to find out what they're up to!"

"I planted one of my insects on each of them before they could retreat." Shino told him, "They won't
be able to hide as effectively now."

They opted to return to the rest of their team instead of giving chase.

Hinata and Sato were surprised to hear that other ninja were present and proclaimed their intent to
found a shinobi village. Hinata found it highly coincidental with what Inari told her of his
grandfather’s wishes.

"If their intention is taking over the village they will first target its leader." Shino deduced grimly.

Inari's face was lit with terror at the thought, "Then they'll go after my Grandpa!"

There was a silent agreement then to find Tazuna and the team set out without Inari, hastening to find
the man.

At the time Tazuna was already at the bridge with a large group of volunteers. They were cleaning
up and adorning the structure as best they could, but the sky became overcast and threatened rain.
Their preparations were slightly rushed in order to avoid possible rain. Murky waves coming in from
the bay churned sullenly beneath the bridge.

"Does this look good, Tazuna-san?" A young boy asked, gesturing to a streamer he and his friends
had set up, "We couldn't get it much higher than this...unless your ninja friends jumped up there for
us!" He seemed interested in the people who had stopped by the day before.

"It looks fine." Tazuna told him, and then added, "But maybe those Leaf kids wouldn't mind
stopping out here a little later to spruce the place up."
The boy laughed, "I'll look forward to that! Hey...is that one of them over there?"

Tazuna glanced back to where a tall ninja stood waiting on the side railing of the bridge. He was certainly no one familiar, but Tazuna did not want to alarm anyone, "Er...hey kid, why don't you bring the rest of the supplies back to that nice lady over there while I talk to my friend, alright?"

The boy left obediently and Tazuna cautiously approached the strange ninja who had arrived. His voice was gruff and impatient, "Can I help you? Or are you here to help set up?"

"You are Tazuna, yes? It's very good to finally meet you." The ninja said pleasantly, "My name is Okibu Tokuja, and I am a former ninja of the Hidden Rain village."

"Former, eh?" Tazuna repeated, "I hate to say it, buddy, but that doesn't sit too well with me."

"Please try to understand, Tazuna-san, that the death of our village leader, Hanzo-sama, has forced my students and I to withdraw from Amegakure." Tokuja explained, "The man who controls our home now is a ninja with dark and heartless intent. We refuse to give him our allegiance."

The old man frowned, "How noble."

"My team and I seek to found a new ninja village that will be peaceable and one day will be able to restore Rain to its most diplomatic state." Tokuja went on, "And for this dream to be achieved I will need your help, Tazuna-san. This village is ideal."

"Sorry." Tazuna told him, "I'm not interested."

The Rain nin gave him a troubled look, "And why not?"

"I can understand that you and your team may be struggling, and although having ninja here would promote defense and warn other countries of our status..." The old man sighed, "Your offer is sour. You and yours are here to make another Rain village; you're not here for the sake of advancement. You don't have any interest in helping the people who live here already, I could tell right off the bat...so I'll have to pass, Tokuja-san."

Tokuja was silent, clearly displeased with Tazuna's answer. He stood contemplating on the railing, not revealing a stitch of emotion to the old man who had rejected his proposal.

"Tazuna!"

The old man turned around and was glad to see that his guards had arrived. The group of Leaf shinobi surrounded their client in a defensive formation, immediately distrusting of the ninja who was already present on the bridge.

"Tazuna-san..." Tokuja spoke up at length, "You have made a very foolish choice. Whether or not you approve, the conversion of this village is imminent. If you wish to avoid the injury of your fellow citizens, I suggest you rethink your decision." Mist from beneath the bridge swallowed him up, and the mysterious Ame nin was gone before the genin could react.

Tazuna stood uncertainly with the Leaf ninja, wondering if perhaps cooperating would have been the best choice after all. He explained to Shino's team what Tokuja had wanted, and none of them believed he could have acted any differently.

"I just can't believe that some asshole like that has the gall to threaten a defenseless village!" Sato spat furiously, "Just who does he think he is anyway?"
"I'm sorry about all of this," Tazuna apologized to them, "I didn't want to get any other Leaf shinobi in over their heads again. Maybe it would be best...if the parade was canceled for now. I think I'll go and negotiate with this Tokuja fellow."

"Don't even think about it." Kiba warned him.

Sato nodded in agreement, "That's right. We're still willing to help you!"

Hinata turned to their team leader for the verdict, "What do you think, Shino-kun?"

All eyes rested on the Aburame as he came to a decision, "Due to the stipulations of our employment, we are still obligated to defend and keep the peace in this village. Because conflict arose during the celebration this matter is now within our jurisdiction. We are responsible, so we will dispose of the nukenin who have chosen to interfere at this time."

The Hatake patted Shino on the shoulder, "Good call there, Shino."

Tazuna chuckled, not surprised that Leaf ninja would be so reliable, "Thank you very much for your help."

The next day there was a vast party within the streets of the village. The genin had all prepared to the best of their ability, and were on their guard for the Ame shinobi who had yet to reappear. Though public safety was their main goal, they were more interested in what they knew about their foes. Shino notified them that so far there were only three shinobi they knew for certain that they needed to look out for. There was doubt they would strike at a time when other ninja were so focused on looking for them as well. They suspected that the Rain nin would lie low until they had a chance to get Tazuna alone to intimidate him. That, thankfully, was something that would be difficult for them, because the old man and his grandson were at the head of the parade, swamped with celebrating villagers and under strict surveillance.

The Leaf ninja had scattered across the village and hidden themselves, staying on the lookout for impending danger. Hinata kept vigilant watch over the area with her Byakugan, but she could not detect any sign of the enemy ninja.

The bloated rain clouds that had blown in the day before finally burst that morning, and a heavy downpour inundated the roads within minutes. People on the streets scuttled laughingly to shelter beneath awnings and into shops, but were not discouraged by the rainstorm. A sudden lightning strike had hit and splintered a telephone pole, and it toppled over into the street during the squall.

Both Kiba and Hinata had been near the area at the time and reacted quickly to the incident. No one had been hurt since most people were indoors at the moment. Kiba still felt suspicious, though, "Do you think they were responsible? They are Rain ninja after all, so who's to say that they didn't start this thunderstorm?"

Her Byakugan was scanning the area futilely, "But Kiba-kun, none of them are here...this must be a regular accident. Until they come out of hiding no one can be blamed for this sort of thing."

They both returned to their perches and waited out the rest of the deluge. It ended within minutes, and once the clouds had passed overhead music began again and the procession continued down the street. The celebration continued without any further interruption. Noon rolled around and the Leaf ninja stopped very briefly to eat before returning to their posts. They were able to relax more while watching the joy of the people, and they had not once sighted the Ame nin. As the parade neared its conclusion Sato stopped by Shino's position on the ledge of the hospital, completely laid back and
looking forward to a smooth evening.

"Maybe they'll show up tomorrow, the bastards." Sato speculated, "I don't think they'd give up that easy, since that guy did say imminent and all..."

Shino still had doubt on the matter, "The odds of them backing off for fear of being outnumbered are small. Tokuja's proposition was serious." He paused in thought, and then asked, "Sato, where did Tazuna say the parade was supposed to end?"

"Hm?" The silver haired boy was reclined on the ledge, his arms folded beneath his head, "Oh...I think he said that they were going to finish up on the bridge, right? Oh." He sat up, a bit unnerved, "Is that...is that bad?"

"They are at the bridge, then." Shino said with certainty, "That is where they intend to strike."

"Shit!" Sato leapt up in a panic, "What the hell are we waiting here for in that case? We have to hurry!"

He and Shino abandoned the hospital roof, hastily taking off for the bridge. Shino made sure to send Kikaichu insects to both Kiba and Hinata in order to signal to them what was going on.

The Aburame's prediction had been accurate, and while Tazuna was giving a heartfelt speech on the bridge, a barrage of smoke pellets sent the crowd scattering in fright. The people fled quickly from the scene, and the Ame nin who had carefully planned their ambush surrounded Tazuna before he could leave. Inari stayed close to his grandfather, with a firm grip on Chokaro who was growling at the newcomers.

Taiho turned to Tazuna, startling the man. His eyes were as red as blood, much like his hair, and his threatening expression was not helping them relax either. "Tazuna-san, is it? I'm here to warn you that this is your last chance to cooperate with Tokuja-taicho. It really is in your best interest to ally yourself with us."

Inari spoke up first, "Yeah right! We don't respond to threats, I think you should know! You better get out of here if you know what's good for you!"

"I couldn't have said it any better myself." Tazuna agreed, smiling. He blinked, startled when Taiho charged them with a burst of speed, and snatched Inari up with one hand.

He leapt back to the railing, dangling the boy over the edge, "This bridge means so much to you, doesn't it? Wouldn't it be a shame if the bridge that has saved so many lives claims one today, hm?"

"Drop me then you jerk!" Inari howled fearlessly, struggling, "I know how to swim now!"

Taiho smirked at him, "Oh, is that so? Boy, I promise you'll be dead before you even hit the water..."

"Leave him alone! I'll do whatever you say..." Tazuna conceded, unwilling to risk his grandson's life.

"Grandpa don't listen to them, you hear me? You can't let people march in here again and bully us anymore!" Inari pleaded with him, "We've worked so hard and we can't give up now! Dad wouldn't want us to!"

"You think this is a joke?" Taiho sneered, "You've got five seconds to decide if you value your life, kid!"
"Inari...I don't want you to be a martyr like your father was." Tazuna said softly, "I'll cooperate if that's what it takes. I think we'll be alright."

Before Inari could protest again Taiho flailed unexpectedly, crying out in surprise after Chokaro had rushed up and bit into his calf. He lost his grip, and the boy was fortunate enough to be tossed down to the concrete again, where he scrambled back to his feet. Taiho kicked the dog aside, frustrated, "The last thing I need right now is rabies..."

Inari knelt down beside Chokaro, stroking the injured dog and thanking her for her bravery. Tazuna stepped in front of Inari when Taiho approached, "Don't touch him again! I swear that by the end of this day you will all regret having come here!"

Jito was nearby, and she laughed at the old man's proclamation, "Aw...Gramps doesn't want us to hurt the little boy! Well, I guess we can just go for you instead, huh?" She drew out her chain dagger, not missing the effect of intimidation it had as Tazuna's eyes widened, "Don't be scared, Gramps, I can make this quick."

"Gatsuuga!"

Kiba and Akamaru threw themselves at their enemies in a spiraling formation, sending the unsuspecting Ame nin scattering in all directions. Jito regrouped and joined Konoei, taking on the Inuzuka and his transformed ninken. Hinata, who had also arrived, squared off with Taiho. She and Kiba had been much closer to the bridge than their teammates. Once Shino had sent them the message, she and Kiba were quick to find Tazuna.

Her eyes were lit with the Byakugan and she attacked with unrestrained jabs of Jyukken. Taiho blocked, unfamiliar with the fighting style, and recoiled in shock as her chakra bit in through his skin and damaged his chakra coils. Seeing direct combat would be tricky, he changed his strategy, and used his superior speed to evade her.

"You've got a neat little Kekkei Genkai, don't you missy?" Taiho chuckled, "Want to see mine?" He demonstrated his bizarre power, morphing his body and he gained reptilian features that made her balk in confusion. He sent her flying back with one massive tail-thwack. "Try to hit me now, ha!"

Taiho taunted her before jumping off the side of the bridge.

His transformation perfectly facilitated swimming and he took cover under the water, figuring that she would be unable to reach him. Hinata stood up again and brushed herself off, trying to stay calm, 'It's been so long since I've tried to use it...but I need to now. I need to be sure that I've become stronger!'

She tapped into the ancestral power she had been gifted with, and scanned the area with the new and hypersensitive vision of the Misago Byakugan. Hinata could see the Rain ninja loitering underwater very clearly. He moved just as fast there as he did on land, and she anticipated his strike after seeing him make hand seals. Hinata avoided the jets of water that crashed up against the bridge.

'He intends to fight from a distance so he can't be harmed by my Jyukken.' She observed while easily deflecting the watery assaults that rained down. One larger barrage followed from all directions, and Hinata repelled it with a precisely timed rotation that ripped the water apart into harmless droplets. Taiho quickly noted how his long-range attacks were useless against her, and finally crashed up to the surface again for another risky, head-on assault.

"Come here, little miss!" Taiho snarled, slashing furiously at her with his elongated claws. She dodged agilely, nullifying his attempts completely, and noted how his strength had multiplied considerably. Punches that sailed past her connected with the concrete of the bridge and tore it off in
chunks. A flying-kick followed one of his tail-sweeps, and Hinata realized that she would not be able
to dodge after he had backed her up against the edge of the bridge.

"Kaiten!" Her rotation was fiercer than the previous one, and though it forced him back successfully,
it also hacked off a portion of the railing behind her. *Oh dear...if we aren't careful we may end up
damaging this bridge, and I am sure Tazuna-san will not be happy about that...* She spied Kiba was
also gouging out some impressive craters as Konoei and Jito scrambled to avoid his relentless
taijutsu.

"Don't forget about me!" Taiho warned, seeing that she was distracted, and he charged again with
impressive speed. Time slowed down and Hinata, though already planning a counterattack, observed
again the astral trigrams she had seen the day of the Retrieval Mission. They were aligned faultlessly;
measuring space and time, and Taiho seemed to melt away while she regarded them in the dimness.

Ahead of her one character had lit up with otherworldly light, calling for her. Hinata understood that
it was a simple gesture that would help her find a way to fight back, but she could not help her
curiosity in viewing the other trigrams. A faint projection on her right looked interesting, but when
she reached out it did not grow any brighter. Unfortunately, it did respond.

She had not expected to be suddenly jolted from her body, which she lost in total numbness, and for
a moment Hinata pondered what she could have possibly done to herself. Her mind seemed utterly
alone in a vast void, stretched thin and groping outwards for something unknown. *What did I do?
Can I...undo it?* She wondered. She clearly heard a voice a moment later, as if it were transmitting
straight into her mind

*Does that mean...I'm going to become evil? Hey Fox...what was that just now? I could have sworn I
felt something just now...*

"Naruto!" Hinata was certain that she had heard him. There was no doubt: his voice had been as
distinct as it would have been if he had been standing right next to her. He was far away, and she
supposed that was why it was so difficult to stay connected. Overwhelmed by the strain, Hinata
blacked out after a few moments.

Taiho halted in surprise after seeing the Hyuga girl suddenly tumble and lay limp on the ground. He
laughed aloud at the sight, "Wow...I can't believe I was actually worried about fighting you! What
for? You look tough and you're impossible to hit...and then you faint all of the sudden! Heh heh!"

Shortly after Hinata's collapse the rest of her team arrived. Shino dove ahead with no warning of any
kind, slicing into Taiho's back when he tried to flee. His insects swarmed to prevent the enemy from
returning to the water, and began to drain Taiho's chakra. Sato stole a moment to check on the fallen
kunoichi, "Sunshine? Sunshine!"

The Hatake knelt down beside her, dreading the thought of her getting hurt. He held her
unresponsive form, calling to her unavailingly. *She looks okay but what do I know? She could be
seriously hurt and I wouldn't have a clue!* Sato was worried that if he went to fight with the others
that she would be vulnerable without him, *And Naruto would have my head if anything happened to
her! Jeez!*

"Sato, it's okay." Inari sidled up to him, holding his whimpering dog in his arms, "Grandpa and I will
stay with her, she'll be fine!"

Sato looked to the boy and then to Tazuna, and after the old man gave him a reassuring nod, he
stood up, leaving Hinata in their care. "Right...make sure you guys don't move from this spot. If
something happens scream really loud and I'll come help you!" Sato notified them before rushing
ahead into the battle.

He immediately went to aid Kiba, much against his inner council, who was snared in a complex netting of chains that seemed to have spawned from Jito's weapon. Sato stopped, making hand seals, knowing that if he didn't free the Inuzuka quickly Konoei was going to finish him off. *It's about time I put this to the test...it's not lethal, but it sure is handy!* The Hatake formed a hasty Chidori and after a short running start, molded the chakra briefly before pitching it towards Kiba.

The thin, razor-wheel of lightning startled Jito when it hacked through the chains, and Kiba shrugged loose. The Inuzuka regrouped beside the silver haired boy, giving him an annoyed look, "What the hell took you guys so long? Hinata and I have been fighting for ages!"

He shrugged, "We got lost on the road of life?"

Before Kiba could snap at him about his weak reply Konoei descended, swiping at them with his spear that was able to stretch to whatever length he pleased. Sato leapt for him, drawing out both of his kodachi, "Yeah! I'll take you on Rainy-guy!" The sound of weapons glancing off told Kiba he would not have to intervene, and he returned his attention to Jito. He and Akamaru lunged for her and she shrieked, moving back to her partner.

"Let's finish them together, Konoei-kun!" She called, making hand signs, "They're more trouble than they're worth!"

Konoei also performed hand signs that aided her in raising a huge torrent of water that plunged down and washed over half of the bridge. When the wave had ebbed off both Kiba and Sato were nowhere to be seen. Jito cheered, thanking her teammate for his help, and was unceremoniously plowed into from behind by Kiba, "Gatsuuga!"

Jito gave a cry before hurtling over the side of the bridge and Konoei was too shocked to react.

"My genjutsu isn't easy to spot, I think you've noticed." Sato smiled, stalking over to the remaining Ame nin, "You really thought you had us, didn't you?"

"I'll make you pay for that!" Konoei snarled, slashing ruthlessly at the Hatake, but was forced back when Kiba teamed up with his fellow Leaf genin and a gang attack resulted. Konoei retreated to the opposite side of the bridge, where Taiho was struggling against Shino. They were too worn out to present an effective counter attack against the Leaf shinobi.

Akamaru gave a warning yelp and Kiba interpreted it, "What the-? What do you mean we're in trouble? What's gonna happen-" A water jutsu was launched from behind the three boys. They were able to dodge thanks to the ninken's warning. It ravaged the entire bridge, and gave Konoei and Taiho an opportunity to rest. A follow up blast struck Sato, nearly flinging him off the side, and he hung on to the railing, wide-eyed, *Whew! That was so close it was scary!*

Shino and Kiba rounded about to help him up, but two water clones ambushed them, using the remaining water on the bridge to imprison them, "Water Prison Technique!" Spheres of water snapped up, trapping each nin in their own suffocating bubble.

Tokuja appeared on the far side of the bridge, looking smug, "Don't any of you understand how useless it is to resist? Please...save us the trouble and cooperate already. We don't want to kill you."

Sato swung himself up back onto the bridge, facing off against the Rain ninja who had arrived, "Cooperate? I don't think you've given us enough incentive...why are you doing this anyway?"

"I've said it once before...clashes in Hidden Rain claimed the life of our leader, Hanzo-sama. Going
back there would be useless when Pein crushes the rebellion time and time again..." Tokuja explained in frustration, "Rather than suffering through such a dismal fate, we have escaped to create a new life. A new village for the people loyal to Hanzo is imperative, and I will do whatever necessary to get one!"

"But taking over this place by force? If you were truly as decent as you make yourself sound then you would've negotiated with these people!" Sato retorted angrily, "You have no right to do what you're doing!"

"And the ninja who killed Hanzo-sama also had no right to do what he did, but abiding by right and wrong slows down progression." Tokuja concluded, "It's time to end this. Konoei! Taiho! Finish them off..." Both of his students had caught their breath, and Sato could only wait with his kodachi drawn once they attacked in unison.

Four of Hinata’s shadow clones intervened, two each dividing off and buffering the advancing Rain ninja. Sato sighed in relief, not only for being rescued, but also over the fact that his friend was awake and unharmed. Hinata crossed over to him, letting her clones pummel the already exhausted Ame nin with brutal Jyukken strikes, "Are you alright, Sato-kun?"

"Sure, but I could say the same for you, Sunshine." Sato smiled at her, "What happened back there?"

She frowned, "I don't know...I...I think I hurt myself somehow. But I can still fight!"

Tokuja was not pleased to see that another Leaf shinobi was active again, and had also defeated his subordinates with relative ease. "I'm through with giving you all chances to reconsider; now you either beg for mercy or die!" Tokuja proclaimed, biting his thumb, and then summoned a giant salamander to the bridge.

Sato and Hinata separated to avoid a huge, webbed foot that stomped down. The creature was a venomous orange, skin stretched tight over its body with countless dark flecks and grooves. Its bulging lime eyes stared down at them as Tokuja perched on top of its head, commanding it to attack. The newt's throat expanded briefly before it spewed a wad of noxious acid down at the Leaf ninja.

Hinata used a desperate rotation to deflect the corrosive away from Tazuna and Inari. Sato lunged forward when there was an opening, hurling another Chidori at the creature's face, but the salamander stood unfazed, oblivious to the strike and the pain it should have caused. Tokuja gave another short command before the newt reached out with surprising swiftness, and pinned Sato down with one of its clumsy feet.

The boy made one last gasp for air, biting his thumb, and hoped he could finish sealing before he was nothing more than a pancake. He conjured an enormous amount of chakra in his panic and summoned. Sato blinked up; suddenly free and able to breathe. He scooted backwards; shocked that he had managed to call upon the largest owl he had seen to date.

He grinned up and the prodigious, tawny owl that loomed above him. She could barely fit on the bridge, and after a moment of observation, Sato understood her striped feathers were ruffled in agitation, if not fury. The bird knocked the salamander back without much thought, more flustered about being summoned than fighting.

Sato, in a wise move, prostrated on the ground before addressing her, "I'm sorry for this being so abrupt! I heard that you were the new boss, and I meant to talk to you sooner but-!"

She screeched a cry so shrill it left all present temporarily deaf.
"Don't let it scare you! Get it!" Tokuja snapped at his hesitant summon and the salamander lumbered forward, swiping at the owl with a thick, heavy tail. The bird hopped back thoughtlessly, utterly unaffected. When her feet met the ground again, her massive claws began tearing into the pavement. Sato cringed, realizing he was in over his head, "Please, Kutaishi!"

The owl boss suddenly lashed out, striking the newt squarely on the neck with merciless talons. It gave a low squeal of anguish before backing off of the bridge. It slipped into the water with Tokuja still on its head as a passenger. Once safe in its element it spat jets of saltwater back up at the bird who evaded them promptly.

Hinata had freed Kiba and Shino from their respective Water Prisons and asked Sato, "Are you sure that this owl you've summoned is...safe?"

"Er..." He scratched the back of his head, "Well...we're probably in more danger now than we previously were, and believe me, that was not my intention..."

Shino gave him a look of deep disapproval, and Sato edged closer to the monster of a bird, again trying to reason with her, "Uh...hey, could you maybe be a bit more careful? This bridge is awfully fragile and the people who live here really need it-"

Kutaishi looked down at him briefly, and to his eternal horror, took off a moment later. Sato watched in dumbfoundment as the blasted animal flew away, not regarding his request in the slightest. 'Oh shit.'

Tokuja laughed at the pitiful sight, "Well that was impressive! You have absolutely no control over that thing, do you boy?"

The Byakugan flashed briefly in Hinata's eyes before she reported, "Um, Sato-kun? I am not so sure that she abandoned you yet. I can still see her high above us...about three miles up."

Sato looked at her briefly, "Even if she didn't leave that still could be a bad thing."

Tokuja's salamander was on an acid-spewing spree during the time, and they were all forced to evade. Though it was not caustic enough to melt the concrete, it was certainly more than enough to dissolve human flesh. Inari had a rather fun time running around with his friends, despite the fact they were in unimpeded danger.

During their frantic scurrying, unknown to them, was that Kutaishi was descending at several hundred miles per hour. The bird had made a perilous dive to get near ground level again, and generated one tremendous wing-beat that launched several, razor-sharp contour feathers into the bay. They stuck into the salamander like knives, stunning it, and ending its barrage of projectile acid. Neither Sato or Tokuja could believe the bird had returned.

The Rain ninja abandoned his summon and leapt for the bridge to avoid the incoming owl, and Shino was quick to send a large swarm of insects to drain his chakra. The salamander struggled to dive underwater, but the inlet was simply too shallow to conceal its girth, and Kutaishi slammed into it a moment later, hooking her claws into its face with a nail-biting crunch. The genin watched in fascinated horror as the vicious owl dragged the helpless salamander ashore, shaking it violently, until it disappeared in a cloud of smoke; defeated.

Hinata aided Shino in disabling Tokuja with a combined assault of insects and Jyukken. Once the Rain ninja was unconscious along with the rest of his team, the two looked back to see Kutaishi circling around the bridge, trying to shave off the speed she had built up during her dive. After she had slowed down sufficiently, she perched on a rocky beachfront beside the bridge, and Sato
immediately went to thank her.

"That was great! You're amazing!" Sato cheered, inwardly proud that he was the one who had called upon such a beast, "No wonder they say you're the strongest!"

"Fool!" Her voice was unmistakably livid. Sato kneeled down again, realizing she hardly had a reason not to kill him.

"My name is Hatake Sato and I am the son of your friend, Riei!" He introduced warily, "I meant no disrespect by calling you for help."

"Shabby little weakling! Your lineage earns you nothing with me!" She hissed.

Hinata made a start to go help her friend, but Shino stopped her, shaking his head. She felt her stomach clench with fear, wondering if the owl intended to exact a price for her services.

"I am very sorry. I am your humble servant." Sato said solemnly, doubting it would be enough to save his life.

Kutaishi relaxed a bit, "I won't kill you, if that's what you're expecting, but I do not fight for just anybody. I understand how you have become popular with my children, but you will do well to understand that I am an entirely different matter. Never call me again!"

Sato flinched at the gust her booming voice created, and heaved a sigh after she departed in a cloud of smoke. A shocked silence followed afterwards, and Sato stood shakily to his feet, brushing dust from his jacket. Kiba, back on the bridge, was astounded that the Hatake had just risked his life for the sake of a mission, no matter how stupid the risk was.

He left the jagged outcrop and rejoined his friends, glad to see that no one had sustained injury. It was also pleasing that the Rain ninja were all splayed out at their feet, utterly spent in energy. Inari glanced over to the end of the bridge, where the entire town had gathered and watched the fight. He snickered at their awed faces.

Kiba helped Hinata disarm and tie up their defeated adversaries. Sato rested on a patch of unbroken concrete while Shino lectured him on proper summoning technique, and how he had nearly jeopardized their mission by risking it all on one bird.

Tazuna stood beside Inari, observing the damage done to the bridge. The road had been torn up, and pieces of siding and railing were crumbling, but other than that, it was still standing, "Definitely needs a patch-job, though..." After a moment of assessing the detriment, the old man laughed to himself.

Inari looked up to him, still clinging to his dog, "What's so funny, eh Grandpa?"

"Well, Inari..." Tazuna smiled, "It seems to me that this bridge is a magnet for great shinobi battles."

The next day, the celebration, though delayed, continued without any further distraction. All the villagers seemed to be having an even better time after witnessing a battle on the bridge the day before, which had closely resembled the first struggle for freedom on the bridge.

Shino, Kiba, and Sato were still on active duty supervising the public, but they insisted that Hinata stay behind to rest. No one was certain what had caused her blackout, and they were not willing to risk it happening again. Hinata remained home with Tsunami and Inari, nursing a splitting headache, and trying to understand what had gone wrong.
'I chose to do something differently than what my instincts directed...and I hurt myself somehow.' She was puzzled over it still, 'I didn't think I was going to, though. It's just so strange...I wish someone else had this ability so they could explain to me why things happen the way they do.' Hinata also hadn't a clue as to why Naruto's voice had become so incredibly clear, or how she had accidentally disconnected herself from her body.

She rested outside on the porch with Inari, holding a bag of ice to her throbbing head. She listened contently as Inari recalled his meeting with Naruto's team, and how they had inspired him. "Say, Hinata-chan, where are they now exactly if they're not together?" He thought to ask.

Hinata watched Chokaro patrol the front yard while she answered, "Naruto-kun is out west somewhere, he said. And Gaara-kun and Haku-kun are in the Hidden Sand village."

"Huh...you don't say?" Inari muttered, beckoning his dog over, "Well...I'd really like to see them again sometime."

The festivities ended the next day, and the Leaf shinobi prepared for the trip home with great reluctance. Their last meal together was breakfast, and Tazuna was trying to get a few last words in while he could, "All of you did outstanding work, which really comes as no surprise to me. I really have to thank you for boosting the morale of this village."

"Don't mention it," Kiba smiled good-naturedly, "We only did what we had to do."

"I wouldn't put it so lightly." Tazuna replied, "I went around town yesterday surveying people and all of them felt after watching you brave, young Leaf ninja fight that it's something they want to do too." The old man smiled widely, "I have hope that this place will become a ninja village with time, but by our own decision."

"That sounds pretty sweet!" Sato approved of the idea, "Good luck then, Gramps."

After finishing up and packing, they left with heartfelt goodbyes. Kiba had a difficult time getting Akamaru away from Chokaro, but once they set out, all of the genin were beginning to feel the aches and pains that were a result of the previous day's fighting. By the time they had gotten to the bridge, which was looking worse for the wear as well, their pace had slowed.

Hinata had paled considerably, and though her head was hurting less she was still not looking forward to the long trek back to the Leaf village. Shino noticed her fatigue, "Do you think that you are feeling well enough for the return journey?"

"I...I'm not sure." She admitted, slightly embarrassed. She had a feeling they were all dreading it.

"I can solve that problem, Sunshine." Sato offered, summoning, but with much less chakra, an owl to help them out. Kutaiku looked at them expectantly, asking what they needed.

Kiba recognized the barn owl from the Retrieval Mission, and quickly understood what Sato intended, "Here we go again..." He sighed, climbing up onto the owl's back, and helped Hinata clamber up as well. He was no fan of flying, but if it meant skipping the two-day journey home by foot, he would cope.

Once they had all balanced out on the bird's back, Kutaiku took off with care, soaring out over the bridge in the direction of the mainland. People nearby watched them leave; wide-eyed, and Inari, who had followed the group to the edge of town, also observed the departure.

His adoration for Leaf shinobi had grown immensely, and he did not fight the smile that spread on his face, 'Wow...we've got to do this more often...'}
The first week passed like a mechanical blur for Haku. Every day was the same: Rise early and learn new techniques, and retire when the sun left the sky.

With time, the wounds that Zabuza had inflicted upon him religiously he began to ignore. He did not notice pain when he focused and as time passed Haku learned. He avoided most hits that could cause injury almost by reflex. Attacks were engraved into his mind, and at times during the night he would wake to find himself punching at empty air in the darkness.

When Zabuza had declared it was time to move on, Haku had not questioned where they would be going next. After nearly a day's travel they had ended up near the coast of the same island that was sparsely populated and barren.

The chilly winter air made the wind blowing in from the bay reach sub-zero temperatures. The beach was only a massive collection of rocks and eroded cliffs, and a small shack was holed up against a hillside beneath the clouded sky. It was nowhere near as comfortable as the lodge had been, but they slept in separate rooms and ate whatever meager food was provided by the landlord who hadn't cared to know their names. They stayed there for over three weeks.

It was a constrained month's stay in the cramped hideout, and the majority of each day was spent training. At first Haku had thought it one of the most abominable places they could have chosen, but he kept his opinions to himself because he knew Zabuza did not want to hear them. Frozen waves beat up against the cliff side every day, and Haku forced himself to grow accustomed to the harsh conditions. Eventually he was not bothered by it at all.

Haku developed his skills without complaint, trying not to let his heart ache too much for his loved ones. His accuracy with senbon increased fivefold, and the sinewy ivory of his arms and legs soon revealed lean muscles from the intense training. In a short time he had been transformed into a swift, angular, educated ninja who was a far cry from the lonely boy who had first encountered Zabuza. Despite all of the improvement and changes, however, Haku's docile nature remained intact.

He was polite and respectful to Zabuza, even when he was frustrated or insulted. He listened carefully, and was soon familiar with most terms and past events of significance pertaining to the Water Country. The only noticeable change in his appearance since his arrival in the Land of Water was the presence of his hitai-ate. At first Haku had believed wearing a Leaf headband would draw unnecessary attention, but he found himself missing home terribly. He soon came to realize that representing his village in a foreign land would only be dangerous if people were looking for him. At the moment, walking freely in the daylight, he was safely anonymous while he was a Leaf shinobi.

Zabuza had not said anything on the matter either. That was, until the day he had packed up their belongings and announced they were leaving again.

"Don't exemplify your village unless you intend to shed a negative light on it." The nukenin told him, "Decide carefully where you choose to wear that scrap metal."

"Why would anyone associate negative things with Konoha if someone saw me wearing this?" Haku asked, baffled.

"They don't have to know you to assume you're no-good." Zabuza informed him, "Outside of your village you could just be an honest ninja, but most people here will conclude you to be a runaway: a criminal."

"That is a petty judgment..." Haku muttered, disheartened. Inwardly he knew that he already understood what Zabuza was talking about.
Their journey took them further south along the coast of the island, into a bustling sea port where snow had been piled up on the roadsides to keep the busy streets clear. Zabuza led the way into a luxurious office building downtown, and told Haku not to speak unless spoken to. He agreed calmly, but wondered why Zabuza was so relaxed while he risked exposing his identity in a public place.

It was a short while later Haku understood the building they had entered was not at all open to outsiders. Guards stood watching the stairwell with stoic faces, but when Zabuza stalked past they stood down. The nukenin told Haku to keep up.

None of the guards paid any mind to the dark haired boy as he traveled down a marble hallway beside Zabuza. Some did look surprised that the young Leaf shinobi showed no fear of the Demon of the Hidden Mist (Haku appeared rather bored, if at all,) but when Zabuza went into an office without even knocking, Haku assumed it was time for him to restrain his inquisitive mouth.

An older man was seated behind a large desk, smoking contentedly. He was losing his hair, by the look of it, and frown lines were drawn deep into his face. He grinned when they entered, motioning for his guards to relax and sit back down on the couch.

"Well, Zabuza!" The man laughed, "I was hoping you'd show!" The man did not make a move to rise from his seat, but did riffle through a pile of papers on his desk before scrutinizing one with interest.

"What's out for the best pay?" Zabuza asked bluntly, and the man at the desk chuckled in response.

"Not even a proper greeting for an old friend? That certainly is like you, Zabuza." He then sighed, "I do have a mission up that I've been hiring for weeks now, but this particular group has been more formidable than expected." His eyes narrowed, "If that team from Mist succeeds, none of my goals can come to fruition. Only the most skilled ninja can take them on. Since you disappeared off the map for a while I thought it was hopeless...but you always did have good timing."

Haku remained silent, aware that the boss was familiar with Zabuza because he had proven to be a reliable mercenary in the past. He quickly understood what was going on, ‘It's me too. Zabuza is taking me on a mission to test me...and it seems to be a very perilous one from the sound of it...'"

"Where are they now?" The nukenin questioned, wanting to know the details before accepting the task.

"They left from a port outside Kyofuda yesterday to track a ship full of cargo that I have special interest in. It won't be long before they've boarded the freighter and taken out my guards." The gang boss continued, "Then they'll hold the captain hostage until the ship turns back around to Kyofuda for legal investigation...make sure that boat makes port here by tomorrow night, or it'll all be over."

Zabuza nodded in affirmation, "How much?"

The man raised an eyebrow, "Well I can't say...who is this charming child you have with you? Surely you wouldn't risk taking such a breathtaking consort on a mission like this?"

"He wouldn't be here if he wasn't capable," The nukenin grunted in annoyance, "How much?"

"Capable, you say? Hm..." The boss looked at Haku with searching eyes, "What's your name, boy?"

"Haku."

The old man stole a glimpse at the dark haired boy's hitai-ate, "And it looks like you're a Leaf ninja, Haku, am I right?"
His voice was cool, "That is correct."

The boss was quiet for a moment, analyzing the boy's reserved nature, "Zabuza never takes on a weak apprentice, but all the same, I can't have a careless child operating for me. I'll tell you what, Haku...if you survive this job I'll take you as my henchman, and then if you really impress me, you may end up as fortunate as your sensei."

"With all due respect, I am not looking for your approval. Regardless of the effects I will complete any task set before me if I must." Haku retorted evenly.

The boss was taken aback by Haku's ambition. Zabuza smirked, 'Finally, the kid's attitude is being put to good use.'

"That must be that Will of Fire I've heard about that keeps those Leaf ninja so damn hilarious," The old man laughed, "I like you, Haku! A pretty face like yours will brighten up my business." He looked to Zabuza, "40,000 ryo apiece if you get it done quick."

'Apiece?' Haku was startled, 'As in I'm being paid too?'

"You could do better," The nukenin growled, but then relented, "Expect us back tomorrow."

"I will." The boss folded his hands smugly beneath his chin, "Good luck, Haku."

Haku mirrored Zabuza and left the office, but not after bowing respectfully to the old man who had seen potential in him. They left through a different series of halls and stairs that were unguarded. A one-way door was the only back exit, and the nukenin pushed it open and stepped out into the frigid air moodily. He expected to be paid more if his employer was desperate.

This gangster was at least a better cover than Gato had been, but he had turned out to be clever and conserved his most talented ninja for last (himself) so he wouldn't have to pay as much as a reward.

"Cheap bastard." Zabuza sneered aloud.

"Who was that man, Zabuza?" Haku inquired, still puzzled, "Is he important?"

"Fuck yeah he's important. He's the most powerful mobster in the Water Country: Inagawa Koseki." The nukenin gave the boy an annoyed look, "Don't those Leaf bastards teach you anything about people in the bingo books? No wonder the lot of you get killed off so quick; fighting against those who outmatch you..."

"You being no exception to that theory." Haku added cheerily.

Zabuza was surprised that Haku had taken the insult in stride but he quickly shrugged it off. They ate lunch in an open-air restaurant; they were the only customers immune to the icy weather outside the pub. It was then Haku took notice of Zabuza's alarmingly sharp teeth after he'd removed the bandages concealing his face.

He lowered his eyes to offer his teacher privacy and ate in soundless apprehension, wondering how he would perform on his first mission with Momochi Zabuza.

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They left their belongings at an inn they had checked into before setting out northward along the coast. Zabuza had told him to take as many weapons as possible, because if things took a turn for the
worst, it was better to have too many weapons than too few. In response to such a sage piece of advice, Haku had several more quivers of senbon on his person than he normally would have.

As they ventured through a grove of twisted trees and shrubs scattered along the cliff side, Haku recalled all of the tajjutsu forms and ninjutsu he had learned. *This is no time to relax. This is easily an A-rank mission considering our objective...and it's only the two of us against a solid team of Mist ninja. We're beginning at a disadvantage... 'Haku thought, 'But Zabuza has faced ill odds before. When he confronted Naruto, Gaara, Anko-sensei and I he nearly killed us all on that bridge...'' It was a fact that he did not overlook.

Zabuza was powerful and took dangerous missions regularly. He was almost always outnumbered, and still managed to wipe out entire teams of enemy shinobi. His cunning strategies and strength had won him many battles. It made Haku question whether his presence was really necessary for such a task. 'Of course it isn't. Even without me, Zabuza would have done this...I'm only here so he can see if I will survive long or not. It is only a test.'

"It's up ahead." Zabuza's voice sliced through the air and Haku glanced over to him, stopping on a plateau as the older nin had.

His storm colored gaze followed Zabuza's and Haku looked out onto the horizon where a large steel ship floated lazily out on the bay. It had not yet turned around to Kyofuda.

"It's a long way off." Haku said quietly, "Can we reach it without being seen?"

"Haven't you learned anything?" Zabuza said snappishly, "Make yourself useful and give us some fog cover."

The dark haired boy nodded sheepishly, deciding to attribute his lack of thought to nervousness. He leapt with cat-like movements down the craggy slope and out onto the crashing waves below. Zabuza followed, also having no problem walking on top of the choppy ocean water.

The pair moved across the bay in silence beneath the dim sky and Haku used his Kekkei Genkai to create a thick mist over the surface of the water. They were hidden for the entirety of the long run to the immense cargo freighter. It was once they reached the ship that things complicated.

Waves rushed up against the side of the vessel as it carved a huge wake into the water, and it was then Haku realized it was moving far faster than it had appeared to be from the shore.

The roar of the water was deafening, so Zabuza could not have gotten a word in edgewise to his protégée, but he didn't have to; Haku was clever enough to jump up and glue himself to the iron hull with chakra. Zabuza made a strained leap for the ship as well, having a bit more difficulty because of the distance and the violent motions of the water. He too clambered onto the side of the trudging freighter, at least acknowledging Haku's agility and athleticism were accredited to his smaller size.

The wind flogged Haku's exposed skin as he crept up the rough, bolted surface, and he leapt up over the side of the railing; his muscles screaming. He knew it was foolish to abandon caution and jump frantically. It had been painful to hold on to the abrasive metal surface but he was lucky not to be seen.

At the top, Haku kneeled down on the rusted deck, panting. Sweat had slicked the back of his neck. He smiled to himself upon seeing the top level of the ship was completely unoccupied with the exception of hundreds of large crates stacked together. Zabuza followed shortly after, more discrete in his appearance, but had still risked the same exposure that his apprentice had. Haku stood when the nukenin did, collecting his bearings after having a solid surface beneath his feet again. The
emptiness of the ship had the dark haired boy slightly nervous.

"If they boarded the ship before us, where should we expect to run into them?" Haku asked quietly.

Zabuza brushed his grease-stained hands on his pants in irritation after he'd touched a slathered cable on his way up, and then said, "Probably guarding the guy at the helm, but there's no way to know for sure so keep your eyes peeled." He looked to Haku beside him, "Stay here. I'm going to the bow to see what we're up against. Don't come unless I need you."

Haku was absolutely puzzled, 'How will I know if you need me?' Zabuza gave him an impatient look so he nodded, "Alright, Zabuza-san."

Zabuza made a few short hand seals to create more fog cover over the deck, and stepped into it, but then paused, "Haku."

The boy stared at the nukenin's back, "Yes?"

He did not answer right away. At length, he added, "Do not disappoint me...kill; because it's either you or them in this situation."

"I understand." He really did, but that did not mean he liked it. He had never killed before, even when he was so capable, but he had never found it necessary. Now, it seemed, he would not last long if he let his opponents off easily.

Zabuza disappeared into the haze ahead and Haku was then on his own.

Haku stood idly in the mist, wondering how he could pass the time. He was near the back end of the ship, and he was curious to see the freighter's layout. He leapt up onto the crates that were piled high, and caught a breeze from the height. Haku hopped from container to container, checking the gaps between them for any concealed ninja or traps.

He was surprised to see a Mist shinobi strolling leisurely down the opposite side of the deck. Haku froze, crouching down low against the crate he was perched on. He cloaked himself in a dense cloud of fog before edging nearer to spy.

A boy with dark blue hair was adjusting his jounin vest. Haku guessed he could not have been more than a few years older than himself. The young Mist ninja below procured a hat from his bag, shivering, and pulled it down over his ears for warmth. He folded his arms and stomped his feet, muttering how he could not stand the sudden cold weather.

Haku's eyes narrowed, 'He's alone.'

He steadied three senbon between his knuckles.

The jounin below leaned on the railing in boredom, staring down at the swirling waves. When he yawned needles connected with his jugular.

Haku was alarmed to see his target disperse into a puddle of water, 'A water clone! He knows-!' The Mist ninja dove for Haku from his hiding place beside a crate. The dark haired boy leapt aside and blocked the following series of kicks with swift reflexes. They broke apart after wrestling with each other, both having a fair idea of the other's physical strength.

'He's stronger than me. He must specialize in taijutsu...' Haku was not happy he had picked a fight with someone skilled in close combat.
The Mist ninja paused in confusion, "What? A Leaf ninja? No way! Why on earth would Leaf try to interfere with us?" He let his guard down. He did not see Haku as an enemy and it was a mistake.

"Don't assume I act in accordance with my village." Haku warned, throwing several senbon from each hand.

His opponent dodged the needles at the last second, and then drew a sword from a scabbard tied to his back. "So you're a missing-nin, eh? Inagawa hired you, I bet! He must be desperate to get these goods through if he sent a punk-ass kid like you!" He then lunged for the smaller boy, slashing wildly.

His skill with a blade reminded Haku of Tenten, but he was nowhere near comparable to her talent. The Mist nin slashed clumsily, leaving openings in his defense; openings that Zabuza had taught him to exploit. Haku got a firm grip on the older boy's attacking arm, sword and all, and while the Mist nin raised his free arm to block the punch he expected, Haku slammed into his gut with a ruthless knee-kick. The attack made his foe crumple backwards, shocked that he had let his guard down.

Haku landed several senbon while the Mist nin reeled about, and then rushed for him again, intent on fighting seriously. His attacks were more polished and quick, but Haku countered easily thanks to his training with Zabuza. Another water clone that had remained unseen struck Haku with a flying-kick from behind, knocking him from the crates and back down to the deck. Skidding along the slippery surface, Haku managed to find his footing, but wasn't fast enough to block the uppercut that connected with his jaw.

The sudden blow knocked the smaller boy over the side of the ship. Haku watched as the hull raced past his face, and knowing that he would not be able to catch himself, he made himself small: pulling his wind-whipped arms to his chest before he plunged into the black waves like a pebble.

He hit the water hard and the pain and cutting cold of it paralyzed him temporarily. All he could see was darkness and the shadows of passing waves. Beside him the bottom half of the ship sliced through the water, dragging him along in the current.

'Air.' Was his first thought.

He had the wind knocked out of him after he had fallen. Haku moved up to the surface and then felt a rough explosion of chakra rip him away and throw him back some distance.

He was spinning wildly, searching for the upward direction, desperate for oxygen and unable to think. It happened again, and this time, he could hear his opponent attacking him a bit more easily, "Suiton: Water Fang Bullet!"

Haku felt his lungs flatten as the jutsu slammed into him again, but the blow pushed him up to the surface where he was able to take a much needed breath.

Oxygen returned to his limbs and brain, and again his thoughts rang clear in his mind, 'When he can see me he attacks with water jutsu...I'll have to fight him from a distance!'

Haku dove deeper into the water, shrinking away from the dim light of the surface, and as he predicted, the attacks stopped. He swam with powerful strokes, feeling at home in the water, and moved away from the ship, hoping the strategy he had in mind would work.

Back on the ship, the Mist jounin paced on the deck, knowing better than to assume his opponent was dead. 'He definitely didn't drown...I didn't hit him hard enough. Looks like I'll have to wait 'til he surfaces again and then I'll-'
He was startled to see the Leaf ninja leap clean out of the water and onto a lone boulder close to the coastline. Haku had put several hundred yards between himself and the ship.

"He's pretty fast underwater..." The Mist ninja muttered, "I'll have to finish this before he slips away!" He bit his thumb and formed hand seals, and from afar, Haku watched in horror as a massive whale was summoned beside the ship.

Intelligence reflected in its beady eyes, and Haku was quick to go on the offensive, or he'd have no way of getting back to the ship, "Suiton: Water Dragon Blast!"

A large ocean current coiled into the shape of a dragon and shot out of the water, aimed for the summoned animal. The whale countered without much thought, and spewed a jet of saltwater from its gaping mouth to deflect the incoming torrent. 'That was totally useless...' Haku was discouraged, 'I'll have to use an ice attack if I'm going to-'

"Finish him, Hachiyamu!" The Mist ninja ordered and the beast obeyed, slamming its flukes down into the water and generating a huge wave that raced for the shore.

Haku managed to lessen the magnitude of the shockwave with his Kekkei Genkai, but the sheer force that remained was enough to send him crashing back into the murky, turbulent water. He surfaced, quickly scaling the boulder again in a daze, knowing he would be unable to brace himself if he was attacked again.

"That didn't finish him?" The jounin was shocked to see his enemy had recovered, "Come on, Hachiyamu! This is one mission we can't disappoint Sengin-sensei on!"

The whale answered with a high pitched cry, and then prepared another water jutsu, one with far more chakra. 'It looks like long distance won't work either... ' Haku thought to himself, 'But I could defeat him if I...if I used...' His hesitant thoughts seemed to drift away as Hachiyamu spat a jet of highly pressurized water for him. All things he could and couldn't have done flashed in front of his eyes and Haku acted rashly, but wisely, in activating his Level Two form.

The massive water bullet halted in mid-air. Haku's control over the Hyoton combined with excess chakra suddenly made all water his weapon. He thrashed his tail in anticipation before freezing the current of water that hung suspended in the air. It was made purposefully jagged, and sharpened to a gleaming point at both ends. The massive ice spire suddenly reversed directions and sailed back at Hachiyamu, impaling the unsuspecting whale in the center of its head.

With a squeal of anguish, the whale disappeared in a puff of smoke. The young jounin stood unmoving on the deck in shock, 'Where did he get all that power from just now? He's different from before...'

Haku soared out over the waves, freezing all water he came in contact with. His white mane trailed behind him as he rushed ahead to the ship with the speed of a storm-wind. In an effortless bound, Haku leapt over the rail, eager to fight such a challenging opponent. The Mist ninja drew his sword again, ready to contend with the strange power he was witnessing.

'I need a weapon.' Haku could not counter a blade without one of his own. Water that had splashed up on the deck rose into the air behind him, partially of its own accord. The shimmering thread froze into a sharp ice blade, and Haku twisted around to catch it by its hilt, then turned back to parry a blow aimed for his head.

He was surprised by how simple it was. With his free hand, Haku slashed at the Mist ninja's face with arctic claws, and the startled jounin flinched away from the attack. He left himself open, unable
to do anything once Haku ripped through his gut with the ice sword. There was a minuscule moment of flailing and confusion before the Mist shinobi tumbled backwards in a bloody heap, his insides spilling out onto the deck.

Haku wheeled around, graceful and white, and vanished into the fog. He moved ahead towards the front of the ship, disregarding Zabuza's order for him to wait. With such raw, blissful power coursing through his veins it was impossible to be patient. He intended to fight more: rip, tear, slash and bite like the creature he was until satisfaction was his.

There was still prey lingering about.

"Dad, Suzumaru's running late," A young Mist nin warned as he and his father patrolled the bow of the ship, "Should I go look for him? He might be slacking off again..."

"That isn't necessary, Yubi." Sengin assured him, "Both you and Suzumaru have achieved jounin rank. I trust you both to take your duties seriously."

Yubi smiled, "At least I do. Suzu-kun has been a bit lax since he perfected his summoning technique, though."

"It is a great accomplishment..." His father agreed, "But I doubt it will go to his head."

Yubi shrugged, turning back to watch the captain at the helm through the window. He resembled his father almost identically, possessing the same green eyes and dark curly locks. Though where his father had a stubbled beard Yubi remained clean shaven, and he was dressed in bright, vibrant, red; his favorite color.

Yubi's previous jounin instructor along with the kunoichi of their team had been killed on one of their first B-rank missions during an ambush. Sengin had adopted the defunct genin team soon after that, resuming his son's training with his remaining teammate. They advanced quickly and had grown inseparably fond of each other. Sengin had also enjoyed the swell of pride he felt at gazing at his only son, who had grown into an admirable shinobi even in the face of adversity.

"How much longer do you think this will take, Dad?" Yubi asked, restraining a yawn, "It's kind of boring just waiting out here on a boat all day long..."

"The captain says he can turn the ship around more easily in deeper water, so once we've cleared the bay we should be heading back soon." Sengin answered, then smirked, "So if you're bored, how about a few rounds of janken to pass the time?"

A zanbato came hurtling out of the fog and the two Mist ninja dove apart to avoid it.

"Maybe later, Dad, it looks like we've got company!" Yubi drew out a kunai to defend himself.

The massive sword wedged itself out of the steel siding it had bit into, and returned to Zabuza's outstretched hand. Sengin edged nearer to his son, his eyes locked on the nukenin, "The Demon of the Hidden Mist chooses to appear at a time like this? It figures that a despicable character like you would sink low enough to deliver all of the contraband goods on this ship to your boss!"

"I really don't care about the moral orientation of the missions I take." Zabuza admitted heartlessly, "If the pay is good I get the job done."

"It's missing-nin like you who killed my teammates!" Yubi cried accusingly, "I'll make you pay for your ways you scumbag!" The young jounin hurled a hail of kunai and shuriken at Zabuza, which
The nukenin formed hand seals immediately after, "Suiton: Blasting Vortex Jutsu!"

Sengin countered with a jutsu of his own, "Suiton: Great Rip Current!"

The clashing bodies of water pummeled each other across opposite ends of the deck, cancelling out. Sengin used another jutsu in quick succession, "Katon: Fire Hawk Bullet!" The fireball crashed into the unsuspecting nukenin, only destroying a water clone. The rapid heating of the sea water on the deck created a cloud of steam, adding to the thick haze the Mist ninja darted in and out of.

Yubi had summoned nunchaku and was busy wrecking a number of water clones Zabuza had created on the far side of the platform. Sengin rushed to help him, but was clipped in the head by the flat side of Zabuza's sword, and swatted back and into the helm with a crash. Yubi turned about to face Zabuza, bravely blocking the nukenin's sword strikes. He slammed into Zabuza with his nunchaku, and then delivered a crushing roundhouse kick that sent him careening into the side rail.

Two water clones were giving his father a rough time, and he doubled back to get to him, "I'll be right there, Dad!"

He stumbled back to Sengin, swiping brutally at one of the clones with both nunchaku. It pounded into the water clone, dispersing it back into a puddle. Yubi leapt back to avoid the other clone that was attacking him and his father simultaneously. He gave a small huff when a zanbato carved a deep gash down the left side of his back. He was stunned by the hit and promptly tossed aside with the flat edge of the nukenin's sword.

Sengin finished the remaining water clone just in time to witness the ambush, "Yubi!"

His father slid on water and blood across the deck over to where his son had fallen. He scooped the boy up, seeing that the wound was fatal, "Hey! Hang on, Yubi! Stay with me! I'll protect you!"

"Sorry, Dad, I..." He sputtered, frustrated, "I didn't think...he’d hit me."

"It's okay." Sengin stroked the boy's face, completely blocking out any recognition of the current battle, "It's not your fault...you're brave..."

Zabuza had paused to watch the odd interaction, observing the older jounin cradle the mortally wounded boy. He might as well have taken advantage of Sengin's lowered guard, but he chose to watch instead for a reason he could not fathom.

Silence fell shortly after and the distraught father set the boy down after he had become still. Sengin shook with fury and then rounded on Zabuza, "His life had barely begun and you cut him down just like that?" He screamed, "You're inhuman! He was my only child; he was everything to me!"

"Do not bring anything into battle that you're not willing to lose." The nukenin replied bluntly, ignoring the man's tears.

Sengin felt all hope for the future drain from his body, and he then wondered what had become of his other pupil. If Suzumaru had not returned by now, there was no doubt that he was dead as well. At that point the mission no longer held any meaning for him, and he only craved vengeance for his losses.

He lunged for Zabuza with a powerful fire jutsu, engulfing half of the platform in flames. The nukenin avoided it, retreating back to the far side of the deck, unable to counter quickly enough for the frenzied jutsu that were rapidly aimed for him. He attacked uncertainly, seeing his water jutsu did
not have the same spirit as the other ninja's. It was a struggle of crashing water, and Zabuza considered that he may have provoked his own death. Sengin summoned his own weapon, an old crescent-spear, and swept it brutally for the nukenin with cries of anguish. There was little chance for retaliation.

Haku leapt down without a moment's hesitation from the level above them. Sengin had not seen him approach from behind, and was defenseless against him once Haku ripped his ice sword through the man's spinal column and instantly ended his misery. Sengin dropped down to the deck with a soft thud, and his weapon clattered uselessly beside him.

Haku perched close by on a rail, his mane billowing majestically in the sharp wind. His ice hued gaze was steady on Zabuza for a moment before it crossed to a young man who lay dead near the helm. He understood immediately and fangs were visible when his lips parted to speak, "You killed his son, Zabuza. That is a crime of the deepest evil. I sent him to heaven so they can be together again."

Zabuza's eyes narrowed as he watched his apprentice. The boy's change of appearance was not nearly as unsettling as the unusual chakra he was exerting. 'That and he has a fucking tail and claws.' His mind added wryly, 'What the hell is with this kid?'

Shortly afterwards Haku reverted back to his normal form. As the curse mark receded, the white strands of his hair drifted off in the breeze as snow, and his cat-like features faded. Guilt settled in his chest when Haku realized he had once again given in to the powers of the cursed seal, even after promising Jiraiya that he never would again. Not only had he gone to his Level Two form, but he had killed two honorable Mist ninja because of it.

'I can't take that back...' Haku had never wanted to act so despicably, 'I must repent for what I have done.'

Zabuza was watching the blood on his sword absorb when he spoke sidelong to Haku, "You used a seal to increase your power and chakra capacity; none of that was your real strength." He stood up, slinging the zanbato onto his back, "Never use a power that isn't yours, understood?"

Haku was truthfully surprised that Zabuza disapproved of his most lethal form. In a way, he was grateful he was just as opposed to it as Jiraiya had been.

"I understand, Zabuza-san." Haku said mechanically.

The nukenin leapt up to the upper level, intending to give the captain a good scare. "Take what supplies will be of use to us and then dispose of the bodies." Zabuza commanded in a low growl back down to his apprentice, "Get up here when you're finished."

He disappeared after that and Haku sighed, looking at the slain Mist ninjas' bodies. He did not want to plunder them for the spoils of battle, and would have much preferred to have laid his brave opponents to rest on land. But with Zabuza's new bad mood and the success of their mission balanced on the edge of a knife, Haku knew that he could not disobey.

He moved silently to where Yubi lay, and gently slid the boy's eyelids shut to give him some dignity.

By evening the cargo freighter had made port and Inagawa's henchman greedily unloaded all of the goods that had been on board. When they reported back to Inagawa, he was astonished to hear that Haku had killed two of the three opposing ninja. He was thrilled to hear it, actually, "Oh! I'd be glad to have you on my staff, Haku! You and Zabuza make deadly pair..."
Haku accepted his earnings quietly, for his heart was still heavy with the weight of his actions. Zabuza informed Inagawa that they were moving farther south, but would return to take future missions. They parted, Inagawa a-tingle with his success, and Haku and Zabuza several thousand ryo richer.

One of Naruto’s most boring dreams to date began with ramen. He found it strange that he had no interest in his favorite food. He felt restless and uninterested as he sat by himself at the restaurant, staring down into his bowl of pork ramen. 'What's up with me? I've been working so hard these past few days...and every time I think of something that ought to perk me up...it stinks.'

The blonde boy pushed the bowl away gloomily and looked to the owner of the stand, "I'm sure it's great, sir, it's just I suddenly don't feel very hungry right now...let me pay you for your trouble."

The man shook his head, "Not at all! It's on the house, kid. You just find a way to cheer up, alright?"

Naruto thanked the owner for his generosity and then swiveled around on his seat. He blinked in confusion to see a vast meadow behind him and he then looked back to the man, "Er...you know your shop is in a field of flowers, right?"

He nodded, "Yes, I know."

"Ah. Okay," Naruto shrugged, standing up, "I just thought it wasn't the best place for attracting business. I guess I'll see you around."

The owner bid him goodbye after he set out and Naruto treaded through the wildflowers, feeling quite perplexed. He did like gardening, but he was not an avid fan of it. He scratched his head, continuing on in the vast field, 'Huh. I wonder where the hell I'm at right now...' He glanced around curiously, 'Hm, well, I guess this would be a nice place to relax!'

Naruto checked around for a spot suitable for a nap. His heart skipped a beat when he noticed Hinata nearby. She was dressed in a white sun dress and was planting more flowers in an empty patch of soil. He grinned widely, guessing she had not noticed him yet, "Hey, Hinata-chan!"

She looked up, eyes lit with excitement, "Oh!"

He ran up to her, giddy as a puppy, and relished how she seemed to melt into his waiting arms. Naruto could hear her muttering nonsensical things into his shoulder and he smiled contently, "Yeah...it's so good to see you again, Hinata...I really missed you! What have you been up to?"

"Waiting for you." She answered quietly.

He ran one of his hands through her feathery-soft hair wistfully. Her pale skin was radiant and her hair had an indigo sheen to it in the sunlight. There was a sharp pain in his chest when he realized that he had begun to forget what she looked and felt like, 'I won't ever let that happen again! Ever!'

He couldn't think of anything to say to her, though, "Er...well...you smell really nice today." Inwardly he cursed himself for his foolish observation.

"Thank you." She smiled, not bothered by his comment, "Are you happy, Naruto-kun?"

"Well now I am...but I have to admit, a lot of the time I'm not." He said quietly, "I just can't help missing you all the time. There are moments when I miss you so much I can't even think straight, Hinata..."
"You're going to be alright. You're strong." The Hyuga girl told him. He brushed away a butterfly that had perched on her head before moving in to kiss her. She was as wonderful as he remembered, gently pressing into him in a blissful embrace. It was then he questioned why he had even bothered leaving the village. What could possibly be more important than the creature here in front of him?

**Lovely dream, isn't it? See how different you feel?** The Kyuubi’s voice interrupted out of nowhere, **Do you know what that feeling is, Naruto?**

The vision disappeared and Naruto reached out futilely after Hinata vanished. He turned to the fox behind him, marching up to the cage indignantly, "Gah! You have some shitty timing, you know that you damn fox? Ugh! Now I remember why I hate you so much!"

**Point the finger at me now, but it's all your own doing, boy. You're the one who's maturing, so don't blame me if I happen to pop into one of your more perverted thoughts.**

Naruto felt his face burn in embarrassment, "I don't need a lecture from you! Just leave me alone!"

**You could never understand what I endure...** The Fox growled lowly, **You barely understand your own feelings. These visions you have are torturing me. It is hardly fair that I now desire that girl as well.**

Naruto was so highly disturbed he was shocked into silence.

**In the beginning I saw no value in such a tiny, female human...but apparently there is so much to be coveted. You would know, wouldn't you?** The Fox laughed at his lack of a reply, **Oh, Naruto, I have gone through all of this before...but I forgot how fun it could be.**

"Forget it!" Naruto hollered furiously, "There's no way you're getting anywhere near her, you hear me? I won't allow it!" He scoffed as an afterthought, "And who are you kidding, Fox? It's not like you know how to love anything."

**What harm is there in sharing that girl?** The Fox taunted him, **She'll never even notice me...**

"I hate you!" He howled, no longer listening, "I would never let something like that happen! Just get away from me!"

Naruto woke up abruptly.

He glanced around the dark of the hotel room. Jiraiya was at the far end, still sound asleep, and Naruto was glad he had not been making a fuss that would have woken him. He rolled from his bed and stumbled into the bathroom, snapping the light on after him.

The blonde boy let the water run in the sink, washing his face with cold water to bring himself back to his senses. He looked into the mirror, unnerved by how his irises were red: evidence of the Kyuubi’s presence.

'What's happening to me?' Naruto thought worriedly, 'I can't avoid that Fox. He can come in contact whenever he wants...and it just messes me up. Am I ever going to be normal again?'

He turned the water off, deciding to calm himself down. The last thing he intended to do was wake Jiraiya up again because of self-induced panic. As far as he could tell, the Toad Sage could not help him anymore with this predicament. The light snapped off again and he returned to bed miserably.
After completing their mission and returning to Konoha, Tenten was invited to the Hyuga compound to train. Lee had only given her a goofy look before telling her they would later meet for lunch. She bade her friend farewell before setting out with Neji.

They sparred casually, worn out from their mission, and Tenten decided to stick to weapons as she normally would. She was not confident with her Jyukken, which was still mediocre to say the least, so she challenged Neji with a Bo staff and had given him a good whack to the head when she caught him not paying attention.

He retaliated with tonfa swiftly, jabbing and blocking her swipes with little effort. They stopped after a short while and Tenten commended him for his improvement, "You've gotten way better, but maybe you should switch to something other than tonfa sometime?"

He did not look to keen about the idea, so she added, "Alright fine. Use the same thing over and over again and be boring. While you're at it, go shower off now, won't you? You'll offend the rest of your clan once you go inside."

"You don't exactly smell like roses yourself, Tenten." He retorted playfully. She laughed at the remark when most other girls would have stormed off infuriated. They parted, and Tenten was not all too shocked that she had not gotten far before Hikune turned up again.

"It's as if you were made to fight each other." Hikune observed.

Tenten blinked, a bit puzzled, "Oh...were you...were you watching us spar, Hikune?"

He smiled at her, "I was just passing by when I spotted you two. It was quite an impressive spectacle. I'm sure most people would give anything to have such chemistry."

"In terms of beating the crap out of each other, yes, I suppose there's chemistry in that respect." Tenten told him irritably, "Unfortunately, that's the only thing we share..."

"Is something the matter?"

"No." Tenten continued on at a brisk walk, hoping to evade the topic. Much to her disappointment he caught up with her in a few strides, sensing that she was perturbed.

"Well, if you don't feel like talking about it I suppose you don't have to." Hikune added harmlessly, "We could always go through those Jyukken forms too."

She shook her head, "No thanks...I'm a bit tired right now."

"I see." Hikune gave her a knowing look, "Why don't you just slow down and relax for now, Tenten? I'd like that." He gestured to the corner of the porch nearby, where he took a seat.

"I can't sit with you, Hikune. I'm...I'm offensive." She supplied the only adjective she could think of.

"I've smelled worse." He chuckled.

She gave up, realizing he could do her no harm, and took a seat next to him on the porch. Hikune then casually returned to the previous subject she had hoped to dodge, "Before I said that you and Neji share a bond, but you did not seem very happy about it."

"See...that's what I thought too," Tenten answered slowly, "But beyond fighting there isn't much there."
"I don't see why." He admitted, confused, "I can see that both of you are close friends," Tenten felt her hands get clammy at the statement, "How could you say that there isn't more to it?"

She swallowed hard, unsure of what to say, "It's...complicated."

Hikune looked at her for a long moment, and then asked, "Oh...more than friends?"

Her chest felt tight. She did not want to deny it, but it was not exactly the truth either. "It's...I don't know." It became difficult for Tenten to speak, "I...guess...it's mostly one-sided."

"Ah. I understand." There was compassion in his voice, much to her surprise, "I can tell that you care about him very much, Tenten."

She sighed heavily, seeing it had not killed her to admit anything. "I do. It can be painful at times too, but...maybe it'll be worth it..." She was not able to say the words with certainty.

"It should be. Neji-sama is often under a lot of stress, and may not be terribly effusive, but he works hard for his precious people." Hikune told her comfortably, "I know that you must be one of them."

Tenten laughed at the thought, "Ha! From your mouth to God's ears...thanks, though, Hikune. I really hate talking about this kind of stuff...but you're pretty easy to talk to."

"Half of my clan comes to me with their problems every day." He explained light-heartedly, "If I was not easy to talk to then I'd be swamped."

She felt that any further discussion of the current subject was unnecessary. Tenten decided to pursue a new activity, after that, "Well...I guess I wouldn't mind going over a few Jyukken forms if you think that'll help me."

Hikune stood up, glad to oblige her.

It came as quite a shock to most of the people in Suna when Dosojin appeared at the village gate. It had been three days as Gaara had asked, and the scorpion lord stopped by to speak to him as promised. The young jounin had also thought ahead to write up a summoning contract to benefit Sand, so he brought a village elder along with him. After signing in blood and a few odd seals, it appeared business was over, and no one had seen the scorpion boss since.

In a few days' time, however, scorpions of alarming size could be seen traversing the village. They routinely helped shinobi with errands and construction work, and were surprisingly friendly despite their intimidating exterior.

"I think they're great." Kankuro told his brother, highly approving of the new development, "They make an awesome addition...and it also helps that they're low maintenance. You don't have to feed them or anything; they just help out."

"That I already know." Gaara agreed smugly. He and his siblings had bought rice cakes on their way out since they had skipped breakfast that morning. They were in a bit of a rush since Baki had summoned them so abruptly, but for good news.

"I want to congratulate you both becoming jounin." Gaara added to his brother and sister, "You are more deserving of your new rank."

"That's sweet of you to say, Gaara." Temari smiled at him, taking a bite of breakfast, "Though I've been wondering, I haven't seen Matsuri all day. Isn't she usually tagging along with you all the
"time?"

His eyes lowered a bit in thought. "She is late." Gaara admitted, finding it strange himself, "I should
go look for her now."

"Good. I'll catch up with guys later. I promised elder Seijo I'd turn in a report that he asked for
yesterday. I'm sure he's not going to like me today..." Temari continued ahead, and Kankuro then
volunteered to go with his younger brother.

They crossed town after parting ways with their sister. Kankuro talked casually, although Gaara
could not help but feel a bit anxious over his student. It was unlike her to not show up on time, but he
supposed that it could be some trivial delay not worth worrying over.

The streets were oddly quiet, even with the typical crowds of people out conducting business. There
was a stillness Gaara could sense and his first instinct was to go to their normal meeting spot to find
his pupil. The playground was empty when he and Kankuro arrived.

"Does something feel weird to you?" Kankuro asked his brother, scratching his cheek. "You
know...like we overlooked something?"

Gaara nodded silently.

"Ah. Gaara-sama..."

A voice called out and the two jounin glanced around before noticing the voice’s owner standing on
the top of an abandoned building. Miosuke looked down at them, smiling, and spoke again, "Good
to see you again, Gaara-sama. Do tell me, are you at all comfortable in your new village now?"

"I am, thank you." He said shortly, not in the least intimidated by the return of the rat he had crushed
during the preliminaries of the previous Chunin Exam.

"I have to say that I really don't believe our last fight was fair, considering that you have that filthy
monster inside of you..." The former Sand nin droned, "It's such an unfair advantage."

"Watch your mouth you lowlife!" Kankuro spat, "We're not teammates anymore, so I won't hold
back if I have to kick your ass!"

Miosuke completely disregarded his old teammate and kept his eyes on Gaara, "I wonder...are you
worried about your little student, Gaara-sama?"

The jinchuriki's eyes widened. He understood then that his feelings had not misled him. Before he
could demand to know where Matsuri had been taken, a group of Sound ninja appeared, standing in
a row behind Miosuke. Matsuri was struggling in the grip of one of the Oto nin, and both brothers	
tensed at the sight.

"I condemn this village to death in the name of Orochimaru-sama!" Miosuke declared, eyes
narrowed, "Starting with this girl!"
A day had dragged by after their struggle on the freighter, and it was not long before they packed up and crossed the bay to the largest island in the archipelago: the heart of the Land of Water.

"We're close to Hidden Mist, so we'll have to lay low." Zabuza warned as they passed through treacherously dense woodland, "The place we're staying at is in a town called Nanakusa. I used to live there a while ago."

It was not a name that Haku was familiar with. He had memorized a local map six times since he had left the Land of Fire, but he did not recollect any place like the one Zabuza had mentioned.

"Are there any shinobi that live there that we may have to deal with?" He asked, since it was his primary concern.

"I doubt it. It's a poor village and too small to attract attention." The nukenin answered, "When we get there we have to get more supplies. Looking anywhere else would be an invitation to the Black Ops."

It was then Haku understood. The village was yet unmarked on current maps, making it easy to overlook. ‘That makes it a wise choice in terms of places to hide.’ Since they were in no hurry they stayed out of the treetops, and picked their course through the uncharted paths of the forest. Haku stared out blankly into the endless foliage.

His positive outlook had taken a nose dive since their last mission. He had not been able to forgive himself for killing the two honorable ninja he had fought against. He began to doubt he ever would, and could only hope to find a way to repent. It helped that he no longer had to train as aggressively or hurl himself into impromptu battles. Zabuza said they would be lax for the next week. Times of rest were too few and far-between for Haku to not enjoy.

The trip was fairly short, and a comfortable warm breeze brushed the fastening winter chill away from the island. It would not be long before the next snowstorm, he felt. They stopped at an ivy-wrapped shrine to rest.

Zabuza seemed totally unfazed by the fact that a lone tiger was patrolling around the place, which was probably, Haku guessed, the only reason the memorial had been abandoned. Eventually the meandering woodland supplied a dirt road, which remained untraveled with the exception of themselves.

They entered the sleepy town by crossing over a splintered footbridge, built over a creek that encircled the village. It was overall a modest looking place with a little-known history. Nanakusa was named for the seven magic herbs said to have grown in the forest surrounding it. It was said that physicians who had lived in the small village long ago were rumored to have been able to create a medicine from the combined herbs that could cure any illness.

"Have you ever seen such a tonic during the time you lived here, Zabuza-san?" Haku asked curiously.

"It's a wives’ tale if you ask me. Doctors around here can barely tell their heads from their asses. They haven't made a miracle cure at any point in time, last I checked." Zabuza killed the innocent myth with his rational explanation, "Thirty years ago, the ninja of this village packed up and left for
the Fire Country, to what's known as Kusagakure, if you've heard. They and their medic-nin took their secrets with them."

Haku raised an eyebrow, "So there was a cure? It's strange that you'd dismiss it then."

"The way I see it, something that existed in the past isn't worth mentioning if it's not doing me any good today." Zabuza grunted, and then stopped outside of a thrift shop, "You stay out here and get our supplies. I'm going to check and see if the hideout's clear of squatters."

Haku nodded obediently and Zabuza made a leap for a nearby roof, disappearing beyond his sight. The dark haired boy sighed, quite relieved to have some time on his own. He could not help but be inquisitive of a medical breakthrough since his first intention had been to become a medic-nin himself. That had fallen through, unfortunately, so he would have to learn what little he could on his own.

With the free time he had been afforded Haku explored their new domain methodically. He started on the outskirts and navigated the fishery docks downtown. Up the hill and over another short bridge brought him back to where he had begun in the urbanized part of the village. All of the shops were small, privately owned businesses. A few houses had been crammed in-between stores on each side of the street, and Haku learned the layout of the town as he wandered, fascinated by the humble and austere municipality.

After a short investigation of the place, Haku found himself browsing around the market for their travel supplies. The bustling and bartering of the busy crowds reminded him of Konoha, yet with unfamiliar faces. He walked down the strip past a number of stands selling every type of household necessity imaginable, noticing that everything was hand-made. It was when he had settled near a vender who had offered him a discount on dumplings (since his smile had been so sweet) that Haku glimpsed another curio stand.

Across the street there was a young woman who had precious celadon figures for sale. What was most remarkable was that she was not only conducting business, but tending to three small children as well. The vender Haku was with took her time preparing food, and he watched with amusement as the children tossed a ball to each other. After it had knocked into one of the fine plates the mother snatched both the plate and the ball to prevent future mishap.

The two girls immediately listened as their mother spread out a blanket behind the stand so they could nap, but their brother refused to rest with them. His mother watched him with a steady, impatient gaze, "You too, mister. Settle down or I'll let you try my job for the rest of the afternoon."

"I could do it easy!" The small boy retorted.

He was promptly guided by his ear to the blanket with his sisters.

Haku muffled a chuckle, and was then served the dumplings that had been prepared for him. He ate nearby the stand, keeping watch over the market, trying to acquaint himself with the sights. 'If I can learn about these people, maybe there is a chance that I can gain some friends out here.' He thought to himself, since Zabuza had said they would be hiding out in the area for a while.

Some time passed and he finished his snack, deciding that it was time to accomplish what he had been sent to do and find supplies. Not a moment after he had turned to leave, he sensed trouble. Haku looked back as the crowd parted for two Mist ninja. They had both stopped at the young mother's stand, much to her misfortune, and the dark haired boy kept a wary eye on them.

"Hey sweetie, we haven't seen you since yesterday! We didn't get a chance to talk much then so we
thought we'd stop by today." One of them greeted amicably.

"I didn't much like what you were talking about then," She reminded them sharply, "If you aren't here to shop then please leave. I need good customers, not people who waste my time."

"Oh! We'll be real good customers for you, babe!" The second Mist nin crowed, "Maybe you should worry about not wasting our time." He was smirking, and the sight of the yellowing, crooked teeth was more than enough to turn her stomach.

"Come on, we'll show you a great time!" The other persisted when his friend failed to capture her interest.

The mother scowled, offended, and then refused to say another word. Before they could edge in nearer, her neighbor, who had returned from a store room, stepped between her and the harassing shinobi. He was a short, fat, balding man, and hardly intimidating, but he spoke forcibly, "Now, now, chaps! Let's leave Tomo-san be. She has a lot of work to get done today."

In an aggressive move, one of the pair of Mist ninja elbowed him in the gut, forcing him to the side, "Shut it! You think you can tell us what to do, Gramps?"

By then Tomo had retreated to the back of the stand, guarding her cowering children. Her neighbor brushed his shirt off and straightened, trying to look formidable against the two ninja who had happened into their village. "Let's not cause any trouble, alright?" The fat man suggested, "Shinobi shouldn't be using their status to bully others."

One of the Mist nin drew out a kunai and raised it to the man's throat. His companion sniggered as all color drained from the fat man's face. "Maybe you're the one who's bullying, old man," He said tauntingly, "We just want to make nice with the young lady here, is all."

"Leave him alone!" Tomo barked warningly, but they paid her no mind.

Haku appeared behind the two unaware Mist ninja. The man threatening Tomo's neighbor immediately dropped his kunai after Haku had harmlessly tapped a pressure point on his hand. His entire arm went numb and responded sluggishly.

"What the hell do you think you're doing, punk?" The ninja snarled, and he and his friend rounded angrily on the dark haired boy.

Haku stood his ground, smiling comfortably, "Well I only wanted to buy one of those nice plates over there, but you and your friend here are holding up business. I just want to have a look around."

"You fucked up my hand, ass-wipe!" He answered furiously.

"It's temporary. You don't need to be waving knives around at these nice people anyway." Haku told him. He did not budge an inch as the two Mist shinobi moved to surround him. Tomo and her portly neighbor could only watch with wide eyes, unable to believe that a young man would stand up to the two ninja who had been terrorizing them.

They drew out fistfuls of shuriken, respectively, and the fangle-toothed nin cried out again, "I don't care what you're up to! We'll teach you why it's not smart to screw with Mist shinobi!"

Haku leapt breezily backwards, the projectiles sailing past his head futilely, and motioned for all the people in the street to scatter. They quickly did so, moving to the far edges of the road. A short estimate told him that the ninja confronting him were barely even Chunin, so there would be little reason to exert himself engaging them. Haku took a more relaxed, defensive stance, watching as they
leapt together to attack. 'It's strange how easily I get into these fights.' Haku mused, 'I hardly even provoke them...'

Their form of taijutsu was sloppy and lacking discipline. If they had ever practiced as exhaustingly or as frequently as he did, Haku assumed, he may have just had a reason to fear them. He blocked them with one arm, kicks and punches alike, and after a short time decided to take the minimum of an offensive. He attacked nerves along their necks when they came too close, that reacted in misfired muscle commands and elimination of balance. The two fumbled around, utterly incapable of landing a hit on the agile boy.

Haku had them following him around in playful circles, wondering how they had ever become ninja in the first place. Onlookers soon relaxed and watched in amusement as the out-of-town stranger made a mockery of two ninja who came from a village they so deeply feared.

"You want to make fools out of us?" One of them howled, throwing a shuriken. His aim was off due to the lack of motor function in his arm, and the star stuck into a display sign just above the head of one of Tomo's children. The girl peeped in alarm, ducking down again immediately.

Haku's eyes narrowed at the carelessness that could have killed an innocent bystander.

A senbon plunged into the offender's eye a moment afterward, and his agonized screaming was silenced after two more throwing needles connected with an artery in his neck. He dropped to the ground, and his partner rushed blindly for Haku. Using the pent-up momentum against him, Haku avoided the thoughtless assault and slammed into his opponent's gut with a closed fist, stunning him. He rounded about with unnecessary speed, landing a ruthless kick to the side of his head, sending him crashing to the ground in a heap on top of his unconscious friend.

Observers scuttled away after the fight's conclusion and a short applause, not wanting to get near the angry ninja who had single-handedly defeated two Chunin from Hidden Mist.

Tomo came forward, smiling gratefully at Haku, "Serves them right! Thank you so much!"

Haku turned around to face her, looking contrite. It was then he felt he had used too much force, and that he should not have over-reacted and made a public demonstration of himself. Hopefully it would blow over in a few days.

"It was really nothing, Miss." He assured her, "Disreputable shinobi like them should be kept off the streets."

He blinked to see a man drag the two away into an unmarked alley, probably to rob them blind while they were still unconscious. Haku made no move to stop him, and looked at Tomo's neighbor as he approached. "That was quite exciting! I haven't seen a ninja in action for some time now and after that fight...what a scene! Wherever did you train?"

Haku watched the fat man, faintly recognizing him, "In the Hidden Leaf village, sir."

The fat man gawked at Haku's forehead protector, "Wow...isn't that something!"

With a jolt of realization, Haku finally recognized who he had been speaking to. For a long while he stood, grinning childishly at the fat man who had rescued him when he had been a child. "From what I can see," Haku spoke at length, "You are starting to lose your hair, Hiroshi-san."

He was confused, "How do you know my-?"

"You don't remember me?" Haku smiled, his eyes alight with memories, "It was not all that long ago
that I left with Gama-sennin."

There was a very long silence. Tomo watched Hiroshi's face expectantly, curious to see if her friend really was acquainted with the good-hearted stranger.

Hiroshi had not looked as Haku remembered him. Instead of the plain yukata he had worn many years ago he was dressed in lavish western clothes. 'It seems he's come into a great deal of wealth...' Haku thought, bubbling over with joy at the sight of his friend doing well. He was visibly heavier as well, but his largeness added to his warm disposition.

Hiroshi stared, his eyes blinking once in disbelief, "...Haku. No...this can't be...little Haku-chan? A...Leaf ninja who..."

Haku grinned at Hiroshi’s self-persuasive rambling. That was all the confirmation the fat man needed, for Haku's smile was all too easy to recollect. "It is you! You're back!"

Hiroshi scooped up the dark haired boy in his thick arms, squeezing him fiercely, "Oh, I never thought God could bless me anymore and yet here you are! A ninja after all!"

Haku laughed after Hiroshi had set him back down, "It is good to see you as well, Hiroshi-san! I did not expect to find you here of all places." He certainly didn't; this was an ideal hiding place for nukenin, although currently it seemed ninja were scarce enough.

"This is my home, Haku-kun! And you are most welcome in it!" He clapped his hand on the slender boy's shoulder, "Well, now, look at you. You've grown like a weed: already taller than me! And how fine-looking too...I always knew you'd be a handsome devil!"

Tomo blushed nearby in agreement.

Haku was modest about his appearance, "I wouldn't say that I'm-"

"Come on, now, meet everyone!" Hiroshi interrupted him, pushing him across the street to where Tomo and her children stood watching, completely bemused. "This young lad here is Haku-kun, from Hidden Leaf!" Hiroshi introduced him to the small family, "Long ago I discovered him in a snowy town, alone and orphaned. I loved him, though; he had a good heart and was smart as a whip!"

Tomo's children gazed up at him with sparkling, awe-struck eyes.

"The legendary Toad Sage brought him and a few other rascals to Leaf to train as shinobi," Hiroshi turned to Haku, grinning, "And now he's come back to tell us all about his adventures!"

Haku felt a bead of sweat roll down his temple, 'He certainly does play up the moment...I really didn't come here expecting to find Hiroshi or share my life up until this point. Well...I suppose there's no harm in it.'

"Hiroshi...you mean...this is the boy from the story?" Tomo asked, understanding, and she then looked at Haku, "Well, then it is a fairytale come to life! I never really believed that Hiroshi truly met Jiraiya-sama...but if you're here then it must be true..."

Hiroshi frowned slightly at her statement. It was true; his stories tended to be a bit radical, but he was still hurt that she had little faith in them. 'At least the children do...' He thought.

"It did happen." Haku admitted, "I trained under Jiraiya-sensei with my best friends: Uzumaki Naruto and Gaara."
Hiroshi beamed at the mentioning of the names, "Oh yes! Little Naru-chan and Gaara-chan...they became your teammates?"

It was strange to hear their names said with childish fondness. Then again, Hiroshi had not seen them since they had been small, and probably could not imagine them any other way. The dark haired boy nodded, "Yes, they did. But...it is a very long story."

"And I want to hear ALL of it!" Hiroshi declared, "Let's head back to my shop now, and there you can fill me in, eh?" He turned to Tomo, "Tomo-san, won't you and the kids join us for some lunch?"

She regarded Haku's face for a moment and could tell that he was hardly in the mood for story-telling anyway. It felt almost as if he was sulking, and Tomo believed it would be best to leave the Leaf ninja and her neighbor alone to catch up. "Maybe another time, Hiroshi. I still have a bit of work to do. We'll eat later, thanks."

"It was nice meeting you." Haku bowed respectfully to the young woman. He felt a small twinge of pride at the sight of her fawning children, circling around the stand and making exclamatory remarks about the fight that had long since ended. He would make a point to pay them a more peaceful visit later.

He followed the fat merchant a short distance up the street, and his thoughts were as far from Zabuza as possible.

They entered a teahouse that was currently closed. No customers were inside the warm bamboo interior, though Haku expected there eventually would be since it was such an attractive and soothing place. The atmosphere helped him relax a bit and Hiroshi asked him to sit down. Haku took a seat on one of the benches while Hiroshi paraded around the place, explaining what had happened to him since they had parted.

Apparently his merchant business had yielded him great success. He had invested all of his earnings in a tea shop and set it up in the center of the small town. His traveling days ended and he settled, leading a happy, comfortable life afterward. Haku was genuinely glad for his friend, and congratulated him, "It really is wonderful that you've done so well, Hiroshi-san. How long have you been here, did you say?"

Hiroshi walked over to the table, setting a steaming teapot down on it, "Well, I'll have lived here for over five years now, next month. It'll be the anniversary of when my wife died then."

The Leaf nin looked at him, startled, "Your wife? I'm...I'm sorry."

Hiroshi waved it off, "No worries, Haku-kun. She'd been sick for a long while, and it broke my heart to watch her suffer when there was nothing I could do about it. That's really why we ended up here, you see. I brought her here hoping to find a cure like the stories said...but we had no such luck."

"They're all in Hidden Grass now...if you had only..." Haku closed his eyes, upset at recalling what Zabuza had told him, "It isn't fair...if you had known then she might have had a chance."

"Now don't you go worrying yourself about something that's long done." His friend told him, "So we ended up in the wrong place at the worst time. That's life, and not you nor me nor anybody is able to be perfect all of the time. I'm only sorry that you didn't get the chance to meet her, Haku. Kinyo would have loved you."

Haku found that he had nothing to say. He had never thought that Hiroshi may have had a family. He had only ever seen him as the kindhearted man who had saved his life as a child. Now, after
getting a glimpse of his true standing in life, Haku felt almost as if he knew nothing about Hiroshi at all. At the same time, he could say that Hiroshi hardly knew him either. Could there really be friendship between people who scarcely knew each other?

Hiroshi left again, sliding a door open near the back of the shop to get to the store room. Haku considered staying there just long enough to tell Hiroshi his story before going to leave. He was certain Zabuza would be put into another one of his bad moods if he failed to return soon anyway. 'That's a problem too.' He thought to himself, 'I shouldn't impose upon Hiroshi like this. Zabuza and I won't be conducive to the welfare of this village at all.'

When the shop owner returned he had a plate of sweet buns with him and he set them out on the table as well. Haku drank his tea and thanked him, though he already knew he was not going to be eating anything. He could not find the heart to excuse himself and go do what Zabuza had requested of him. Some things needed to be said first.

"So? Tell me what your life is like in Leaf." Hiroshi prompted amiably, pouring himself some tea.

"Where to begin? Well, I may have to condense it into a more succinct version, if you'll forgive me." Haku told him, then added, "After Naruto, Gaara, and I reached Konoha we were interviewed by the Hokage before we became citizens. Jiraiya-sensei left shortly after that, so we lived together and got by as best we could."

"The transition couldn't have been easy, though..." Hiroshi said quietly.

"It wasn't. It took us some time to adapt, but once we were settled and acquainted with the village, Hokage-sama enrolled us in the Ninja Academy." Haku recalled fondly, "We made excellent friends there."

"Marvelous!" Hiroshi had heard exactly what he had wanted to hear, "And I'm sure you three trained very hard!"

"It was quite a struggle. Being a shinobi is not easy by any means..." Haku agreed, "After several years of learning we graduated as genin. It was then Jiraiya-sensei returned to give us more intensive training."

Hiroshi nodded, listening intently while he sipped his tea.

"We worked hard and took many missions. Our friends and our village had become the focal point of all our efforts," His voice then lowered, "But we also endured...many difficult times...there is no set path to power. We had to watch many of our allies get hurt and there were times we were unsure of our survival. In the end, I think, we're all moving towards the future together; that's what makes a ninja truly strong."

A pressing silence followed Haku's summation, and he glanced across the table to see Hiroshi rubbing at his eyes with the back of his hand. He was astonished by how deeply touched the man had been, since he had given him a very skeletal description of what it was like in Konoha. 'And I also omitted several obstacles and perilous situations.' His mind added as an afterthought.

"That is...truly amazing, Haku-kun, and I'm..." He cleared his throat, trying to get a hold of himself, "I'm very proud of you and glad that you've come back to share this with me."

Haku lowered his eyes, deciding to be truthful, "In all honesty, Hiroshi, I am probably not the person who you think I am. I will apologize now before I say anymore, because you may not be as proud about how I lead my life currently."
"What on earth are you talking about?" Hiroshi chuckled, helping himself to a bun, "You're out here on a mission, aren't you? I really don't think there's a need for you to be apologizing!"

"Yes...a mission of sorts, but not one that was assigned to me. I made this choice on my own." The dark haired boy said. The confused look on Hiroshi's face indicated a lack of understanding, so he added, "There are two very important things that you need to understand about why I am here, Hiroshi-san."

"What's that?"

"The first is that I am descended of a ninja clan of the Water Country." Haku announced, "This means a number of things. All you have to understand is that anyone with the same ability as me could potentially be a relative or family member in some way." He chuckled to himself, "Of course that would be the direst concern of an orphan, wouldn't it?"

Hiroshi smiled gently, "That makes two of us."

Haku briefly recalled how Hiroshi was also an orphan, but he continued, "The second factor is circumstantial. My teammates and I have disbanded for two years for training purposes. I came back here to search for my clan, although, I have received no approval for this and am potentially risking becoming a criminal against my village..." He sighed, "But then I suppose...I've already done enough to be punished for."

Hiroshi stood up from the table, aghast, "Punished? Haku what are you rambling about? Have you...have you done something?" His eyes narrowed a bit, "Are you...really with Leaf?"

"My heart is forever tied to it." Haku promised, "Yet in order to search for my clan I've enlisted the help of a nukenin."

"You what?" Hiroshi howled, "How is a character like that supposed to help you search for people like you?"

"He knows of them quite thoroughly, much to my shock." The Leaf nin answered, "His name is Momochi Zabuza, and there's no doubt in my mind that you've heard of him."

"Oh I've heard of him, alright," Hiroshi sighed heavily, "Stars...you've gone a bit off the deep end, Haku-kun. What kind of arrangement could you have made with a demon like him? He's no good, and you'll end up in trouble in no time!"

"Hear me out." Haku asked softly, "I'm being trained and challenged more than I've ever been in my life. I'm stronger now, I can defend myself, and I know that if the deal goes sour I have some assets of my own that he'd be loath to give up." His eyes trained themselves distantly on the far wall of the shop, "It's just that...I have a feeling that I will find something. It may not be particularly what I'm looking for, but I'm here, am I not? Not acting on this opportunity could be a mistake."

Hiroshi stared at him for several moments before turning back to look at him, "Well...I hope you're right, Haku-kun..." He took a deep breath, "Is...he here with you?"

"Yes, we'll be living here for a while until further notice." Haku announced.

The look of concern on Hiroshi's face made him smile, "The darker half of my life isn't what you were expecting was it?" Hiroshi shook his head and Haku laughed, "Don't worry so much. It's been about two months and things are going well. He's not as unbearable as you might think."

"Fwo! There's no way you can convince me of that!" Hiroshi assured him.
"No really...his brutal honesty can be quite comical. His foul language is easy to ignore and the lack of integrity is not completely his fault..." Haku explained, his voice lowering, "I think that it's likely his past was much worse than mine..."

"Even so, don't get too sympathetic for a person who is accustomed to leaving others high and dry." Hiroshi warned him, taking a seat again and pouring more tea, "Anyhow...it will be good to have you here again, Haku-kun. Perhaps later you can meet Tomo-san's children? I'm sure they'll like that."

"I'd like that too." Haku agreed, standing, "But for now I must depart. Introductions can wait 'til tomorrow, but Zabuza cannot." He bowed to Hiroshi gratefully, "I'll see you on the morrow, Hiroshi-san."

The fat man smiled, "See you in the morning then, Haku-kun, and don't let that brute order you around!"

Haku exited the teahouse, feeling strangely unburdened. The sun was beginning to creep nearer to the horizon, and he realized it would be a bit more challenging to collect their supplies so late in the afternoon. He followed the street back towards the shops, wondering how he would balance the accompaniment of a nukenin and a tea maker.

Neji was not pleased to be pried away from training with his team. He gave a very cold look to the new genin who had been sent to inform him that sent the poor boy away at a brisk walk. Once the message had been delivered he had no choice but to report to the Hokage's tower. He left Lee and Tenten at the Hyuga compound with a short word before setting out.

He knocked once before entering the office. His eyes quickly focused on the Hokage who sat with her elbows on her desk, hands laced patiently beneath her chin. Neji then looked to the two other occupants in the room and immediately assumed there had been a mistake.

"Ah, Neji." Tsunade forced a smile, "Good of you to make it. I have a mission here and I would like you to be the leader of the team I've assembled."

He was not so quick to accept. Ino and Chouji gave him uncertain looks from where they stood near the Hokage's desk. He made a small noise in his throat, not wanting to say anything that would instantly offend the other two Leaf genin in the room. Tsunade could tell he was debating the matter in his head so she added, "Er...you see, Nara Shikamaru is absent at the moment. That is why I chose you."

"Why would I be the one to replace Shikamaru, Hokage-sama?" He asked, though he already had a fair idea of why. He didn't like it, though. Ino caught the sting in his tone of voice and immediately folded her arms, having guessed earlier this would be a difficult match-up.

"You are the only available ninja with the leadership skills required for this mission." Tsunade admitted and then asked, "So I assume that's a yes?"

He nodded, quite annoyed, but knew he could not refuse when he had no dire previous engagement. Neji figured that because Shikamaru was a chunin he had plenty of new tasks that would tear him away from his otherwise lazy lifestyle. This left his teammates one-short, and he could count on Tsunade to pity their circumstances and offer them missions with substitutes. He only wished she had left him out of her sympathy plan.

"What are the details of this mission, Hokage-sama?" Neji asked at length, resigning himself to
"This is a simple retrieval mission." Tsunade informed him what she had already told Ino and Chouji, "You will go meet with an agent from Leaf who is now stationed in Tanzaku Quarter and bring his report home. Genzo Takeshi has been observing a curious faction that has taken root there, and this information is valuable, so you must bring the report back quickly."

Neji bowed formally, his voice low, "I will see it done."

Chouji and Ino, who had been silent the entire time, animatedly assured Tsunade that they would succeed after Neji had turned his back. They had mainly been wondering how things would work out with the Hyuga as the third member of their team, and were surprised that he had accepted. They also bowed to the Hokage before leaving and followed after Neji.

The mission was intended to be brief, a few hours at the most, but when they had left the village and set out on the path to Tanzaku Quarter the silence was unbearable. To dispel the awkwardness Ino chattered about numerous subjects, careful to be friendly rather than annoying. She had a new keenness to how others perceived her, and knew that the Hyuga was stiff and not talkative by nature. At the least Chouji's responses helped create a conversation. Neji, all the while, had a hard time relating to anything Ino brought up.

At last Neji found something to say, "What detained Shikamaru?"

Ino looked perturbed by the question. Instead of ignoring the inquiry she answered Neji understandingly, "I'd figured you were going to ask that. He didn't tell us where he was going or what he was up to yesterday before he left...but Chouji and I still know what's going on."

Chouji took over for her, "Now that Shikamaru's a chunin his family wants him to get serious about being a shinobi. He and a few of his relatives went to the Nara Research Center where he can observe their secret medical technologies and jutsu of his clan."

Ino explained that they were more troubled that Shikamaru failed to say anything to them about it, even though they eventually uncovered the truth, "It just makes Chouji and I feel like he doesn't trust us, you know? It's outside the parameters of laziness and just plain insulting."

Neji did understand, much to his wonderment.

"You know what Neji? I think you're lucky." Ino decided with a smile, "You weren't promoted to Chunin rank like Shikamaru was, but that's kind of a gift. You can still be open with your teammates and hang around with them, but Shikamaru can only see us sparingly. Maybe somehow Hokage-sama knew that it would be better for you to stay with your team, but took Shikamaru away from us out of necessity of the time."

Chouji gave her a questioning look, "Wow, Ino. That sounded almost rehearsed."

"For once it wasn't." She marveled at her own insight, "Whoa! That was all made up on the spot...I ought to write it down."

She and Chouji shared a laugh together, and Neji was distantly reminded of Lee and Tenten. They had a similar dynamic of friendship, and Neji, though it was difficult for him to participate, could still acknowledge such a covetous relationship. His mood soured even more at the notion of how he was indeed not of equal rank to Shikamaru. His blood boiled. If anything, he figured, he was above Shikamaru in skill and strategy, so why was he still a genin?

His silence endured for the remainder of their journey, although Chouji and Ino were perfectly
comfortable with a conversation between themselves. They had made good time and reached Tanzaku Quarter by late morning.

Ino and Chouji awkwardly followed Neji's lead, sensing what Ino had brought up earlier had peeved him. At the least he was kind enough to keep his frustrations inward. Still, they were unsure of how to approach him. 'With Shikamaru you can say anything and get the same response: tiresome. Neji, though...he's not as predictable.' Chouji thought to himself, 'I really thought he'd be less uptight by now after all this time.'

"That's the rendezvous point there." Ino and Chouji jumped in surprise when Neji spoke up. They looked across town to where a water tower was situated in the distance. To avoid the crowded streets they took to the rooftops, bounding from ledges and fire escapes, and vectored off of a telephone wire to get to the top of the water tower.

"Takeshi?" Ino called, glancing around, "Hm. Where is that guy?"

He was nowhere in sight and she and her teammate halted when Neji held out his arm, gesturing for them to stop.

They looked to the far edge of the containment unit, and there, laid crumpled on the platform, was their informant. The genin rushed to him and Neji was the first to kneel down and examine the man. Ino watched the Hyuga's expression soften after he had checked for a pulse.

"He's dead." Neji said quietly.

Ino had not expected such clear remorse. Perhaps he had changed?

"What happens now?" Chouji asked lowly, "This was definitely not supposed to happen..."

"The situation has complicated itself." Neji announced, standing up again, "There is no report here with him. If we intend to retrieve it, we must first find this man's murderer."

One of Gaara's shadow clones plowed into the Oto nin holding Matsuri from behind. The ambush knocked him off balance and Matsuri snapped her head back, catching the Sound ninja in the face. Stunned, he dropped her, and she rolled aside recklessly on the building's ledge. The clone was promptly destroyed by a hail of shuriken, unfortunately, and by the time the kunoichi was on her feet again she was surrounded by the rest of the enemy ninja.

Gaara had already entered the fray by then.

Sand swarmed on the rooftop, dragging Sound ninja away from Matsuri. Miosuke retreated back to avoid the red haired nin, and Kankuro cut him off before he could reach the top of the next building. His face paint accentuated his furious expression, "Figures you'd go straight to Sound! It's disgusting that I once considered a traitor like you my teammate!"

Miosuke stood very still, watching the jounin with fearful eyes, "Do you...want to kill me, Kankuro?"

Karasu was already looming a short distance away, and the faintest pluck of a chakra string would allow the puppet to shred the coward to pieces.

Kankuro's voice held no sympathy, "Kill you? Feh! I'll do worse than that!"

Miosuke drew out a tuning fork from his jacket pocket, looking calm, "Do worse...if you can, that
A small tap to the instrument sent a chilling hum through the air. Upon hearing the noise Kankuro felt his muscles stiffen and he became utterly incapable of moving. His eyes narrowed a margin, ‘Great. So he's got some new tricks.’

"I can still fight, you know." Miosuke reminded him, "Funny how you've advanced so quickly, eh old friend? Look at me. I need to take it easy when it comes to battles...but I think I prefer it this way."

He drew out a short sword that was kept at his side, beginning his approach, and Kankuro began to struggle at the sight of it. His limbs were screaming in protest, chakra forced to every corner of his body, but there was no telling how long the paralysis was due to last. 'And this is completely stupid! I just made jounin and I'm going to let this guy kill me that easy?' A bead of sweat trailed down his temple, 'Looks like Gaara's still tangled with the rest of the party on the next roof over. Wonder how I'll get out of this one?'

A thin cord sang past Miosuke's cheek and whipped suddenly; the weapon’s tooth left a trail of blood on his face. He rounded about, observing how Matsuri had drawn out her jouhyou and was wielding it with a defiant look, "I won't let you hurt Kankuro-sama!"

Kankuro felt a smile tug at his unmoving lips, 'Aw...what a sweet kid.'

Miosuke regarded her, highly amused, "So this is Gaara's apprentice? The only person brave enough to learn from the fearsome Ichibi no Shukaku?"

Comprehension did not cross her face at all, though perhaps it was for the better. Unaffected by the traitor's words Matsuri lashed out with her weapon again, snapping the tooth of the jouhyou violently. It skimmed his shoulder harmlessly as he stepped to the side, and rapped his knuckle against the tuning fork again. The sound waves carried inexorably to the kunoichi's ears, and she immediately froze in place. He clucked his tongue in disapproval as he walked towards her.

Kankuro felt his stomach drop. The situation was now doubly perilous. From the look of it he could just barely see his younger brother thrashing around with fierce shots of sand in the midst of charging Sound ninja, 'Is he stuck in a genjutsu? Well this certainly is an off day. We all need help...'

Gaara retreated behind his sand shield to get his bearings, and after dispelling the genjutsu, hammer-fisted an Oto nin in the back who had gotten too close.

'Now that's more like it!' Kankuro thought sunnily, still trying to get in contact with his unresponsive muscles.

"Do you call him Gaara-sensei, hm?" Miosuke purred questioningly, "How funny...you just don't understand. Your sensei is a monster that has terrorized this village for countless years; crushing homes and devouring souls...but not to worry," He grinned, "I will tear you up before he can!"

Matsuri's eyes fluttered shut in fear as the short sword came arcing forward, but a powerful gust erupted from behind her, sending both her and the attacking traitor flying. The wind subsided, and Temari ran past her, calling over her shoulder, "Sorry, Matsuri! I'll get him this time!"

Another whirlwind followed and Miosuke was sent hurtling off the side of the building. Temari charged fearlessly after him with a bloodthirsty cry. She, much like Kankuro, had a score to settle.

Matsuri felt the rigor of her body fade a bit after Miosuke had been swept away. Her eyes raised up, where she was glad to see Kankuro already on his feet. He bent down next to her, trying to help her
up, "Try moving your feet; that worked for me. It'll get your blood going again." She did as instructed and winced at the pins-and-needles that followed. Thankfully, her mobility returned. Matsuri stood, collecting her discarded jouhyou.

She followed the jounin as he tailed back to Gaara, where about a dozen enemy ninja were still overwhelming her teacher. Kankuro corralled four of the Oto nin off with a blow from Karasu, and Matsuri joined in, courageously attacking two other Sound ninja. They were quick to react to her, countering with a storm of kunai and shuriken, but her jouhyou's defense was too swift for the projectiles to come near.

Gaara's eyes locked onto her, knowing that she was not yet a match for the enemies they were facing. He wheeled about, redirecting his sand, and crushed three opponents he had previously ensnared. Three more followed after that, sending a drizzle of blood out over the roof tiles before he caught up to his student. He made hand seals and used a savage fire jutsu to eliminate the two ninja who had cornered Matsuri.

They stumbled pathetically, trying to pat out the flames, and the kunoichi smiled at him appreciatively, "Thank you, sensei!"

Both pupil and teacher moved ahead to rejoin Kankuro.

Below on the ground, Temari was assailing Miosuke with vicious gales generated by her fan. After backing him against a wall, she took a moment to consider the best way to finish him, 'Will Gaara want his head severed from the neck up or just above the chin? Tough choice.'

She leapt back startled when the traitor had summoned his giant boomerang and cast it at her without warning, 'He can still use Tsubakura? I thought his arms were done!'

Temari regained her wits, attacking again, "Daikamaitachi no jutsu!"

Miosuke quickly countered with one of his own wind jutsu, and the resulting blast whipped up a large dust cloud. By the time it had settled the traitor was nowhere in sight. Both of her brothers along with Matsuri descended from the roof to regroup with her.

Gaara looked to his student worriedly, "Did they hurt you at all, Mouse?"

Presently she was too shaken up to speak, so Matsuri answered him with a feeble nod. Kankuro placed his hand on the girl's shoulder, glancing over to his brother, "I'll look after her, Gaara. You and Temari go find that son of a bitch!"

Gaara gave a lingering glance to his student before nodding in agreement. He and his sister left promptly, following Miosuke's trail. Temari took off on her fan, scanning the area from a higher perspective, and after catching sight of the traitor, she directed Gaara to him. They cut Miosuke off at an intersection, but he was not alone. Two straggling Sound ninja had caught up to him, awaiting orders. The people on the street casually went indoors, not caught off guard by the impromptu battle.

The odds had shifted again once Baki descended onto the scene with three young chunin close behind him. They were quick to respond to the sounds of a nearby fight.

Baki stared at Miosuke for a long moment, furious, "You...so it's true then." He could no longer consider the boy his student if he proudly sold his allegiance to Orochimaru.

The pair of Oto ninja were already injured and were not keen on fighting any longer. One of them openly berated Miosuke, "I can't believe you blew our cover so soon! You just had to insist, didn't you? I knew Sasuke-sama should have come with us. He would've finished this properly."
"If you value your lives you will tell me where Uchiha Sasuke is." Gaara warned darkly.

The mere thought of finding the Uchiha was tantalizing, and with an opportunity as fortuitous as this Gaara could not pass it up. The Sound ninja were happy to surrender, being that they were already beaten bloody. They kneeled down submissively to the Sand ninja closing in.

Miosuke was averse to their display. He immediately drew his short sword and without a moment's hesitation he struck both of his henchman at the napes of their necks, killing them. The move stunned all watching, and Gaara wondered if Miosuke had done it simply to deny him the information.

The traitor did not seem afraid at all. He grinned at them, "Yes, yes...you've all won the day, haven't you, noble ninja of the Sand! But even with this victory, what do you plan to do about all of those explosive notes covering the gate of this village?"

Temari's breath hitched. There was a possibility he was lying, but knowing Miosuke, it was likely he had taken precautions beforehand. "You couldn't possibly be evil enough to betray your birth village that way..." She told him, her eyes steady, "What would make you do this?"

"Everything." He smiled. A hand sign followed and the detonation of the tags was audible from the far side of the village.

A shock rippled through the ground and Gaara estimated that there would only be a few seconds before the wall caved in on itself. The damage would be unimaginable. It would take weeks to clear a new gateway, and by then, the entire city will have starved. He had disappeared with immense speed. After his reckless stunt, Baki and Kankuro were quick to wrestle Miosuke to the ground and subdue him, counting on Gaara to take up the slack.

The young jounin arrived at the gate swiftly, just in time to have debris topple down on top of him. Gaara’s sand slammed upward with equal force, slowing its descent. More sand glided in, creeping up the two massive rock walls that were defaced and crumbling. It was an exertion of chakra similar to how he had freed Dosojin, and Gaara briefly wondered if calling his scorpion allies would do him any good. 'Not at all. They'd be crushed instantly and I am sure they would not appreciate that...' He could hear the cruel muttering of Shukaku in his head as he drew on its chakra. Gaara had gained leverage, controlling the falling slabs of rock, up until the beast gave a guttural roar that drove him to complete distraction. In his panic, he flailed. Sand pitched the broken pieces of the gate in several directions and the demon laughed heartily at his distress.

Gaara got a grip on himself, even if it was only for a moment, and used the last of his strength to hurl the debris forward and away from the gate and out onto the dunes. The last of his sand snaked up the walls, stabilizing the tottering barrier. When he felt sure enough that it would not collapse in again, he sighed deeply, glad to no longer be in need of Shukaku’s power. He dusted his hands off on his pants and turned around, scowling at the four Sound ninja waiting for him at the mouth of the village.

They rushed for him all at once and he let his sand shield deflect the incoming attacks. Gaara folded his arms, thoroughly exhausted, 'I have had it. They could not pay me enough to do this on a regular basis.'

Sand from beneath the Oto nin's feet pulsed upward, swarming around them. One was quick enough to leap away, but the rest of his team was immediately swallowed by the dust cloud and quickly torn apart. He stumbled backwards, horrified, and froze in place after Temari had appeared behind him.

"I'm just going to automatically assume you give up?" She asked him, visibly bored, and the Sound
ninja nodded in defeat. She strolled past him, walking up to her brother to make sure he was unharmed.

The rest of the Sand faction arrived shortly after and Baki was thoroughly impressed by how, essentially, Gaara had neutralized Sound's ambush all on his own, *'He's unlike any other shinobi in this village...no one can compare.'*

Gaara waved off his sister's concerns and followed her back to where Kankuro was waiting with Matsuri. He inspected his student clinically, observing a few cuts and scrapes, but she was otherwise uninjured.

"Those Sound ninja..." Matsuri whispered, barely within Gaara's earshot, "I hate them. The things they were saying about you...Gaara-sensei...they were horrible. You aren't a monster."

Gaara watched her sadly, having hoped that he would never have to explain it to her. "Matsuri, some of those things you were told were very true." He told her quietly. "We will talk." He walked ahead and his pupil followed silently.

Temari looked to Kankuro expectantly after Gaara had left, "So? Did you kill him?"

"Not yet." Kankuro answered, smirking, "Miosuke's interrogation is first, and then we can give him an extremely unfair trial."

---

Naruto's journey with the Toad Sage was becoming increasingly strained. The blonde boy was quieter in the days that followed his troubling dreams. He over-worked himself constantly when it came to mastering the Body Flicker, and Jiraiya often had to step in to halt his self-destructive behavior. When asked what was wrong Naruto assured his mentor that he was perfectly fine. Jiraiya could only assume it was the truth, because his knowledge of seals was also advancing rapidly. Naruto’s learning had not much been affected by stress.

Still, the boy's attitude change was bothering him. They had doubled back towards the shinobi countries again, this time taking a northward approach. There were few towns along the mountain pass they were following, and Jiraiya was unsure of how long Naruto would last without eating ramen. The nearest village could not come soon enough.

Light snowfall had coated the trail from the night before, and the Sage made awkward small talk after Naruto had been silent for over twenty minutes straight. "So how about this snow, eh kid? Isn't it just heinous?"

"It reminds me of Haku-kun..."

"Er, I take that back. It's really nice!" Jiraiya amended, panicked.

"It's alright, Ero-sensei. It stinks that it's slippery and cold, but..." Naruto sighed deeply, "I haven't heard a word from him or Gaara-kun in so long..."

"Aw, Naruto, come on! They're hundreds upon hundreds of miles away and you expect adequate communications?" Jiraiya laughed lightly, "You'll hear from them, you'll see. And I bet you they're doing great!"

A small smile appeared on the boy's face. The Sage grinned to himself, *'A tiny victory in the scheme of things, but a victory nonetheless!'*

After the opening conversation had ended successfully, Jiraiya continued on to more important
matters. "Naruto, I've noticed that you've been avoiding your use of the Kyuubi's chakra lately. I hope you realize that you simply can't afford to do that." He informed him gently, "Your training depends on it. We only have a limited amount of time for you to get these techniques down."

"I know." The jinchuriki's eyes were dim.

"Is there something you want to talk about?"

"It's that fucking Fox!" Naruto bellowed, stopping in his tracks, "Get it? It's him! It's driving me to the edge, Ero-sensei, and I just can't deal with it! I can't and I tried!"

Jiraiya's eyebrows had taken off to his hairline. He stared at the boy, thinking, and then answered after a moment. "Okay...can you describe the, er, symptoms?"

"He talks to me all the time just because he knows I hate it. He makes me...see things." Naruto felt his face heat up in humiliation, "Ero-sensei...it's like...the Fox is becoming me. I just can't stop it and I definitely can't relax about it..."

"I figured as much, and I promise you this: I'm working on it." The Sage smiled understandingly, "Don't be afraid, you hear me? There's nothing wrong with you and this will pass. We're actually on our way to a place where we can address this problem."

Naruto kept walking, sighing to himself, "Well...I appreciate that, Ero-sensei. I won't hold my breath, though."

Jiraiya patted the boy on the shoulder, "Neither would I, kid. Still, I have a feeling this is really going to help you. Just hang in there, alright?"

"...alright."

Sato was the only spectator when Tama met Iruka at the Academy for her evaluation. He had been sulking only a little, trying to hide from her how disturbed he was by Kiba's infatuation with her. He truly did not know how to cope with such distress, and Sato would sooner summon Kutaishi again than tell Tama how troubled he was. She did not need extra concerns at a time that could determine her status as a shinobi.

He watched the first parts of the exam as if he were looking in a mirror. It was essentially the same graduation test that had been administered to his class. Her supplementary jutsu were all spot on, and her accuracy with weaponry was fair enough, but what really shone was her taijutsu performance. Not only had she exceeded expectations, but she had knocked Iruka clean across the schoolyard with just one kick. He stood up, brushing himself off while he laughed uncontrollably.

Iruka retrieved a clipboard from a nearby bench, glancing over her scoring chart, "Well...it goes without saying that you're more fit to pass than a number of other students I've tested in the past...the only question now is..." He held up two forehead protectors, one with red fabric and one with black, "Which color do you prefer?"

Tama shrieked in surprise and hugged the Chunin gratefully about the shoulders. A moment later she reasoned that red was the best choice, "Lee-kun has a red one as well, doesn't he? I think I'll go with that!" She accepted the hitai-ate with a wide smile and then turned to face Sato.

The Hatake looked at her beaming, glorious face, and for a moment was insatiably compelled to hug her and congratulate her with wild screams of joy. For reasons he could not fathom, he merely stood there, staring at her thoughtlessly while she thanked Iruka over and over for the positive result. He
assured her it was all her doing.

The Chunin looked to Sato briefly, giving a disapproving head motion that read: Say something! and the silver haired boy finally snapped out of his catatonic state. He gave the girl a dashing smile, hoping it was inspiring enough for the new genin, "Congrats, Tama! I knew you'd make it. So tell me, what does a bright, fresh-off-the-roster kunoichi like yourself plan to do now?"

"Well," She tapped her chin thoughtfully, "I ought to go home and make dinner..."

"Brilliant!"

She giggled. Iruka interrupted the mindless banter by clearing his throat and then addressed Tama, "Listen, Tama-chan, I was informed that if you passed, as you handily have, that Tsunade wants you to report to her office immediately."

Tama wore an uncertain expression, "Am I in trouble?"

"Hm? No! Of course not!" Iruka laughed at the thought, "She just wants to get to know you and fill out your registration. She'll also select a team for you since there are plenty of open positions. I hear Nitobe Sawako is still waiting for two students."

She smiled, bowing professionally, "Thank you, then. I'll take my leave now." Tama gave one last lingering look to her fiancé before setting out for the Hokage's tower.

Sato watched Iruka in his peripheral vision, grinning coyly, "So, Iruka-sensei...was I right or was I right?"

The Chunin sighed, glancing back to him, "Alright...I admit, you were the first to see potential in her and that really is a blessing," He paused thoughtfully, "Though now I suggest you focus on your own training again. You wouldn't want to fall behind, would you?"

"I hear you on that one..." Sato agreed, placing his hands in his jacket pockets. He walked away, but then called back, "Thanks for helping us out, sensei!"

Neji and his team had scoured the town for any leads on Takeshi's murder. Few people had even known a Leaf shinobi had been in the area, let alone killed. Two informants, however, had confirmed that a group of foreign ninja had settled in the area a few weeks earlier.

"You see them a lot in the gambling houses." A young man had told them, "They're creeps. They think they're big-shots because they have a lot of money, but they can only accomplish things by intimidation if you ask me."

Chouji asked him what symbol the shinobi bore and the man was unsure, "It looked like a moon, to me. Don't quote me on that, though."

After thanking the man for his help they moved on. Ino had already suspected what was supported by fact, "I bet those nukenin are the ones that the report was detailing. It would make sense that they'd kill the guy who's been spying on them."

"Those Moon ninja left his body behind." Neji pointed out.

Chouji frowned, "What does that mean?"

"It means they left him to make a purposeful statement to other ninja who would be looking for
him...to not interfere." Neji explained, "It was a foolish tactic. They don't expect Leaf to retaliate with seriousness."

"Yeah! How could they think we'd back off anyway?" Ino agreed, "We won't let them get away with this, will we Neji?"

The Hyuga thought for a moment and then suggested, "We should find the rogues' hideout. That way we can retrieve evidence that may be brought before the Hokage."

Chouji was a bit taken aback. It was unusual to hang back and wait for further orders from Tsunade, when they usually just grabbed the bull by the horns anyway. "Er...Neji? Why don't we go with the regular strategy and just kick their butts? Nine times out of ten that solves the problem."

"We still don't know what we're up against." Neji replied shortly, "We were not sent here with approval for entering combat."

"There’s no need to be so by-the-book. Ninja are supposed to improvise." Ino observed thoughtfully, "We really should counter, if you ask me. I mean, we have the element of surprise, and, like, we have you!" Neji gave her a sour look, so she added, "You're a combat specialist. The circumstances couldn't be better."

"I disagree."

His bluntness stung. Ino fell quiet, very frustrated, but understood that his stubbornness was not because he did not believe the conditions were ideal for an ambush, but that he lacked faith.

"Oh come on! You think I don't get it?" The blonde girl snapped, "You're only hesitating because we're not your usual team! You don't trust that Chouji and I can be as strong as your other teammates, do you?"

Neji said nothing. He was extremely annoyed because Ino, had in fact, been totally correct in her reasoning.

He did not believe anyone could ever compare to Lee or Tenten, as far as teammates went. He certainly had his doubts that the two people he was with now would meet his expectations. As team leader, Neji felt that he could not be rude to the loudmouth.

"We will engage," Neji relented, "Only once we have a strategy."

"Sounds good." Chouji said, glad that the Hyuga had changed his mind. Ino raised her chin a bit higher, also pleased that he was willing to do things their way.

It was decided that they would make plans over lunch, and Chouji selected a restaurant that served Korean barbeque that happened to be on their way. Neji was no fan of the stuff, and ate reluctantly while silently listening to his teammates devise a way to get the better of the Moon ninja.

"Here's one for you." Ino announced, pointing her chopsticks at Chouji, "We can wait outside one of those gambling houses, right? When one of them isn't paying attention I'll just steal his body and sneak into their hideout unnoticed. Once I take out the other guards, you two can burst in and help me shut the place down!"

Chouji nodded, seeing the goal, but asked, "What if one of the guards holds you off?"

Ino made a face, "Well...I guess Captain-X-ray-Vision here can keep watch before things get out of hand."
Neji looked at her briefly, trying to make his glower less threatening. It worked to a degree. Ino wasn't nearly as unnerved by his bad mood as she ought to have been.

Chouji spoke up again, "I suggest we don't put you through so much risk, Ino. I could lure some of them away and bust them up. You two could sneak in during the diversion."

"What about you, Chouji?" Ino asked worriedly.

He shrugged, picking the last morsels from a skewer of chicken, "I dunno. I'll wing it."

"You won't be winging it." Neji said lowly, disagreeing with the reckless idea.

Ino rounded on Neji, her expression cross, "Right. Sure you'll interject when you have to tell us what we can and can't do, but when are you going to come up with something, huh? You're the team leader, you know, so if anyone should be helping it's you!"

"Very well then." Neji replied, delving into a strategy, "Risking one person in direct confrontation is foolish. Any sort of fighting should be done with at least two people at any given time, and that requires that we stay together. Rather than bursting in without any expectations, we will keep watch over the areas they operate in, seeing where it is they gather. If we intend to ambush them at all, it will only be when their leader is present."

It was thought out logically and the plan sounded the most likely to work.

"It's good." Ino said shortly and Chouji also agreed with it.

A short while later they finished lunch and set out. They had staked out a rooftop nearby a casino that would be advantageous to their spying. Not much had happened. People entered with some money and often left with nothing. It only looked to be regular dealings of high-risk games, but when they spotted two Moon nukenin approaching the place an anxious hush fell upon the Leaf ninja.

After the pair of rogues entered the building, Neji followed their movements with his Byakugan. The Moon ninja went to the back of the building, meeting with a third member. The rogues conversed briefly before continuing on quickly through a back door. Neji reported the movement, standing up, "We'll follow."

They stuck to the rooftops, unnoticed, and Chouji was thrilled by their findings, "Evidence better than a report has to be the culprits themselves! Tsunade-sama will definitely like this!"

"Keep it down!" Ino warned him.

The Leaf genin stealthily tracked the retreating Moon ninja, but stopped after seeing they had been lead out of the village. They observed their targets moving ahead into the forest, and Neji took a moment to decide what their aim was. "They wouldn't leave so abruptly if they didn't have a reason. Perhaps they're aware that they've been discovered; we did move Takeshi's body."

"Oh, I forgot about that..." Ino sighed, "I guess that would give it away."

"We're ready for anything!" Chouji said firmly, "It's three on three and we're the ones pulling the ambush!"

They didn't debate the matter any further. They followed the Moon ninjas' trail, moving up to the treetops warily. Chouji took up the front and Ino slowed to catch Neji near the back of the group. His Byakugan was scanning the woodland ahead of them, but he gave her an acknowledging glance when she approached.
"Look...I'm sorry about getting on your nerves earlier." Ino told him, ducking under a tree branch, "I wouldn't have acted that way if I just had the assurance that you'll treat us as equals, but I guess that's up to you, isn't it?"

Neji shook his head, "It was wrong of me to doubt."

"Not really..." Ino said quietly, "I've got to say how envious I am of your team, Neji. You and your teammates get to be together all the time. That's not helping right now, I know, but...Chouji may not be as athletic as Lee, and I'm not as fearsome as Tenten, that's for sure." She smiled, "But Chouji and I have been getting stronger even without Shikamaru, at least believe that. So, I just meant to say, sorry about pushing your buttons."

"Save your apologies." He answered, "I am at fault. As leader I can't afford to mistrust my team...from here out we work together."

The blonde girl grinned widely, both shocked and thrilled that the Hyuga had turned over a new leaf. 'This guy really has changed. A lot of it has to do with that Retrieval Mission, I bet, but I'm sure there's more to it.' She thought pleasantly.

"Wait for just a moment, Ino." Neji said suddenly, and he stopped. Ino halted as well, watching Chouji barrel on ahead without them, 'There he goes again...'

"Let him be." Neji advised, seeing that she wanted to follow after her teammate, "There's more to the plan that I did not go over earlier. Listen closely."

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It was not the most shocking thing to see the Moon ninja stop and face them once they had caught up. The three shinobi who had drawn them out this far appeared as if they only had something to say. This was the case, Ino thought, because they had not yet attacked and looked to be waiting for their full attention.

"There is no need for any confrontation between us." The leader of the Moon group stepped forward. He was a tall, dark haired man and when he continued Neji's eyes automatically narrowed, "We are here conducting harmless business. We are no threat to your village and certainly not to our previous one, if they put you up to this."

"Harmless." The Hyuga repeated, "What then of Takeshi? You saw fit to end his life in order to protect yourselves."

The leader sighed, clearly regretting it, "It was an act of desperation. He confronted us without warning. In the past we've had trouble with our dealings that forced us from our homeland, and your Tsunade-hime gave us a headache when she decided she did not need to pay back her debts. It's no wonder she'd grieve us a second time!"

"If you're desperate clearly you have something to hide," Neji smirked confidently, "Come quietly and you might receive mercy from the Hokage...but not from us."

One of the underlings looked to his leader, "He's made his point for sure. What do you think, Kurumi-sama?"

"What do I think? Well..." Kurumi sized up the Leaf genin for a moment, "I say we silence these three just like we did the last one. Hideo! Ichibaru! Take them out."

His teammates rushed immediately, both singling out their preferred opponent. Chouji leapt ahead when Ichibaru had made a move for Ino. He got in front of the kunoichi, plowing into the man, and
was more than a match for his strength when they locked hands and grappled with one another. Hideo had attacked Neji on command. Rather than expending unnecessary energy, he used an abrupt rotation that sent Hideo hurtling into the tree-line. Ino gave chase while the man was still in shock.

Kurumi was a bit startled when Neji had confronted him, but he was no pushover. The Hyuga closed in with fierce stabs of Jyukken, and Kurumi danced around him like a fleet-footed gazelle. Neji backed off momentarily, noting how he had not hit his opponent once. Kurumi took advantage of the pause and made hand seals, "Futon: Wind Bullet!" A shock of air hurled into Neji, tearing into his skin and throwing him back across the clearing.

It was fortunate for the Hyuga, because off to the right Chouji had used his Multi-Size technique to lift and toss Ichibaru. The man hurtled into Kurumi with unexpected momentum, and the two sailed a bit farther only to crash into an overturned log. Neji had picked himself up, ignoring the cuts he had accumulated and moved to Chouji. By then both Moon ninja had regrouped.

Ichibaru had breathed a fair-sized fireball that was promptly fanned by one of Kurumi’s wind jutsu. The flame intensified, stretching over the entire field and roaring within range of the Leaf ninja. There was no time to dodge. Neji avoided the firestorm with another rotation, and Chouji had heaved up a large slab of earth to shield himself.

There was a moment of confusion in which the jutsu was broken off, and Ichibaru had gained on Chouji, striking him with a flying kick. The Akimichi tumbled backwards, and swipe an over-extended arm out at Ichibaru. He reeled back from the enormous appendage, and summoned a Bo-staff from a scroll. They dove for each other again, trying to gain the upper hand.

Neji had chased Kurumi from one end of the meadow to the other, but the agile Moon ninja was too quick to allow any of his attacks to land. Things worsened when Hideo had returned, bursting from the forest back out to the thick of the fighting. Kurumi grinned at him, "Good! Help me finish this one, Hideo!"

Hideo leapt, hurling fistfuls of shuriken, and the projectiles pelted down at his fellow Moon ninja. Kurumi could barely evade the un-called for assault, barrel-rolling to the side, and getting nicked in the process. He stood again, his guard shaken, watching his friend in disbelief.

Neji smirked openly, "Good work, Ino."

Hideo turned to the Hyuga and smiled immodestly, "It was all too easy. He didn't even expect it, and was too shocked to fight me off."

Kurumi looked on, clueless, his only reasonable answer being that Hideo could have possibly been allied with the Leaf nin. Hideo charged at him again, hurling a preemptive wave of shuriken before getting close to engage in hand-to-hand combat. Neji scoped the area briefly with his Byakugan, noting how Ino's body was safely hidden behind a tree in the woods beyond. A moment later he took advantage of Kurumi's distraction and attacked, instructing Ino to help Chouji instead.

Hideo moved on, throwing a storm of knives at an unsuspecting Ichibaru. Chouji crowed proudly before helping his teammate gang up on the poor slob.

Kurumi stared at the scene unfolding, at a loss, "I...just don't understand. How could Hideo have betrayed us?"

"Don't fret." Neji told him. "I hardly think he would."

He dove ahead suddenly, and pummeled Kurumi with a spike of Jyukken in the gut. He bent double,
stunned by the attack, and was incapable of escaping Neji’s sixty-four palm assault that followed. Kurumi caved immediately after the execution of the technique, and when he had tumbled inertly to the ground the Hyuga left to regroup with his teammates. Ichibaru lay in a crumpled heap of defeat as well.

Chouji had already left to retrieve Ino’s body after she had told him where it was located. Upon his return, Hideo looked to Neji, saying, "Alright...when I switch out I want you to hit me as hard as you possibly can, got that Neji?"

He was happy to comply. The jutsu was released and Ino woke up in her own body, watching with satisfaction as Hideo woke up as well, only to be caught in the solar plexus with a relentless jab of Jyukken. Chouji let her stand up on her own, his expression very approving, "Great showmanship there, Ino! You scared the crap out of both of them with that performance."

"Thanks, Chouji. You weren't any less intimidating yourself..." She looked to the Hyuga, "But credit where credit is due; I never would've thought of any of it if Neji hadn't come up with it earlier!"

Neji was not about to boast, "I was only taking the abilities of my teammates into account."

The task of tying up and bagging their fallen adversaries was made especially sunny for the group, who were pleased that their trust in each other had resulted with success. While apprehending the Moon ninja, Neji was lost in thought. They both did exceptionally well. It's a shame I had lowered my expectations like I did...’ He had to acknowledge their improved ability, 'Ino's talent is unlike most others. It's extremely difficult to control another shinobi's body, and then expect to fight in a foreign vessel as well. Chouji's strength has also grown since the Retrieval Mission.'

He was thoroughly impressed how much the team had developed in the current absence of Shikamaru. Hopefully, the Hyuga thought, Shikamaru would be able to fully appreciate their abilities as well, if he didn't already.

"Uh, Neji?" Neji glanced over to Chouji, who had snapped him out of his contemplation, "You alright there?"

"Of course." He answered, adding, "It's a good thing you recommended direct confrontation when you did. Now these three can be brought to justice for their actions."

Ino was in full agreement, "I couldn't have said it any better myself! Well, I can't wait to get back home to tell Shikamaru how much ass we kicked, right Chouji?"

Her teammate was also psyched.

Neji watched the road ahead, his countenance reflecting a new calm, 'This was all more than worthwhile, and it will be good to meet with my teammates again as well.'

Naruto and Jiraiya's trek had taken them to a valley with a warmer climate. The Sage notified them that their destination was close by, "It's called the Apple Village. It’s real nice. Traditional people live there so we can take a load off and relax!"

On the way, they passed by several apple orchards in which every tree was in full bloom. Naruto scrunched up his nose, regarding the endless sea of fruit, 'Gee...I see that these people named their village appropriately.'

The town was small and very comfortable, as Jiraiya had predicted. The majority of the denizens were farmers and gave innocently curious looks to the two strangers who had happened by. Both
pupil and mentor had gone to the far edge of the village, where an extravagant Shinto shrine overlooked all the other buildings. As they scaled the stone steps Jiraiya told him, "I thought I'd let you know that there's a special fellow here now who you can talk to, Naruto."

"Special." Naruto repeated hopefully, "Does that mean he can teach me a new jutsu?"

"Nope."

They walked on and Naruto was slightly annoyed that a learning opportunity was not available. Jiraiya motioned for them to stop in a yard in front of the temple, and Naruto was alerted to another person's presence by the sound of shifting gravel.

An older man crossed over to them, looking expectant, "Welcome to the Valley Country." He looked to the Toad Sage, "Hello, Jiraiya-sama, I'm not surprised you dropped by."

"Hey there, Roushi." Jiraiya replied casually, "Naruto, this here is Junyo Roushi. He's a shinobi of the Hidden Rock Village, but he's done some extensive travelling in his time."

"Er...nice to meet you, sir." Naruto bowed politely. Roushi gave the boy a once-over before nodding to him. Jiraiya walked over to his friend and pulled him aside, speaking to him beyond Naruto's earshot. After a brief exchange of words, the keeper of the shrine nodded to Jiraiya as if in agreement.

A moment later, the Sage looked back to his pupil, "Listen, kid. You're gonna hang out for a bit and chat with my buddy Roushi here. I promised an informant of mine that I'd meet up with him out here around this time, and it'd be rude to keep a friend waiting."

"I hear you." Naruto answered glumly, "See you later then, Ero-sensei."

Jiraiya went ahead without the blonde boy, and it was then Naruto got a good look at the old man he had been left with. He was, without a doubt, much older than Jiraiya, and was dressed in old-fashioned attire. His hair was red and tied up in a short ponytail, and most peculiar of all, was his face. A black mark stretched from cheek to cheek on Roushi’s face, pronouncing his facial expressions.

The old man was tired of Naruto's staring, "Would you care to join me for some tea?"

"Huh? Oh sure!" The blonde ninja rubbed the back of his head, caught a bit off guard. He followed Roushi around the temple and across a small footbridge, where a Zen garden was situated just short of a lake. It was indeed very peaceful, but Naruto got the feeling he and his teacher were intruding in such a serene place.

"Sorry about the sudden visit, Gramps." Naruto told him, taking a seat at a small outdoor table, "It's not fair for Ero-sennin to barge in here and impose upon people. I don't even know where he's off too..."

"It's no trouble." Roushi told him, also taking a seat, "Your master only wishes one jinchuriki to speak to another."

Naruto was stunned by the statement. Roushi only poured the tea, and set a cup in front of his guest. He looked at the boy, waiting for him to speak.

"You know that I'm...?" Naruto stopped to think, folding his arms, "Huh. So you're one too? Wow. The only other person like me I know is my friend, Gaara."
"Yes, I know."

Naruto scratched his head, "Yeah...though you don't really strike me as someone with a biju."

"Does anyone? Is it so easy to tell?" Roushi answered, taking a sip of tea, "Look at our faces: those whisker marks of yours and the band across my nose. There are small indications like that, but it is never easy to judge someone, Naruto."

Naruto nodded in understanding, also taking a sip of tea. The flavor was a shock of strong herbs and jasmine. It was so foreign he immediately took a liking to it. He listened as Roushi continued, "Jiraiya-sama tells me your biju has been causing you some unrest recently, and I will be able to give you some peace of mind." He added, "Though it is clear why the container of the Kyuubi may be a bit uncomfortable even under the best conditions..."

"That was...really thoughtful of him." Naruto mumbled, glad that Jiraiya had thought ahead, "So...have you had your demon all your life too?"

He nodded, "I have had the Yonbi inside of me since I was nine years old."

Naruto felt relief wash over him, considering the man's age, "Well then you sure have experience! I could really use your advice..."

After kinder-dumping his student off at the temple, Jiraiya crossed the village back to one of the larger apple orchards. It had been a long time since he had last met with an informant, but he had figured that while he was traveling with Naruto he could get a few more meetings in. The information was extremely valuable to the Hidden Leaf Village.

For a while Jiraiya was uncertain if he had gone to the right place. He swatted insects out of his face as he followed the columns of trees, wondering if it was wise to stop by just as the harvest was nearing. He blinked as he looked ahead, and spotted a man in black waving to him from on top of a hill. Jiraiya chuckled to himself, realizing he had not been mistaken.

Jiraiya strolled up the hill, unable to suppress a grin. He raised an eyebrow when he noticed a little boy romping about the place as well. He scaled trees with remarkable agility and twisted through the branches, knocking apples down from the treetops. Once back on the ground he turned to the man in black, wearing a disapproving expression, "You know what I think, Dad? That mask is silly looking."

"Aw, that's not true." His father replied, "I wear it for anonymity, Yuma, and I think it's kind of cool looking..."

Jiraiya stopped a few feet away from the two, watching them bicker. He cleared his throat to remind them he had arrived, and then said, "When you sent a message to me a while ago about you having new information for me, Obito, I didn't know you'd be bringing your son with you."

"He insisted." The Uchiha admitted, "Yuma has never travelled before, so we both had fun coming out here."

"That's right!" Yuma agreed, distracted by juggling the apples he had picked.

Obito chuckled, patting his son on the head, "Listen up, Yuma. This here is Jiraiya-sama, and he's the man we came here to speak to because he's a friend of the Leaf Village."

The small boy stopped juggling, looking to Jiraiya, "Cool! You're a ninja too?"
"You bet, and I'm also a successful novelist!" Jiraiya announced shamelessly, "But yes, I dabble in shinobi work here and there..."

Obito sighed after the proclamation.

Jiraiya noted the other man's embarrassment so he pressed on, "Right...so...what's going on with Orochimaru?"

"Orochimaru has planned an attack on Suna, but it's small-scale; nothing major. It's really only a distraction from the hunter he's sent after some boy..." He explained, folding his arms, "All very confusing...oh! And Sasuke is safe for now; he won't try to steal the boy's body for another two years or so."

"Good for Sasuke." Jiraiya remarked blandly, "But what did you mean by some boy earlier?"

Obito scratched his head, "Gee...what was his name? Oh yes...there's a boy named Haku he's tracked to the Water Country..."

"WHAT?" Jiraiya's shout startled both father and son, "He and Gaara were supposed to stay together! In Sand! Figures that kid would act recklessly while I'm not around..."

Obito understood the Sage's worry and hated to add to the bad news, "Jiraiya-sama...it's worse. He's sent Shimofuri Koinyu after the poor kid: he works for Dintei Bihokokuni, so he's obviously no good. After he collects Haku, Orochimaru has given Koinyu permission to enter Leaf."

"Why the hell would he do that?"

"They're looking for Susumajin." Obito said darkly, "Even I didn't know it ended up in Leaf. Somehow they figured it out, and if they find it Bi will do anything to get his hands on it. I tried to stall him when I was last there but there was nothing I could do, Jiraiya-sama. I'm sorry..."

"No, it's okay. Tsunade will handle it." Jiraiya assured him, "What of the Akatsuki?"

"They're quiet now: only requesting spy work and gathering thugs. We'll be on the hunt again in a year or two, though. I...haven't really warmed up to them yet either." Obito admitted, "I only know three people. It's as if Zetsu is keeping me away from the others on purpose."

The Toad Sage leaned against the trunk of a nearby tree, "Just three, huh? Oh boy..." He paused wondering if what he was about to say was prudent, "Well then...it will grieve you to know that Sasuke's older brother has also left the village. Itachi has joined the Akatsuki."

"Wow. The two of them malefactors…and so young!" Obito was a bit unnerved, "But Itachi? No...that peaceful little kid I used to babysit? Looks like the Uchiha are just as rambunctious as ever. By the way, Jiraiya-sama, how is my family doing?"

The older man was silent for a few moments. His chest was heavy with guilt. He knew that Obito had never learned about the Uchiha massacre, or why Sasuke and Itachi were the only ones ever mentioned anymore. He had kept it a secret from him, fearing that the truth would plunge the unfortunate man into despair.

"They're fine, last I checked." Jiraiya lied.

"Good!" Obito believed him full-heartedly, "Now, what do you say we get some lunch?" He glanced to his son, "You hungry, Yuma?"
"Starving." The boy agreed, taking a bite of apple, "Bleh! These are not very ripe at all..."

Obito hoisted the boy to his feet from where he sat on the grass, and seated Yuma on his shoulders. They laughed together, and Yuma picked apples from branches suspended inches from his head. He had no intention with doing anything with them by then, though. Jiraiya followed slowly after them, watching with pained eyes.

'You are the biggest secret I have to keep.' He thought to himself, 'When everyone is so certain there are only two Uchiha remaining...there are really four.'

One afternoon, Tenten had the good fortune of spending time with Hinata. Neither kunoichi had been assigned a mission that day, and were interested in a friendly contest of strength. During their spar Hinata had expressed how impressed she was with Tenten’s hand to hand combat skills. "You have improved so much, Onee-san!" Hinata commented proudly, "I won't tell Neji-niisan that Hikune-kun taught you, if you like."

"I appreciate that." Tenten thanked her, restraining a sigh. The truth be told, she really had no idea when she intended to tell Neji anything, whether it be her feelings, skills, or her increasing familiarity with his relatives. Secrets were beginning to pile up, and she was wondering if she would ever get the chance to clear her conscience. She did not mention it to Hinata, though it helped that the younger girl was so cheerful and optimistic.

They took a break in a garden just outside of the courtyard they had been practicing in. The blooms in the yard were unusual for the types of plants throughout the rest of the Hyuga compound, Tenten noticed.

"I planted this garden myself." Hinata told her, "I like to come here to relax when I can."

"I can see why. You must've put a lot of work into this place..." Tenten smiled, looking around. She sat down on a patch of grass, breathing in the perfumed air, and asked, "Do you let other people stop by here, Hinata-chan?"

She nodded, "If they want to. Not many people come all the way back here for leisure time, though."

Hinata sat down as well, and Tenten stretched, considering how the area was superbly designed for a nap. Falling asleep while she had company, though, would not be the most polite thing to do. She made small talk to pass the time, "Neji and Lee were both assigned to separate missions, but they should be wrapping up soon. It's been a while since our last real mission as a full team." Tenten glanced to the Hyuga girl, "So...what's been going on with you, Hinata-chan?"

"Sato-kun has helped Tama-san achieve genin rank, so he's come back to the team for proper training." She reported thoughtfully, "It's nice that we can all be together again for missions...but I have been detained a few times."

"By what?" Tenten asked, fiddling with a small violet that had gone astray.

"Two days ago, my father called a meeting for my sister and I, as well as Neji-niisan." Hinata recounted, "He wanted us there so he could test our chakra affinities."

"Hm? You mean the natural element of your chakra? I heard of that once from my mom." Tenten commented, laying back on the grass, "How did that go?"

"It was interesting. Father each handed us a slip of paper, and said that it would react differently depending on our nature. My paper immediately became soggy, and he told me that my affinity is
water. So is Hanabi's, actually." Hinata explained, "Neji-niisan's paper tore right in half, so it means his chakra reflects wind."

"Wind, huh?" Tenten was intrigued, "Now I wish I could be tested..."

"Tsunade-sama says all ninja are tested eventually." The Hyuga girl assured her, and then looked up at the sun, "Oh my...it's getting late...I should go water Naruto-kun's plants..."

"You better go ahead and do that then." Tenten agreed.

"Oh but I couldn't! I wouldn't want to leave you alone after you stopped by to visit!" Hinata protested meekly. Her trivial concern earned a chuckle from Tenten, who really had no problem with being on her own temporarily.

Hinata stood up, looking to the nearby footpath where some of her cousins were passing by. Two older boys along with Hikune, who she quickly waved over and Tenten felt a headache coming on, 'Really...Hinata has to learn that ruder things have happened to me...'

Hinata promptly informed her cousin where she was going before swapping out with him, and Hikune stepped into the flower garden, giving Tenten a highly amused look. "She overreacts a bit, doesn't she? It's because of her father you know." He laughed softly, "Hinata-sama only stresses over people she does not want to disrespect, so naturally she holds you in high esteem."

"That's sweet of her, I guess." Tenten answered and then added suspiciously, "You show up a lot when I'm around, I've noticed."

"I don't try to be omnipresent, believe me." Hikune said, sitting down between a row of chrysanthemums and camellias, "I actually just got in from a mission. Those were my friends over there that I was torn away from." He smiled, "How are you today, Tenten?"

"Can't complain." She said, but then remembered what Hinata had mentioned, "Hey Hikune...what do you know about chakra affinity?"

"I'd say I know enough." He answered, "My affinity is lightning, which is a bit unusual for my family because the Hyuga tend to lean towards fire and water."

"When did you find out?"

"When I first became a Chunin. Most shinobi find out at about that time." Hikune said, gently batting a butterfly from his hair, "Since then I've been working on my chakra manipulation. I have a few jutsu incorporating it now, but nothing major."

Tenten's shoulders slumped a bit, "I wish I could find out what my affinity is...I really could use an improvement in my ninjutsu..."

"Why?"

"Well, it feels like everyone has been getting ahead of me...Neji and Hinata...I suppose it's because they're Hyuga, so I guess I don't really have a reason to complain about it, do I?" She pointed out dryly.

"That's understandable, but who are you trying to impress anyway?" Hikune chuckled, "You're fantastic already."

Tenten wore a sullen look and it bothered him. It was not easy to cheer someone up when he did not
possess a direct solution, so Hikune hoped he could give words of encouragement she'd respond to, "Neji thinks you're brilliant, I'm sure!"

"Oh please don't feed me that crap..." Tenten retorted, ripping up a few blades of grass in frustration, "The only person who Neji thinks is brilliant is himself. He's never bothered to compliment either Lee or me, Hikune, no matter what he truly thinks."

"Then maybe you shouldn't take his opinions too seriously." Hikune suggested.

Tenten stood up, brushing flower petals from her pants. She paced around the garden, careful not to step on any of the vivid shrubs. "I'll be fine." She said, half to herself, "I just need to unwind and relax so all of this affinity business stops worrying me..." She couldn't help but add, "Did you know that Neji is a wind type? Is that unusual too?"

Hikune sighed, "Tenten, I really think it best that you calm down now." He also stood up, and plucked a peach flower from a branch. He handed the delicate magenta bloom to her, and she took a deep breath, feeling a bit less overwhelmed.

"I understand what you're feeling, I felt that way a few years ago too...but please remember that, regardless of what Neji may think, or what you will do to make him think something, you are truly gifted already and are in no need of improvement." Hikune said quietly, "That is, unless you really want to pursue something, then go chase it for yourself and not for someone else."

He smiled again, and this time Tenten was watching. The dimensions of his face were clearly visible then: smooth skin and a strong jaw, offset by white doe eyes. Strands of bronze hair hung adorably in his face, and Tenten averted her eyes, disliking how she was ogling. 'What am I doing? This guy is what? Seventeen? Eighteen? Twenty-five? ' She was very cross with herself, 'He's definitely not Neji, but he...he's still...'

After a moment she managed to mutter, "Thanks, Hikune. It's not that I'm trying to grab his attention anyway." She paused in thought, "Neji's interest is pretty elusive as it is...and I guess I can live with myself as I am."

"Don't sell yourself short, Tenten." Hikune said, and his voice lowered, "If Neji cannot see all of the remarkable things in you that I have already seen...then perhaps you should not try as hard for him."

'But I want to.' Tenten thought, 'I want him to notice. I want him to react, somehow...'

The peach blossom she had been fiddling with suddenly lifted, and she realized Hikune had reached for it. 'When did he get so close? ' She wondered. She watched with simple puzzlement as his fingers laced with hers. The world became still and quiet. Tenten felt the calmness that had been with her transform into uneasiness. She raised her eyes a bit, only glimpsing his neck, and then further to his face.

His expression was focused. She was intimidated, for some reason, by the truth in his gaze. Tenten had seen the expression once before, not recalling from where, but she knew immediately that she wanted to flee. She did not budge an inch. 'Maybe I should say something.' She thought, 'He always listens when I say something. '

It was too conflicting to open her mouth, because she was curious as to what would happen if she didn't. She remained quiet, wondering what silence would provoke. Tenten briefly stumbled through her thoughts, watching him lean in. How new, she thought. How sincere. How very scary.

She drew back a bit on reflex when she could feel his mouth. Her brain had a hard time processing
the information, let alone telling her how to react to it. The contact was so alien, but she permitted it anyway. His mouth pressed against her's again in a harmless motion, and emotion and thought met in a brief, decisive battle. 'It's not uncomfortable or shame-filling.' Part of her admitted, 'But what am I doing? I don't know the first thing about this!'

Tenten had no way to justify her actions. She couldn't shut her eyes. She marveled at how she was so close to this person, and how he had shown her kindness. He was still being polite because the kiss was close-mouthed and professional, but it was no less dizzying.

It ended after a short moment, and Hikune withdrew, batting his eyes open. He seemed a bit contemplative himself, not unlike Tenten's apparently frazzled expression. She wondered if he had done it before. 'He's certainly very good at it.' She noted.

"I'm sorry," He said, his countenance still cheerful, "I've been meaning to do that for a while now."

That was when her comprehending jammed. There was implication that it had been of earlier thought, and not spur-of-the-moment circumstance. Tenten struggled to keep a level head, praying she could come up with a feasible reason to flee from the scene.

"Uh...I better go see if Hinata-chan came back yet." Tenten supplied, aware it was a weak escape cause, but he nodded anyway.

"By all means." He said, as if aware that she needed to find a place to sulk and think. "I'll see you around then, Tenten-"

She had already dashed out of the garden, cleared the perimeter wall of the compound, and set out in the direction of her apartment. She hoped Hinata could forgive her for jumping ship so soon, or if perhaps Hikune would be brazen enough to explain. Tenten's greatest concern was not that she had fraternized with an older boy of the Hyuga clan, kept the entire debacle from Neji, or had escaped from the place in a most unfashionable way.

It was that some part of her had liked it.

Sakura descended a flight of stairs from the Hokage's tower, smiling pleasantly to herself. Tsunade had been kind enough to excuse her from lessons for the week, on the condition that she kept up with her studies at home. She was more than happy to agree, being that no lessons with her master meant more training with her team. It had been a few days since she had last seen Kiba and Kakashi.

As she followed a side street across town she spotted Tenten, soaring out over the rooftops at high speed. She had wanted to say hello to her friend, but the other kunoichi was gone almost instantly. 'Maybe she's late for a mission?' Sakura suspected, 'I've been in hasty situations too.'

A bit farther ahead, after crossing a foot bridge, Sakura came to her team's training ground. She grinned widely, seeing Kiba rolling around on the grass with Akamaru. The small dog yapped upon sensing her presence and Kiba quickly looked up, "Hey! Sakura!"

"Yeah, hello, I'm free at last." She joked and hugged her friend while they laughed.

"It's good to see that the old lady decided to give you a break, finally." He told her, brushing off grass particles he had accumulated on his jacket, "Why the heck do you let her push you so hard anyway?"

"It makes me feel more respectable, considering that Gaara-kun is already a Jounin." She clarified, "I'm sure he earned that rank for good reason, and I love him to death, but I've got to do something to
"Yeah, I gotcha." He nodded, and looked across the field in surprise when Kakashi appeared, "Whoa! You're here when you said you'd be, sensei!"

"Yes, hi everyone." He said, walking over to them without even glancing up from his book, "I'm glad you could make it Sakura, because I have a surprise for you both."

Kiba was confused, "Does that mean you being here on time isn't the surprise?"

"Well, I suppose that's half of it," Kakashi agreed, and then called aloud, "Alright, you can come out now."

Both genin blinked and watched Tama step out of the tree-line from behind Kakashi. She waved to them with a friendly smile, "Um...hey guys!"

She came to stand by Kakashi and he finished the announcement to his students without his dirty book hovering under his nose, "Now, now, children! What are those un-welcoming expressions? Meet our new teammate, Maito Tama, although I do believe you've already met."

Sakura, thank heavens, reacted promptly. She rushed up to the black haired girl and hugged her, congratulated her, and excitedly promised her that she would love Team 7. Without a doubt she did already, now that she had a place to belong, and Tama graciously thanked the younger girl. Kiba was a little less spirited in his welcome, but no less enthralled.

Tama was dressed differently than he remembered. A dark indigo shirt, a bit more revealing than what he'd seen most other girls wear, and black shorts that accentuated long, slender legs. Kiba covered his nose, hiding the blood. It helped that she was carrying more weapon holsters than necessary (making her appear over-prepared,) however Kiba was in no position to be tactful. The girl that made him act crazy and threaten a certain Hatake was standing before him: as a teammate.

While Kiba spiraled in his thoughts, Kakashi inched over to the Inuzuka, his crinkled eye evidence of a wide smile. "You okay, Kiba-kun? Was it too much of a surprise?" He asked playfully.

"Er, well..." Kiba cleared his throat, snapping himself back to coherency, "This really is kinda unexpected...and, not to be biased in any way: is it wise to have two girls on a team, sensei?"

"I don't see why not." Kakashi told him, "I was more than happy to take her on as a student. I'm also certain that this team will balance out fine, if that's what you're worried about."

He didn't mention how he had also taken her in the hope of easing his students' pain at the loss of Sasuke. Tama was a warm-hearted person who had plenty of experience cheering people up. Her Taijutsu skills would also be valuable in a pinch, he tacked onto the list.

Kiba approached the two girls, trying to not appear awkward. It kind of worked. Tama smiled at him, looking expectant, and he managed to utter two words, "Hey Tama."

"Good to see you again, Kiba-kun!" She hugged him too, since she had hugged Sakura (and did not want to convey favoritism,) and said, "I'm so glad Tsunade-sama placed me with you two! I know that I'll do my very best to contribute to this team!"

Kiba's mouth hung slightly ajar when she released him. It was a one-hundred-eighty degree flip from Sasuke's view of the team. If the Uchiha had ever proclaimed faith in their cell, Kiba had missed it. He got a sense that this was going to be a very different unit-experience now that the current third member of their squad smiled out of habit.
Kakashi interrupted further communications, "Alright now, everyone, you can all socialize later on. It's about time we head out for our mission."

They heeded their teacher and left the field to prepare. The new Team 7 was more than ready.

Matsuri was seated in a black armchair while staring out an open window. The Kazekage's mansion was currently empty with the exception of herself, and the hollow quiet of the place was not improving her damaged mood.

It had been a long day, she thought. Matsuri gingerly touched a wound on her arm that had been disinfected and wrapped, but the cut was worse than most she'd seen. The pain was still a dull ache then.

Gaara had left the scene of the battle with her, acknowledging how he needed to have a chat with her, but Baki had called him away a short while later. It seemed urgent, so she couldn't have taken offense. Temari and Kankuro had told her to wait at home (their home) until they returned. "We'll clear this up as soon as we can, alright Mousy?" Kankuro had assured her.

She shifted in her position on the chair, letting her long, gangly legs hang off the side. Matsuri sighed aloud, returning her gaze to the window. Outside the sky harbored a few gray clouds.

"Will it rain?" She wondered, "It hasn't rained here in months..."

"Too true." Gaara agreed. His student jumped a little after he had entered the room undetected. She opened her mouth to speak but did not feel that anything she could have said would do the moment justice. The silence made more sense.

The jounin crossed the room, closing the door behind him. There was a sofa across the way but he sat on the coffee table instead. He didn't like the thing much. It was an antique of useless expense: real hickory imported from the Fire Country. Gaara regarded her for a long moment as she stared into her lap phlegmatically.

"How did they capture you?" He asked at length.

"I'm sorry..." She apologized, "I saw them coming and got ready to fight, sensei...but they were using strange sound jutsu...I was overwhelmed so easily and I couldn't stop them from snatching me up..."

"It's alright, Matsuri." He answered, "All that matters is that you're unharmed. Miosuke is still awaiting trial."

She frowned at the mentioning of the conspiring traitor, "That man...I can't believe he said so many terrible things about you!"

"There's something I need to tell you." He said, his eyes trained onto a brass ornament on the far side of the room, "...a few things..."

Matsuri watched him with attentive eyes. Gaara spoke again, "In all fairness to you, I have killed more people than I've been able to count; shinobi, that is. Though you have not directly witnessed it, I also have a miserable temper and sarcastic mien."

"Oh...well Temari-sama and Kankuro-sama act that way sometimes too." Matsuri replied thoughtfully, "But you're all still very nice, I think."
"On our good days." He agreed with a smirk, and then added, "How much of what Miosuke said did you understand?"

She shook her head, "...not much."

"And what do you know about the Sand Demon of our village?"

"My parents once told me about it a very long time ago." She recalled, "They said it was the One-Tailed Tanuki and that it wields tremendous power."

"That's fairly accurate." He decided, then said, "That demon they spoke of is very real. It has been sealed into shinobi of this village a few times in the past, including the Third Kazekage. It grants the container great power, but terrorizes them at night, because the biju will devour their souls when they fall asleep."

Matsuri pulled her hands to her chest, "That must be so frightening for those people..."

"Over thirteen years ago, the Fourth Kazekage ordered that Shukaku be sealed into an unborn child, with the hope that it would create a weapon for his village." Gaara narrated darkly, "It did not work as well as he had hoped, and he eventually tried to have that child killed."

Matsuri's expression was troubled. A look of understanding dawned over her face, "Sensei...was it you?"

"My father tried to kill me because he feared he would not be able to control me." The jounin announced, "I lived in Konoha peacefully, away from the chaos he wrought. In a way, I was relieved to hear that he had died."

The girl teared up, rubbing frantically at her cheeks, "Oh...b-but...but even if that's true...that still doesn't make you a monster, sensei..."

"Don't be upset, Mouse." He said gently, "I do not care what anyone says about me, as long as I have true friends by my side. I know who I am."

Matsuri stood up, her face red with emotion. She gave her teacher a short, professional hug, "Thank you for telling me the truth, sensei..."

He patted her back comfortingly before she took her seat again. "You're one of the few people who know the truth at all, Matsuri." Gaara admitted.

"Does that girl that you love know?" She asked pointedly.

"I have yet to tell Sakura." He confessed, adding, "When I do see her again, which I expect to be soon, I will tell her."

"So her name is Sakura?" Matsuri repeated cheerily, "What a lovely name! I'm sure that she won't mind either when you tell her!"

"Thank you..."

"Can I meet her too, Gaara-sensei? Is she very pretty?" Matsuri began the barrage of questions in the routine fashion.

"She's beautiful." Gaara told her, "I suppose it would be alright to introduce you."

There was a calm quiet for a moment. Matsuri peered out the window once again, and was surprised
to see raindrops falling reluctantly from the clouds outside. She looked back to her mentor, smiling, "So...do you still have to work on the case, sensei? Or can we train a bit?"

Gaara glanced out the window as well, "I think Temari and Kankuro can last without me a little longer."

After a long, informative conversation over delicious tea, Roushi went ahead to show Naruto helpful meditation techniques he could use that would ease the link between his mind and the biju's mind. The blonde boy picked up on the skill quickly and found the relief was immediate. Still, Naruto found it unusual that Jiraiya had been able to locate the old ninja when he kept such a low profile.

"One of my old teammates now lives in Ramadi village, so I'm guessing you stopped by there." Roushi deduced, "Jiraiya must have asked her where I was."

"You don't say? You don't live here normally?"

"The truth be told, I'm only here to visit my granddaughter for a few weeks." The old shinobi admitted, getting to his feet, "I like to get away from my own village when I can...the people there are cruel and have never understood me."

"Yeah...I used to have issues like that..." Naruto could relate, "But things in my village improved and now I have a lot of friends! I bet you can do it too, Gramps!"

"You think an old-timer like me could find friends so late in life?" He wondered, "Hm. I suppose."

After spending several hours together, Roushi paused in their discourse. He closed his eyes for a moment and then said, "Jiraiya-sama has returned with some company. We should join them now."

"How can you tell people are here?" Naruto asked pointedly.

"I have several abilities...some of which originate from the Yonbi." Roushi explained briefly, leading the way out of the Zen garden, "It is common for jinchuriki to have skills that are supplied by a biju."

"Hm...I never thought about if I had special abilities like that too."

"They will come to you as you get older and more experienced." Roushi assured him, "Though they can be bothersome at times."

They followed the perimeter path around the temple back to the front steps. Naruto spied Jiraiya with a man dressed in black and a small boy. They were carrying bags with big smiley-faces on them.

"We brought take out!" The man in black called ahead, "I hope you're hungry!"

Naruto was thrilled. A side yard near the front of the shrine had an area they settled down to eat in. In the shade of red maple trees, Naruto thanked Roushi for his help, and looked to his teacher who was introducing the newcomers.

"Naruto, this here is a friend of mine: Obito. He spies on Akatsuki and Orochimaru for the Leaf Village." Jiraiya hit him first with the facts, "Don't mind his mask, though. He's had a bit of a cosmetic mishap."

"Spy? Well, that automatically makes you awesome." Naruto decided, holding out his hand, "I'm Uzumaki Naruto and it's great to find another brave guy around here!"
Jiraiya rubbed the back of his head sheepishly, but Obito took his offered hand, and shook it proudly. "Yeah! Where are all the brave guys?" Obito agreed laughingly and then looked to his son, "Yuma, why don't you say hi to Naruto-kun? He's a shinobi from the Leaf Village, you know!"

The small boy's eyes were wide with glee, "The Leaf Village? You too? Cool!"

"Nice to meet you too, er, Yuma-chan." Naruto replied, a bit startled when the boy made a grab for his holsters in the hope of snatching a kunai.

They sat down to eat and Obito was quietly goggling to himself at the sight of Naruto. Occasionally he would lean in and whisper to the Toad Sage, "Gosh he looks just like sensei!" And added, "Just like him!" Naruto remained for the most part, unaware, too preoccupied with food and the amusing six year old who was already an expert with shuriken.

They ate loudly, conversations sparkling relentlessly, both about Leaf and foreign places. Food was passed around until containers were empty, and when they had finished eating, Naruto ran off with Yuma to the front of the shrine, "I'll show you some cool jutsu, kiddo!"

Yuma was excited to have a playmate with equal energy, for a change.

Jiraiya watched from the lawn, smoking his pipe contentedly. Obito dumped the leftovers into an empty container, occasionally glancing over to the two boys. After a moment, he spoke, "I'm so glad that I finally got to meet him, Jiraiya-sama. It really is amazing...I can tell he's going to be phenomenally strong."

Jiraiya smirked, "You're not the first person to get that impression."
Lee had wrapped up the religious morning spar with Gai-sensei before they reported to the Hokage's office. Lee smiled widely when he saw that Tenten was already there chatting with Tsunade.

"I first met your mother by accident, I remember." Tsunade recalled, "Chinatsu was undercover as a singer at the bar I had stopped in. Incidentally...I kind of blew her cover. She was a very forgiving woman, Tenten."

"You'd be surprised." She muttered, and then turned to see half of her team was present. Lee and Gai animatedly wished her good morning, and Tsunade interrupted the sunny greeting.

"I would now like to begin this briefing." The Hokage announced, "Neji will be the leader of this team since," She glanced to Gai, "I need you elsewhere, if you don't mind terribly." Gai was fine with it, predictably, so she continued, "I had hoped that boy would have the courtesy to show up on time..."

"Indeed...the prodigy of our team is running a bit late today." Gai observed, "Though he certainly can't be as agonizing as Kakashi, isn't that right, Tsunade-sama?"

She nodded, reciting a proverb, "Too swift arrives as tardy too slow."

No less than four seconds later Neji darted into the office, visibly aware of how he had delayed things. His expression was apologetic, and before Tsunade could open her mouth to utter another word, another voice echoed from the hallway, "Wait, Neji-sama!"

They glanced back to the door, where Fujita entered, slightly wind-blown from chasing the Hyuga heir. "I beg your pardon." Neji said, his cousin standing beside him, "Hiashi-sama asked to speak to us before we departed."

"Very well, then." Tsunade dismissed the matter, "I must commend you, Neji, for leading Team 10 so well on your previous mission. I expect that you will do at least as well for this task."

Neji assured the Hokage he would do his best. Tenten jumped slightly after seeing Fujita appear. The sight of the boy quickly reminded her of his older brother...and what had transpired. Lee noticed her uneasiness, "Are you alright, Tenten?"

"Er, yeah. I just got...a static shock."

"Really?" He raised his thick eyebrows, "You hardly moved enough to generate a spark."

Curse him and his intellect, she thought. She raised her chin a bit, saying, "Well I'm sorry that I can't predict the movements of subatomic particles, Lee. I'll let you figure it out." She had not meant to snap at him, but her natural reaction was to be defensive when the kiss kept playing over and over again in her head. She felt totally helpless, wishing that her focus would return to the matters at hand.

Lee didn't mind her mood and muffled a chuckle at her retort. Afterwards they went back to paying attention to Tsunade's description of the mission.

"Nitobe Sawako is currently deployed to the Lightning Country, so he has requested that Fujita take missions with another team for now." Tsunade added, in regards to the novice genin, "You will be
going to a place called Katabami that has recently been overrun by the Kurosuki family."

Fujita's shoulders straightened a bit. It was one of the first serious missions he had ever been appointed to.

Tsunade went on, "Essentially it is not really a family you're dealing with, but a gang under the leadership of Kurosuki Raiga. He has overthrown the local government there and has taken control of the town." She rested her chin on her hands, eyeing the genin team critically, "Three men managed to escape and reach Leaf. They will guide you to Katabami, where you will dislodge the gang so the town is made safe again."

"When shall we leave?" Neji asked.

"Pack what supplies you'll need and then go immediately." Tsunade ordered, "The border of the River Country isn't far, but you should get there as soon as possible."

Neji accepted the terms and bowed respectfully. Tenten and Fujita did the same before following after him. Lee was about to make his exit as well, but when Gai had something to add he could not help but stay to listen. "I heard that Raiga was once part of the Seven Shinobi Swordsman of the Mist." Gai scratched his chin in thought, "It's odd that he would stray so far from his own country...go with caution, Lee."

Lee took the advice to heart, "Of course, Gai-sensei!" He hurried out into the hall to catch up to his team. Tsunade then had the chance to brief Gai on his mission.

After preparing themselves, the team met at the village gate. There with them were the three fugitives who had fully recovered from their perilous flight. Neji went over the details of the mission again one last time before they set out, "We will undertake the mission to escort Rokusuke-san and his companions, head to the Katabami gold mine, and chase out the Kurosuki family."

Lee added on to their agenda, "There's a restaurant near the gold mine that I know well. Let's make that one of our bases."

Tenten gave him a sidelong look, "A restaurant you know, Lee?"

"It's something you can look forward to during our journey," Lee told her, "I think you'll like it!"

Fujita seemed to perk up at the mentioning of a place where they could enjoy themselves. With the stress of having to eliminate a group of hoodlums terrorizing a village, it would be a relief to have a place to fall back to. Overall, Fujita seemed to respond most sedulously to Lee. He was, after all, the most enthusiastic about the mission. Neji and Tenten's thoughts seemed to be elsewhere.

They set out shortly after with Rokusuke and his friends. The journey to the River Country was predicted to be quick: a straight shot from Leaf. It was also coming into the rainy season in that region, so they were warned of possible flooding and storms that could cause a problem.

They passed through a forested area before coming to a mountain pass. On the way up the hill, Lee was speaking to Neji about borrowing a book, and Fujita thought it would be nice to have a chat with his tutor in weaponry. He strayed to the back of the group, where Tenten was watching the rear of the procession.

"Hello, Tenten-san." The boy greeted, "I have to admit, I was so excited to hear that I was placed with your team for this mission. Even Neji-sama was pleased that I could go!"
"Of course he is." She agreed, a small smile appearing on her face, "We're all happy to have you with us, Fujita-kun."

Fujita remembered something he had meant to say, "Oh! And my aniki says that he wants to apologize to you about yesterday." He looked curious, "Did you and Hikune-niisan have a disagreement or something?"

Tenten was flustered by the statement. She promptly got a hold of herself, giving him a reassuring look, "Don't sweat it. Everything is fine between us, okay kiddo?"

Fujita relaxed, but when Tenten retreated to her own thoughts her anxiety did not fade. It was hard for her to wrap her head around how her first kiss had been with an older boy, a jounin, no less. It was highly unusual, Tenten thought, that Hikune had interest in her at all, 'I mean, I'm not exactly the town beauty.' Yet when facing it objectively, she could understand that Hikune had seen something in her worth valuing. He had even told her about it, and she still had been ignoring most of what he had been saying until he had actually done something to show her.

Though she could not in any way reciprocate how he felt, she was not upset by his actions. 'It was nice.' She at least had to credit him that, 'Just goes to show that affection doesn't have to be so complicated. I like it better when it's simple.' Tenten glanced ahead to Neji at the front of the group, and then frowned to herself. 'But I haven't simplified things. I've hardly told him about anything that's going on.' She noted, aggravated with herself, 'That's the problem right there. Everything I don't say keeps compounding.'

Her fists balled at her sides. A new resolution to fix her situation with the Hyuga prodigy welled up in her gut. This time she would do better, work harder, and not let any slip ups (like Hikune) happen again. She was willing to pass Fujita's brother off as a hiccup in her journey, so long as it kept her focused.

At the top of the mountain they took a break for lunch. Neji shared a canteen with Tenten, while Lee finished eating and paced around restlessly. A helpless boulder on the side of the path looked to be asking for a beating, so Lee accepted the invitation and proceeded to pummel the stone into gravel. Fujita watched in awe, having never witnessed such bare-knuckle strength up close, "Can I ever become that strong with only my fists?"

Tenten noticed his marveling expression, and looked over to him from where she sat. "Fujita, just keep in mind you have Jyukken, which is better suited for you than Gouken. Lee may look impressive to you now, but he'll be nursing swollen hands later." She smiled thoughtfully, "It's just not meant for everyone."

The young Hyuga sighed resignedly, "I understand...it's just...my aniki is skilled with both Jyukken and Gouken. Could I not master both as he has?"

"Your brother has much more experience than you do." Neji reminded him, "You will find your own way as you grow."

Tenten looked to her teammate briefly, a bit surprised by his compassion. Indeed he was only looking after a cousin, but she wondered if he was only reciting something that he would've liked to have been told when he was younger. Neji hardly ever did receive words of encouragement from his elders. Tenten looked back to Fujita, seeing he was seriously considering what Neji had said.

While the ninja relaxed, Rokusuke was hurrying through his meal, not wanting to waste any time. One of his friends leaned in, telling him quietly, "Settle down, Rokusuke. These ninja will liberate our village, but you have to calm down."
Rokusuke stood up, watching with a disapproving expression as Lee instructed Fujita in basic kata of the Iron Fist. To him, he saw no sense in training when they were needed to help save the people of his village. His friends observed and laughed as the young Hyuga was knocked to his backside with one spirited punch from his instructor.

"How much longer do you plan on resting here?" Rokusuke demanded impatiently, "If we hurry we might be able to save Kanpachi from his grave!"

"Give it up." His friend said sadly, "How many days has it been since then? I know it's painful, but by now it's too late..."

Tenten's cheerful expression wilted after hearing the exchange between friends. Neji watched her chin tilt downward, and was not pleased to see that she was already disheartened. He stood up, pulling his bag over his shoulder. "We'll go now, then." He suggested, looking at her, "If you want to."

She raised her eyebrows, surprised, "Sure. I'm ready to go anyway...but I don't know how much of a difference we can make."

Neji called to Lee and Fujita, who quickly joined the rest of the group. They set out after Rokusuke and his companions, following behind as they descended the slopes and entered the River Country.

While they walked, Lee felt himself nodding off. "It sure brings back memories...this sleepiness." He muttered, "The restaurant is near."

"Sleepiness, Lee-kun?" Fujita asked curiously, "Are you feeling well?"

"I will be fine. I ran down this road sleeping for three days straight." Lee told him.

The young Hyuga was baffled, "Oh...how did you manage such a thing, I wonder?"

"It is the truth. It was a miracle of youth with Gai-sensei, and my body still remembers it. To think about it just makes me sleepy." Lee explained, his eyes half lidded, "That is right, there is a sweet smell of curry out here..."

"Curry?" Fujita sniffed the air, "Hm. Now that you mention it..."

"We are here!" Lee cried excitedly, "Ahead! Just there! It is the Curry of Life Restaurant!"

He and the young Hyuga looked far down the road, and past a grove of trees, a fairly dilapidated shop sat innocently beside the road. An old woman was outside of the establishment, tossing out an old pail of water. Lee quickly stole past the front of the party, pelting up the road giddily, "Baa-chan! Sancho!"

She turned around slowly, smiling at the sight of him, "Is that Lee? Lee!"

"Long time no see!" He laughed, scooping up the tiny woman, "I am so glad to see that you are doing well!"

The rest of the procession followed shortly after and Rokusuke looked particularly antsy. "That mountain over there is the Katabami gold mine." One of his friends pointed across the valley.

Neji's gaze crossed to the mine, and Tenten watched him as he considered the best course of action from there out. He turned back to her, catching her staring, "Need something?"
"Oh!" She hopped back a step, distracted, "Er, nothing, Neji! Just wondering how we'll get there..."

He was quiet for a moment and then looked to Fujita, "Fujita-kun, bring Rokusuke and the others to Lee. We'll be just a moment."

The young boy nodded, "Of course, Neji-sama." He did as he was asked and guided their escorts after Lee into the restaurant. Tenten could not imagine why Neji had dismissed the rest of the group, and felt an uneasy lump form in her throat. They waited wordlessly until Fujita and the others had gone into the building, and then Neji's hand closed tightly around her wrist.

"This way." He said, tugging her along roughly off the road, "He is still watching us."

She didn't understand, "Who?"

"Fujita is using his Byakugan because he is worried." Neji told her, "But he's only being nosy. Keep up."

Tenten followed him a good distance past the treeline, and once they were completely surrounded by bramble and oak he stopped and released her. Neji gave her a pointed look, and then said, "You have not been yourself since we left the village. Are you ready to tell me what has unsettled you?"

"I...uh." She took a breath, "Well, no, Neji. I can't tell you anything because there isn't anything wrong with me."

"I know you." He said, "Tell me."

Her shoulders fell, "Why does it suddenly matter? You...you know about me when I'm...I'm professional...but my problems are hardly something you'd understand."

"So you're admitting there's an issue."

"If you knew half of what was going on you'd probably punch me, I swear!" She shouted, turning her back to him, "I got myself into this...situation, so let me get myself out."

There was a quiet that she did not like. She knew, of course, she was causing him more stress than he needed. Telling him there was a problem and that he, as her friend, was helpless in fixing it. 'But he is.' She thought, 'Unless he wants to beat the crap out of Hikune, which is not happening, I guess I have to work this out. The fact that Fujita is here also throws a damned monkey-wrench into things...'"

Neji was appropriately insulted by her lack of faith. Accusing him of not understanding anything was completely stupid. He figured she was only shutting him out because he would understand, and that there would be consequences. But what could she have done? Killed Hiashi? Certainly nothing would ever draw his aggression to her, he thought. He liked her enough by then to put up with her shit. When she refused to say anything he could not help but be human, however, and get pissed off.

"We are on a mission now." He reminded her and then ground out, "How...how can I trust that you are in the right state for this? I don't even know what I'm dealing with."

She turned back around, looking as if she regretted what she had said. If she had been any braver she probably would have tackled him right there, taking Hikune's approach to things and made out with him. Of course that would be rude and clue him in to thinking that he was the problem. Saving impulsive wishes for home would be prudent, she figured.

"Don't be mad." She said simply.
It worked, and he relaxed somehow. He picked up on the unspoken fact that she was composed and handling it. That and she did not want the leader of their team having a fit before they had accomplished anything. Still, Neji felt slightly affronted that she was withholding information. He figured it must have been for the best. "Is there anything I can do?" He asked finally. If she wouldn't explain then maybe she could request a direct solution.

"Yeah," She nodded, "Trust me. I promise I'll get a grip."

He agreed, somewhat thrown from his guard. He had a brief memory of their time at the inn, and wondered why it had suddenly come back to him then. Maybe he was wishing for the same peace now as they had shared that dismal day. He couldn't afford any more of a delay, so Neji lead the way out of the woods and back out to the road.

Tenten was glad she had dodged another potential bullet. If Neji had found out about Hikune at such an inconvenient time, she really could not fathom how he would react. Doubtless it would be in a manner unhelpful to their cause in Katabami. She gave him a grateful smile while they walked and he seemed satisfied with it.

When they entered the Curry of Life shop lunacy again resumed.

Inside Lee was already seated at a table with Fujita and the others. It appeared the old woman had gone to the back to prepare food, given the table was set and ready for guests. Neji and Tenten joined them, catching part of Lee's recollection. "Old Lady Sancho's curry saved my life." He said, stirring a spoon in a glass of water, "Back when I had just become a genin, and Gai-sensei was giving me special training, we took part in a sort of marathon all through these hills."

Tenten shuddered, "I remember that. You invited me to come along, didn't you?"

"I did." Lee nodded, "You said that you were busy though, if I recall."

She glanced to her left where Neji sat. In actuality she had not been doing anything other than training with Neji, and she felt that it was not very fair of her to have not shared her time equally. The present day was no exception to her guilt. She was no fan of marathons either. Neji said nothing on the matter, and she was glad he did not have to remind Lee why he had been neglected.

Sancho overheard the exchange and laughed, "I remember how you and your teacher would run side by side, not letting wind or rain stop you!" She tossed in a few spices to the pot she was mixing, "You ran by our shop three times without fail, and we even caught you asleep, still going strong!"

Lee scratched his head, "It is such a blur..."

"Oh yes, and you gave us quite a scare, Karashi and I." Sancho added, "On the third day you finally dropped from exhaustion. My son was so impressed with your strength he happily made a special curry that was quick to rejuvenate you."

"Yes! That is right!" Lee cried, "It was as if the fire of the sun had leaked into my mouth and reawakened my soul!"

"Doubtless it was painful." Neji observed.

Sancho passed out a plate of curry to each guest at the table, looking proud of her work. It did not look terribly appetizing, what with a strange tar-like consistency and a smell that wreaked of hot sauce and other maniacal herbs. Fujita looked from his plate to Lee, and then back to his plate.
"Baa-chan made the Curry of Life especially for us, so let us dig in!" Lee proclaimed, "Itadakimasu!" He then spooned up some of the boiling mixture from his plate. Fujita, not seeing any kind of reluctance from Lee, figured he ought to try something outside the normal diet of the Hyuga. After he had also taken a bite, Tenten hazarded one as well, followed lastly by Neji.

Lee's face turned pinkish, but he was enthralled by the flavor, and continued to shovel the stuff into his mouth at an unsafe rate. His teammates radiated a hellish scarlet in the same manner before screaming in shock. Rokusuke and his companions, who had also experimented with the stuff, were hollering in anguish. Sancho seemed unfazed by the pained reactions.

"It...it's...good." Fujita gasped, his white eyes filling with tears, "I...I-like...it..."

Lee looked over to Sancho, his plate nearly empty, "By the way, I have not seen Karashi-kun yet."

"Karashi was inspired by your hard work and became an energetic, bright boy." Sancho told him, "Perhaps too energetic...he left for the city. It's really my fault for telling him to get stronger..." She looked away sadly, "I'll become a man and join the Kurosuki family, is what he said."

Lee slammed his plate down onto the table, highly troubled by the news. Sancho noted his quivering shoulders, and quickly said, "But I'm not blaming you, Lee. Please don't worry about it!"

Tenten managed to drink from her glass of water, and added, "It's too late for that, I'm sorry to say."

"It is my responsibility." Lee said angrily, and then raised his hand, "Neji! Please add the retrieval of Karashi-kun to our mission! We must turn him away from the path of evil!"

Neji was still reeling from the curry, and his Byakugan had unintentionally activated after ingesting the concoction. Tenten offered assistance by raising his water glass up, and he immediately seized her hand to tip the cup back. His grip was uncomfortably tight, and by the time she had managed to pry her hand free Neji had already gulped down all of the water. He relaxed, and Tenten sat back, frowning in thought, 'Again? He's very...grabby today. It's painful.' She blamed it on stress.

The team leader looked back to Lee, "Very well. There's no reason to exclude him if he is already in Katabami." Sancho folded her hands in thanks and Neji continued, "We'll make this restaurant our base. First, we will investigate in the village and search for leads. From there, we'll come up with a plan and make our move."

"Yes." Lee agreed, looking dutiful.

Neji glanced over to the table where Rokusuke and his companions sat, "You three stay here. It would be dangerous if any of you were to be seen by the Kurosuki family." Rokusuke stared down at his plate, not saying a word. His friends also looked unsure of what their friend's hurry was.

Tenten blinked in surprise to see Fujita had finished all of his curry. He smiled at her, his face still bright red, "Are you going to finish that, Tenten-san?"

"Um...I feel I'm incapable of doing that, so feel free, tough-guy." She answered, pushing her plate towards him, and cringing when he took another bite of the spicy abomination.

By nightfall the Leaf genin had taken refuge upstairs in a room Sancho had offered. All were considering rest, but before they could even settle down, one of Rokusuke's friends rushed into the room. "We've got trouble!" He hollered, "Rokusuke...Rokusuke is gone!"

The other came up from behind his companion, "He must've left for the city all by himself!"
Tenten entered the room, having overheard the news, "He's crazy! If they find him they'll--"

"We have to go after him!" Fujita cut her off, not wanting to be reminded of the danger, "Neji-sama, if we go now there still may be a chance..."

His cousin looked at him for a long moment. He closed his eyes, sighing, "Let's hurry."

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Feeling they could catch up to Rokusuke faster without supplies, they left without provisions. They had not wanted to trouble Sancho, and left the shop in silence before following the main road. They moved swiftly, Neji and Fujita at the front of the formation, both watchful with their respective Byakugan. As the path snaked around a cliff side, a brief flash of lightning arced from one cloud to another.

Rokusuke had gotten a far start ahead of them, and he was nowhere in sight. In fact, he had already reached a graveyard on the outskirts of the city, where he dug frantically at one grave. He scratched through the soil, rubbing his hands raw, "Please be alive...I'll get you out of there."

"Hey."

Rokusuke looked up, startled by the voice. A tall figure in a hooded cloak was a short distance away, and he spoke again, "What are you doing there?" Rokusuke flinched, considering going back to his pervious task, but when he flicked his eyes to the side he realized he was surrounded by a number of hooded men: agents of the Kurosuki family. His shriek was cut short.

A few hours later the sun rose. The Leaf ninja descended the steep slopes in the early morning light, before taking cover behind a rock formation. Katabami was below, nestled beside a riverbed and towering cliffs, and Fujita was unnerved by the stillness of the village.

"The terror coming from this place chills my blood." He said softly, "I wish aniki were here..."

"What?" Tenten laughed awkwardly, "Why would your big brother need to come on a mission like this? We can handle it!"

"Quiet down, Tenten." Neji admonished lowly, "Before we can begin searching for the Kurosuki family we need to locate Rokusuke and Karashi. They should be near."

Lee spoke up from the back of the group, "We also need to keep in mind what Gai-sensei said. If the leader of the Kurosuki family was one of the Seven Shinobi Swords then we must go with caution."

"You can't always rely on what Gai-sensei says." Tenten pointed out.

"What are you talking about, Tenten?" Lee rounded on her, hissing, "You, my dearest friend, should know that our mentor has never lead us astray!"

"But he has lead us in circles." She smiled, "On occasion."

Lee shook indignantly and Tenten ended her goading, seeing how seriously he was taking the joke. Neji turned to face them, displeased with the example they were setting for Fujita. "The both of you need to find a way to silence yourselves." He warned, "Before I find it for you. We need to begin our investigation now."

He moved stealthily down the rockface, and his teammates followed quietly. Fujita had rather liked the banter between Lee and Tenten, and he did not understand why Neji felt so threatened by it.
They had closed in on the village, and stopped just on top of a small cliff wall. It overlooked the back of an enormous palace, situated at the mouth of the gold mine.

"Is that it there? The mine?" Fujita asked faintly, and Tenten nodded to him in confirmation.

Already in the waking hours of the morning people were entering and leaving the mine. Those who went in with empty carts left with a cumbersome haul. The genin observed as an elderly man exited the mine, carrying a basket on his shoulders that was much too heavy for him. He eventually caved, his knees buckling, and his burden hit the ground when he did, scattering stones everywhere.

Two cloaked guards noticed his blunder and left their post in front of a shed. "What are you doing?" One of them growled, "Hurry up and get to your feet!"

"If you keep slowing down work we'll call the boss." The other added, "Then we can plan your funeral!"

"I'm sorry!" The old man prostrated in front of them, barely having the strength to do so. Even after they demanded he get up, he was simply not able to. Their threats persisted, getting more savage by the second. The man was quickly frozen with fear.

"That is unforgivable! How they're treating him!" Fujita hissed furiously.

"Calm down, Fujita." Neji warned, "Your brother wouldn't want you to lose your head here."

"But if we don't do something they might kill him!" He retorted desperately.

"Leave this to me, Fujita-kun!" Lee offered and bounded down the hill with a grin.

"Lee! Brash much?" Tenten called after him.

Four guards had by then responded to the old man's trip and had encircled him. "Go on. Hurry and pick those up." A newcomer demanded, watching delightedly as the old man scrambled to replace the rocks that had fallen from the basket. His laughter faded when Lee's fist rammed into his gut, and he bent double before stumbling to the ground in anguish.

The others balked in surprise, giving Lee the opportunity to pummel them. They fell prey to swift, well-aimed jabs, one tumbling down after the other without putting up a fight. Lee backed off when he had succeeded, and waved up to his lofty comrades.

"What skill!" Fujita chirped in awe.

Neji was less thrilled than his cousin, and lead the way down to Lee's impromptu battle ground. Lee wanted to make certain the victim was unharmed, "Are you alright, sir?"

The old man was terrified of them, "What have you done?"

Fujita offered him water but the geezer knocked the canteen away frantically. "What's wrong?" The young boy asked.

"Please! Hit me! Kick me!" The old man cried, "Knock me unconscious like those guys!"

"Why on earth would we do that?" Tenten asked, folding her arms, "Are you on some unsafe medication, sir?"

"If you're not going to do it then I'll do it myself!" He decided aloud, attempting to punch himself in the face.
Lee quickly grabbed his arms, halting him, "What are you doing? There is no reason to act that way!"

"This is awful. If they find out I'm the only one who's okay, I don't know what they'll do to me!" The old man lamented pitifully. He jumped in fright when a gong was struck suddenly, that rang out from the front of the palace. The sound had all of the shinobi on alert.

"Were we spotted?" Tenten wondered.

"No...it's the funeral gong," The old man said sadly.

"Funeral?" Neji repeated.

He explained further, "It's for those who have betrayed the Kurosuki Family's boss, Raiga. He has a funeral for them while they're still alive."

"Buried alive?" Tenten and Fujita cried in unison.

"Well, you see..." The old man sighed, "He's quite fond of it. When Raiga holds a funeral he cries bitterly."

"That is unusual enough to cause concern." Neji said darkly, "And that gong does not seem to be an announcement for your funeral. Whose is it?"

"I heard Rokusuke got caught. It's probably his." The old man speculated.

Shock rippled through the group, and, deciding not to waste any more time, they rushed on to find their employer.

A procession of hooded men carried a white coffin into the graveyard. A grave had already been dug and they ceremoniously lowered the casket down into the pit, awaiting their leader's command. The coffin shuddered and jumped as Rokusuke struggled in a panic inside of it.

Raiga stood on top of a nearby hill, talking to himself, "It makes me happy. It brings back memories of when I first met him."

"Really?" A small voice echoed, "That's nice."

"Yeah." Tears slid down the nukenin's face, "When we first arrived, he asked us to manage this mine. He was happy to be freed from the tyranny of those former rulers. He smiled cheerfully...he was a good person." He rubbed at his eyes, "Funerals are wonderful. They touch my heart."

"Will I also have this kind of grand funeral with people lined up?" His companion asked again.

"Don't be ridiculous! I won't give you a funeral, because you won't die until I die, understand?" Raiga snapped, "I don't have to give you a funeral to remember the good times. You have always been good, Ranmaru."

"Raiga..." Ranmaru whispered, "They're coming...and they will show themselves soon."

Raiga smirked, "Good. I'm eager to see what kind of people they got help from..."

From the far side of the graveyard the Leaf ninja kept watch over the bandits with Rokusuke's coffin. Neji scanned the area with his Byakugan, seeing their employer was indeed in the casket, "He seems to be alright. He's still alive." He took a head count of their enemies, "If we can defeat those guys
around him we can save him."

"We'll have to be quick." Tenten said lowly, drawing out a few smoke pellets, "Are you ready, Fujita-kun?"

"I am!" He confirmed. The kunoichi threw the bombs out to the congregation. They scattered after they had detonated and prepared for an enemy attack. The Leaf ninja charged fearlessly, Tenten filing off to the right, and Lee to the left. Fujita stayed near his cousin to take on those in the immediate area of Rokusuke.

Tenten summoned a three-chamber staff, and wheeled it around expertly as she approached. The two bandits who had closed in fell almost as quickly as they had attacked, both getting savage blows to the face. The combined Jyukken of both Neji and Fujita overwhelmed their opponents, while Lee knocked another rogue back in Tenten's direction.

"Got him!" She cried, smashing the staff into the side of his neck. He crumpled, and Lee went after the last cloaked foe on his feet. It was bizarre how he was running pell-mell through the cemetery, but Lee did not think much of it once he had caught up.

Lee lunged, but pulled his punch at the last second. Even though he had not been hit, the straggler in the cowl fell backwards and his hood slid down. Lee recognized the youth to be none other than Karashi. The man cowered on the ground, and the rest of the Leaf genin gathered around to observe.

"This is Karashi-san." Lee introduced awkwardly, scratching the back of his head, "Though I did not think we would find you here..."

Tenten raised her eyebrows, "You mean...this is Old Lady Sancho's-?"

"Son?" Fujita finished.

Karashi folded his arms and stared at the muddied ground, too stubborn to submit to them. Lee tried to speak to him anyway, "Karashi, is it true what Baa-chan said? That you joined the Kurosuki Family of your own free will?"

"So what?" He grumbled, "Raiga-sama is amazing! He threw the Akudaikan family out of the Katabami gold mine and freed the villagers!"

"Every day Sancho-san is dependably making curry in your absence, worrying about you." Fujita told him, "Is that fair at all to someone who loves you?"

Tenten glanced to the younger boy and for a moment he looked too much like his brother. His eyes were focused and honest and a shiver coursed through her. When Neji gave her a questioning look she quickly composed herself, not willing to get him suspicious again.

"Leave this to me." Lee said, stepping in front of Fujita, "Karashi-san, you saved me with the Curry of Life, remember? You are able to make such wonderful curry, but you are in a gang in which the boss mocks life. Why?"

"Fuh! No one will praise me for making curry." Karashi growled, "I was born to this world as a man, and I must build up my strength to take my place on this earth; to be important! It's better than staying at a restaurant where barely any customers go."

Tenten exchanged a glance with Lee and asked, "Would you care to revise his theory?"

Lee's fist cracked against Karashi's cheek, sending him back several feet and back down to the mud.
Fujita could not help but flinch at the unexpected contact.

"That curry that you're making light of saved my life, Karashi-san. You can save more lives if you only put your heart and soul into it!" Lee told him, raising his fist, "Even for a person like me, nothing is unreachable when I set my mind to it! I also believe...that you were a stronger person before all of this."

Karashi watched him with uncertain eyes, unsure of what to believe. "Promise me that you will cut your ties with the Kurosuki Family?" Lee said, watching him steadily, "Promise?"

There was a long moment of silence before Karashi shifted, and then bowed to Lee. "Understood." He agreed quietly, "I'm sorry. I'm...sorry."

Tenten smiled, resting her hands on her hips, "Hm. That's settled!"

"Hey!"

They rounded about, hearing a muffled voice resonating from behind them. "Is anyone there? Get me out of here!"

"Rokusuke!" Neji recalled, dashing back to the coffin. While they had been reprimanding Karashi, they had left their client to suffer longer in the casket. He and Fujita quickly pried off the lid and released the trapped man. He sat up immediately, gasping for air.

"Thanks...you guys..." Rokusuke said between heavy breaths.

"Sorry to keep you waiting." Fujita smiled, "It's good that you're unharmed."

"No, I'm the one who's sorry." He said miserably, "When I thought I could save my friend I couldn't just stand by and wait. Still, there was nothing I could do..."

Fujita understood his heartache, and helped him out of the dismal container. Lee kept a watchful eye on Karashi and Tenten looked to Neji, seeing his gaze was locked on a high cliff wall.

"What's wrong, Neji?" She asked, "Did we miss something?"

In the distance he could barely make out the outline of a spectator. He was startled fantastically when a pair of blood red eyes seemed to snap up in front of him. He jumped back in shock before realizing it was an illusion. The phantom he had seen, Neji was certain, was not on their side, "What is this? A piercing feeling..."

"Neji-sama?" Fujita came to stand beside him, also sensing something.

"We are being watched." Neji told them, "I think...it's Raiga."

"Whoa." Tenten muttered, "Where is he, can you see?"

"At the top of that hill." Neji observed the formation ahead, "We should hurry." Abruptly he broke away from the group, racing in the direction of their last foe. They tore after him, having difficulty keeping up.

"Karashi-san, I am leaving Rokusuke in your care for now." Lee told him, and after receiving an affirmative nod he followed the remainder of his team.

Silence hung eerily in the valley. They scaled the slopes but found nothing at the top.
"Where did he go?" Lee wondered aloud. They waited for a moment, and only then did it dawn on them that visibility was diminishing. Mist rolled in, creating a haze so thick their surroundings blurred and then vanished.

"This fog was created by a jutsu." Neji caught on, "This technique is used most commonly by Mist ninja...our foe, in this case."

"Gai-sensei was right..." Tenten marveled, and then grinned, "He was right."

"Neji-sama...I..." Fujita was suddenly anxious, "I can't see anything...my Byakugan is...I don't understand."

"What's wrong?" Neji realized it was a futile question, and figured it would be better to try it himself. His Kekkei Genkai activated, but was immediately confounded. Images melded together, and all movement of chakra was missing. He could see nothing save for the people next to him.

"Impossible..." His voice was incredulous, "There shouldn't be any technique that can block the Byakugan..."

His friends stayed silent, already aware that if their leader was impaired, they all were.

"How are they, Ranmaru?"

"They're amazing." He answered quietly, "Two of them are able to see chakra systems of people. It is probably the power of a bloodline limit."

Raiga tensed, "So they can see us?"

"Don't worry. My power is stronger than theirs." Ranmaru was calm, "So what should we do?"

"Everyone in the Katabami gold mine is depending on me." Raiga answered confidently, "I have to protect the peace of this village."

"Are you going to give them a funeral?"

"No. There's no point in giving them a funeral when I have no memories of them. I'll just dispose of them. Watch!" He raised two swords from beneath his cloak, "Ninpo: Thunder Fangs!"

Lightning ripped up from the blades, soaring to clouds overhead, and the action was not missed by any of the Leaf ninja. They watched the immense expulsion of lightning chakra arc upward from a nearby cliff.

"Thunder..." Raiga bellowed, "Roll!"

A huge bolt of lightning screamed downward with fatal precision, striking the group of genin below. The cliff side was torn apart by the energy current, and a cloud of dust was all that remained afterwards. He raised his chin proudly, "How was that, Ranmaru?"

"You're amazing, Raiga!"

Raiga laughed gleefully at how simple the task had been. It had actually been a very long time since he had ever needed to use such force, excluding his encounter with the Akatsuki. Ranmaru's illness had taken a perilous dip, and after medicine had been offered from the nukenin Zetsu, he had risked a mission in order to obtain it. Since then, he and Ranmaru had settled comfortably in Katabami, holding funerals and living richly.
The stillness was sickeningly quiet and Ranmaru spoke up abruptly, "Wait...the four of them are still alive."

"Impossible. I hit them directly with my Thunder Fang!" Raiga retorted, but then agreed, "Yet if you say they are alive then there is no doubt about it..."

"One of them is troublesome..." Ranmaru added softly.

_The enemy was close, but I saw nothing.' Neji thought to himself, hidden beside his teammates in a thicket of bushes, 'Strange. Even though this is the Hidden Mist Technique my Byakugan should have been able to see through it.'_

His throat moved perceptibly as he swallowed. He relaxed as best he could before using his Byakugan again. _This time...I can see them._ Neji's eyes focused on two forms dead ahead, some twenty meters. They were tall with functioning chakra circulatory systems, and he quickly noticed others stationed about the place.

He informed his team what they were up against, "There. Two at 52 degrees, southwest. Three at 12 degrees, southeast. One at 8 degrees, southeast. Another at 24 degrees, northwest..."

They shot out of their cover together, each peeling off towards a separate enemy. Fujita's speed was surprising, and he reached his target with senbon already clenched in his knuckles. He attacked swiftly, and watched as the throwing spines bounced back off of a boulder. _What is this?_ Fujita stopped, using his Byakugan, and could still see a circulatory system, _My eyes are...lying. My Byakugan is lying!_ He deactivated his Kekkei Genkai, at a loss over what to do.

At the same time his teammates were also discovering that the foes they were ambushing were not there at all. Neji tested his blood limit twice, grudgingly acknowledging how the illusion solely existed for his Byakugan. He was more helpless using it than he was viewing the environment regularly, 'There are chakra flows through virtual images? What is the cause of this?'

Lee called down to his teammates from where he hung upside down from a branch protruding from the cliff. He too had discovered that their enemies had disappeared, and was awaiting direction on what to do next. _But Neji was the one who ordered us to attack how we did...'_ He observed, _'If he was mistaken...is he still reliable?’_

"One is on the cliff. One is under the cliff. One is on the right, and the other on the left." Ranmaru reported, viewing the struggling Leaf ninja below.

"I can't give them a funeral...but I'll make sure nothing is left." Raiga smirked, raising his swords again, "Lightning Banquet!" He jammed the blades into the dirt, letting a ruthless current spike out and over the side of the cliff. The electricity rampaged for the nearest foes, striking Lee first on the way down, and the others on the way as it streaked ahead. Cries of shocked pain followed.

Raiga lifted his swords again and hopped down the slope, eager to see the result of his attack. The genin were splayed out on the ground near each other, unmoving and silent.

"Roasted corpses..." He shivered at the thought, "We are strong, you and I." He paused and then amended, "No...it's just you. You are the strong one, Ranmaru. It's only when I'm with you I can be this powerful."

"Wait, they're not dead yet." His partner warned, "They are only unconscious."
"Persistent bastards." Raiga hissed impatiently, "Fine. If I can't burn them, I'll smash them!" Lee was the nearest, and the lightning blades ripped downward for the heedless genin. The swords did not connect, however, after Lee had swept Raiga's legs out from under him and planted a solid kick to the nukenin's back.

He stumbled back, anchoring himself with his swords, and a soft sound of terror came from Ranmaru. Raiga glanced over his shoulder, panicked, "Are you alright? Ranmaru!"

His companion did not answer, and by then Lee was already on his feet. His face was an expression of blissful sleep, and he attacked with such ferocity Raiga was immediately forced back. He defended by crossing his blades, astonished by the Leaf ninja's rapid recovery. "Hang in there, Ranmaru!" He called, "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine." Ranmaru answered dutifully, "Raiga...this person is still unconscious!"

He looked back to Lee, who had him cornered against the cliff side. He stood motionless, awaiting the opponent's move. Raiga cautiously moved his blade forward towards him, watching in amusement as Lee batted it away, his eyes still closed. "Amazing." Raiga muttered.

"He's fighting purely with reflexes." Ranmaru announced.

"That's a nice face. It's engraving itself into my heart...perhaps a funeral is in order." Raiga decided, "I'm sure that if I give him a funeral I can cry again!"

Lee charged, knocking Raiga sideways, but the nukenin gained leverage with his blades and tossed him off to the left. Lee stayed on his feet, unaffected by the counter, and Raiga cursed loudly, "What's with this kid?"

"His moves are hard to predict, but for your sake I will do my best!" Ranmaru said resolutely. When Lee raced forward again Ranmaru foresaw the motions, warning his friend when to dodge and when to counter. It was difficult with such a quick, limber opponent, and Raiga's lesser speed made it an even greater challenge. He leapt clean over Lee, arcing down with his blade, which was caught between the boy's feet.

"Take this!" Raiga howled, plunging his second sword down, which was clamped securely in Lee's hands. Deadlocked, the nukenin struggled to get his weapons back, unable to imagine how an enemy could fight back while not awake.

Farther off, Lee's teammates began to stir. Fujita lay belly-down in the dirt, his gi matted uncomfortably with sweat and mud. His tired eyes adjusted, locking on to Lee as he battled with Raiga. 'Eh? He's asleep! How on earth-?' He tried to raise himself up to stand and collapsed back down again, "Gah!"

On the opposite side of the hill Tenten rolled over, her head still foggy. Her limbs felt as if they had been horribly fried. Lightning jutsu were no picnic, and she hoped she would be cautious enough to avoid them in the future. Neji was by then staggering to his feet, watching Lee unconsciously fight off their opponent.

"Raiga! Back up now!"

Neji was confused by the shout, "What was that voice just now?"

Lee swung his legs in a vaulting motion and Raiga backed away to evade, but the reverse kick connected with the back of his cloak, tearing it. A bundle fell to the ground with a shriek, and Raiga rounded about, throwing his hood back in terror, "Ranmaru!"
The discarded bag fell close to Neji, where he regarded it as Tenten joined up with him. "What is that?" She asked, completely perplexed. They bent down to get a closer look, wondering what value it held to Raiga.

Raiga fought back fiercely, desperate to reach his friend, but Lee was still too much of a roadblock. He swiped the boy aside with a vicious swordstrike, and moved ahead to retrieve Ranmaru.

Lee tumbled to the ground, and finally woke, "Huh? It felt like I was fighting in my dream..." He face-planted soon after, finding his energy was inexplicably sapped.

Raiga floundered around in the thick mist, unable to spot the tiny form he had lost. "Ranmaru?" He called softly, sweeping his gaze left and right through the fog. When he discerned he could not see a thing he rounded on Lee again, furious, "You bastard!"

He leapt, brandishing his blades, and was kicked away in mid-air. He righted himself as he fell, and Lee looked up to see Fujita standing over him, waiting in a Jyukken stance.

"Fujita-kun..." He rasped, knowing Neji would have his head if his relative was injured while he could have done something to prevent it.

"You twerp!" He snarled, "You don't know when to die, do you?"

"This is my first mission that has ever taken a turn like this." Fujita said evenly, activating his Byakugan, "As Sawako-sensei said, feel no fear when protecting your comrades! I do not fear you."

"Then prepare to die!" Raiga generated a ball of lighting with his swords, and flung it towards the young genin.

Tenten examined the bundle curiously, "What do you suppose is in this bag, Neji?"

"Byakugan!"

The question was all that was required to prompt the activation of his over-used bloodline gift. Neji inspected the bag, fairly certain that the small chakra circulatory system he could see inside was real. "Inside there is..." He paused, watching as the system vanished in response. It was then he made note of the tiny red particles that had been released into the air, "Could this be it? This dust is hiding his tenketsu...and creating false tenketsu?"

He glimpsed the red eyes that he had seen earlier, finally understanding that Raiga had been stripped of his advantage. He called out to Fujita, who was preoccupied with dancing around blasts of lightning. "Fujita! You and Lee combine forces and finish him!"

"What? But," He ducked beneath a sword-swipe, "We could not get near him earlier!"

"You can now." Neji answered, "His eyes are over here."

Without further hesitation Lee had also gained his feet, and charged ahead with Fujita. Raiga countered with jolts of lightning, but the Leaf genin were wary and quick to avoid the shocks. When they had gotten too close, Raiga let loose a burst of chakra and fled up the vertical face of the cliff. Fujita and Lee followed, encouraged by his retreat.

Raiga formed hand seals on his way up, "Ninpo: Rock Slide!" Slabs of stone cracked off from the top of the cliff, cascading down in a wash of dirt and rock. Raiga evaded the fall, and Fujita was confident they could as well, "Slow down, Lee-kun! Just enough to avoid the stones!" Lee took the
advice, and found the time to leap from boulder to boulder, just like his smaller companion, and reached the top just after Raiga.

A sweep of lightning greeted them, and Lee tumbled aside to avoid it. Fujita leapt higher, vectoring down with several throwing spines. The needles stuck the nukenin in the shoulder and forearms, and his movements became sluggish and pained.

"Fujita-kun, lend me some time, if you can!" Lee asked, readying to open his gates.

Fujita darted ahead like a sparrow, too fast and agile for Raiga to land a hit. Lee watched as senbon plunged into Raiga from all directions, disorienting and angering the nukenin. Fujita saw his opening, and although he was aware Lee was preparing to finish Raiga, he believed that he could do it himself.

He ended his shinjutsu assault and took an offensive stance. He had only ever used the technique once with his brother, and not very well at that. This time he intended to succeed, "Hakke Rokujuyon Sho!" He struck with two palms successfully, and began the transition for the reckless speed necessary for the multiplying assault.

Neji and Tenten had left their finding to help their friends, and after reaching the summit, observed Fujita's risky move. Tenten jumped in surprise, having never heard Neji's voice reach such a level of alarm. "Stop now!" He warned, "That technique is too dangerous!"

Fujita heard his cousin's command, and he blundered as he feared he would. His strike was just a centimeter off, but one chakra hole had been left open. Still mobile, Raiga managed to hastily counter against the young Hyuga, "Lightning Ball!" An orb of electricity ripped loose from the nukenin's swords, colliding with the struggling Leaf genin.

There was the briefest of moments in which Neji realized the attack would not have failed if he hadn’t interfered. He froze up, watching as Tenten shot past him just in time to catch the stunned boy as he hurtled backwards. She could feel the heat radiating from Fujita, which was worryingly evident on his skin and burnt clothing. Tenten set him down gently, grateful that he was still breathing, but uncertain of what injury he might have sustained.

Raiga turned around just in time to get a fist in the face charged by three chakra gates. Lee sent the unsuspecting nukenin streaking across the plateau, and met him at the far side with untraceable speed. He initiated the attack he had used in the Waterfall Village, confident it was far more developed and bolstered than before, "Fledgling Peacock!"

The sheer volume of punches and the friction it generated sparked actual fire. Raiga let out a short cry before sailing out and over the edge of the cliff down to the valley floor, plummeting with meteor-like speed. Recoil was evident when his foe hit the ground far below, and parts of the rock wall crumbled away feebly. Lee stilled himself, willing his gates closed, and glanced over to where Fujita laid incapacitated with his teammates.

He ran over to Tenten, where the boy was held protectively in her arms, "No...Fujita...will he be alright, Tenten?"

"I'm willing to view this as a glass half full, but..." She cringed, "He feels to me like he's cooked. That lightning is horrific..." Tenten looked to Neji beside her, frowning, "Give me the water bottle. Now."

He handed it to her without question, and she tipped some of the water into her palm before distributing the drops to his face and neck. After a few tense minutes of trying to cool him down,
Fujita stirred, unimaginably dizzy and disoriented. Even the tips of his hair were singed, making him look as if he had tangoed with a fuse box.

"Tenten-san?" He asked weakly.

"Yeah, that's me." She smiled at him, "Can you try to sit up, Fujita?" He did. Remarkably, he had far more strength than she had expected him to. He had even lifted the canteen and taken a generous drink from it all on his own.

After they were sure he was lucid again, Neji apologized to him. "Forgive me for interrupting the way I did." He said quietly, "But you are too young to attempt a technique like that in the field."

"But I just turned eleven last week~!"

"Don't use it again." Neji deadpanned. He had graduated early, granted, but he refused to see Fujita try his hand at techniques beyond his physical range. Hikune had helped save his life once, and Fujita at least deserved the same consideration, Neji believed. Tenten seemed to calm down after that, and suggested they move on.

"By the way, Lee," She added, "Nice finishing blow. It kind of reminds me of that time Gai-sensei-"

"You think so?" He chirped excitedly, hugging her, "Thank you, Tenten! I have worked so hard on that technique, and it is an honor to be compared to our beloved teacher!"

"Um. You're welcome." She patted his back and he finally released her.

"With their leader gone, there is no telling what the Kurosuki Family will do now." Neji told them, helping Fujita to his feet, "But...there may be someone who knows enough to give us an idea."

With that said they returned to the bottom of the hill, and the bag sat there helplessly where it had been left. They gathered around it, giving it a critical examination. "So this is Raiga's eyes?" Fujita asked curiously.

"It's a person." Neji told him, kneeling down and unzipping the bundle. They observed, quite astounded, that inside was a young boy who appeared completely unaffected by their presence. He was pale, with violet hair and cinnamon red eyes that were blank, trained on the dreary sky overhead.

Lee also knelt down and asked, "It was you who I was fighting in my dream, was it not?"

"Not just me." He answered, "Raiga and I are one."

"You two are one?" He parroted, a bit puzzled.

"Always...since then..." He trailed off, losing eye contact again.

All Ranmaru could focus on was the truth. He had not joined Raiga out of friendship or charity. The brute had stormed into his town one night in a pack of Mist Black Ops, ransacking everyone who was suspected of being a spy against their village. Raiga had found him in the scrap of a shed he lived in, though one could barely call it living, since his illness and strange power had isolated him from the rest of the community.

Ranmaru could see that their spirits were tortured in the same way. Existing, but never understanding what life's purpose was or its value. He was fine with being killed. Raiga, conversely, found a piece of him that had been missing for many agonizing years. He took the boy away from the village,
aborting his mission, and had lived with Ranmaru by his side ever since. Ranmaru's extraordinary gift made Raiga a force to be reckoned with, and Ranmaru was mobile for the first time in his life. They were only free when they were together.

"We found a reason to live, finally," Ranmaru explained to them, "By helping one another."

They stared at him, having never heard a story as equally farfetched.

"I wouldn't have had a reason to live if Raiga had never found me. Now...there is no reason for me to live anymore." Ranmaru said softly.

Fujita's face was wracked with immense heartbreak, "Don't say such a thing!"

Ranmaru wasn't listening, "Why are you hesitating? Now that I've lost my arms and legs I can't resist anymore. Fulfill your mission and finish me."

Fujita had heard enough, turning away. He refused to cry in front of his teammates, and choked back the tears that were threatening to fall. There was no way for him to help a person who so desperately wanted to be destroyed. It was against everything he had been taught, and he was unspeakably horrified by what Ranmaru had been reduced to.

"Our mission is to drive the Kurosuki Family out of this village." Neji reminded his teammates, "If Raiga isn't around he won't be a threat to the village. All that's left is to secure the village from the rest of the gang."

"But what about him?" Tenten asked, gesturing uncertainly to Ranmaru.

He did not answer at first.

A short while later they had scaled the top of the valley wall, where a small shack was stationed for storing supplies. They had taken Ranmaru there and bound him against a support beam inside the shed. The boy kneeled with his eyes shut, completely wilted.

"Is it really necessary to tie him up?" Lee asked guiltily.

Neji shook his head, "That isn't the reason for this."

Tenten stared at Ranmaru, worry eating away at her stomach, "At this rate, he might die...he's a sick kid and he hasn't been treated properly in who knows how long..."

"We'll come back to help you later." Fujita promised the boy, before shutting the doors and setting a tag as Neji had instructed.

"Even a chakra seal?" Lee asked pointedly.

"It can't be helped, since he is still our enemy. He could have other techniques we have not seen." Neji told him, "This is a precautionary measure."

They left after that, though all were aware of the fact that Ranmaru was certainly unable to use any jutsu or pose a threat. Someone so incredibly weak was only strong in the wrong hands. It was pitiful just to look at his miserable face. Neji knew that he was currently harmless, and had only locked him up to keep him out of the way. He had not mentioned the truth because he sensed the sympathy his teammates had towards the boy. Appearing insensitive was one of his specialties, though it was never truly Neji's intention.
The Leaf ninja trekked back down the slopes towards Katabami. The sky was just as gloomy as it had been during their fight with Raiga, and a chilled breeze swept through the hills. Tenten carried Fujita on her back, after seeing his ability to walk had not fully returned. The boy felt so helpless with his emotions and state of injury, and did his best to appear steadfast. All were silent as they followed Neji.

Out of bored curiosity Fujita used his Byakugan briefly to scout ahead. Now without Ranmaru's interference he could see their surroundings clearly. He was surprised to see the Kurosuki Family, in its entirety, minus one leader, was lurking farther ahead. "We should stop here, Neji-sama." He advised his cousin, "The gang is hiding in wait on that cliff, 23 degrees northeast. They probably want to catch us off guard."

Neji used his Kekkei Genkai, scanning the area Fujita had reviewed, and agreed with him. "This is the final phase of our mission." Neji thought aloud, "Dislodging the unsuspecting followers."

They circled the long way around the cliff side, out of sight. Though it took a bit longer to come in range of the waiting gang, their ambush was incredibly successful. Lee waited with Fujita, since they were still recovering from the exertion of their previous battle, getting a front row seat as their teammates attacked. Neji and Tenten worked with fearsome precision, raking through the men left and right, landing finishing hits with little effort. After a short while, they were stunned and disarmed, and Tenten took the liberty of keeping the majority of the looted weaponry.

The group continued on, growing exhausted, but glad they had fulfilled their requirements. Once back in town, an angry mob was gathering around Karashi. A man in a blue tunic seized Karashi by the collar of his shirt, "You had better be prepared, Karashi! It's about time we exacted justice..."

He shoved him back roughly, and an older man added, "You enjoyed every moment of bullying us. Don't expect us to forgive you easily."

"I'm sorry, I had no choice!" Karashi pleaded, "If I didn't follow their orders the Kurosuki Family would have killed me."

A blacksmith raised his mallet, "How about I open that head of yours with this hammer instead of the Kurosuki Family?"

The people were in agreement with the idea, and closed in around the hoodlum with various instruments of pain-inflicting. Lee had managed to step between Karashi and the approaching crowd. "Step aside, Lee-san." One asked, but he refused to move.

Instead he got to his knees, lowering his head, "Please hit me until you are satisfied."

"Are you crazy, kid?"

"Karashi was once a decent, respectable person. I am to blame for him joining a crime family." Lee explained, "It is because of me that he came to believe that power is everything." Karashi nodded feebly with the explanation and Lee continued, "Karashi is still immature, but he has the talent to make life-saving curry. Please give him the chance to apologize and change by making curry."

"If Karashi follows the wrong path again," Lee added, raising his fist towards the boy's face, "I will punish him myself!"

Rokusuke spoke up at length, "Everyone, how about we let Lee-san and Old Lady Sancho deal with him? He's not worth our energy at this point."

A muttering followed in which the people deliberated. A positive response seemed to follow, and
Karashi heaved a sigh just before Lee swept him by his head to the ground to prostate before the people he had terrorized. They both thanked the villagers for their compassion, though Lee with a bit more enthusiasm. Lee's teammates were a bit doubtful of Karashi's sincerity, but as long as he was in custody their mission requirements had all been met.

"So that's it then?" Fujita wondered.

"Not quite yet." Neji answered, leading the way back out of the village.

It was no surprise when they returned to the shed that Ranmaru was still there. The seal on the door was untouched, and inside the small boy sat joylessly just where he had been left. "Are you alright?" Neji asked him.

"I'm fine, but what does it matter?" Ranmaru said softly, "I can't live on my own."

Tenten stared at him, deeply stricken by what he had said. Those were the exact words she had once told herself after her parents had been killed. On her own she had believed that she didn't matter, but thankfully the Hokage assigned her to a Genin team before she had any radical thoughts. Her teammates became her focus, and she was able to forget about how incredibly alone she was. Ranmaru's plight was a bit different, though.

"People don't always have a choice about surviving on their own." Tenten told the boy, "That's part of growing up, so stop acting so helpless!"

"But, Tenten-san..." Fujita said quietly, "It's very difficult, especially for people like him."

Ranmaru stared at the floor, "I was born in a weak body. The world inside that tiny hut was all I knew." His ruby eyes were filled with painful memories, "I have no memory of my parents, and I just got by on the scraps the villagers brought for me. But I had one power that no one else did..."

He smiled sadly to himself, "People found out about my ability and began to fear it. With time, none of the villagers would come by anymore...all I could do was wait for my death." Ranmaru's voice raised slightly, "That's when Raiga picked me up. I was saved."

"I see." Lee said quietly, "That is a harsh past."

Neji agreed with him wordlessly, and Ranmaru then added, "Raiga showed me the world that I had never seen. If we had never met I would have died."

"Raiga probably became one of the Seven Ninja Swords members by using your powers." Neji observed, slightly detached from the story. He was still trying to piece events together chronologically.

Tenten's expression had softened, "You two helped each other survive...but he used your gift for his own benefit. Didn't that bother you at all?"

"No. I have no sense of right or wrong, so it doesn't really matter to me." Ranmaru answered honestly.

"People fell by his blade because of you." Fujita pointed out, suddenly unsympathetic, "Do you believe you're truly alive by living like that? You need to live your own way." The boy looked as if he had been struck by an idea, "You should try the Curry of Life to get some energy, and then we can show you a better way to survive."

"Yes!" Lee conquered, "That will help you for sure!"
"Wouldn't that actually be harmful?" Tenten wondered, remembering how the curry had proven to be devastating upon ingestion.

Neji was also skeptical, "Fujita-kun...you could barely stand to eat that curry. Maybe you shouldn't promote it to someone more fragile than yourself."

"It took some getting used to." Fujita admitted, "But after eating a few servings I started feeling more energetic, I swear."

"That is the curry that saved my life!" Lee said matter-of-factly.

With Neji's permission, Fujita cut Ranmaru loose from his bonds and pulled the small child onto his back. "Until you find the strength to walk on your own, I'll be your body." Fujita offered smilingly.

They left the shack and stopped briefly at the cliff ledge. They peered down; at the distant bottom of the ravine Raiga's arms were visible protruding from a rock pile, a sword held fast in each hand. From such a distance it was difficult, but Neji managed to scan their defeated enemy with his Byakugan, and could not detect any trace of life.

"Can you see, Ranmaru?" Fujita asked. The boy peeked above his shoulders, staring down at the valley floor. His red eyes glowed briefly, and there, with a faint glimmer, he could see the most minute motion of chakra in Raiga. He smiled to himself, making sure not to tip-off the Leaf shinobi in any way.

They collected Karashi and Rokusuke before heading back on the mountain trail to their base. Outside of the shop, both of Rokusuke's friends were overjoyed to see they had returned unharmed. They ran into the restaurant, calling for Sancho's attention. She couldn't have gotten a word in edgewise after the team of ninja entered shortly after, with newcomers joining them.

Rokusuke immediately reunited with his friends, and Karashi timidly approached his mother, still filled with guilt. He fell to his knees, choking back a sob, "I'm sorry, Mom! Please...forgive me..."

Lee also spoke on his behalf, "He said he will dedicate himself to preparing to take over the Curry of Life Restaurant. Please forgive him."

Sancho turned to face her son, slamming a plate of sinister looking curry down on the counter. "First, you eat." She demanded simply. Karashi looked a bit put-out by the dish.

"That looks delicious!" Fujita cried, his stomach feeling supremely empty after so many battles, "If you're not going to eat that, Karashi, I will!" Ranmaru still rested silently on his back.

Sancho smiled at the young Hyuga, "Not to worry, I have all of yours prepared." She noted Ranmaru as well, "Oh my. That boy looks so pale!"

Fujita smiled sweetly, "Would it be alright if he eats with us, Baa-chan?"

Sancho nodded, and while they still had her attention, Neji thought to ask, "Please make mine especially mild, ma'am." Tenten seconded the notion. Sancho was happy to oblige, and turned back to her work in the kitchen.

Lee was surprised when Karashi abruptly thanked his mother for the food, and took a seat at the counter. One bite of the curry had painted Karashi's face a blistering scarlet, and Sancho glanced over to him with a smirk, "That's your punishment. It's 300 times stronger than usual, so eat up!" Karashi bent over the curry, eating solemnly as tears streamed steadily down his cheeks. He still could not see his mother crying quietly to herself in the kitchen.
By nightfall everyone had eaten well, primarily because no one, with the exception of Lee, had ordered the spicy curry the restaurant served. Fujita sat beside Ranmaru at the table, and noticed the small boy had not even touched his food. "Aren't you hungry, Ranmaru?" Fujita asked him, "It's alright, Baa-chan made it mild for you."

Ranmaru shook his head weakly in response. It was then Fujita wondered how long it had been since the child had last eaten. His movements were sluggish, and though sick people tended to have less energy, Ranmaru looked especially feeble. "Should I ask Sancho-san to make something else for you?" He offered at length.

"No, I don't need it." Ranmaru shook his head again, "I'm not hungry."

Fujita looked at him for a long moment, and then gave up on coaxing him to eat. He knew that the last thing Ranmaru wanted was something to help himself survive. He also knew that food would eventually be forced at him, with as many people as necessary to hold him down. *But no one can last that way; being forced against their wishes.* Fujita thought gloomily, *Ranmaru...where is your will to live?*

The following morning Rokusuke and his companions left early to return to Katabami, but not before thanking the Leaf ninja for the help and generosity. After Neji and Tenten had seen them off, they found Lee exacting his punishment for Karashi, which only happened to be simple training regiments that Karashi could not possibly keep up with.

They found Fujita with them, cutting beams to fix up the walls of the shop that looked worse for the wear. Overhead, black clouds hung threateningly, promising a thunderstorm. Sancho was pleased with their offer to repair her restaurant before the storm hit. Crumbling siding and a leaky roof were not problems either she or her son were able to fix. "Where is that son of mine anyway?" Sancho pondered aloud.

Neji glanced over to the kunoichi of the team, "Tenten, I'm concerned about Karashi and Ranmaru being by themselves at the restaurant. We're fine here. Could you go and keep an eye on them?"

She complied with the team leader's wishes dutifully. Back at the curry restaurant, Tenten found the dimmed lights suspicious. "Where is everyone?" She surveyed the room for a moment, "Karashi? Ranmaru?" There was no reply. Of course they were gone, she thought, *Hoodlum is as hoodlum does.*

Neji would definitely be displeased with their joint disappearances, she noted sourly. After having promised him she would get a hold of herself, Tenten was not about to panic and rally the team for help. Fetching the two would be easier to do on her own. *They couldn't have gotten very far...* She left the shop without warning her teammates first.

"Hey, is the boss really still alive?" Karashi asked, carrying Ranmaru down the mountain on his back.

"At the time, that Neji person couldn't sense it, but I could." The small boy answered. He remained silent for the remainder of the journey down into the ravine. Once on the valley floor, Karashi quailed at the sight of Raiga's arms raised up out of a pile of stones. The twin blades shone threateningly in the weak daylight.

Ranmaru peeked over Karashi's shoulder, eyes glowing red, and could see the faintest trace of chakra lingering in his friend. "Raiga..." He said softly, before prying himself out of Karashi's grip.
He tumbled to the ground pathetically, his legs locked from illness, and proceeded to drag himself to the rock pile. Karashi watched him anxiously.

"You were everything to me. I was only waiting to die when you told me I still had the opportunity to live." His feeble limbs hoisted him up where he was able to cling to Raiga's lifeless arms, "To me, being with you meant I was alive!"

The boy choked back a sob, drawing on what little chakra he had to offer, "I won't have a funeral for you either. Even if I have to trade my life I won't let you die." Ranmaru waited there, feeling the faint leeching of chakra take effect. He was so small and inexperienced, he knew, and the green glow of energy wasn't certain to revive his friend. He was overwhelmed by the exertion after a few minutes, and eventually crumpled over.

Karashi, startled, hurried over to the unconscious boy, "Ranmaru!" He shook his shoulders gently, "What happened to you? Ranmaru!" He picked him up, and balked in shock when the heap of stones began to tremble. Karashi tumbled backwards, not understanding how Raiga's once motionless arms had begun to struggle.

Tenten glimpsed over the edge of the cliff, observing how both Karashi and Ranmaru were flat on their backs down below. "What the-?" Lightning struck, and she leapt backwards in surprise. The bolt touched down, vaporizing the rock pile, and she could feel the tightest of knots in her gut form when Raiga had gotten to his feet, alive after all.

Karashi slowly edged away from the revitalized ninja, knowing to pick himself and run could prove fatal. Raiga stared down at Ranmaru's limp form, waiting for some reaction. The boy did not budge from his spot on the ground, and panic quickly set in, "R-Ranmaru? This isn't funny, you know, playing dead! Wake up now, Ranmaru!"

He knelt down beside him, giving him a gentle nudge, but to no avail. Raiga glared back in Karashi's direction, sending a ripple of fear up the man's spine, "What...did you do to Ranmaru?"

"N-No! H-He only..." Karashi stuttered stupidly, then got a grip, "He was gripping your hands and then you came back to life! After that, he..."

Raiga glanced down, still able to see the faint glow of chakra that had awakened him. He held the boy's hands tightly, hoping to return some of the donated chakra, but it had no effect. Raiga stared at his face for a moment, heartbroken by such paleness, such sacrifice, "Ranmaru..."

A long moment passed before Raiga carefully let the boy down, and stared back towards Karashi. He squealed in terror when the nukenin raised his blades, but was astounded when a storm of knives shot down from the top of the cliff. Raiga deflected the hail of kunai, and it was then Karashi could see Tenten racing down from the hilltop.

She had summoned a battle chain and cast it downward, letting the coils loop around the stationary nukenin. Tenten circled around him, binding Raiga with metal, and after thoroughly ensnaring him let loose another volley of flying blades. To her disappointment, he managed to counter, letting another bolt of lightning deflect the incoming projectiles. Raiga reeled back, snapping the chain, and then released a more concentrated blast of electricity.

Tenten let out a small cry when she was struck; her back slamming against the broad side of a boulder. She sat, shaking in pain, trying to think of a better attack strategy.

Raiga smirked, shrugging off the remaining links of the chain, "Are you that brat's comrade? Could you be that stupid?" He raised his blades up, fangs poised for a killing strike, but Tenten already had
a new weapon in her hands. His swords raked down, sinking into the used summon scroll, and she rolled away to safety.

Raiga rounded about clumsily, his countenance an impatient snarl. Tenten was on her feet, a Bo-staff held reverently in her hands, 'Though it's made of wood it won't do any good blocking that lightning...I have to hit him hard and fast!' She wheeled the staff around skillfully, and after he took a step forward, slammed down on Raiga's foot.

He yowled in unexpected pain, and Tenten seized the opening, jabbing his throat and abdomen in rapid succession. Raiga lolled backwards, unable to counter, and Tenten landed hit after vicious hit. She would have preferred to have used a metal weapon against him, but the effectiveness would not be worth the risk in an electrically charged environment.

Tenten paused, and in the split second her guard was down Raiga lunged, "I see an opening!" His sword arced forward and jammed. His eye's widened as Tenten reversed the staff's momentum, flipping the blade up and sending it streaking from its master's hand across the clearing. The sword stuck in the rock wall just above Karashi, who shrunk away in fear from the close call.

Tenten charged again, hoping to rid him of his second sword, but when the blade stuck in the wood he was prepared. He did not lose his grip as he had earlier, "This pole is annoying!" Point blank, Raiga discharged a massive lightning bolt, ripping through the Bo-staff and plowing into the kunoichi.

Tenten made a soft noise before hitting the ground. Karashi looked on fearfully when she did not get up again. Raiga turned back to the sulking man, approaching slowly, and retrieved the sword that was stuck in the rock above his head. "Because I'm crazy," Raiga said, lifting Karashi up by his shirt collar, "I can't understand why things ended up like this. Whose fault is this?" He was referring to Ranmaru, "Yours?"

"N-No! It was probably those guys from Konoha!" Karashi shrieked, thrashing when his feet began to hover over the ground.

Understanding flickered across Raiga's face, "That's right. If they hadn't shown up, Ranmaru and I would both be fine." His fist tightened around Karashi's throat, "So, where the hell are they? You know, don't you? If you don't tell me I'll kill you!"

"Sure..." Karashi wheezed, "I know..."

Raiga dropped him, and Karashi cowered away from him on the ground. He stared up at the nukenin uncertainly, wondering what he intended to do without Ranmaru.

"Bring them here." Raiga hissed furiously, "Hurry up and do it!"

"Yes, Boss!" Karashi chirped, hobbling to his feet and running back up the slope as if an invisible whip were at his heels.

Raiga looked back to where Ranmaru laid unmoving, "Wait, Ranmaru. I'll have gathered their bodies for your funeral."

Tenten stirred, finding that she was supremely uncomfortable wherever she had landed. It was nice how the jagged stones had cushioned her fall, and the smell of singed wood was also pleasant. She hobbled to her feet, exhausted, not surprised Raiga was nowhere to be seen. 'But where is Karashi? Did he make it?' She wondered, 'And what about...?'
The moment she spotted Ranmaru she immediately went to him, troubled by his state, *This child...did he really give his life in order to save Raiga?* She would have thought it noble if not for how twisted it was, that someone so young had already devoted themselves completely to another person. Tenten balked when the boy gave a small move, and she bent down to examine him, "You're not dead! Oh! Hang in there, okay, Ranmaru?"

She quickly set a list of priorities. Tenten scooped the boy up, knowing she would need to find a safe place to help him recover. The restaurant was simply too far away, *I might lose him by then...* She hazarded the perilous climb back up the valley wall, remembering the shack they had locked the boy in earlier. The sky had gone black, and thunder roared out over the mountain range as if conjured by Raiga.

It was a tiring trek back up the slopes, but Tenten managed to reach the storage shed with the ailing boy on her back. *Do you know why I'm going to take care of you?* She thought, feeling a new attachment for the poor child, *Because just as you were so willing to give your life for someone that you love, I know I would do the same.*

Fujita looked up when a drop of water pelted his face. He stopped working on a side panel of the restaurant, and looked upward, "It's started raining..."

"But we have mostly finished up." Lee observed, walking past his teammate, "That is enough for now, Fujita-kun."

He and the young Hyuga joined Neji, where Sancho was thanking him at the front of the shop, "I am so happy that you were kind enough to do all this for me! Thank you, boys, all of you!"

"Bad news, Mom! Bad news!" They looked down the road, seeing a frantic looking Karashi running towards them. He grabbed his mother about the shoulders, and Sancho's contentment vanished, "Oh my, what's wrong, Karashi?"

"It's Tenten-san..."

Lee's eyes were wide, "What happened to her?"

"She fell from a cliff!" Karashi cried, "It scared me half to death! We took Ranmaru to see the remains of his master and a bolt of lightning from those clouds struck down!" He shook his mother's shoulders, "It startled her...and it was such a long fall! I'm not sure if...if..."

"Oh heavens!" Sancho paled at the news, "Then you've got to help that girl right away!"

"We have to!" Fujita agreed, with Lee loudly voicing his sentiment as well. They looked to Neji, who seemed to be in need of more convincing. Fujita thought it strange, because he seemed to care about Tenten most of all, *I thought he would be quickest to lead this campaign...*'

Karashi looked at Neji for a long moment, sensing his doubt, so he added, "Uh...I'll go get some medical supplies. I'll catch up with you all in a bit."

"Very well." Neji said at length, before setting out down the road with Lee and Fujita in toe. After heading back towards the ravine, they took a shortcut through a patch of forest. Working on the shop had been no distraction from the fact that Karashi and the others had been missing, and with the subsequent information of Tenten's accident as well, Neji could only suspect that Karashi had been lying through his teeth.
'The question remains, though...what happened to her.' Neji thought, wishing he knew why Tenten had gone off without them.

"I do hope she's alright..." Fujita said quietly, his eyes downcast as they passed the tree line and raced along the cliff's edge.

"Do you really think Tenten would be harmed that easily?" Neji pointed out, glancing over to Lee, "Don't we know her well enough...to be sure something like lightning would never stop her?"

"Yes." Lee agreed, then sighed, "Perhaps Karashi has not had enough training...I am sorry."

Fujita was caught off guard, "Then...what's going on?"

"This is most likely a trap." Neji figured, "Or he may be being threatened by someone.

"The Kurosuki Family is defeated." Lee reminded his friend.

"But still..." The Hyuga prodigy was loathe to admit it, "My eyes may not be completely trustworthy."

After Tenten had taken shelter in the supply shed, rain began to cascade down on the valley. Lightning illuminated the dim shack, and the kunoichi vigilantly observed Runmaru, troubled by his weakened state. She did her best to bring his fever down and keep him warm, but she could do little else. It was then she wished she had some more formal training in medical treatment.

Runmaru's violet hair was fanned around him while he dozed. A sheet of sweat had lined his pale skin. He stirred suddenly, muttering to the girl next to him, "Where's...Raiga?"

"He's revived. That's the reason why you're so weak." Tenten told him softly.

"It's okay." He assured her, rolling to his side beneath the blanket, "I will die soon..."

"Don't talk like that! You hear me?" She snapped vehemently, "Think about the people that you and Raiga killed against their will...you expect me to let you do whatever you want? Die when you like? Kill when you like!"

Runmaru flinched away from her furious voice, some part of him understanding what she meant. How could he see himself entitled to such luxuries? He and Raiga had taken the right to live away from so many others; nothing more than wily thieves. Tenten wanted him to take responsibility for such crimes, but Runmaru was afraid that if he accepted it, he would be consumed by such darkness. 'Even if that time in my life was wrong...Raiga and I were together. It was our time.'

Runmaru didn't answer, and instead fell prey to a hacking fit. While Tenten made sure his coughing wasn't too rough, she noted that staying much longer would be dangerous, 'The storm is getting worse...we can't stay here. At least he's awake now.'

She pulled back the blanket, scooping the small boy up in her arms, "It's time for us to go. We need to get back to Baa-chan's restaurant, and I don't want to hear one complaint out of you."

"He is alive!" Lee warned, half shocked himself, as he and his teammates entered a clearing Raiga had been waiting in. Fujita steadied a kunai in his hand as he charged, and Neji quickly called a warning to Lee.
Lee knocked the knife out of the younger Hyuga's hand, startling him, and watched as lightning struck down on the plummeting kunai. Fujita landed beside him, not understanding, "What's going on?"

"The lightning he used before was created solely by his chakra," Neji explained, catching up to them, "Now he is using real lightning. We need to keep in mind how it behaves in nature, as well as in battle."

Raiga stood watching them, his eyes narrowed with hatred. His blades were pulsing with stored electricity, and the storm clouds looming overhead served as his secondary weapon. Lightning arced down, channeling through his swords before Raiga let loose several more strikes with a cry.

Neji called for his teammates to get down, and Lee and Fujita dropped immediately as instructed. The lightning struck nearby but could not accurately hit a target that was stationed so low. Neji observed with his Byakugan, noticing a pattern in which the beams struck and flowed, '

*If we can get through that electric field and bring this fight to close combat he will be overwhelmed without help from Ranmaru.*

"Fujita! Come with me." Neji darted ahead when the field had cleared temporarily. The younger boy followed closely, diverging as lightning lashed out at them.

As they ran headlong into the chaotic lightning thicket, Fujita remembered something about his brother. "Neji-sama! A rotation will protect against lightning energy to an extent," He warned the team leader, "I cannot use that technique, but I have seen Hikune-niisan perform the Kaiten to defend himself from jutsu similar to this. You can-" He fell sideways, a bolt of lightning just barely missing him.

Neji continued on, acknowledging what he had been told, *'He is correct. His brother is skilled with Raiton techniques, Hiashi-sama said. He would know at least one thing from training with a sibling so skilled.'* Lightning had struck just ahead of him, short of half a meter, and a follow-up strike was close behind it, he could sense. With no time to think about how effective it would be, Neji threw himself into a rotation, awaiting the next thunderbolt.

Lightning hit as he had anticipated, and Neji was glad that his recklessness had not cost him the day. The energy was immense but was conducted outward, into the ground with the rapid spiraling motion. Pain he was accustomed to only amounted to a prickling heat, with the slight sensation of nausea. When the flash passed he stopped, gathered his wits, and kept moving. He could see that Lee was following behind them up the hill, also dodging the sky-sent assaults.

Unfortunately, the new defense measure was also a burden. Every time Neji deflected a lightning blast he was slowed down, only to be caught in another shortly afterwards. He was not gaining ground fast enough, Fujita could see.

*'Aniki has taught me well...better than even Father.* 'He thought, rolling away from a thunder-made crater, *'I have chakra the same as his, he told me! I can do this!'* Fujita hurled senbon at Raiga, a number of them bouncing off of his upraised swords. The needles stuck vertically in the ground around the nukenin's feet, *There!*'

More throwing spines stabbed into the ground, and after Fujita was satisfied with the metallic ring around Raiga, he leapt to avoid an incoming thunderbolt. *'I can see it clear enough...'* He thought, if only a little, the lightning brushed over the needles in the ground with a quiver. It was an attraction that Fujita was ready to exploit. Chakra focused, heart pounding, the young boy streaked out into the open. Neji called for him to stop.
Raiga swung his swords for the smaller Hyuga, "Stupid brat! I'll fry you!"

Lightning ripped ahead, and then shuddered out. Raiga blinked, confounded, and then looked down to watch the electricity channel frantically into the miniature lightning rods surrounding him. What was left over continued ahead towards Fujita, a pitiful thread of energy that he easily avoided.

Neji raced ahead, quick to spot the opening, 'He's wearing down Raiga's attacks, letting the ground absorb them!' Fujita and his cousin descended upon the rattled nukenin. Neji, from behind, prepared a finishing assault, "Well done, Fujita!" A massive bolt of lightning roared down from the clouds even without Raiga's beckoning, striking the unsuspecting Hyuga heir.

Neji fell back, scorched, and before Fujita could react, a second bolt funneled down for him. He also stumbled, in horrific agony, realizing his mistake, The needles...they caught Raiga's attacks, but also...made a target for the real lightning.' He hit the ground hard, eyes shut tight from the searing pain.

Raiga laughed at the pathetic team effort, "You helped me counter against you, stupid, white-eyed dolt! You are limited by the extent of your chakra, but my power is boundless!"

"Is that something you say to someone who gave everything they had to fight against you?" Lee spat, having finally caught up from his evasive maneuvers.

"You again?" Raiga smirked in Lee's direction, 'I'm not going to give you a funeral this time!"

Lee moved cautiously, not wanting to provoke an attack as he removed the leg weights from his calves. Raiga wasn't all that impressed by the craters that the discarded weights made when dropped. He watched Lee steadily, eager to eliminate the last of the Leaf ninja.

Tenten had draped a piece of burlap over Ranmaru's head to shield him from the pouring rain. She trudged towards the restaurant, squinting to make out the figures up ahead, 'What the--? Is that Karashi? How did he...'

"What are you doing, boy?" Sancho cried, trying to pry her son's hand from her wrist. Karashi was dragging her away from a shop in a panic, desperate to escape before Raiga's next appearance.

"Mom stop being so difficult and come with me!" He snapped, hauling her to her feet when she sat down stubbornly, "There's no time!"

Sancho bit back with shouts of protest, before seeing the kunoichi approach, "Oh! Tenten-chan! Thank goodness!"

Thankfully Tenten did not have to say much to gain cooperation. Sancho invited them inside the shop, demanding the truth since Tenten had confirmed she most certainly had not fallen from a cliff. Karashi reluctantly, but accurately, explained the ordeal to his mother, leaving her appropriately infuriated...once again.

"My stupid son!" Sancho pounded the boy over the head with a ladle, "Stupid! Stupid!"

"It couldn't be helped." He whimpered, "The Boss is revived and we'll be killed if we stay here!"

"Run, then, if you want." Tenten said from across the room.

Karashi and his mother looked to the kunoichi, who was busy laboring over Ranmaru. She had removed the boy's sodden clothes and dried him off, desperate to try and warm him up again. "I
won't run." She told them quietly, "I won't give up. I'll save him."

Sancho walked over to her silently, observing the ailing boy. Ranmaru coughed violently before his blood eyes opened, he looked up at Tenten uncertainly, unable to speak anymore.

"Let's feed this boy the Curry of Life." Sancho decided, remembering how Lee had been saved, "It really does work wonders that even I don't understand." Tenten thanked her with a small smile, and Sancho promptly went to the kitchen to prepare the dish.

Karashi shook his head fearfully, "That's it! I don't care what happens to you two!" He ran upstairs, unaware of how Tenten was thoroughly ignoring him. He stared out his bedroom window, out to where the storm clouds were thickest, only able to imagine what was going on out in the valley. Still, even when he was terrified of what could happen, he could still envision Lee running that blasted marathon unconscious. The nerve of some people! Making you admire them and believe you can be like them!' He thought acidly.

Lightning struck, and Karashi’s eyebrows knitted into a frown, 'But...I don't have to be just like him to be respectable. Why did I go out of my way for an adventure when I was already on one? The thrills were different...but not always in the good way.' He sniffed the air, catching a whiff of curry that his mother completed. Curiosity made him venture back down the stairs.

Sancho had handed a plate of curry to Tenten, and when she presented it to Ranmaru, he still refused to eat. Karashi could immediately tell that his mother had not gotten the recipe quite right in her rush, just from the smell of it.

"The mix of spices if wrong." He informed his mother, testing it himself. Sancho was shocked to find him in the kitchen, tossing this and that into the pot.

"You remember how to make the Curry of Life?" She asked, bewildered, "Karashi?"

He finished swiftly, returning with a new plate for Tenten. His expression was of earnest humility, "Here. This is the true curry of life." She took it from him with an analytical look, before leaning down to Ranmaru again, attempting to spoon-feed him.

"Please eat this." She said tiredly, aggravated that he still turned food down. "What? You can't even eat unless you're with Raiga?" Tenten asked snippishly.

"Why save me?" He asked faintly.

"Do I need a reason to help people?" Tenten said pointedly, "Karashi and Sancho worked so hard to make this for you, to help you. Do you feel nothing after watching them toil that way?"

Ranmaru opened his eyes a margin, staring at the wall.

"If you don't feel anything, then you are the lowest kind of human." She knew she was blatantly opinionated, but she wanted to get through to him, "We, as human beings, live by supporting each other. If someone's in trouble it's only natural to lend a helping hand, am I right?"

Ranmaru rolled over from beneath his quilt, looking from Tenten to Karashi. Karashi smiled awkwardly, "Anyway, just take a bite. Try it."

Ranmaru looked back to Tenten, finally appearing compliant. Tenten offered him a small bite of curry, which he timidly nipped at. She was quite astounded by how he sat up, willing, if not eager, for more. Tenten handed him the plate, watching in fascination as Ranmaru ate fitfully and, strangely enough, voluntarily. 'It looks like we got through to him,' Tenten thought, 'Or he could just be
starving. How long has he been surviving on an empty stomach?"

Ranmaru finished, his plate bare, and Tenten took it from him. "Was it any good?" She asked, then added, "That's what it feels like to be alive."

His ruby eyes reflected genuine surprise. He stared down at his lap, small tears sliding off of his nose. "If that's so..." Ranmaru said softly, "I want Raiga to try this curry too."

Tenten sighed to herself and then smiled widely, 'He's himself finally!' She stood up, ready to rejoin her teammates, "Let's go."

Back on the mountainside, Lee fought desperately against the nukenin. Neji and Fujita were still out cold, and Lee was grateful Raiga was no longer paying them any mind. He sped past Raiga with blinding speed, plowing into him with a knee-kick, following with a volley of punches. Raiga reversed his hold on his swords, and lured a thunderbolt down from the clouds. It arced down, striking Lee point-blank range.

To Raiga's eternal surprise, Lee weathered the attack, coming out of it only singed. "This kid..." The nukenin muttered, "What's up with him?" He looked to Lee, his impatience becoming intrigue, "Why do you fight this hard?"

"So I can become strong enough that Gai-sensei can look at me with pride." Lee panted, smiling to himself at the thought, "That is my Nindo."

"Really? You live for a man named Gai, do you?" Raiga snickered, "In that case, have Gai conduct your funeral! I'm sure he'd cry for you while thinking of your efforts!" The nukenin summoned down two monstrous bolts of lightning from the sky and struck himself. Newly energized, he attacked again with greater force, "Ninpo: Lightning Dragon Tornado!"

A whirlwind of debris and electricity soared for Lee with a static scream. Exhausted and unable to counter, he braced himself for the impact, futilely. The thunderous dragon-attack barreled him over, crushing him against the ground, while electrocuting him at the same time. Lee tumbled head over feet with a grunt, rolling bonelessly down the slope.

"Please hurry, Tenten!" Ranmaru chirped, hanging on tightly to her shoulders as she ran.

"I have no problem with that." She agreed, turning back to Karashi and his mother, "We're going ahead, alright?" The kunoichi gained speed, racing along the path ahead. It was only after she had passed by a smoldering form stuck in a rock crevice did she turn around and stop.

Tenten stared at Lee (the aforementioned smoldering object,) who was unconscious and so devastatingly pathetic that she had to act on behalf of her secondhand embarrassment. She set Ranmaru down carefully (he stood on frail but functioning legs, at last) and kneeled down to Lee. She seized him by the collar of his jumpsuit, shaking him disapprovingly, "Hey! Lee! Get a hold of yourself! We're on a mission here!"

Karashi and Sancho rounded the bend shortly after, coming to stop beside Tenten and her incapacitated teammate. Karashi fell to his rump, exhausted from running and hauling a giant pot of curry on his back, "I...can't run anymore..."

Tenten held up Lee's burnt face for Sancho to see, "Oh! Baa-chan! Please could you help Lee with that curry of yours? He's out completely!"
"Oh gracious!" Sancho unlidded the pot hurriedly and began to spoon out curry onto plates of rice, "Judging from this poor boy, the others can't be doing much better. Karashi! Help me with the curry!"

"Tired..." He moaned.

"I'll help, Baa-chan." Ranmaru said softly, aiding her in the distribution of food. A plate was entrusted to both Tenten and Karashi, and Ranmaru had taken one for himself, "I want to give this to Raiga..."

Tenten gave him a doubtful look, "Ranmaru...he...he probably won't-"

"Don't wait for me! I'll be fine!" The violet haired boy teetered down the path without them, and though Tenten was tempted to stop him, she stayed with Lee. 'Raiga definitely won't hurt him. If anything, Ranmaru is better off on his own at this point...' She thought, 'He'll be alright.'

"Fujita might need this." Tenten decided, glancing over to Karashi, "Could you find Neji and give that to him, Karashi? We shouldn't take chances."

He nodded feebly. "Sure...I'll...I'll help him out." He lifted the plate he had been given and set off down a more rugged path that circumvented Raiga safely, while Tenten crossed the cliff closer to where the battle had raged.

Sancho, on her own, regarded Lee for a long moment, "Poor thing..." She ladled some of the raw curry into the boy's mouth, waiting for a reaction, and feared perhaps he might not respond to aid so late. Of course she wasn't all that shocked when he leapt to his feet a moment later, enthralled by the presence of his favorite food. Sancho could hardly believe her eyes once Lee had bent over the pot, eating with the ladle he had plucked from the restaurant owner's hand.

After a minute of gorging himself, Lee turned back to Sancho, his face a bit pinkish. He smiled somewhat mischievously as he bowed gratefully to her, managing to smash the crown of his head on the ground. 'How flexible that boy is.' Sancho observed. His state was irregular, however, and more than just a little disconcerting.

"The world is spinning." Lee said groggily. "S-spin-ningg."

"Oh dear. You are feeling better aren't you?" She asked hopefully. He nodded in confirmation, his movements emulating the elasticity of loose rubber. Such behavior made Sancho think back to try and pinpoint what could have off-balanced him.

She quickly remembered how she had been urging Karashi to hurry with his preparations of the curry of life. After asking him to set the pot in a carrier, he had accidentally bumped into a shelf, knocking a wine bottle into the mixture. Curry splashed up as a result of the displacement, landing in his eyes, scalding him, and causing him to drop the pot on his foot. Agonized further, he hopped backwards, clutching his foot, crying, smashing his head near another shelf, and if he then had the wherewithal, would've side-stepped the pan that crashed down. Of course it landed on his head.

"That wine bottle did it." Sancho noted, "But there appears to be no problem with the curry's effect. The alcohol...might cause some delirium for these children. Dear, dear..."

Lee started laughing hysterically, unable to control the reflex, and ran backwards up the hill. Sancho sat by the pot, at a loss of how to proceed. Lightning streaked through the sky overhead.

Tenten had found Fujita on the far side of the clearing, laying at an odd angle beside a boulder. She
rushed to him, gently nudging his shoulders, "Fujita? Not again..." Tenten gave him a taste of the Curry of Life, and ducked back when he sat up suddenly. The breath of fire had her a little worried too, but at least he was awake.

"Oh...Tenten-san." He took a sharp breath, "You're alright? I thought...well, Karashi said you fell from a cliff."

"How original." Tenten commented, setting the plate down, "We've got to get going now. Still have some fight left in you?"

"Um. Not really, no."

"Yeah, me neither." She sighed again, "Could you spot Neji for me? I know Karashi's looking for him but I just want to check."

Fujita nodded weakly before activating his blood limit. He strained for a few moments, scanning their surroundings, and then relaxed. "I think he's still unconscious. He's southeast of here, just a bit farther ahead." He frowned inwardly, "But what about Raiga?"

"We'll deal with him in a bit, just lay low for now." Tenten instructed before slinking off behind a rock formation. Hopefully the nukenin wouldn't notice how his opponents were up and about again, she thought. It would be highly inconvenient to fight at such a time. As Fujita had predicted, Neji was still out even with Karashi tending to him. She stopped beside the two, wondering what the delay was.

"He won't wake up?" Tenten observed.

Karashi sighed heavily, "Not yet he won't. Is Neji-san always this finicky?"

"Now that I think about it," She smirked to herself, "I'll have to say yes. Don't tell him I said that, though." Tenten lifted the plate from the ground and shoveled some of the curry into her teammate's mouth, "Buck up already, Neji!"

Karashi's warning came too late. Tenten observed as the Hyuga heir stirred for a moment, extremely discomforted, and clawing at his throat before passing out yet again. Tenten raised her eyebrows, "I...don't think I've ever seen his face so red before..."

"For some reason he has no tolerance for this curry." Karashi pointed out, guiltily remembering how he had added wine into the mixture, "Er...does he have any resistance to alcohol at all?"

"Oh, I doubt it. Hyuga tend to be digestively frail by nature." Tenten pulled Neji into a sitting position, gently slapping his face to wake him. She glanced over to Karashi, "Alcohol? What is in that curry?"

"Nothing helpful, I guess." Karashi groaned.

Raiga prowled expectantly across the plateau, keeping watch for any sight of Lee. During his brief vigil he spotted a figure up ahead sulking near a boulder, momentarily illuminated by lightning. Raiga kept his swords at his belt, not eager to fight a weakened opponent, "You're still moving? I'll have to finish you!"

"Raiga."

The nukenin immediately recognized the voice. Certainly not Lee, and when he edged nearer, he
could not help but grin to see Ranmaru alive and on his feet. "You're...alive." He said quietly, watching the small boy hobble closer. Raiga closed the gap in a few strides, easily lifting him up, "You're well again, Ranmaru, somehow...but you're still so small. I swear this time I'll protect you properly!"

The violet haired boy was smiling, feeling some of the old thrill of being so high up off the ground. Before another word was said, however, Ranmaru did what was most prudent of the time and spooned some of the curry of life into his friend's mouth, "Please eat this, Raiga."

"Good! You like it!" Ranmaru smiled, presenting him with another spoonful, "This is just my way of guarding our friendship. Is it...is it alright?"

Raiga chewed, visibly puzzled, trying to discern what about the food was so strangely satisfying. Could use a bit more spice, he thought. There was still an edge to it that not only filled his stomach, but also heated his chest on the way down and sharpened his senses, if only a fraction. Something was different.

"It's alright." Raiga agreed, compliant when Ranmaru continued to feed him, almost panicked. He wasn't hungry at all, but Raiga still noted how the entire plate was clear after a minute. He didn't know whether to blame it on Ranmaru's rush or his own neglected appetite. Raiga set the boy down on the ground, taking a seat next to him.

"Things feel strange." Raiga informed his companion, glancing over to him, "Hm. Have I always towered above you this way?"

"Like you said, I'm very small." Ranmaru was smiling so widely he feared his skin would tear, "Maybe I'll grow to be as tall as you one day, Raiga!"

"Fuh! I don't think so!" He was laughing.

Ranmaru was startled. Had Raiga ever laughed from sheer joy before? Not outside of a funeral, no. Part of him was still unable to believe the curry had worked, and another part of him was so immensely grateful that it he had gotten through to the person who was his friend and not a killer. The small boy hugged Raiga's arm, pressing his face against the bandages wrapped around it.

"I'm happy." Ranmaru said softly.

Raiga patted his head affectionately, "Good. I'll do anything to keep you that way, Ranmaru. You deserve anything you ask for."

"Do I?" Ranmaru looked up at his friend, "Raiga...I...I have a request."

"Anything you want!" Raiga reminded him, "Tell me."

"I...I don't want to live in Katabami anymore...it's so dark here." Ranmaru chose his words carefully, "Let's go somewhere far away, on an adventure. There are meaningful sights for us beyond funerals and storm clouds! Can we find them?"

Raiga was silent for a while, and Ranmaru stared at his knees. He had known it was a long shot. Known that changing who Raiga was at a moment's notice wouldn't change what had happened in the past. 'But I didn't change him. Now he knows what it feels like to be alive...I only...’ He closed his eyes sadly, 'I only meant to wake the good part of him up. The part that had been sleeping...like me.'
"Is that what you wish?" Raiga asked at length.

Ranmaru stared at him, nodding, "Yes, it is!"

"This place was kind of boring anyway..." Raiga decided, getting to his feet, and was then suddenly sent hurtling across the clearing. Ranmaru squeaked in terror, not expecting Lee, who had landed a surprise kick in on his friend when Raiga's back had been turned.

The nukenin caught himself, skidding out over the muddy plateau before drawing his swords. "Get away from him, bastard!" Raiga warned Lee, his voice venomous.

Lee, drunk as a skunk, glanced down to Ranmaru. His cheeks were colored, and he had to forcibly un-cross his eyes to get a look at the boy. "O-oh! Ranmaru-chan...I...buh...did not see you there!" Lee greeted amicably, "Sorry...I must get away...you...from..."

"Um...alright." Ranmaru said uncertainly. When Lee began his shaky approach towards Raiga he added, "Oh wait, Lee! Please don't fight him! You don't have to!"

Lee misinterpreted what Ranmaru had said and swiftly charged, "Here I come! Hic!" He was impeccably fast but not very alert. As he dashed he tripped over a stone and fell on his face, but his legs kept moving, obediently dragging him closer to his target. He somersaulted, his feet beneath his head again, where they belonged, and flew onward.

Raiga let loose a jolt of lightning from his blades, furious when he missed the goofball. Lee was able to bend his body at incredible angles, turning this way and that to avoid the lightning. Raiga attacked with strike after strike, hacking into the ground, missing Lee by inches. The drunken Leaf ninja reached him, knocking his foe back with another solid kick.

Raiga regained his balance quickly, and connected his twin swords at the hilt, spinning them ritually above his head, "Ninpo: Lightning Strike Armor!" Chakra-induced electricity crackled off of him and then intensified, spreading like a sheet across his entire body. "I've had enough of you!" Raiga howled, racing ahead, just in time to meet Lee who plowed into him in a manner similar to that of a charging bull.

The impact was devastating, and both combatants tumbled back a great distance, stunned by the other's assault. The dull hum of thunder reverberated through the air. Raiga pulled himself up out of a small crater, and observed Lee across the clearing flat on his back, 'That hurt...if I hadn't been protected by my armor then it would've been my funeral.' He struggled back to his feet and gathered his discarded weapons.

He stalked over to Lee, still irritated, even when the boy showed no signs of continuing the fight. Raiga pointed one of his swords at the dozing shinobi, poised to fry him. A small hand carefully lowered the blade down, "Raiga..."

He glanced over to Ranmaru, glad that he had not been injured, "This person is troublesome, Ranmaru, I'll get rid of him for you."

"That's not what I want!" Ranmaru's eyes were pleading, "I would be happier if we left now."

"But this guy-!" He looked to Lee, utterly pathetic; snoring like a baby, and realized that killing him would be more embarrassing than anything else, "Well...never mind." Raiga replaced his swords at his hip before lifting Ranmaru up again, and seating the small boy on his shoulder. The other Leaf ninja had not even crossed his mind. There was something newly calming in the breeze.

"Let's go somewhere where we can avoid these pointless battles." Ranmaru recommended, referring
to their current rumble with the Leaf shinobi. Raiga was able to let go of it surprisingly fast, but only because Ranmaru was so insistent about it.

Raiga carefully picked his way down the opposite slope, balancing his friend on his shoulder, "Where should we go, Ranmaru?"

The boys eyes glowed red for a moment. His blood limit allowed him to scout ahead and analyze the surrounding landscape, "Up there...the river cuts through this valley...I want to see where it empties out into the ocean at the end."

"That is our way, then." He agreed, descending the cliff, and following a secondary path that ran parallel with the river.

Ranmaru briefly scanned the cliff behind them, where he could see the Leaf genin gathering together. 'I have never had a friend before Raiga. You Leaf ninja...were all so kind to me...people who I can call my friends should we ever meet again...but perhaps we best not.' He smiled to himself, 'You have shown me what it really is to live. Raiga has been protecting me for so long, the least I could do was show him the truth. I will try not to be a burden for him anymore...now...I can live for me.'

The thunderstorm had already begun to clear up by the time Neji and Tenten had joined with Lee and Fujita. Lee was still sobering up, terribly drowsy, and needed Fujita to support him with one arm. "Ranmaru! Where is he?" Fujita pressed, looking at his cousin beseechingly.

Tenten had not seen the boy since he had run off, and Lee's muttering was indistinguishable, even though they gathered that he had met up with Ranmaru at one point. Neji used his Byakugan wearily, and it took him a moment before he could locate their lost companion. "This might not be good." He murmured.

"Wha happen'd?" Lee croaked, rubbing at his nose.

"Ranmaru is already outside of the city. Raiga is with him." Neji reported, slightly unnerved, "For us, this marks the end of our mission, with Katabami liberated, but..." He couldn't deny that he did care what happened to the boy, "Ranmaru will have to work hard to survive alongside such a brute."

There was no point in going after them. Everyone was thoroughly exhausted, in one way or another, and Ranmaru most likely had gone with Raiga willingly. "I think he'll be alright. I mean, he has lived with Raiga for a long time already...he'll be able to manage a bit more easily now, I'd imagine."

Tenten commented, smiling.

Neji agreed, and the assignment officially closed itself. They returned to the Curry of Life Shop along with Karashi and Sancho, feet dragging and half dead. It was heavenly to collapse onto the beds that had been prepared for them, and the Leaf genin were all sound asleep in a matter of moments. Karashi and his mother were grateful to have some peaceful time to themselves to spruce up the restaurant.

Tenten woke in the middle of the night, sticky and uncomfortable. The room itself carried a foul ambience from their singed clothing and hair, 'Our collective stench is a reminder of our endeavor...but man! How did we fall asleep earlier?' Tenten thought that it may have been pure exhaustion that overrode olfactory discomfort. Then again, all of her teammates were male. Naturally, unpleasant smells affected them on a lesser scale. Again, she cursed her gender.
She dragged herself out of bed, snatched up her bag (or what she hoped was her bag,) and shuffled silently down the hall to the bathroom. The door was traditional rice paper, and appeared to be in need of repair. Tenten was genuinely surprised by the spaciousness of the bath, and immediately felt tension ebb from her muscles. 'What...a...day.'

She dropped her bag, noting the only light in the room flooded from a lantern suspended from a hook on the wall. Though dim, it was sufficient enough, and she turned on the hot water, hoping Sancho wouldn't mind if she cleaned the day(s) accumulated filth from her body. Tenten stripped down, tossing her battle-savaged clothes on top of her travel bag. A soft voice came from outside the door, "Tenten-chan?"

"Er, yeah, that'd be me." She answered, a bit guardedly.

It was Sancho, "Oh, I thought I heard a noise. You washing up dear? Go right ahead! Can I get you anything?"

"N-No! Don't worry about me! You just get some rest, Baa-chan."

"Ah, well, goodnight then, dear." Footsteps faded, and Tenten relaxed after the restaurant owner had gone back to bed.

After the encounter she had thought to acquire some modesty, and wrapped a rather unhelpful towel around her waist that she had commandeered from a cabinet. It was not much more than a hand towel, to her disgruntlement, but since everyone else was asleep she assumed she wouldn't have any more visitors unless they needed to urinate. Her torso was bare as she scrubbed herself down with a cloth, anxious to feel clean again.

Her thoughts wandered to Ranmaru, 'Hm. I wonder how he's doing? I know he's fine...but I can't help but feel we parted too soon. Will we ever meet again...on a...more friendly basis?' Doubtful. She sighed. What a day indeed. Tenten hoped against hope Ranmaru would grow up to be a person, perhaps a shinobi, who did not follow in Raiga's destructive footsteps. 'Knowing him, though, I'm sure he'll be a sweetheart.' She smiled to herself.

Tenten sighed again, profoundly grateful their mission had been a success...even at the expense of their comfort. She noticed the lantern light flicker for a moment against the wall. The kunoichi regarded the short gust for a second before realizing it was caused by movement. The door had opened. She turned around slowly, not wanting to alarm the poor slob who needed to relieve himself, 'Please not now...'

Neji's facial expression was not very discernable in the dim light, but it was clear he had not in any fashion anticipated such an occurrence. He noticed the lantern light flicker for a moment against the wall. The kunoichi regarded the short gust for a second before realizing it was caused by movement. The door had opened. She turned around slowly, not wanting to alarm the poor slob who needed to relieve himself, 'Please not now...'

Neji's facial expression was not very discernable in the dim light, but it was clear he had not in any fashion anticipated such an occurrence. He stood, utterly stilted and mute, wondering if he was in fact awake. Tenten sighed again, not willing to overreact like she had planned to.

She was sitting on the side of the bathtub, and since her lower half was pretty much covered, she shifted her focus to her barer parts. She was sure he didn't mean to stare. Tenten gave up on trying to shield her chest with the washcloth, and resorted to the humiliating reaction of crossed arms. If there was anything that reminded her how unbearably female she was, it was that instance. She found it very unfair.

Since he seemed to be trapped somewhere between shock and realization, Tenten figured loosening up the silence would snap her friend back to his senses.

"I guess next time I can advise you to knock." It was not her best conversation starter, "But what the hell, it's late at night so I blame myself. I smelled so terrible I woke myself up, but I guess you and
the others can live with yourselves for a little while longer?"

Neji seemed to gain some lucidity, "Um...yeah."

"Need to pee?" She knew it was blunt but it wasn't as if he was handling the situation any better.

"I...ye-"

"Fine, hurry up, I won't watch." She turned her back to him again, scrubbing her arms a bit more fiercely. Embarrassment was settling in, 'Oh hell...why now? W-why?" Neji had not moved an inch from the doorway. He was one of the most frustrating people she knew, Tenten had to admit. "Neji."

She repeated, "Hurry it up."

"I--" He stopped, realizing the futility of words. He wondered how it was possible she could be so permissive in an awkward moment. Maybe she was beyond the point of caring, he noted. She'd been through worse, without a doubt.

He went about his business and Tenten was impressed by how thoroughly she ignored his existence for thirty seconds. Shortly afterwards, however, he didn't seem to get the hint to leave. Perhaps it was because she hadn't reminded him to. He was finished, sure, but still distracted. Her form by lantern-light was oddly captivating, despite the unflattering towels she had draped over herself hurriedly.

Truthfully, though he had walked into the situation completely unaware, it was not her nudity that surprised him. Neji, in fact, could not take the human form all too seriously when his Byakugan was more than just insightful. He had glimpsed Tenten, along with several hundred (men and women alike,) others in his lifetime, with and without his bloodline limit. Neji's real wonder was about her smooth reaction. There was something curiously relaxed about her modest behavior, as well as her lack of screaming and tantrum-throwing.

Because of such trusting and tolerant conduct, Neji could not help but feel encouraged to stay. They had barely gotten the chance to just talk in several days, and the current location seemed to be placid enough. Even though his intentions were harmless, it was still completely inappropriate. He remembered that after a moment.

"Neji, you're stressing me out here." Tenten muttered with slight irritation, "Got something to say?"

He was quiet, taking the time to think. She was getting the impression that he really was trying to annoy her. "I'm sorry for my intrusion." Neji told her, and it didn't sound like an apology so much as an excuse. He went to leave, but she did catch him murmuring her name afterwards in such a peculiar tone her spine went rigid. The door closed and the lamp flickered.

Tenten continued to wash herself with only half a mind. Part of her was still waiting on Neji, irrationally expecting him to return and say what had really been on his mind. She shook her head, getting a grip, 'Oh yeah, I'm sure he had something very profound that needed articulating while I'm naked.' Then again, it didn't sound all that preposterous to her. They were growing up, she noted, and she couldn't deny any sort of recognition from Neji would elate her. It was kind of a confidence booster until she reexamined the circumstances.

'That's a whole different kind of attraction that I doubt he's capable of.' She sneered, and it broke her heart a little, 'Besides, I need to get out of here before the next encounter.' For instance, Lee dropping by a short while later would not be a welcome visit. Tenten finished scrubbing and then rinsed herself, draining the water and toweling off afterwards. Combating the new anxiety she felt would be a challenge. She dressed in a spare outfit she had brought with her before slinking back down the hall.
'He's probably asleep already. I'm overreacting.' She did that a lot, she noticed. Tenten entered the room quietly, setting her bag down, and settled on her bed. Fujita and Lee were nearby, snoring peacefully, and Neji was resting on the far side of the room. She let her eyes stray over in his direction, inquisitively, and found he was awake after all. His gaze was trained aimlessly at the ceiling. 'Great...he's restless now.' She wondered how she put up with him.

Tenten relaxed, settling her chin on her pillow and waiting for sleep to take over again. To her, the silence in the room was dreadful. She was still waiting for Neji to say something. She could sense there were thoughts that needed sharing. The silence persisted. She sighed, turning her head slightly to the left where she glanced back at him again. His white stare locked with her's, surprising her, and Tenten felt her pulse throb in her neck. 'Why am I so jumpy? It's just Neji...he's naturally this...weird.'

Rather than surrendering the staring contest she gazed right back, not expecting to achieve anything from it. It was quiet for a long time, and Tenten slowly began to understand that he was looking at her because he had seen her. 'There's not much else to see...' She estimated, but he apparently thought so. She was beginning to appreciate that look of his; the look of clinical discovery.

Tenten was not precisely aware of when the smirk appeared on his face. She was a bit miffed that he found something amusing about their dead-end interaction. She didn't return the smile, finally fed up, and rolled over to face the wall. Sleep was beckoning. Neji did speak after that, "Goodnight, Tenten."

"If you say so..."
Sasuke felt more alive when he fought on his own. The rational shinobi would have recognized that fighting off the bulk of a local clan on one's own was foolish, perhaps useless. Yet he was an Uchiha, exceptional in every right, and expected to be so. These people were united as the Shin clan, one of the few actual families to have first settled the Rice Country. Orochimaru wanted them out.

They cast Genjutsu with their instruments, flooding the air with eerie music alongside screams of pain. His Sharingan nulled their jutsu, piercing through illusions of fog and reversed surroundings. Sasuke gripped a kusanagi sword in his right hand and a man's throat in his left. His blade howled down, splitting just below the rib cage and spilled his opponent's guts. His foe had stood nearly a foot above him, looking menacing with a gisarme in hand, but he fell faster than he attacked.

The Uchiha moved like wind across a footbridge; furious members of the Shin charging at him from the opposite end. They attacked unwittingly, their sound jutsu futile and their efforts more so. He crossed the bridge quickly, leaving a wake of fallen enemies. The majority had fallen back to the far end, where they had been forced to retreat from their small village. The town sat in the distance, far from the forest-staged gauntlet that was leaving its inhabitants massacred.

Sasuke could see it in the way they crumpled by his sword, and how they floundered away from throngs of constricting snakes; the extent of his power. He was barely exerting himself. His potential, he thought, was rapidly being realized if foes that should have outnumbered and overwhelmed him could hardly raise a hand against him. They were ineffective and slow. He could see it as they ran and scattered. They saved their speed for escape and not for attack: the first mistake. He could catch them, if the occasion called for it, but it was the leader that needed to fall.

The leader's real name was Ongakare, but he was a pompous, middle-aged man who had taken the name Shin instead, intending to personify the whole of his clan. As the strongest, certainly the swiftest, he was the pinnacle of all his underlings could hope to be. His name was their entirety. He resembled Orochimaru, somewhat, in appearance. Maybe that was what had really offended the Snake. Sasuke caught sight of Shin up ahead, suddenly less motivated. Killing the man would not merit him much.

Shin had not even approached to fight him. If no one was willing to make the effort, why meet in battle at all? All of his followers had fought bravely and uselessly. He was extremely fast, but that may have been Shin's sole admirable quality. His ribbon-dart technique could not compare to anything his lone adversary was capable of, so he sent more grunts ahead to attack. Sasuke didn't bother to defend, and let a huge black serpent lunge ahead from beneath the bridge, which had been dawdling nearby, waiting for an opportunity since it had been summoned.

Those that avoided its jaws turned around, fleeing, Shin leading the front of the escape. The clan had been reduced to less than half of their original attendance, Sasuke estimated. There was no doubt they would never return to the Rice Country again, after the humiliating and complete defeat they had suffered. Orochimaru would be glad that one other task had been eliminated from his agenda, but the list went on and on. Sasuke would have other projects to fulfill.

A dead shinobi laid face down on the dirt road, and Sasuke ripped a piece of the man's cowl off to clean the blood from his kusanagi. He noted what a mess he had made. The woodland showed clear signs of a disturbance, trees toppled and the undergrowth savaged. Plant life had a thin coating of blood in some areas. It would not be difficult to decipher what had happened here. He sheathed his
sword, turning to the giant black viper coiled near him on the roadside, "Group them together, Aoda."

The serpent moved out to the path, dragging the bodies closer to one another with his teeth, aided by a few kindred. The snakes were dismissed after completing the task, and Sasuke incinerated the pile of corpses quickly with an intense but brief fire jutsu. Ignoring the stench, with the assignment carried out fully, Sasuke passed by the mound of cinders. He headed back in the direction of the village, which would be little more than a ghost town in the upcoming months. It would be up to Orochimaru whether or not the village would be resettled or destroyed. Either way, the Shin clan's home was at the mercy of the Otokage.

Koinyu stood at the center of the footbridge, watching Sasuke approach. He had been observing the battle for a while from a distance, waiting for the former Leaf ninja to finish his work. He regarded Sasuke with keen, golden eyes. The Uchiha was as level and impassive since the day he had first been introduced to him. Koinyu imagined he had not always been that way, because young people were naturally...more lively, if memory served. Koinyu supposed Sasuke’s outlook had been shaped by his life in Sound. ‘Hollow existence describes it a bit more accurately, I think.’ He corrected himself, ‘A creature so drab and consistent as this is not something that is living.’

One feature that was unfailingly stunning about the stuffy teen was his Kekkei Genkai. The Sharingan still burned in his eyes, penetrating, red, clear. Such eyes were deeply coveted by Orochimaru, Koinyu could understand, but he also had to credit the doujutsu of other clans. The level of Sasuke's blood limit had great potential to escalate, yet others had evolved eyes as well; achieved even outside decades of picky breeding and wars.

In Koinyu's opinion, a ninja's eye technique was only as permanent as the organic material it originated from. 'I could blind that kid in his sleep, and then what would Orochimaru think?' He hummed to himself, 'Something that lasts...that is the truest pride of one's clan. A genetic trait can easily die out of existence if conditions sour. Now if I were to present Orochimaru-sama with Susumajin...how it is untouchable, unable to retain damage...he would lust for such a creation of unbounded power!' He could not get his mind off of the hidden treasure rumored to be slumbering within Leaf.

Sasuke's eyes faded from ruby to onyx and he stopped a short distance away from Koinyu, wearing a dissatisfied expression. "What was the point of fighting fools as weak as them?" He snorted, assuming Koinyu had the answer, "It was a waste of my time."

"Your time, maybe, but not Orochimaru-sama's." Koinyu answered pointedly, "The Shin were not loyal to him, and that made them unfit to be Sound shinobi. It was only befitting that they were chased out, anyway. That clan may be small, but their unique ninjutsu may have become a nuisance to us."

Sasuke's countenance was a mild scowl, "That's a load of proprietary garbage. There isn't an excuse that covers for how pathetic they were, and would've been if they'd been ignored."

"So maybe it's the land he wants." Koinyu tried to sound indifferent, "It's not like they were going to hand assets over to Orochimaru-sama in any event. Running them out could have been a demonstration...a flexing of the muscles: yours, in fact." He smirked, "But what do I know? I'm just a Rock ninja hired to keep things organized around here."

They passed through the empty town, Koinyu keeping the silence at bay with reminders of their respective itineraries. The Iwa nin led the way north, through a dense tangle of forest, past farmland, and again into overgrown jungle. By midafternoon the hideout, discrete as it was, came into sight. A new experiment Orochimaru had commissioned would need Koinyu's attention soon. The violet
A dark-haired man was rather looking forward to it.

"This is where we part, Sasuke-sama." Koinyu stopped outside of the entrance, "I have a special assignment that requires I travel to the Water Country and collect our lost lamb; Haku."

"Bringing him here would be a waste of energy." Sasuke observed stolidly. He had said it before and he was tired of repeating himself. The fact that Haku had survived his assassination technique was bizarre, Sasuke noted, and attempting to recruit him into Sound in any fashion was effort worth saving. Taming a horse so steadfastly docile was a moot point.

Koinyu was laughing at Sasuke's annoyed face and assumption. "Bring him back?" He simpered at the idea, "Oh no, Sasuke-sama... I won't be doing that." He bid the Uchiha farewell before setting out east to follow the coastline. Koinyu was a seasoned hunter and he would find his wayward quarry swiftly.

Sasuke descended the stairs, slightly curious of Koinyu's intentions. He had pointed out what was quite apparent in that Haku had proven to be a worthless investment. The water nin avoided persuasion, capture, and all-around need to be involved with Orochimaru and his games. Sasuke, on a minute level, was envious of such oblivious talent. Perhaps Haku had not struck Orochimaru with enough aggression or ambition to be valuable any longer. The curse mark had been wasted on the boy.

'If he won't bring him back,' Sasuke concluded, 'He'll kill him.' He was not about to stop Koinyu either. It was only tying a loose end, after all.

Rin wiped the sweat from her brow with the back of her wrist. She was kneeling between two rows of soil that would soon house artichokes. The garden was kept in excellent condition thanks to her fastidious work and attention to seasonal changes. Every now and then she would drop off some of the organic spoils to the garden's previous owner, Char, who was now too old to cultivate the land on his own.

The sun beat down on the plot and the only shade Rin could take comfort in was that of the straw hat she had brought with her. She worked scrupulously, planting wiry tufts of seed in the ground with bare, calloused hands. She trembled a little while she worked. Though it was an occasion that was ritual almost every two days, her tending to the garden, she found the stillness of the mountain was intimidating.

The tract of land was situated in a wide field, with high visibility from either side of the clearing. An enemy ambush was often a possible danger, and her keen senses were not always able to detect Rock ninja skulking close by. That was why, in the absence of her husband and son, she had asked Sesshu to come along with her. Her blonde ninken sat majestically at the bottom of a hill just behind the garden. He was alert for any altercations Rin should be aware of.

Sesshu's ears pricked suddenly, and Rin's eyes darted over to the dog whose muscles were taut for action. She waited a moment, expecting a report, but he then relaxed and sat back down. "It's just birds." Sesshu concluded with a sniff, "They get awful fussy sometimes."

"Don't scare me like that..." Rin sighed, setting back to work, "For a moment there I thought I'd have to jam this hoe in someone's neck."

She stood, proceeding a bit farther down the row. Her basket was half full and more labor was required to successfully sow the remaining seeds. Rin's mind was stuck on her family all the while. Obito and Yuma were not due to return for a few more days. She had faith they were perfectly safe,
and it was only because she knew her husband so well. His abilities had far exceeded what she could have ever expected, and she also admired how he was brave enough to act like a buffoon in front of dangerous nukenin on a regular basis.

'I really did marry a genius. Maybe he wasn't in the same category as Kakashi...but honestly...who could endure that kind of strain and anxiety so frequently, and still be a loving father and...’ She sighed, wiping her forehead again, 'I miss him. I always miss him...and I'm beginning to wonder if there will ever come a day when I won't ever have to miss him again.'

Rin shook her head; her neck was uncomfortably damp with perspiration. 'No. I can't think like that. I have to remember how hard he's trying...helping Jiraiya-sama. He risks so much– I should be grateful for the time we do have together.' She thought, but it still did not feel like it was enough.

She had lost him once, and after finding him again there was no way she was settling for anything less than forever.

Rin had left Konoha as quickly as possible, and traveled through the night well into the day. Her fear was that her clan, sociable and wild as they were, would come looking for her after realizing she was missing. Of course, Tsume would pass it off as another early morning mission she had disappeared on, and Rin believed her sister would not suspect her to be in peril until she failed to show up the following evening.

'Hopefully sensei will cover for me.' She thought. She didn't care what he told her family so long as it prevented them from tracking her down. For three days she traveled with Sesshu, exhausted, unsure if her head start had been enough. On the fourth day of traveling northeast and not meeting any interference from Leaf, she assumed that she was not going to be intercepted at all. It helped Rin relax a bit, but she was still wary due to the fact that her travels would take her out of the territories of the Land of Fire.

After passing into the deeper reaches of the Grass Country she finally stopped to rest. Sesshu had gathered during their flight that they would not going back home any time soon, if ever, and was not pleased about it. "Why didn't you talk to me about it first?" The dog huffed, pacing across the floor of their room, "I'm going to miss them all..."

"If you had said goodbye they would've suspected something." Rin reminded him, rolling over on her futon, "Now go to sleep. If you keep whining you'll wake up everyone in this hotel..."

She had prepared for the stormy weather in the days that followed. They were warned to steer clear of mudslides and areas that flooded. Rin had known Sesshu was uncomfortable traveling in such incessant rain, but was surprised he had not once complained about it. Her poncho didn't offer much cover anyway, and she was essentially just as soaked as her furred companion.

Rin recalled the terrain faintly, from back when she and her team had passed through years before. They had successfully destroyed the bridge they had targeted, but lost a friend. No one had been the same since then. The site of Obito's death was not far from the trail she was following, but she wondered how she located it at all in the pouring rain, obscuring her sense of direction and smell. There were just some things she knew innately.

They came upon a collapsed rock formation in the thick of the forest. It was where she had been held prisoner in a cave by Rock ninja, which was long since filled in. 'Why was I so weak back then?' She lamented, furious with herself, 'If I hadn't let my guard down he'd still be alive...' Rin stood silently, gazing at the tall heap of stones that had claimed a wonderful person long ago.
“Is this where it happened?” Sesshu asked her quietly.

“Can’t you tell?” She replied glumly, “I wouldn’t have stopped here if this wasn’t it.”

“Are you sure? It’s just that...” The dog hesitated, “There are scents here that are stale and damp, but...they’re different. Others have been through here.”

Rin looked at him oddly, “What are you jabbering about?”

Sesshu crossed through the muddy bank, clambering up onto a wet boulder. She had wanted to yell at him for making light of her teammate’s grave site, but she gave up since she was cold and wet and crossed over to see what had thrown off her ninken’s judgment.

They moved up the hill to get a different perspective, and it was then Rin understood what had confused Sesshu. The agglomeration of stones and debris, on the opposite side, had been excavated. At first she was speechless, unsure of what the intrusion meant. The dog slid down the incline cautiously, picking through to the burrow that had been ripped open. He entered it, briefly, sniffing frantically, and then pulled out again. Sesshu looked up to his partner from the bottom of the heap, “There’s no body in here! Someone took it, Rin!”

Her heart withered a bit. The uncertainty she had felt turned into unabridged rage. Who had the audacity to invade a grave of a fallen shinobi? This ground, though abandoned, she believed consecrated simply because of the tragic end; the abrupt loss of friendship. No decent person would dare trespass and disturb this place. Her chest swelled with fury, and Sesshu clambered up the slope again, his belly-fur slick with mud.

“Whoever did this I’ll— I... I can’t believe—!” She was shrieking into the dark woods ahead, “They have no respect...he was so brave and he didn’t deserve any of it...this isn’t fair.” She looked at Sesshu, “I won’t accept this!”

“It's done already, Rin, settle down.” He advised, pressing his muzzle against her clammy palm, “Let's get out of here now. I think the rain's starting to get to you. We'll find a place to rest and figure this out.”

They passed through the forest, taking the long way around the ravine, and took refuge at a small inn on a hilltop. They dried off and relaxed, but even then, there was no way to comprehend it. There were no measures she could take to investigate who was responsible for the intrusion. Rin slept restlessly, and in the morning decided the only way she would feel better about the ordeal was to let it go. The worst that could have happened was that Iwa nin had discovered her teammate’s body and tried to steal secrets from the corpse, but she highly doubted they had achieved anything from it. ‘Scoundrels...all of them.’

Her passing into the Land of Earth was a distinct reminder of her hatred for the war. The environment was rugged, windy, and people she encountered were nearly all antisocial and impatient. She preferred the rainy Grass Country to the dreariness of the arêtes. Her luck improved when she had circumvented the Hidden Rock Village, going a bit further north, and discovered a tiny but comfortable town nestled in the side of the mountain. It helped that she remained safely anonymous, having thrown away her headband back in the Land of Fire.

It was her good fortune to meet a compassionate pair of elderly people in a restaurant she had been eating at. They were old and curious, and when they asked about her background, Rin found herself spilling her guts, desperate to find someone to connect with. Connect she did. They were pleasantly surprised to hear she was a kunoichi, and declared Sesshu was the most handsome dog alive. He thanked them humbly.
The husband, nearing his seventies, was Mirin Topatsu. Topatsu's wife, Anzu, offered for Rin to live with them until she had settled into their village. She was deeply grateful for their kindness, and found that it was not only her benefit to live there, but the community's benefit. They had gone without a doctor for months, and a trained medic nin was a welcome addition to their town.

She came to understand, after living with Topatsu and Anzu for three months, that their village was floundering. Iwagakure imposed heavy taxes on outside villages to pay for war expenses. Townspeople could barely afford the cost of living, and certainly could not afford medicine when their loved ones fell ill. Thankfully, Rock didn't check in often on the puny village on the mountainside. Had there been a scout, one might have noticed the medic who had taken it upon herself to heal the village. Diseases that were easily curable were nearly eliminated in the first month. Thereafter, Rin was the greatest success the town had ever seen in the field of medical science.

Word traveled from her new village, Nashi, to a neighboring town on the opposite side of the valley called Shincha. There was a desperate need for a physician for a village elder. Topatsu knew the man who was suffering, and urged her to hurry to his friend. Rin left for Shincha that morning with Sesshu by her side, determined to help anyone in need.

The sister village of the valley was a bit lower on the slopes of the mountain. It was a poor agricultural community, and the people there quickly directed Rin to her patient. "I wish someone would tell me what he's come down with." Rin complained to her ninken as they crossed to the far side of the city, "I don't know what to expect."

"Still, I'm sure you'll handle this just as well as the others." Sesshu assured her with a yawn.

Upon arriving at the correct address, just before noon, they found the cabin, a bit worried by the dimmed lights inside. Rin knocked on the side door hurriedly, wanting to get to work as soon as possible. Sesshu sat beside her calmly, putting on his most innocent puppy face so he would be invited inside too. A man answered the door a minute later.

Rin would've acted friendly and reassuring then, had it not been for the fact that her first impression was shot down. He didn't look sick, so she assumed he was the caretaker. Then again, she couldn't judge whether he was ill at all, because he was wearing the most ridiculous mask she had ever seen. Other than that he was dressed normally, and she waited to be guided inside but it didn't happen.

The man stood in the doorway for a long while, scrutinizing her through the single eye-hole in his mask. It was not a comforting greeting. After being stared at and thoroughly unnerved, the weirdo who had answered the door spoke up. "Ooh! So this is the doctor? Great!" He sounded a bit unsure, but his voice was high pitched and goofy so she didn't care, "Char-san really needs help. You can call me Tobi, and you are Miss?"

He backed up a bit and Rin walked in, frowning and distrustful, "You don't need to know my name. I'm sure this won't take long." She walked in, aware of how she was acting like a jerk, but it was all in her own defense. Sesshu padded in after her and Tobi closed the door behind the dog.

Rin found her patient, Char, on futon in the living area. She kneeled down beside the old man; glad that he was awake. She ignored Tobi's comments and observations, and asked Char himself to explain his symptoms. Sesshu laid quietly beneath a potted plant watching Tobi. After assessing Char's soft-voiced descriptions and performing a physical examination, Rin near instantly knew what she was dealing with.

"You have pneumonia, sir." Rin told him gently. A bowl of cold water was set beside the futon, probably from Tobi's attempts to bring his friend's fever down. Rin wrung out the cloth after soaking
it in the frigid water, and replaced it on the man's blistering forehead.

"I'll need to run a test to see if this is a viral infection, so please bear with me." She added, rummaging through her bag.

Tobi waited anxiously from beside Char, watching her draw out a hypodermic needle, "I-Is there anything I can do, Miss? I sure am worried about Char-san...he's so frail and exhausted--"

"You want to help? Get him some water you air-head, he's dehydrated!" She snapped, cutting off his rambling "Do you even know how to treat someone with a fever?"

He shook his head, "Well no, see...you're the doctor--"

"Get a move on!" Rin barked, and Tobi quickly scurried out of the room to fetch water. She swiped a spot on Char's arm before pricking an evident vein with the syringe, "Just relax now...this will only take a moment."

By the time Tobi had returned with something for his friend to drink Rin was already tapping a vile full of blood. His obnoxious chatter resumed again as he sat the old man up to sip the water, and Rin could only pray she could tolerate him for a few hours more. After a brief wait, she inspected the test's results. "Good, it's not viral." She sighed, then added, "Antibiotics are needed to kick a bacterial infection though, and..." She stared at her lap, "I don't have any."

"Where can we find some then, eh?" Tobi inquired noisily, "Poor Char-san! We can't just sit around and do nothing!"

"They're hard to come by. The only place I can think of would be in Iwagakure because their hospitals would carry a mandatory drug like that..." Rin theorized anxiously, "Except...I have no idea how I can go near that place without being found out."

"Found out?" Tobi turned his head to the side, "They won't arrest you for requesting nice drugs like that. Now if it were some leaf you could roll up and smoke they might say--"

"No! I mean that I'm a Leaf shinobi...or...was. But whatever! I'm sure they have me on record for a few of the missions I've taken in the past." Rin stood up, stowing away the used needles, "It's a few days longer to get to Grass but their medical supply is just as good."

"But how can we gamble that he'll last that long?" Tobi asked worriedly.

"I'll have to gamble, because if I get killed in the field he'll die anyway." She retorted impatiently, "I can't risk it on my own."

"You don't have to! I'll go with you, Miss!" He offered, "I have people in Rock who know me. If I go with you they won't suspect anything-- you'll be fine!"

Her brow furrowed, "I'm having a hard time believing that."

"It's true..." Char rasped, wanting to interject, "Tobi-kun is a brave warrior who is known all through this land. I trust him with my life. Please, Miss, I must insist that he travel with you...for your own safety..."

Rin looked from Char to Sesshu. The dog's tail wagged briefly, "He's good, I can tell." She sighed, not liking the idea, but relented. She and her ninken followed after the lunatic who was prattling the whole way into the surrounding stone-jotted woodlands. As Shincha faded from view, Rin decided to rely more on her own instincts than her guide's experience. She and Sesshu tested the air frequently
for any new scents.

While they picked their way through the treacherous landscape, Tobi did his best to start a conversation, "So...er, Miss...you said that you left Konoha, right?"

"I did say that."

"Why the heck would you do that? I heard the food is awesome there!" He chirped brightly, "Don't you miss it even a little? If not your friends, at least the chow?"

She glanced sidelong at him, "You are so damn weird. No. I miss my sensei a little and my big sister, but the food was mediocre at best."

Tobi gasped, "Ooh! Now you're just being spiteful."

"Shut up already..." She groaned, "Why are you so casual like that? Show more respect, be bit more dignified, why don't you?" She paused, looking at him again, "Come to think of it...you remind me of someone."

Again, a gasp. "Really? Who?"

"Someone I knew." She walked on ahead, "He was annoying too."

Tobi deflated a bit, "Ah well, looks like all the annoying people are drawn to you. Even if you are terribly snobby and mean, Miss Whoever-you-are, I can tell you're a wonderful person. Might I add--"

Rin had plugged her ears with her index fingers, wondering why she had arrived here of all places after leaving her birth village. 'What a dumb idea that was.' She thought sourly, 'I don't mind helping people, it's just that chattering idiots aren't exactly my type...'

Tobi's monologue was cut short, and Sesshu gave a warning growl as a team of Rock ninja passed by. The squadron inevitably halted to inspect the strangers. The team leader spoke up, "I'm sure you're aware of how close you are to the Hidden Rock Village, which is perhaps your destination."

"Iparachi-san!" Tobi knew the man, "Sorry if we startled you. This lady here is a doctor and we're on our way to pick up some medicine."

"You don't have clearance to do that, Tobi." One of Iparachi's teammates sneered, "Besides, this outsider you have with you looks suspicious."

"I'm a doctor." Rin clarified again, indignantly.

"How often do doctors keep such monstrous dogs with them?" Iparachi pointed out.

Sesshu quailed a bit beside her, his ears flattening. Rin could feel Tobi tense a few feet away, realizing that the Iwa nin were onto them. Another one of the Rock ninja spoke up, smirking. "You know what I've learned throughout this war? It's that Leaf is all too obvious! We have a spy here, and not just any spy-- an Inuzuka, fwo ho!"

Rin cringed inwardly, hoping to avoid a fight, but Sesshu was already bristling, "Well? We shouldn't disappoint them!"

The talking dog was all the confirmation they needed. The Rock ninja charged together, hoping to overwhelm the kunoichi. She was ready for them, and counterattacked with Gatsuuga, barreling
through the line of reckless enemy ninja. They hurtled back from the blow, and those who did not recover quickly enough got a face-full of teeth from Sesshu. Earth jutsu were initiated, and Rin soared to the edge of the hillside to evade, ripping through what incoming rock and debris she could. 'I'm not going to win this...if I can slip in a substitute I could get away just long enough to–' A stone slammed into her back, knocking her out of her attack stance.

Tobi was frantic, "Iparachi-san! Please don't do this– she isn't a spy! We're only trying to help someone!"

Iparachi paused to look at the masked man, perched on a fallen log, "The way I see it, Tobi, Leaf ninja are all vermin– medic nin and ANBU alike. As long as they bleed anyone will do!"

He leapt down into the fray where his team was closing in on the Inuzuka, and Tobi followed, knowing he had no other choice. At the risk of his own reputation, he attacked, "Katon: Dragon Fire jutsu!" A pythonic jet of flame lashed out at the line of Rock ninja, forcing them to scatter. One of the ninja did not escape in time, and was crippled on the ground with fatal burns.

Rin looked up at her companion, shocked that he was capable of such a technique. Apparently, her enemies were taken aback by it as well. "What the hell are you up to?" Iparachi demanded furiously, "You should know better than to attack an officer in your own homeland!"

"Maybe I should." Tobi shrugged, "But the Miss is my friend and I won't let you get in our way!"

They told him he had poor taste in friends. The remaining three Iwa nin attacked again, one filing off to distract Tobi while the lingering pair faced Rin again. Tobi knew his opponent from a past encounter, a man named Oiyamu, and he had a devilish temper to begin with. Fighting him on his own would be a challenge, so Tobi resorted to creating an Earth clone to help trounce his foe.

Further ahead on the slopes, Sesshu had transformed into the likeness of Rin, and aided her in one of their most lethal attacks. The two moved like a blur of teeth and claws, corralling Iparachi and his partner in a vortex of wind. The sheer speed was untraceable, and Iparachi only thought to look up as Rin and her doppelganger were jack-knifing down in a twin helix of chakra, "Diving Twin Fang!"

Iparachi rolled to the side, getting cut up by the ring of wind, but managed to narrowly avoid the attack that sliced his teammate into literal pieces. Rin hoped it would not be immediately obvious to her surviving adversary that she was paralyzed. The attack was a kind of taijutsu with effects similar to that of the Lotus. Her muscles were screaming with agony from the exertion, and she could only hope Iparachi would need as much time to recover as she would. She glanced to her left, where Sesshu lay in his normal form, also waiting for mobility to return. Her hands and face with coated with blood.

Tobi had managed to gain leverage on Oiyamu after his clone had gotten tangled in the foe's dagger-chain. Tobi made hand signs, attacking his replica and enemy with a relentless electrical attack that channeled through the chain. The earth clone dissipated, and Oiyamu was stunned by the hit that thoroughly fried his nerve endings and stamina.

Tobi rounded about just in time to observe Iparachi staggering to his feet. Rin was on the ground, also desperately trying to stand. 'Come on!' He thought pressingly, 'You can do it! Just get up and shred him!' He did not realize how seriously impaired she was. Tobi watched in horror as Iparachi clobbered the slow moving kunoichi with a point-blank earth jutsu. The rock assault sent the young woman flying, and Rin landed on the far side of the plateau like a rag doll.

He ran, seeing Sesshu was also not moving, and he could only wonder what the hell they had done
to incapacitate themselves. Iparachi would reach her first. Tobi felt his guts wrench with fear, knowing his companion was not able to fight back. A follow-up earth justu was seconds away from crushing her. 'She has to get up...she won't, but she has to!' Tobi picked up speed, hurling kunai, buffering Iparachi, but not by much.

"Get up, Miss!" Tobi skidded in front of Iparachi, wrestling with the stronger man. Rin was crumpled on the ground still, and the Rock ninja spat on his foe's mask, livid.

"You're with them, eh? The blockhead decides to join the enemy!" Iparachi hurled the smaller man aside, "You'll see just how wrong that decision was!" Hand signs followed.

"Rin!"

The kunoichi looked up, wondering if she was hearing things. Her eyes went to Sesshu, a ways off, but he couldn't have spoken while he was still limp. Rin stared ahead at Tobi, who dove in front of Iparachi. It was a surreal moment, watching Iparachi's every hand sign be mimicked to the point of mind-reading, and have the same jutsu thrown back at him. Rocks caromed off of each other, canceling, and Rin then picked up on the urgency of how she had to get up and defend herself.

Her knees were quaking violently but she struggled out of the way. It was not as if she was in dire peril anyway. She could not fathom how Tobi, dense as he was, was fighting with more ferocity than any other ninja she had seen, 'Sensei included...'

From what she could gather, Iparachi was floundering around because he was trapped in a genjutsu he had not yet detected. 'Genjutsu? That's it, but...Tobi isn't...he– is capable.' Confirmin it was strange, and she observed as Tobi darted ahead, and finished the last Rock ninja with a brutal blow to the temple. He toppled over like a crumbling wall. Rin shuddered, wondering if she need be afraid of her comrade. She hobbled over to Sesshu just as the dog was tottering to his paws.

"You're hurt." Sesshu observed sadly, "It's my fault...I should've gotten up sooner to help."

"Hush up." She sat beside her ninken, running over her scrapes and cuts with a basic healing technique. Her skin sewed back together but she was still unbelievably dizzy from the beating she had taken. She found that after taking care of herself and her dog, she couldn't find the will to stand up again. Rin balked when Tobi walked up to her, promptly hoisting her to her feet. Even though she could not see his expression, she could tell that he was hiding immense concern behind his mask, "Are you going to be okay?"

"I...I expect so." Rin wiped the last of the blood from her face on her sleeve. They continued on in silence, partly bewildered by the battle but mostly tired. It was fortunate they reached the inner sanctum of the Rock Village without further resistance. The real problem was locating the hospital, which took longer than it should have, and after pestering nurses for assistance, a kind hearted physician stopped to listen to what they had to say.

"I think straight up cephalosporin will do." Rin informed the doctor, "Please tell me you have some available, because that infection is just going to keep spreading unless I contain it."

"Yes, we have a wide range of that in stock, it's just that..." He sighed, "It's illegal to distribute medications like that to non-citizens. I could put in a request with the administrator, or you could go directly to the Tsuchikage for permission–"

"Ah, no." Tobi said bouncily.

"We can't even wait for an appeal. He'll die." Rin pressed the matter, "Please help me."
The doctor paced around in his office. The antibiotics were so close—just inside a glass cabinet on the wall, and still, they were unreachable. Rin waited anxiously for his decision, "Miss...I'm so sorry, truly I am. But if you had brought him here he could have been treated immediately. There's no way to solve this on your good word alone." She did not want his sympathy.

"Bring him here? This village is draining his home every day of resources and money, and the medical bill he'd pay here afterwards would only cut him down more!" Rin shrieked, fuming, "This place is killing its own people just to fuel the war! Bring him here? Feh! I work for free!"

She stormed out, and Tobi apologized for her outburst before following her out of the office. Rin stormed through the lobby, ignoring the strange looks she was getting from passers-by. Tobi followed after her, "Hey, wait up, won't you?"

"He will die, Tobi. I should've...just gone to Grass." Her voice broke, "Why did you insist? We shouldn't have come here...why did you—?"

He held up two bottles of a clear liquid that made her watering eyes widen. "This is it, right? Cephalo-whats-it, yeah? I grabbed it while that no-good monkey was dealing with you." Tobi handed her the medicine, "Never take no for an answer, okay? Bust some heads!"

Rin had only just made it past the front entrance of the hospital before she broke down in relieved sobs. Tobi tensed at the sight, unsure of how to comfort her. He looked down to Sesshu, who only wagged his tail in a manner equivalent to a shrug.

He took a step forward, wrapping his arms around her small frame in a chaste hug. "Shh, it's okay, Miss. I did get the right one, didn't I? If that's not it I'll go back, I mean– I have slippery fingers!" His voice lowered a bit, "You...you're crying. You really wanted to help Char-san that badly?"

"Yes." She squeaked, "That's what I do. I save people. I save them to atone for all of the others I couldn't save."

He was silent after that, thinking about what she had said. They left the village, following a different route back to Shincha in order to avoid any confrontation from Iwa nin. They moved quickly and nervously, and Rin could not get her mind off of the battle they had fought together.

"Hey." Rin muttered abruptly, "You know my name...so...who told you?"

"Nobody." He answered simply, skipping over an upraised tree root, "Nobody told me, Miss."

"Call me by my name." She smiled at him, "I think you've earned it."

"Ooh! I've earned it!" He giggled like a schoolgirl and she sighed, but was beginning to suspect such behavior was all for show. "The way he was fighting back there... She thought to herself, 'It was unreal...'."

It was twilight when they finally got back to Char's home. Some neighbors had stopped in to keep watch over the old man, and left upon seeing Rin had things under control. She administered the antibiotic to her patient, and waved off his whisper of thanks. "That's it, then. I'll just have to monitor him for a few more days to make sure he gets the proper dosage." She looked to Tobi, "You'll help me, won't you?"

"You want me to? I'm flattered." He twittered from his place on the floor where he was rubbing Sesshu's belly. Rin took his answer as an affirmative response, and then turned back to Char. His fever had lowered significantly, and Rin usually was a believer of the 'elderly people have no stamina' theory, but she was surprised by how he was pulling through. She kept her ears trained
behind her. Her suspicion of Tobi lingered even though Sesshu seemed to trust him.

The golden dog rested his head lazily on Tobi's knee, having never experienced such a satisfying scratch behind the ears. "We will be good friends..." Sesshu yawned, almost inaudibly.

"Oh...we were." Tobi mumbled, "You've just gotten so big."

Such an observation did not compute with Rin. 'He is crazy, maybe he's just prattling again.' She thought, then amended, 'But it's a sham. He means everything that he says, no matter how weird it sounds.' Rin asked Tobi to move Char back to his room for some rest, and when the masked man returned she was leaning against the wall; arms folded.

"You're kind of creeping me out." He admitted.

"You can't be as silly as you try to paint yourself to be." Rin thought aloud, "I just cannot buy into it anymore, though...after watching you back there, against those Rock shinobi..." She stared straight at him, "That kind of versatility doesn't just happen. You're trying to hide your abilities by acting like an idiot."

"Well...not really. After all, I am naturally this goofy." Tobi corrected, "Perhaps I embellish a bit too much?"

She nodded, suspecting that was it. "Whatever your real aim is...I have to thank you, sincerely." Rin added at length, "You saved his life."

"Hey, don't praise the messenger. I just delivered, you're the one who's not afraid of needles here." He laughed at the thought, "I'd do anything for Char-san. He was one of my first real friends."

Tobi studied her face for a moment. Her eyes were stuck on the floor just past her feet; twin pools of emotion that were making his stomach do loops. How could she still be sad after they had succeeded? Nothing he said seemed to help. Maybe her problems, no, not maybe; her problems went beyond this place, and originated somewhere beyond his reach of assistance. Maybe not.

"If it wasn't the mediocre food...why did you leave your village?" Tobi asked, breaking the silence.

She answered softly, "I was heartbroken. It's tiring to be that powerless, really-- I needed something to hold onto again..." A sigh, "Nothing there could ever make me happy again. Anyone or anything..." She looked nostalgically to Sesshu, who had fallen asleep on the rug near the foyer.

"I'm sorry, then. I didn't know things were that hard in Leaf." He did not pursue the matter.

Rin looked up at Tobi, wondering how the hell he did it; got her to open up with such ease like no one else could. Maybe it wasn't really him, she thought. It could be that all the things she had never gotten off of her chest had piled up over time, leaving her brimming. At the first chance to relieve some pressure, she found herself overflowing; revealing her most precious, secret thoughts to someone who she didn't know, but swore she did anyway.

That orange whirlpool was unbearable. It was an affectation, hiding someone underneath who she was almost certain would be her best friend if he was only willing to open up the way she did. 'But he won't,' She thought, 'He's been obscuring himself. Pretending to be stupid and hiding himself.'

She had not been much different, acting the way she had earlier. Rin had come across as an overbearing snob who wanted to appear to be in control, but really was flying by the skin of her teeth. She was just as much of a fake. Then, a sudden thought, 'What if...what if he's brimming too? What if he has a lot to say that's been locked up? Could there be anyone out here harboring as much
pain as me?" She was willing to bet on it by then.

"Could you please take off that mask now? It's kind of oppressive." She approached the matter casually, "I'd be nice to see your face."

"...nice." He repeated the world almost bitterly, "No, it wouldn't. I'm quite ugly."

That had taken her aback because he sounded completely serious. Rin wasn't sure how to handle the situation delicately. "I don't care what you look like, really." She smiled, "I thought that after all of the things that happened today...I could use a new friend."

He took a step back, distrustful, "You left all of your loved ones behind in your village. What makes you think I'd be that easy? You might throw me away."

"N-No!" That struck a chord, "I wouldn't. Do you think I would've worked this hard today if I didn't really care about people? What happened back in Konoha was my business, anyway, you can't judge me!" Maybe yelling wasn't the right method, but she couldn't take it back.

He relaxed a bit after that. Even though her reassurance had come in the form of a shout, it was still an affirmation. Tobi waited with his back against the opposite wall, not trying to flee when she approached. He swallowed hard when Rin stood in front of him, standing a few inches shorter, but it felt as though she towered above him.

His reluctance now seemed like avoidance, 'It's as if he's afraid I'll be offended.' A ridiculous notion, 'That won't happen. He seems so familiar, and so, I wonder...'. Rin did try to string together everything she had witnessed up to that point. She did consider how his outgoing nature was out of place in a country full of stingy people. If he really was from Rock, it couldn't explain the odd jutsu he possessed, 'Or how he knew me, somehow– and knew Sesshu.'

A possibility remained, but it was such a long shot that she refused to get her hopes up. The intrusion; she could not deny that she was praying the disturbance in the rock pile accounted for something other than a grave robbery. The idea was preposterous though, 'It's so futile...'. Like bombarding a stone with feathers, nothing could come of wishing. But her most natural reaction was to believe, to beg for the unthinkable, just then. She had run away from a place she had a clear future, and left all of her opportunities forfeit.

Here she found nothing was definite or limited. Even when she was certain she would lose Char, she had found success. Her despair seemed almost unnecessary. 'What's the worst that could happen if I raise my expectations right now?' And even though she knew better, she got her hopes up.

Rin's hands moved steadily up to his face. He tried to bat them away, evidence of leftover apprehension, but her voice was soothing, "It's alright...if it really is you, then I was meant to be here." Deft, porcelain fingers traced over the mask before hitching against the sides, lifting carefully. There was a quiver then, but no immediate answer.

She took in the sight of his face, troubled when no recognition took place. She had expected to know instantly if it was anyone she knew. Perhaps she had expected too much from herself right away. Her estimations were about right as it was. He was a young man about her age, pale-skinned, with spikes of ebony hair. Her hands hovered aimlessly on either side of his face, uncertain. Something like recognition, or at least appreciation did kick in after she felt his hands steady themselves beneath her elbows.

He was not ugly, but he was a mess. Half of his face was etched with scars, faint and faded, but looked to have been excruciating. His right eye was black as night, but his left eye remained closed.
After a moment she understood he had no left eye. Rin suddenly acknowledged that her only memory of him had been of a young boy in goggles with a loud laugh and wide smile. In her naivety she had expected the same person. Time was cruel. This was who he was now, had been, and would be for all she knew.

"Obito." Her voice cracked. She pulled her hands to her chest; lowering her chin sadly.

He smiled, somehow, the same smile he had when he had been younger, "Yeah...they used to call me that."

He blanched when she began crying, soon hysterically, and her knees gave out like they had wanted to back on the battlefield. He hooked his forearms around her before she could hit the floor, and lowered her down slowly. "See? I knew this would happen!" He laughed softly, "When I first saw you I was so happy, but if I let you know who I was I knew you'd be upset..."

Obito's back was still pressed against the wall as he sat on the floor, Rin curled against his chest sobbing. He sighed, hoping she would recover from the shock quickly, but was content to keep his arms secured around her trembling shoulders. Words had failed her, and she was frustrated she had no way to communicate—no way to convey to him how she felt beyond crying. His left hand rose up, gently collecting the tears from her cheeks. He said nothing all the while, just keeping up with the small droplets that were all for him.

"I-I...I'm...not upset..." She choked out, "You're alive."

She leaned into him, knowing she could trust the way he held her. Even though she was sure he was real, she had no way to justify it, "How...did you-?"

"Live?" He smiled again, "Oh, it wasn't so bad. Sure, at first I was miserable because I wasn't dying fast enough, and let me clarify it was god awful because half of me was in the free air while the other half was crushed and mangled." He blinked when he felt her fingers return to his face, tracing the marks, "I have...a lot of scars...and many more from the surgeries."

"What?" Now she was lost, "But you were-!"

"Finished, I know." He agreed, "I guess we weren't paying attention to the Grass ninja who had been watching us the entire time. I mean, we were in the Grass Country so it was only reasonable, but..." His voice lowered, "His name was Zetsu and he saved me. I'm not sure how he dug me out but he did. I blacked out and..."

She was staring at him with such intensity he broke into a sweat. She seemed to notice how uncomfortable he was so she backed off a bit. "The next thing I know I'd woken up, and Zetsu was telling me all sorts of things. I wasn't bleeding anymore, and then he was talking to other people." He tilted his head back to think, "I was awake for some parts of the operation. Two people were fixing me up. Sewing, hacking, whatever it was I don't really care to remember..."

He raised up his right hand, which was artificial, "See? Sasori-sama and Orochimaru-sama gave me this. My leg is the same. I was completely crushed so there was no use in trying to salvage living tissue."

She was stuttering like an idiot, "Y-You're...kidding...right?"

"I know Orochimaru-sama is the scum of the earth, no one has to tell me that." He affirmed.

"But...Sasori...of the Red Sand? That Sasori?" She checked, "He's a nukenin, Obito."
He raised his eyebrows, "I know. They all are."

"They?"

"The people I work for, Rin." He told her, "Let me get on with it please, and then it'll make more sense. Where was I?"

"Your...a-arm."

"Right! So I woke up and...you've got to understand when I blacked out, there was some internal bleeding or something in my head, so they thought I wouldn't make it." He clarified, "I woke up and I...I didn't know who I was. I wasn't me. I was nobody who just happened to be severely injured, recovering in this dark room with Zetsu-san. He told me that I worked for him, and that my name was Tobi."

"You let them name you?" She growled, "Wait...if you had amnesia...how--?"

"Hold on," He interrupted, "I figured this out all on my own later because while I lived with them, wherever we happened to be, I was learning all over again. Some things I remembered inherently like how to fight and use my Sharingan..." Obito let out a deep sigh, "My Sharingan...sheesh. Orochimaru thought I would be useful until he realized I only had one eye. He told me I was worthless, witless trash and the ass-end of my clan." He smiled, "Good thing for me, because back then I didn't know he could steal bodies."

Rin made a gagging sound of disgust and he continued, "So I got stronger, browsed through a few different countries, and ended up learning how to fight like a maniac. I copied things from all sorts of places...made a few friends...lost most of them." His voice was somber, "And...as time passed, I would have memories that weren't mine. I'd wake in the night talking to people in the Leaf village. My mom and dad visited me in dreams and I didn't have a clue who they were...but I learned eventually."

"Your memory came back." Rin said, knowing that much was apparent.

"It just popped back one day during a fight— it almost killed me too because I was so overwhelmed." Obito told her, "I managed to get away and just cried for days on end. I was so pathetic and lost. I couldn't tell Zetsu that I remembered everything otherwise I'd be taken advantage of...when I was a blank slate I was safe."

"Why didn't you come home?" Rin demanded fiercely, "You would've been alright! Don't you realize how much Kakashi has been suffering without you? And me?"

"Years had gone by, Rin. It would've been too much of a shock, and the truth is..." He closed his eye, "I'd rather be remembered as a heroic friend who died in battle...not the broken failure that I really am."

Her brow furrowed, "No...you aren't...if you could only see what I'm seeing...you just don't get it." Rin felt her chest aching, "Kakashi's distress is more than anyone can repair. You could help him, Obito!

"How could I help him if you couldn't?" He asked quietly, "You love him."

There was a silence that was contemplative. It was a good point. It may come as a shock to Kakashi, but there was no guarantee it would cure him of his bleak attitude. Minato-sensei could handle most of his pupil's emotional baggage, and they would have to have faith in that. As it was, Rin doubted Obito would be physically capable of returning to Leaf...just as she now found herself incapable.
There was one issue she wanted to address, however.

"Listen to me." She said softly, "I can't be in love with someone who...who has always seen me as a burden. The most he ever did to demonstrate his friendship with me was give me Sesshu, who, by the way," She smiled, "Arrived on my doorstep thanks to you. Do you remember that? Kakashi couldn't bear to face me in person, so he sent you. You almost didn't hand him over because you loved him so much."

He smiled weakly, "I do remember that. He was a just this tiny puppy...now look at him." They glanced over to the snoring hound, "He's a big, furry lug!"

Rin sighed, resting her cheek against his neck. Obito was a bit confounded by her suddenly clingy behavior. Of course, he wouldn't complain if she wanted to be close to him, the same could be said for himself.

"I'm sorry things didn't work out..." He was referring to Kakashi, "You know...one of the first people I thought about when I remembered everything was you." He told her gently, "Even though years had passed I still felt the same. See...I always knew your face and your smile. I would think about you even when I couldn't recall anything. I cared about you and it was horrible because I didn't know who you were. When it came back to me, it was kind of a relief...but I just...I thought I'd never see you again."

"...same here." She agreed, her voice hushed.

She wondered why she was okay with him kissing her hands and jaw so frantically. Rin figured it should have startled her, but she felt no emotional barrier there that was worth enforcing. He was distraught and she didn't blame him. Even when it was not so innocent he was chaste, and eventually got a grip on himself and ended the contact. She looked at him again, and saw that he was the one who was crying this time. He always used to cry when he was younger, but now it was different.

Rin watched him sigh, conflicted with his own feelings, and it was then a new emotion came to her. Regret. Sure she had left her village because she was unhappy, but it could not have been any clearer how Obito had suffered ten times more than she had. He had lost so much, and his grief had probably been pushed to the wayside for ages. In the end, the only thing she could think to do was blame herself. His eye had been removed by her own hands—bequeathed to Kakashi, 'God...what was I thinking when I said yes? I'm sick! I've practically destroyed the Hippocratic Oath...I've torn him apart...broken him.'

"I did this to you." She said lowly, running a fingertip feather-light above his left eye, "No amount of apologizing will ever fix it, I know, but...I'm sorry."

"W-What?" He was shocked for some reason, "Sorry? I told you to do it, Rin! Don't start thinking like you hurt me or something, because you haven't."

'Liar.' She thought, 'Maybe I didn't harm you physically, but you'll never bring up how horrible you felt every time I sided with Kakashi...every time I swooned for someone else when it was you who had always stuck with me. I took you for granted, said harsh words, berated you...but you still chose to be my friend.' Her eyes closed, 'You should have run away the instant you saw me at the door...'

"I'm fine...so...please don't worry?" Obito added softly.

Rin wondered how their arms were still so fantastically tangled. She wondered when they would ever break the embrace, because pretty soon they would have to check on Char. She pushed the
thought from her mind, making her decision aloud, "Obito...I'm staying here. If you can't go back to Leaf then I can't either," Gratitude shown in his eyes, and she added, "This time I promise...I won't ever let anything harm you again."

The memory was still fresh in her mind along with so many others. Rin let out a breath she did not know she had been holding. A glance down at the basket showed only one artichoke seed remaining. She planted it carefully, with reverence for the past. The day she had found Obito again was the day her life had started over. She was reborn into someone she was sure was a stronger person.

Sesshu lifted his burly head again, scenting the air, "Guess who's back, Rin."

"Already?" She stood up, dusting the soil from her knees and spotted Yuma scurrying out of the tree line.

His father was right on his tail, also competing in the footrace to see who could 'get to mommy first.' It was a bit odd how Obito wasn't wearing his mask today. And yet, those were two smiling faces she would always be happy to see.

Haku woke from a comfortable sleep, gazing at beams of sunlight that filtered through the window of his room. For a moment he had no idea where he was, but his memories returned quickly.

Zabuza's hideout was situated on the top floor of an abandoned building, and thankfully had not been occupied since its last inhabitant. It was a surprisingly spacious place, and Haku settled into it well, glad to have a semi-permanent shelter in Nanakusa.

He stretched the sleep out of his limbs and dressed. He was admittedly a bit disconcerted about how his life suddenly consisted of only two alternating routines. The first being modeled around their lawless lifestyle, in which missions were nearly always fatal and the training was unforgiving. The second was fairly new, in which Haku discovered that Zabuza was an astoundingly lazy person. Haku couldn't say he was surprised that after seeing his partner work so hard for months he was apt to sleep for days on end.

This new lax approach to their survival landed Haku with mundane tasks straightaway. While Zabuza enjoyed a period of rest, Haku was on active duty surveying the city, cleaning, completing chores, keeping inventory, shopping, and all other female-dominated tasks. He was not in the habit of complaining, but he did sometimes wonder if Zabuza had ever scrubbed a dish in his life before he came along.

Habit reasserted itself and Haku left his room, moving down the hallway in silence. The floorboards, though old, did not make a sound as he passed, and the dark haired boy finally stopped outside of Zabuza's room. The door was left open for fresh air, and the nukenin, apparently, was still asleep.

Haku couldn't help but think about how any hunter in the Land of Water would salivate at the chance to catch Zabuza at his most vulnerable. It had become customary for the demon to let his guard down around Haku.

'I am a fundamentally trustworthy person.' He thought to himself, 'But all that could change at a moment's notice, I suppose.'

He wondered if Zabuza even understood what a risk he was taking in trusting another person that way. Haku could imagine that, after collecting enough evidence on his clan, he could finish the nukenin off and save the hunter-nin some trouble. It was a wicked notion that unnerved the dark haired boy and he promptly pushed it out of his mind.

He entered the room unnoticed, picking up discarded garments in exasperation. The laundry they had
accumulated would have to get done later. It was another reminder of how mortal they were even as they were slaying other ninja in the field. Haku looked to his left, not really meaning to, and caught sight of the missing nin. His face was unwrapped at the time, and asleep he looked almost like a normal person. Zabuza would probably sleep until noon if left undisturbed, Haku wagered.

The dark haired boy walked out, venturing down a flight of stairs and dumped the dirty clothing in a pile outside the washroom. 'If his outfit didn't change so frequently this wouldn't be a problem...' Haku noted in annoyance. Zabuza was mainly to blame for his workload. He rarely ever kept up the same appearance more than a week. Even if it was an effective strategy it was a troublesome one.

The kitchen was small, but thanks to Haku, adequately supplied for the time being. He made breakfast ritually and left it out, knowing his partner would seek food later. With the free time he had been blessed with, Haku decided to pay a visit to his overweight neighbor. He left the hideout via window (because all the doors in the building had been boarded up,) and set out down the street in the early morning light.

Hiroshi's teashop already had occupants, more specifically, Tomo and her children. Haku smiled on reflex, already fond of the chatty little family. Tomo greeted him, "Good morning, Haku-kun! I don't think we finished our introductions yesterday, what do you think?"

"I agree, Tomo-san." He watched the three youngsters line up on command, "Why don't you tell me your names?"

A girl with mint green hair, who stood a few inches taller than her siblings, spoke up, "I'm Nagisa and I'm the oldest. I'm going to be seven in two weeks, Haku-san!"

He laughed and the immediately younger sister cut in, "Oh yeah? Well, I'm Hotaru and I'll be seven in a few more months, but I will be as old as you, Nagisa!

Haku looked to the youngest, a boy with ginger hair and watery eyes, who was obviously too shy to speak up. Tomo patted her son's head affectionately, "This little one here is Katsu...he's our quiet lamb." He smiled uncertainly at Haku.

"They're adopted." Tomo mouthed near inaudibly, "I'm too young to have children myself since I just turned eighteen, but orphans around these parts are always welcome under my roof."

"Oh...I see." Haku said quietly, "After observing the...range of hair color in this family I was wondering if their father was a rainbow..."

The children laughed in unison with their mother, even though they didn't get the joke. "Hiroshi is in the back preparing food." Tomo added at length, "I really should be there helping him right now, so why don't you wait here with these knuckleheads? I'll bring you some tea, Haku-kun."

He thanked her before she left, and he took a seat at the table with the children. Nagisa and her violet haired sister pestered Haku with questions for a long while, but he was very gracious and well-spoken and answered them to the best of his ability. It was not long before they were fawning over the good looking ninja, and were twittering amongst themselves who was allowed to marry him. Haku gently suggested they finish their breakfast, to which they immediately complied.

Katsu, all the while, stood soundlessly beside Haku. He stared at him, as if some other-worldly understanding had dawned on him. "Is something wrong, Katsu-chan?" He asked softly.

The boy hesitated only for a moment, "Are you a ninja for real?"

Haku nodded in confirmation, "I am...is there...something you want me to explain?"
"No, it's just...if you are a ninja you have to come with me right now." Katsu pulled insistently on his sleeve, "Will you please?"

Having no reason to object Haku followed the small boy out of the restaurant, after being promised their trip would be brief, and crossed the road to Tomo's home. Katsu lead him through a grid of narrow hallways before arriving in a back room of the house. He pulled Haku closer to a table by his sleeve, gesturing to the cage that sat on it. The dark haired boy was at a loss.

Katsu looked at Haku with all seriousness, "Listen, Haku-san! My daddy and me lived in the Mist village and he was a ninja there. He used rabbits to help him fight sometimes or go do things for him, but he died a while ago." His face brightened, "But I got to keep one of his rabbits, see? She had babies!"

It was a bit much to take in all at once. Haku watched in confusion as Katsu opened the cage and scooped up a tiny fluffball from the pine bedding. "They don't drink milk anymore." He said, stroking the animal, "They do eat the straw I give them, so I think I'm doing something right."

Haku then abruptly noted how it really did make sense, 'These animals are raised specifically to serve ninja. That means...the mother must already be trained.' He cleared his throat, "Um, Katsu-chan, where is their mother right now?"

"Sachirame picked the lock and ran away! She's really smart." Katsu told him, "She likes it better outside, but she comes back a lot to check the babies."

"Ah." Haku wondered how that could be, "So she comes by often?"

"Yep." Katsu handed Haku the tiny white creature he had been holding, "This one is most like Sachirame. Her name is Pua, and since you're a ninja I want you to take care of her and teach her tricks."

"I really don't think I can, Katsu-chan, though it's a very nice sentiment." Haku chuckled incredulously. In truth, training animals was probably the last thing on his agenda. He barely knew how to take care of the lump of fur he had been given, but deep down, Haku knew that there was no way he could contest the irresistible charm of an innocent little bunny rabbit. After Katsu insisted again, Haku finally relented, holding the small animal to the warmth of his gi.

They left the house, Haku very uncertain of what to expect from raising a rabbit. It stung a little that he was so doubtful even after Katsu was complaining the whole while about how absolutely no one would believe him. Before they could close the front door, a blur of white dashed inside, and there was a moment in which Haku had to decide if what he saw was real. "Oh...she's back again..." Katsu sighed, shutting the door, "Sachirame won't listen to a word I say...I told her she has to go in through the back..."

That moment was all the affirmation he needed, and Haku tucked the snoozing bunny in his gi, following Katsu back to the teashop. Tomo was a bit surprised that they had left, "Where did you two go, huh?"

Haku sat down, accepting the tea she offered smilingly, "Just for a short walk."

Things progressed from there in an unusually pragmatic way for Haku. A week rolled by, hardly noticed to him as his life quickly changed from 'AWOL Leaf shinobi,' to the kind of 'nukenin undercover serving tea who also babysits.' He could only assume he preferred the lifestyle, and since Zabuza was asleep ninety percent of the time he didn't hear much shit about it.
He had gotten the scare of his life in the middle of the week when Zabuza awoke in the afternoon, sniffing around for food, and spotted tiny Pua on the kitchen counter top in her makeshift home (a shoebox.) She was nibbling peacefully on a stalk of celery, and Haku walked in just in time to see the nukenin eyeing his precious pet. "Is that a rat or dinner?" It was a very blunt question with a tangible edge of hunger behind it.

Haku did gather the audacity to throw a wooden stool at him, and by some miracle, chase him out of the kitchen before the bunny met harm. He wasn't surprised that his immediately negative answer had only prompted Zabuza to go back to sleep for the rest of the week, thank goodness. With time he could see the rabbit begin to grow at a rate that was probably not common of its species, 'Or maybe are they just bred this way? Shinobi interference with animals can create strange...results.'

He worked in Hiroshi's teashop as a server, and when he had time off he loafed around with Tomo's children and Pua. In a period of three weeks, there were two occasions Zabuza decided to wake up and take a mission. Haku left Pua in Katsu's care when he was off with his partner, and always returned home weary with bloodshot eyes. Haku never could muster the courage to tell them what exactly he did, not willing to crush their idealist views of what a ninja was.

After that Zabuza remained lax for the most part and Haku trained on his own. Pua took up a surprising amount of time. He was told that it was only natural for young rabbits to dash around and chew on everything in sight. There was an added problem in that Pua was highly impressionable and could remember the best areas to play. Such places included under dressers, hiding in piles of clothing, and the occasional couch crevice.

Her heightened intelligence did help with command recognition. She responded to 'stay, sit, stop, cute, eat, don't eat, and look' in the first four weeks. She had quickly imprinted on Haku and responded to his voice with a bounce. He spent more money on oat feed than he would've liked to, but since his money wasn't being put to much better use he spoiled her rotten. After two months the shinobi part of Pua's breeding became evident.

Haku had to observe Sachirame on a regular basis to understand how the rabbit brain functioned. She was a vigilant mother who delivered food to her babies when Katsu was idle, and was also an effective destroyer of all the local gardens. Enemy number one of all agriculturalists in the area was none other than the blasted ninja rabbit. Haku was fascinated by how Sachirame had unbelievable reflexes, jumped buildings unthinkingly, and demonstrated super-speed to avoid her murderous gardening pursuers. Pua was capable of that and so much more, he thought, so long as he trained her properly.

By two and a half months she was already accustomed to action, often going with Haku on missions but sitting out of fights. The more she learned the more her personality mellowed out, and Pua was comfortable sleeping on Haku's lap when she wasn't rushing around with a kunai in her mouth. Adulthood was at about six months, but by three the white rabbit was equipped with an arsenal and unexpected abilities that even Zabuza couldn't sniff at. "But if you were really going to get a pet it should've been a wolf or something." He complained stiffly.

One afternoon, Haku finished with another one of Inagawa's missions and went straight to the teashop to unwind. Hiroshi seemed a bit stunned for some reason when he walked in, and Haku could only guess it had something to do with the Rottweiler-sized toad that was sitting at a table smoking. Haku saved the poor man the trouble and went to it himself, faintly recognizing it. "Er...Gama...Gamakichi?" Haku asked quietly, "You...got big."

The toad swelled with pride, "Oh! So ya noticed, Haku-kun! Here, I have something for you from the boss. It took me forever to find you!"
Haku accepted the slightly battered scroll the toad tossed to him, "How is Naruto-kun? I guess I've waited too long to send something to him--"

"Will you just read it already? Then you can ask questions." The toad complained, adjusting the pipe hanging from his lip. With a sigh Haku took a seat at the table to read what Naruto had to say, but not before assuring Hiroshi the toad was a good friend. The fat man was grateful no customers were present, so he figured he would keep the 'closed' sign up on the window until their amphibian guest was ready to leave.

There was a magnitude of information conveyed in the blonde boy's sloppy handwriting. Haku wasn't all that surprised that he was learning complicated techniques from Jiraiya, 'It has happened before...' And the people he had met seemed most interesting, including a masked spy and another jinchuriki. Naruto expressed his concerns briefly, among those Gaara's stresses of being a teacher, 'A Jounin? Maybe Sand was the best choice,' Hinata on her own, 'But she isn't really, we have plenty of friends in Leaf,' and finally, a warning. There was something about a Rock ninja who had been sent by Orochimaru to track him.

'How perfectly lovely.' Though Haku might have done well to show some apprehension; he felt he had improved vastly and could take on any enemy, 'In this country, I am very much in my own element. I'll be on my guard but I won't worry myself sick about it.'

After that it was mostly well wishes and challenges for the future. Haku decided to foreshorten the things he had gone through in the past months in his reply. Meanwhile, Hiroshi served the friendly toad some tea while Haku wrote back. By the time Gamakichi was finished and thanking the fat shop manager, Haku handed the message back to the toad. "Thank you for coming here, Gamakichi." He said sincerely, "Though, I wonder if I could ask a favor."

"Well...uh...I dunno." The toad answered, "What did ya have in mind?"

With a short whistle, Haku summoned Pua who rushed in from the back room. "She's nearly full grown now so I want her to attempt some independent projects." He told Gamakichi, "Take her with you so she gets a feel for the countryside, and after that I'm sure she can make it back on her own."

"Ya know those mountains up North are ridiculously dangerous, so this isn't a strict liability case if something happens?"

"I...suppose not. There are some things beyond your control." Haku agreed.

"Alright, I'll escort her up to the boss then!" The toad agreed, "Have a good one, Haku-kun!" The toad left the shop out of the side door, Pua following obediently as her master had instructed.

A few days later, in some backwater valley, Naruto was enjoying ramen in a street side bar. Jiraiya had promised to be back in a short while about three hours ago, so he didn't wait up for the Sage when it was lunchtime. 'That pervert...he's probably at that bathhouse we passed by earlier and taking notes on the female form.' He thought sourly.

He was genuinely surprised when Gamakichi showed up, clearly worn out. "You okay?" Naruto asked him, "You look...kind of horrible."

"Just a...little tired, Boss." The toad rasped, handing him Haku's reply, "We kind of ran into some wild dogs at one point...and then a lion..."

"Jeez, well, here! Pull up a chair and I'll get you something to eat!" Naruto offered, and the toad dragged himself up onto a stool. Naruto belatedly added, "Did you say we?"
The toad gestured on the ground to where a sleek, white rabbit sat expectantly. A moment later she leapt up, settling on the counter beside Naruto. The blonde boy regarded the bunny and the bandana it was wearing. The characters on the blue cloth read simply 'white,' and Naruto quickly understood it was Haku's way of inconspicuously starting his own mailing service.

"Oh! Cuuu-te!" He picked the rabbit up, stroking her ears, "You belong to Haku-kun, don't you then? Sweet little bunny!" The rabbit twitched her nose in satisfaction, glad her looks could earn her such adoration. "Did you catch what his name was, Kichi?"

"It's a she." Gamakichi sighed, "She told me her name was Pua."

"Right, right. Since you're a toad you understand animal speech."

"Not really." The toad replied honestly, "She talks."

Naruto stared at the toad, "No way, but she's like...an actual rabbit."

"Your friend has some tricks up his sleeve, then. Go ahead and ask her something." Gamakichi dismissed it, and called out to the cook for some miso soup.

Naruto watched the rabbit he was holding for a minute, trying to think of something to say that would get a response. Only one thing came to mind, at the time, "Do you...want some ramen, Pua-chan?"

"Ramen." She parroted.

Naruto pulled the rabbit to his chest, overcome with bliss from such an adorable squeak. "She's the second cutest thing ever! I love this bunny!" Naruto decided (Hinata was number one, to him,) and set Pua down on the stool to his left. Gamakichi was having a hard time getting the cook to cooperate since she apparently, 'didn't serve frogs.'

"Hey! Don't talk like that to a customer!" Naruto snapped at the old hag, "You want the money or not?" Shortly afterwards Gamakichi was slurping up noodles without further hassle. The toad also explained how Pua's intelligence aided in combat, including the use of smoke bombs and other clever devices to ward off pests...lions included.

Naruto ripped down a menu flyer from the siding of the bar, and on the blank side scribbled down more current news for his friend, and to congratulate him on surviving Zabuza's training and finding Hiroshi. While ideas spilled down on the paper, Jiraiya at last showed up, flushed from his research. He lifted up Pua and took her place on the seat beside Naruto, patting her soft head in greeting, "Hm...cute rabbit, squirt."

"She belongs to Haku-kun." Naruto mentioned, still busy writing.

"You don't say?" Jiraiya blinked down at the bunny, "I bet you're a vicious little sucker underneath it all, in that case. Aren't you?"

Gamakichi paid Jiraiya a brief hello and goodbye after finishing his meal, and then left to go home and rest. Out of curiosity, the Toad Sage also read the note Haku had sent. Even though he was displeased with the boy's rash actions, he couldn't help but crack a smile at how remarkably well he was doing. Perhaps it was best they all split up in the end, he thought.

He wasn't feeling hungry, so after Naruto had finished with his reply he informed him they would be leaving, "We have a lot of ground to cover, Naruto. Where we're going next is one of the more treacherous countries we'll pass through."
"Sure, just give me a second." Naruto waved off his concerns, and tied his reply onto Pua's bandana, "You have a safe trick back okay, cute little bunny? Don't go picking fights with lions anymore." Pua ran off dutifully, having the route home partially memorized and leaving the rest up to her sense of smell.

After that they left the restaurant and Jiraiya continued, "Listen good, squirt Roushi warned me that there has been some shady activity in the Bear Country, which is just beyond the border here. A few Leaf shinobi have gone there responding to reports about thieves and other paranoid complaints, but it seems they haven't encountered any problems. We're going to check it out."

"Have you ever been there before, Ero-sensei?" Naruto asked, "Or are we flying by the seat of our pants again?"

"I've visited a few times. The village there is very secretive and kind of pretty." He smiled at the memory, "Though the people are cranky, talented bastards."

It was a two days journey across the country border before they entered the Land of Bears. Naruto observed how there were no bears to be found, probably because of the geologic peril that threatened local wildlife. Steep cliffs carved an intricate network through the mountains, and fuming out of every crag was a noxious, yellow gas that obscured the ravine bottom.

"That's poison gas in that canyon." Jiraiya warned his pupil as they strolled along the edge of the cliff, "It spews up from vents along a dormant volcano, and it'll kill you easy if you breathe it in, so...do me a favor and be careful?"

Naruto nodded, "I can do that."

It was a cautious hike west across the lip of the gorge, but eventually the tension subsided and Naruto had his mentor snorting in barely controlled laughter with some very rude jokes. Not until recently Naruto had absolutely refused to endorse the filthy books Jiraiya wrote, but as adolescent inquisitiveness got involved, the blonde boy was gradually being educated. He was surprisingly detached when reading Jiraiya's work. His teacher was almost offended that Naruto was so physically impervious to what he was reading about, or if he had absolutely no clue what any of it meant.

Periodically there was the awkward question or observation that did come up. One of the more recent ones happened to be, "Ero-sennin...squeezing a lady's boobs isn't going to make her fall to the floor howling for more. You're delusional and gross."

"It's for dramatic effect, kid." Jiraiya said, partly defensive, "What hurts me most is that you pass off my work as garbage when...who knows? You may need inspiration and draw on my techniques one day for that special someone-"

Such speculation earned the Sage an immediate and painful black eye.

Those thoughts evaporated, however, when a stranger appeared on the opposite side of the divide. He was moving fast after catching sight of the trespassing Leaf ninja, and his face was obscured by a gas mask. He drew out a crossbow that fired an arrow across the gorge, and after it sunk into the bark of a tree, he ran across the rope attached to it. Jiraiya stopped in his tracks, "Oh...looks like the welcoming committee has arrived."

Naruto assumed he was being sarcastic, "I'll take care of it then, Ero-sensei. It's been a while since the last brawl!"
He sprung off, maybe a bit too excited, and somehow avoided the incoming shuriken. He sent a shadow clone in first, who exchanged punches with the attacker before detonating. The foreign ninja flew backward, slamming against a tree trunk, the wind knocked out of him. Naruto disappeared, employing his Body Flicker ability, and sailed past the opponent before hurling a brace of kunai. The other shinobi floundered, forming hand seals, "Kujaku Myoho!"

A tail of violet chakra fanned out behind the stranger, and snapped forward, deflecting the kunai. Naruto balked at the counter, 'How could he block with only his chakra?' A spare shadow clone that had been hiding in wait ambushed the unknown ninja, barreling into him unexpectedly. The blow sent the stranger crashing towards the cliff's edge. Conscience kicked in and Naruto dove ahead, seizing the unknown shinobi's wrist before he plummeted to his death.

The stranger, back on his feet, tore his hand out of Naruto's grasp. His voice was lacking gratitude, "What do you think you're doing so close to the Hidden Star Village?"

"Hidden...Star Village?" Naruto mumbled, glancing over to Jiraiya, "Are these the cranky people?"

The Sage patted his pupil on the head, "Settle down, Naruto." He looked to the stranger, "No need to be so impolite, kiddo, attacking my student like that. I thought I'd drop by to have a chat with Akahoshi."

The stranger removed his gas mask. He was about Naruto's age and had a very serious face. His olive hair was braided and thrown over his shoulder, and the intensity in his chestnut eyes made Naruto take a step back. "You know Akahoshi-sama?" He asked.

"Pft! Kid, do you know who you're talking to? I'm the Legendary Toad Sage, Jiraiya, and you ought to show more respect!" Jiraiya snapped impatiently.

"Oh! Forgive me, Jiraiya-sama." He apologized finally, "My name is Sumaru and I would be happy to take you to my village."

"He comes too." Jiraiya tapped Naruto's shoulder.

"Yeah, sorry about earlier..." Naruto smiled at the other boy, "I guess I was itchy for a fight, but if you're so protective of your home it must be a great place right? I'm Uzumaki Naruto!"

Sumaru relaxed visibly, and a small smile dawned on his face, "Nice to meet you, Naruto-san." He led them down further along the cliff to where a conveniently placed rope bridge had gone unnoticed. After crossing it safely to the other side, Sumaru walked ahead of them, keeping watch for other intruders as he led the Leaf ninja to the sanctity of his home.

"I didn't know you were familiar with the Star Village, Ero-sensei." Naruto commented quietly, "Actually...I didn't know about this place period."

"As you've seen, I've got connections." Jiraiya told him, "Though honestly, I've only ever spoken with Akahoshi once back during the war."

"Huh. So...what are we doing here anyway?"

Jiraiya's voice lowered, "It's always nice to be welcomed to a shinobi village with food and a warm bed...but something fishy has been going on down here and we're going to get to the bottom of it."
Chapter Soundtrack: “Yume no Hajima Ring Ring” by Kyary Pamyu Pamyu

In the days following the half-hearted Sound invasion of Hidden Sand, Gaara found it much more difficult to sleep. He had done away with sleep altogether after aiding in the execution of Miosuke. Temari and Kankuro were glad to finally be rid of such a heartless traitor, but he could not share their relief. The insomnia he had suffered from as a child had returned, though it was not nearly as torturous as it had been in the past.

His workload expanded as his time was spent more efficiently. Reports were completed in the dead hours of night, and though his strength waned at times, he was still able to train Matsuri without giving indication of his new predicament to her. Gaara welcomed new assignments without complaint, and was quickly becoming one of the most respected jounin in the village. Gaara suspected that neglecting sleep was one of the wisest moves he had made, besides the fact that he would dream in broad daylight at slow hours of the day.

Last night had been no exception. He had sat on his bed for nine hours examining economic files that would be reviewed by the council. When morning arrived Gaara simply tied up the work and dressed for a new day. His mind went briefly to whether or not he'd have the patience to train Matsuri after reading so many trivial, monetary complaints. He wouldn't be able to, of course, once he remembered she was off on a two day mission with another genin team.

Slipping the binder beneath his arm, Gaara exited his room and shuffled down the hallway with the grace of a zombie. He managed not to fall down the main flight of stairs and reach the first floor of the mansion safely, and then gave a curt, throaty greeting to his older brother. Kankuro was seated in the kitchen and enjoying breakfast, that was, until he saw Gaara appear looking slightly haggard. He told his brother to sit down and eat up.

"Er...what's with your face today?" Kankuro pointed at him with his chopsticks, "Those bags under your eyes, I mean."

Gaara's gaze went from his bowl, to his brother, and back to the bowl, "Are you serious?"

"Well shit! I always knew you've had them for...forever, but now they're," He paused, "I don't know...more pronounced? You look like you lost a fight with a mallet."

The red haired nin flicked a lentil at Kankuro's face, "The next time you're tempted, tell me outright how beautiful I am instead of making useless observations."

Kankuro sighed deeply and then took a bite of egg. That last bit on his brother's part was surprisingly light-hearted, but something was still out of place. He noted the collection of paperwork his younger brother had with him. He hadn't seen it before so it was probably new, 'How long has he been working on that crap? No, I'll rephrase that. How long has it been since he hasn't been working on that crap?'

"Are you okay?" Kankuro tried again, more directly, "Sleeping alright? You look a little out of it today."

He was right on the money, but if his siblings were still in the dark about it he preferred to keep it that way; just one less thing for them to worry about. "I'm alright." Gaara confirmed and then crammed a pickled radish in his mouth.
Kankuro dismissed it after that and Temari showed up looking refreshed and wide awake, a sharp contrast to the others. She knocked Kankuro in the head with a serving spoon after discovering the alarming lack of rolled omelets on the table, "Not gonna save any for me, huh, glutton? A woman has to eat at some point so-"

"Alright, take some of mine if you have to nag..." He offered her the rolls he had not touched, "Good morning to you too, Temari. Nice hair! Sticking up like that-" She hit him again and took the food, feeling vindicated.

She sat down next to Gaara, kissing his temple in greeting, "You look tired, baby brother. Are you up for a mission today or do we hang back and train?"

"I'm ready for whatever is asked of me." He told her, pouring the tea, "Pass the mustard when you can."

Temari paused in her selection of food and then glanced to Kankuro. The expression on his face matched her’s and they looked back at Gaara together. "Try not to sound so grown up, okay?" She chuckled quietly, "Feel free to tease and whine a little."

He smiled and Temari was able to relax, eventually passing him the mustard he had asked for. Kankuro was apparently familiar with the financial reports Gaara was handling, and brought it up, "Can you believe that they're actually willing to cut trade with The Tea Country? It's like the council expects a farm to just spring up out here so we don't have to import as much."

"The drought is worrying them. We pay too much for water as it is, and the Tea Country doesn't contribute as much as the Fire Country, or the Bird Country, for that matter."

While her brothers debated the issue, Temari noticed the messenger hawk that had perched expectantly on the ledge of an open window. She took the note that it had delivered, and read it briefly before interrupting the discussion. "Speaking of the council they want to see Gaara immediately." Temari informed them, "Finish it up."

The hawk departed, and the three of them wrapped up breakfast before setting out. The assembly room was situated in a large cavern that had been carved into the cliff side. It was stuffy and uncomfortable navigating down the dimly lit halls, but it opened up into a vast antechamber complete with a wide table and plenty of seats. It was unusually crowded, for some reason.

Baki ushered them over to where he was standing before the village elders. He gave a critical look to Temari and Kankuro, "What are you two doing here? Your brother was the only one required to attend."

"Felt like it." Kankuro answered gruffly, "What the heck is the big to-do here anyway?"

"You'll see soon enough." He pointed to a row of empty seats just behind him, "Wait there. It's just as well you're here, since you were bound to find out sooner or later. Gaara, approach the panel please."

The red haired nin crossed over to where the elders of the Sand village were gathered. A few other ninja, mainly jounin, stood nearby Gaara— Baki included. The council members watched Gaara with steady, squinting eyes, their faces solemn and wrinkled. The occupants of the room fell silent when the head elder spoke, "This committee has determined that there are only two worthy nominees for the title of Kazekage remaining within this village, since the death of the Fourth, and the untimely demise of Orahira Haiji, his second in command..."
Gaara’s ears were pounding with such information. He had never known that his father had a
planned successor, or that this person had died before their time. His stomach churned with
uncertainty. He doubted he wanted to stay and hear the rest of what the head councilman had to say.
Baki stood next to him, muttering for him to stay calm.

"I, Soi Masateru, will announce the candidates for the Fifth Kazekage." The old man croaked, trying
to sound important. The jounin in the room looked restless, and it was then Temari and Kankuro
understood what all the hubbub was about.

'We're picking the new village leader, eh? About damn time.' Kankuro thought to himself, folding his
arms, 'This could get ugly. Not many people were as strong as Haiji-sama...but he went and killed himself when his girlfriend betrayed us for Sound...' He looked sidelong to Temari, who also
appeared tense, 'There are a couple of people here who are worthy...but probably just as emotionally frail as Haiji.'

"The primary nominee and long-time servant of this village, Baki..." Masateru glared down at the
jounin disapprovingly, "Was informed of his selection, but earlier forfeited the billet. His reason for
decline was expressed in so that he believes himself unfit for the position..."

Baki’s eyes were trained intensely on the floor. Those around him were hushed, seeing that Masateru
was keen on humiliating him for his decision in front of the entire assembly. "He's cruel...that old buzzard." Temari hissed to her brother, "I hope the other poor slob they picked is brave enough to
turn him down too..."

"This circumstance leaves only the secondary candidate for consideration." Masateru went on
roughly, "Accomplished jounin and third child of our late Yondaime, Sabaku no Gaara."

The silence in the room became a soft buzz of whispers and confusion. Temari reached over and
placed her palm beneath Kankuro's jaw, knowing it was about to hit the floor. Gaara, front and
center to the council, stood like a solitary totem after all of the other anxious jounin had leapt away
from him in shock. His brother and sister felt their hearts ache for him as he stood, completely alone,
staring in disbelief at Masateru and his peers.

Baki was too ashamed of himself to even look at Gaara in that moment. Silence came over the room
when the head councilman gave the young jounin permission to speak. Gaara was able to keep his
composure, by some miracle, and spoke pointedly to Masateru, "Soi-sama...I know that you are
aware that I am a former Leaf ninja and that I have lived in the Hidden Leaf Village most of my
life..."

All ears were focused on Gaara when he continued, "My allegiance to that village will never be
extinguished...even if I do accept the title of Kazekage. Would you be willing to have a leader who
hails from two different countries?"

"What nonsense are you speaking, young man?" An elderly woman answered sharply, "The late
Third Hokage, deceitful as he was in hiding you, could never take from you your heritage. You were
born in this land where wind flows through your veins. Here there is no question of your credibility
or strength."

Something like anger washed over Gaara. How could they view Sarutobi as a deceitful leader? 'He saved my life...from these people.' He kept his emotions in check as he tried to think clearly, 'They
must think I feel victimized or something like that for being kept in Leaf...but if I were to become Kazekage...I could change that view. Ties between Leaf and Sand would be stronger than ever!'

His heart wrenched, 'But I still can't do it.'
Baki finally came to stand beside him, finally having overcome his embarrassment. There was a concerned look on his face, and there seemed to be an unspoken apology to Gaara for letting such a cumbersome matter fall to him. *He never intended this for me...but he certainly couldn't endure it himself...how do I--?*

"Have you come to a decision, Gaara-sama?" Masateru asked carefully, seeing traces of astonishment and fury glance across the young jounin's face.

His shoulders trembled for a moment, restraining his indignation. Gaara hated how the idea had suddenly downsized into a yes or no question. It was so much more-- a massive commitment and burden and privilege...it made him feel sick to his stomach. *If I also decline...I will come across as an even bigger mutineer than Baki.* It was then he realized he couldn't say no.

"Soi-sama..."

But he could avoid it somewhat.

"May I request a few days to consider this proposal?" Gaara queried, adding, "Deeply and seriously consider it?"

There was a brief uproar of objections from the other jounin who felt cheated, but Baki howled at them for silence, which was quickly achieved. After consulting with a few other elders, Masateru responded, "You may...and be sure to consider carefully, Gaara-sama." He redirected to the entire assembly, "This meeting is adjourned! We will meet again in five days for the candidate's answer." After that he and his fellow elders stood.

With respect for the council all those seated also rose, and waited until the committee had exited the antechamber. Gaara left almost immediately after, closely followed by his siblings. It was a dizzying trip through the corridors back out into fresh air. Gaara could not think of anything to say to his brother and sister as they followed him down the street.

Kankuro had finally gotten a grip on himself and spoke quietly to his brother, "Holy shit...you know...I was expecting some kind of shenanigans to go down when we went in there, but...not all of...that, per se..."

They stopped walking and Gaara turned to face his siblings. His face was the epitome of discomfort. There was no doubt that there was absolutely nothing they could say or do at the time that would help him relax. In that case, Temari thought, might as well deal with this straight up. "Gaara...do you think you can go through with this?" She asked him.

He was silent. He played the scenario over again in his head, and then fast-forwarded to when he'd be in office, managing the village and protecting all of those who needed him. The only thing he really had an objection to, minute as it was, was the one thing he could never let go of. If he was in Sand under such constraints it only made sense that Leaf would be almost unreachable.

"I need to see Sakura." Gaara announced, breathing deeply, "I need to talk to her."

Face to face. No more messages or keepsakes in the mail. He knew his reply had not answered Temari's question, but he simply couldn't get his mind off of the matter. If he could not touch that girl's beautiful face one last time before throwing his future into some godforsaken desert and the dust-swept collection of homes clustered within it, he'd probably do exactly what Orahira Haiji had done and check out early.

"Relax, Gaara." Temari was rubbing a soothing circle against his back, "You've got five days to get
your affairs in order. From there it's either: a) Humor that ugly old bastard and take the position and
hope you can arrange an ambassador project with Leaf, or, b) Turn him down, get publically
humiliated, kidnap Sakura and marry her. Perhaps c) Which entails kidnapping her before you take
the position?" She smiled at him, "What do you find most appealing?"

"That really is..." He sighed, rubbing his temples, "A tough choice...although C does seem to have
its merits..."

"Let's take a breather..." Kankuro suggested, and they followed without question and parked
themselves on a roadside bench. They sat in age order, and in the middle, Kankuro had rested his
arms around the shoulders of both siblings on either side of him. "So..." He began lowly, "Anyone
have an idea how to finagle out of this one?"

The three of them sat in silence, stewing over the matter. Other than what Temari had come up with
on the spot, no other solutions were rising to the top of the resolution barrel.

Baki's appearance was most welcome at that point. Perhaps he could bail Gaara out with some
cockamamie scheme of his own? "I'm sorry about all of this, Gaara." The man sounded genuinely
remorseful, "I never wanted to put any pressure on you. I only hesitated because I didn't feel entitled
to make a decision without you being there as well."

Clearly that had backfired. The council had not taken too kindly to his reluctance, and they were not
willing to budge on finding another candidate unless it was wholly necessary. Baki added onto the
apology, "I can negotiate later on if it comes to it. If you decide that you can't take the position I will
accept it in your stead."

"But you don't want it." Gaara reminded him, "No one wants the title...except for the unfit."

Baki chuckled, "Yes, the unfit, well put." He sighed after that, "This never should have fallen to
you...as a veteran of this village something like this is first and foremost my responsibility. It's
just...being Kazekage has always been more of a burden than a gift..."

"I understand perfectly." The red haired nin agreed, "I'll need time to clear my head and think about
this."

"Then you'd probably want to look into a mission that's available." Baki advised, "Guards are
needed to protect an architect at the southern tip of the Wind Country. Your team could handle it
easy, and...take some time to reflect while you're at it."

There was a pause and before Gaara could accept the terms Temari interrupted loudly, "Oh! Baki!
Such a shame you couldn't have told us sooner!" She stood up, yanking Kankuro to his feet by his
elbow, "Kankuro and I can't take a mission right now..."

"We...can't?" He whispered to her near inaudibly, looking for a reason.

"We're too sick to go! Kankuro served some bad tuna yesterday and we've been throwing up
sporadically and battling rashes all night." Her face became convincingly ashen, "We ought to wait
until the food poisoning passes before taking another mission..."

"I've never in my life served spoiled food." Kankuro changed his phrasing after Temari jabbed him
in the side, "Er...until yesterday...ugh. Yeah...need to get some more rest." He still didn't quite get it,
but luckily, Gaara had caught on to what his sister was trying to set up.

"They aren't up to it, Baki." Gaara assured the befuddled jounin. Before he could suggest another
team that could be sent, Gaara proposed his solution, "I want the mission, but I also want to put in a
request for aid from Leaf."

"That's more expensive, Gaara." Baki admonished lightly.

"I know people who work for less." Gaara smirked, knowing there were plenty of shinobi who could be taken advantage of, "Chances are good I can recruit at least two others for cheap."

Baki saw the logic, inwardly cackled at the foolhardiness of Leaf ninja, and then calmly agreed to Gaara's idea. "Don't be too cheap," He warned, "The Hokage might think we're up to something. She doesn't know that nominations are being examined in Suna right now...and it's better if it stays that way."

He nodded, giving a grateful look to Temari, "Of course. I'll send word immediately to Konoha, and once backup arrives we'll head for the coast."

Not a short time later in the not-too-distant Leaf village, Tsunade was examining a mission proposal from Sand that had been sent by messenger hawk. There was an express, slightly urgent request for Haruno Sakura to attend, and the Hokage would've obliged had it not been for the fact that her apprentice was already deployed on a mission. She got the feeling from reading the rushed details that the sender would not be pleased if the ninja specific to the message were not available.

"I'll just have to send substitutes..." And she actually felt bad about it, because the solicitation was for such little money...and such miserable work, "I'll send a few extra grunts...splitting the wages could ease this up."

Not ten minutes later Nara Shikamaru, Hatake Sato, Maito Tama and Hyuga Hinata were lined up in her office. Tsunade's briefing was more of an advertisement in the hope it would distract from the low pay, "Unlike the winter chill here, the desert is reliably warm all year round, albeit it's cooler this season, but you should think of this as a vacation considering how very little is expected of you."

"Is that really the mindset you want to instill in us, Hokage-sama?" Shikamaru verified, "Be warned, Hatake Sato is with us, so there's no need to prompt him to bring his beach chair..."

"Like I'd lug it all the way out there!" Sato snorted at the idea, "Besides, Shika-kun, you'd probably use it to watch clouds in your free time..."

"Are you through?" Tsunade groaned, "Get out of here already. This mission came up suddenly so you don't want to be late for the employer!"

Later on, after packing what supplies they needed, the team made good time through the River Country, but were buffeted by the unforgiving heat just beyond in the Land of Wind. They trekked through the sand dunes, heads bowed to avoid looking into the sun directly. It might have helped if they'd had previous experience with the desert, because Tsunade had completely misinformed them.

"It's so hot even lava would complain..." Sato panted, wiping sweat from his brow, "How the hell do people survive out here anyway?"

"It can't be that difficult." Tama observed optimistically, "Though, Sato-kun...was it really wise to wear your jacket out here?"

"I've got to admit...it wasn't wise at all." He laughed at himself, "It's chilly back home, but here it's like the land winter forgot!"

"That was so poetic, Sato-kun." Hinata was smiling. Her teammate began to fall behind as he
stripped off the unhelpful garment, revealing only a fishnet shirt underneath. Shikamaru barked at him to keep up and the Hatake quickly caught up with the rest of his team.

Sato watched Tama from the corner of his eye, proud of how far she had come. After achieving Genin rank, her parents had found out about it after she had gone on her first mission. They reacted less disastrously than what had been anticipated. It did help that Kakashi was her mentor, which was a step above Ken's brother, ironically. Her mother had actually been happy for her, after much persuading on Tama's part. Her father, on the other hand, had reluctantly given his blessing but only after making her pledge to air on the side of caution.

After that things had settled. Tama was an active member of Team 7 and took many missions after quickly becoming one of Tsunade's favorites. Her charisma and efficiency only added to her considerable skill, and both Kiba and Sakura had come to trust her without hesitation, improving the overall team. No one spoke about Sasuke in those days, because broaching the subject in Tama's presence was somewhat taboo. She could still sense their anxiousness at times.

Currently the eldest kunoichi was having a pleasant conversation with Hinata, so Sato assumed he should chat with the team leader. He fell in step beside the Nara, "Hey, Shikamaru. I was just wondering about that crack you made about me back at home...do you not take me seriously or do I just annoy you?"

"Neither." He admitted, "I actually wanted you to bring the beach chair."

"Oh." Sato grinned after a moment, "You could have just said so, but hey, you never know! We might be pretty busy on this one."

"I have my doubts." Shikamaru said, then turning back to the girls just behind them, "We're here. Those walls ahead are the village gates." They looked out onto the horizon where cliffs parted just at a trench that, if none were mistaken, led into the Sand village.

They picked up speed, wary to stay on top of the sand with chakra, and neared the allied village. They stopped just outside of the tremendous stone barrier, and greeted a guard who asked what their business was. "We're answering a request that was made for Leaf." Shikamaru notified him.

The guard nodded in understanding, and then called up to a higher level of the gate, "Oi! Gaara-sama! Your team just arrived!"

"Gaara-kun?" Hinata squeaked in surprise.

"Gaara-sama?" Sato chimed in addition.

A gust of sand followed quickly after and, sure enough, Gaara stood before them looking expectant. Tama had to hold back a gasp at the sight of him. She had always been a little uneasy around the redhead since he had squashed Sato in the Chunin Exams, but there was something about him that was vastly different. It could have been the near completely black outfit that complemented his mysterious good looks, or maybe that he had added an inch or two in height already. They all had grown, incidentally, but they were not keen to notice that factoid.

"Gaara-sama, huh?" Shikamaru looked enlightened, "I didn't know you were from a noble family. Scratch that: I barely know your family."

"My family isn't as noble so much as it is respectable." Gaara amended, his eyes searching through the group of Leaf ninja, "Where's-?"

"Where's who?" Shikamaru was frowning, "Not enough people for you, or is this bunch just
These people were his friends, and it hurt that he felt such disappointment after seeing them again at last. Instead of making a fuss about Sakura, as he initially planned to, he took a deep breath before welcoming them to Suna. Hinata was the first to respond with a friendly hug, and he noted her change in appearance. "You're wearing your hair long now." Gaara observed, "Naruto-kun will like that, no doubt."

"E-Eh!" She blushed, trying to explain, "It's the tradition of the Main Family of my clan but...if you say so, Gaara-kun."

Sato was also very glad to see his moody friend again and introduced him to Tama. Gaara recalled the distant Tanabata Festival and the news of how Sato, and this particular kunoichi, were engaged to be married. He felt an apology was in order about the exams, but she waved it off, seeing how rueful he was, "No hard feelings, Gaara-sama." She told him, deciding to treat him with respect. He recovered from the awkwardness and managed to push Sakura out of his mind...for the moment.

He lead the way back out into the desert, briefing them on more up to date details of their mission. The group traveled southeast for the rest of the day until reaching the coastline. Gently rolling cliffs overlooked the sea, and as the sun set the Leaf ninja set up camp as Gaara instructed. They would reach their destination the following morning. The shinobi huddled around a small fire as the temperature dropped rapidly.

The Sand jounin figured that if there was anyone who would know why Sakura was absent, it would be her friend. He sat beside Hinata near the fire and asked, "Hinata-chan, is there any particular reason the Hokage could not send Sakura?"

"I'm sorry Gaara-kun. Sakura and Ino are on an important mission with Shizune, she told me before she left." Hinata explained quietly, "Hokage-sama must have known that it would bother you if she couldn't attend...so she sent more people. I know you must...miss her terribly."

Gaara stared into the spitting flames, "It can't be helped. There are...things I need to discuss with her, but they'll have to wait. I shouldn't have so readily assumed she could come out here."

Hinata was a remarkably sympathetic person, and always had been in his time knowing her. When they were young children he had been amused by her shyness and silent devotion to Naruto, but presently he held her in the highest respect for her loyalty and courage. He was certain that she was struggling just as much in the absence of Naruto as he was with Sakura. Gaara decided against telling her about his nomination to become Godaime. He wanted to spend as much time as possible with his friends– while he still could.

The next day the ninja followed the coast further south. The ocean breeze was a wonderful relief from the staggering, dry heat of the desert they had endured. By mid-day the ninja spotted a small, sea side town just at the land's edge. Beside the bay a huge facility had been built into a plateau and was clearly still under construction. Several water collection vats sat behind a levy that held back the tossing waves.

The mission's parameters were relatively straightforward. The chief architect needed replacement guards to supervise and ensure the safety of the workers. It would be a relatively short mission, and hopefully accidents could be avoided altogether. The worst they were expected to deal with were dangerously high temperatures and possible equipment malfunction– standard C-rank blotter.

They followed a sandy path ahead to the work site, and after entering the premises, a tough-looking woman with gray hair greeted them. The hard lines of her old face formed a welcoming smile, "Here
"You are Mara?" Gaara asked and received an affirmative nod. "I am Gaara, and here with me are comrades from the Leaf village."

Shikamaru introduced his team with less enthusiasm, and Mara proceeded to take them into the interior of the property. On the way the older woman filled them in on the situation, "I'm a volunteer from the Wave Country. You mentioned Tazuna, right?" She looked to Gaara, Hinata, and Sato, "He's a friend of mine. We've worked together for ages! You could say that Wave is renowned for shoreline engineering these days because many different countries are employing us now."

"When did the Wind daimyo request the construction of this water treatment plant?" Gaara asked curiously, "I'm aware that now our country is experiencing a drought, but we've had no news of this."

"Long time ago...five? Six months? It went quick though." Mara held open the tarp covering the entrance to a roomy tent, "In here everyone, I want you to rest up before I put you all to work."

After the shinobi had slipped past the canvas she followed, continuing her explanation, "It's not just for The Land of Wind, you know. Investors from The River Country, just next door, were kind enough to help out...all their damned rivers empty out in this estuary." Her laugh was dry, "But hell, people in the desert kind of need water anyhow, don't you think?"

She mentioned how her last guards had returned home the night before to the Grass Village, "I'm glad for them too, because they've been with us from the start-- really nice guys." Mara notified them that once the last of the massive carbon filters were installed there would be two days of inspection before the plant could begin piping in seawater and desalinating it.

She stepped out of the tent after she had finished briefing the new recruits, "Take some time to unwind in here and I'll have some food sent in for you. Gather your energy for later because you're gonna need it!"

Mara left quickly after that and the group settled down to relax without much thought. The ground was covered with mats to lie on and a number of cots were set up around the pavilion. Gaara spread out on a cot, sighing deeply, and looked off to his right unthinkingly. On the floor Tama was sitting cross-legged with Sato stretched out in front of her. She cradled his head in her lap while he dozed, absently combing her fingers through his hair. Gaara turned and faced the opposite side of the tent.

The open display of affection troubled him, especially in the absence of Sakura. He was not sure how to deal with his own frustrations, let alone make a decision on accepting the title of Kazekage. Gaara made sure not to glance back at the two cuddling ninja after that.

Food arrived on a large spread with two workers. They greeted the shinobi animatedly before hurrying back to work. Shikamaru lounged near the low table, picking at the food that was not very appetizing. None of them ate very much, and opted for staying very still in order to beat the sweltering heat. Hinata eventually settled near Gaara, her hair tied up to keep off of her neck.

"Hello, Hinata-chan." He mumbled tiredly.

"Gaara-kun...I was wondering why Haku-kun couldn't join us for this mission." Hinata asked quietly, "Is he busy? Or does he not much like the desert?"

"The hospital back in Suna is always hectic, and woefully under-staffed these days." He answered, and that much was true, "Haku-kun stays where he is needed most."
Gaara wondered how he had gotten away with the lie, and wondered if it was even necessary that Hinata stay in the dark about it. 'No. There may come a point where she forgets herself and mentions it. If the Hokage finds out that Haku is not with me there will be strife.' He reminded himself, 'It's better if she's under the same impression as everyone else.'

"I understand. I'm glad Haku-kun has found a talent." Hinata folded her arms on the side of the cot, resting her chin on top of them, "I miss us all being together, you know? It's been so long...I hope you and Naruto-kun and Haku-kun come home soon."

"That is my hope as well." Gaara agreed weakly, "Tell me what I've missed, Hinata-chan."

The Hyuga recounted events in the Leaf Village that Gaara had not been present for, and a surprising number of them, to his wonderment, involved Sakura. He listened with his eyes closed, envisioning the pink haired girl's face.

The afternoon passed in a smoldering haze, and the ninja in the tent napped in the shade of the pavilion to conserve energy. Gaara, still unable to achieve sleep, watched his teammates doze peacefully while trying to preserve some of his own strength. His mind passed in and out of awareness, and occasionally one of the Leaf ninja would stir only to use the bathroom or get a drink of water.

Twilight painted the evening sky with a vibrant sunset along the coast, and the red light stretched through an opening in the tent, illuminating Sato's sleeping face. Eventually he woke up, realizing he had fallen into a deep sleep on one of the cots in the pavilion. The silver haired nin shifted to stretch his arms, but found there was no room to facilitate the movement. Tama was curled up against him on the mattress, her sleep undisturbed by his stirring.

Sato wasn't used to such intimate proximity, and supposed they had forgotten themselves after finding a comfortable place to nap. 'It's no big deal, and technically...we're allowed to be this close to each other. And yet...' He sat up, stretching at last, 'It's still a bit weird to be snuggling with my childhood friend. I can't blame her really, she's fifteen and never had a boyfriend...I hope she understands that she shouldn't wait for me.'

He realized they must have been out for a few hours, because the rest of the team had already left. It couldn't have been all that important if they had been left behind, Sato reasoned, so he relaxed, looking back to Tama. Even if he wasn't really attracted to her, he could acknowledge that she was a beautiful girl right then. Her raven hair had settled in waves across her shoulders, and the lines of her face were tranquil and delicate. At times he forgot her specialty was hand to hand combat.

"I'm...worried about you being on my uncle's team." He said softly, half to himself, "I don't want Kiba freaking you out..."

Out of curiosity Sato reached out his hand and touched her arm. The girl's skin was as smooth as velvet beneath his fingertips, and he felt something in his chest tighten wistfully. She really was something to be coveted. 'Even if she's supposed to be mine one day...I...I don't know! It's sort of like I've been handed treasure for free when I didn't do anything to earn it. I don't deserve diddly-shit, least of all her patience.' After a few careless moments Sato withdrew, slightly overwhelmed by her presence.

Tama woke when the caresses ended, "Hm...why'd you stop?"

That certainly had his attention. Sato couldn't answer that question, or even better, why he had started in the first place. "I dunno." He replied, gently running a knuckle against her arm once more,
"Why do you have to be so dam soft?"

She shrugged, "I suppose I'll be rough and wrinkly by 40, but I have a way to go, huh?" She sat up, enjoying how he laughed at her joke. The truth was she was hoping that when she did reach that age, he'd be there to let her know if there was a difference.

They straightened themselves out and then left the tent. Outside of the pavilion Hinata greeted them, as if she had anticipated their awakening, "Did you two have a nice rest?" They answered affirmatively, and continued ahead with the Hyuga to find Gaara and Shikamaru embroiled in a game of shogi. The board had been set up on a bench just overlooking the construction site. The Nara had his feet propped up on Gaara's calabash.

"Seriously, what are we here for?" Sato complained about the lack of action. Weren't guards supposed to guard something? Instead they had napped away the afternoon and were having a grand old time! Tsunade had been right in one respect– it was more of a vacation than a mission. The lack of peril was unusual, all of Sato's teammates agreed, though Shikamaru had no objection to that.

Time passed and the board game war between Leaf and Sand shinobi dragged on. Gaara was surprisingly skilled, the spectators found, but Shikamaru was always four or five steps ahead of him. On one of the Nara's turns there was an abrupt shudder from the construction yard and a huge beam of welded metal slipped from a forklift. Without so much as blinking Gaara raised a hand and with an unspoken order, halted the slab in its descent with his sand, and saved two unsuspecting workers in the process. They cheered.

Disaster averted– the game resumed. 'Okay.' Sato conceded, 'So there are some dangers out here that we've got to keep an eye out for. But still, it looks like Gaara could clean up the whole thing on his own.'

A short while later Shikamaru was impressed Gaara had forced the game into an absolute deadlock– neither side was victorious. Mara would come and go, sometimes asking them to inspect objects or use their chakra to climb up to the more dangerous areas around collection towers and read off serial numbers. All seemed well for a while, and with some stolen time, Hinata, Tama, and Sato walked around the perimeter of the construction site. An off-duty worker let them borrow a fishing pole and the three ventured out onto an upraised jetty.

"So...how would you rate my uncle as a sensei, Tama?" Sato asked curiously, leaning on the guard rail of the walkway, "He's not totally boring is he?"

"Well...no..." She took a moment to think, straightening out the fishing line, "Kakashi-sensei is a bit...um...late sometimes," Sato rolled his eyes at the remark, "Incredibly knowledgeable...clever and outspoken, one might say...even literary--"

"Literary?" Sato spat, "That's not a biography of the Dalai Lama he's reading, you know!"

"There! All finished!" Hinata handed the fishing pole back to Tama after she had wedged a piece of tuna on the hook, "Do you think we'll catch anything?"

"You can cheat...if you want." Tama suggested smilingly, and Hinata took the advice, scanning the water briefly with her Byakugan. She directed the older girl to cast in the direction of the nearest fish, both pleased with their smooth cooperation.

"But really, though, porn novels aside– he's teaching you stuff right?" Sato pressed the matter, hoping to heaven that his uncle could exercise some tact around his newest pupil.
"He taught me three new jutsu last week just to keep me on par with Sakura-chan and Kiba-kun."
Tama assured him, "He's a great teacher and I really am grateful...though honestly...I get the feeling
he's a little upset with me."

Sato's azure eyes narrowed, "It's not because of Sasuke, is it?"

"No! Sasuke's got nothing to do with it! It's some of the techniques I already know– from Uncle
Gai." Tama clarified, "He says they're very dangerous and shouldn't be handed down to ninja so
early in their career."

Sato exchanged a thoughtful glance with Hinata before saying, "You know...my uncle is naturally
uptight that way. Kakashi just doesn't want to see anyone get hurt again, I think. Besides, you're
plenty capable if your uncle saw potential in you, so just give him some time to see how you fight."

"I wonder if maybe I'd be better suited to Uncle Gai's team?" Tama speculated, tapping her chin in
thought.

"I hate to break it to you, Tama, but there won't be an open space there ever." Sato took the thought
seriously, "They love you, I'm sure, but Tenten is their number one gal."

She was in full agreement, "She's so cool with weapons...I remember how she throttled Shikamaru-
kun in the Chunin Exam Finals."

Both Sato and Hinata, who both had very clear memories of the Finals, recounted it to Tama in
fragments of their own participation. Sato's was a bit cut-off because he had consequently been
beaten within an inch of his life by Gaara and hospitalized, but Hinata filled in the gaps. They passed
the fishing pole down the line as they grew tired of monitoring it, taking turns story-telling, and once
in Hinata's possession the line went taught.

"O-Oh!" She hadn't been prepared for a result, "A bite!"

"Nab him good, Sunshine!" Sato cheered, watching as Tama clutched her sides with laughter at the
sight of the Hyuga frantically reeling in the line. To their wonder Hinata had battled with her captive
valiantly, and finally wrestled a thirty-someodd centimeter mackerel over the railing. It was wide-
eyed, mouth agape on the hook, and Sato managed to secure the streamlined body that was snapping
back and forth in a wild struggle.

"What a catch, Hinata-chan..." Tama sighed, catching her breath after laughing. Sato unhooked the
fish and Tama lifted the mackerel up by its gills to scrutinize it, "Looks like dinner to me!"

Hinata and Tama went back to the construction site with their soon-to-be meal, and Sato returned the
fishing pole to its owner, though neglected to tell him it had provided handsomely for his team. They
spotted Shikamaru on top of a front loader watching the evening clouds pass by. Even he was
impressed by the Hyuga girl's catch, and joined them in preparations for eating the poor creature.

"Where'd Gaara-kun go off to?" Sato asked the team leader, prodding at an infant campfire they had
made, "Is he looking for food too?"

"Nah. He went with Mara after she discovered how useful his sand ability is. She's making him do
all the work." Shikamaru was quite glad about it too, "When he gets back tell him you've all been
working just as hard."

"What about you?"

Shikamaru shrugged, "I've never worked a day in my life. No use in ruining that record now."
Hinata had remarkable skill when it came to preparing fish, which Sato knew from past missions, and the others discovered quickly after trying it themselves. They sat around the fire eating contentedly. Stars peeked out from behind clouds in the night sky, and even after waiting nearly an hour for Gaara to appear they returned to the pavilion to rest, making sure to save him some of the food if he was later interested.

Shikamaru was the first to fall asleep, predictably, and Hinata followed shortly after brushing her teeth. Once all the others were settled Tama crossed the tent to where Sato was spread out on his bed and took the spot beside him. Her chin was just level with the bridge of his nose, and Sato got a fantastic view of her rosy mouth, then curved in a comfortable smile. Again, he was deeply conflicted.

"Is this appropriate at all?" He posed a question about their nearness.

Tama raised her eyebrows slightly, "Hm? Oh, I believe it is essentially harmless, but appropriate? Well...we are going to be married someday."

"That again." Sato sighed gently, "Married. It sounds like such a conventional word...then you say it and it kind of," He smiled unintentionally, "Seems heartfelt?" He cleared his throat, "Hrm! What I mean is...Tama, don't you ever feel like you're missing out since you can't date other guys?"

"Other guys?" Her tone sounded as if she had no idea other men existed in the world.

"Yeah...guys like," He hesitated slightly, "Like Kiba?"

Tama's laugh echoed with the debonair of a songbird, "Kiba-kun? But he's my teammate! I don't think that I could ever view him as more than a good friend, Sato-kun."

He was relieved with her reply and at the same time identified the exact same way. 'How will I ever see you as more than my friend when I'm supposed to be your husband?' He felt his heart wrench, 'You'll be disappointed in me. You'll want more than what I have to offer.'

"And you?"

Sato blinked, "Huh?"

"Before we're hitched officially, do you see yourself dating another girl?" She sounded perfectly even and relaxed about the idea.

"Maybe." He admitted with a chuckle, "Naruto would kill me if I went anywhere near Sunshine, but Tenten definitely if I can get her to take me seriously one day. Hm. Ino's not bad either..." Sakura was so expressly off limits he didn't dare utter her name for fear of Gaara walking by.

"Ask Hinata-chan anyway, just for fun." Tama suggested.

Sato's face was a mix of astonishment and relief, "Why...are you so cool about it? All this dating business?"

"Well...I love you and I'd do anything to make you happy." She laughed as if it was a no-brainer, "Go explore, young ninja! Date girls and stuff. I'll wait."

Silence weighed heavily on the silver haired nin. He laid there, feeling a strange burning sensation in his throat. Her selfless loyalty had him genuinely astounded, and Sato couldn't picture it: why, of all things, of all people? 'Me?' Sato closed his eyes, slowing his nervous breaths, 'Maybe she just...doesn't know any better.' He wanted to ask her, in full, unadulterated bluntness what exactly
about himself she could love, why she did, or if she'd be devastated if her feelings were unrequited.

Sato said nothing. He couldn't form the questions, and he wondered if he was too cowardly to do so or if he outright refused to say anything that might hurt her. His eyes snuck up to her's, and he could see the same calm expression on her face that had been present at the start of their discussion. There was no false pretense there, he knew. The quiet became peaceful after that, and the two studied each other with on a few inches gap between them.

"Thank you." Sato said at length, because he didn't love her back, and feared he never would, "Let's get some sleep."

She pecked his forehead in response, "Okay. Goodnight then, Sato-kun." Tama rolled over, facing her back to him and Sato let out a sigh he had not known he'd been holding. He was unable to place why he felt such an enormous guilt about the whole ordeal. Sleep did not come easy, but while he drifted off, Sato could see the past before he and Tama had known any sort of obligation– carefree and playing in the park. Smiling children.

A while later after all occupants of the tent had fallen asleep, Gaara returned from assisting Mara. He was grateful for the food that had been left for him, wondering how they had gotten their hands on such a fish. He couldn't help but notice for the second time Sato and Tama huddled so close together, bathed in moonlight and snoring peacefully. This time he did not look away.

Horrible jealousy filled him. The two were hardly serious about each other, and if things had all gone as they were supposed to, Sakura would be beside him looking that serene. 'Am I destined to not have what I wish for? To always serve others and never think about myself?' He wanted to be selfish again, and part of him was very bitter towards the Hatake and his intended that they had no such problems.

Gaara breathed deeply, acknowledging that they were not responsible for the way things had gone. These people were his friends. Even when he hadn't been blessed with Sakura's presence he believed he should still be glad for their company. He relaxed a margin, turning his gaze to the entrance of the pavilion. Outside the moon was rimmed with silver light– a mirror of his solitude.

Hinata rose with the sun the next morning and found Gaara was already picking at the breakfast foods that had been left for them. She stretched before rolling off of her cot and crossed over to the table, "Good morning, Gaara-kun! How did you sleep?"

"Well, thank you." He imagined if he had slept at all it would have been comfortable, "The others have to get up soon. Mara expects us in less than ten minutes."

"Oh." Hinata wasn't accustomed to a construction worker's schedule, "She was here recently?"

"A short while ago I spoke with her, yes." Gaara handed her a bowl of rice topped with bright colored morsels, "That's for you Hinata-chan. I tried waking Shikamaru earlier but he's proven to be incredibly stubborn."

Hinata ate from her bowl, glancing over her shoulder to where the Nara snored. After a few more bites she padded over to him, gently tapping his back and got no response whatsoever. "Incredible is a good word for it." She agreed with her red haired friend, "He's so deeply asleep..."

"Rather he doesn't take this mission seriously; he's leaving everything to me." Gaara said pointedly.

Fortunately Sato rose a few minutes later, stretching like a cat, and then strode over to Hinata,
"Morning, Sunshine...morning, Gaara-kun..." He yawned sleepily, "Shika's not up yet?"

Gaara nodded, nipping at a bit of egg, "If he ever intends to wake it won't be soon."

"Hm?" The silver haired nin bounced over to the lax team leader, "Oh well, Shika-kun! You had this coming!" He kicked the Nara off of the cot with his foot, watching with satisfaction as Shikamaru fell, quickly becoming aware of the fast-approaching ground. A woeful moan followed, and before Shikamaru could stand and accuse anyone for the tumble Sato was already seated beside Gaara eating.

"You're a pest..." Shikamaru shuffled over to them, "...Hatake."

"Hinata did it!" Sato corrected him indignantly, "Why do you always pick on me, Shikamaru?"

Shikamaru looked to her, his countenance skeptical, but to his surprise she nodded. "I certainly did." She bluffed, smiling amiably, "Good morning, Shikamaru-kun!"

"Feh." He understood they were all in on it, so he sat down to eat with them, promptly dismissing the joke. Gaara found it amusing that Hinata could play along so easily with Sato during his antics. They ate quickly and the Hyuga girl wondered if Tama also needed to be woken.

"She'll get up soon. Let's leave her be, she deserves a few extra minutes." Sato said this while grinning directly at Shikamaru, "Tama will join us in a bit."

"Shaddap already..." Shikamaru warned him, standing from the table and leading the way out of the pavilion. His teammates followed shortly after, not disturbing Tama's sleep.

As predicted Tama rose a short while later, blinking sleep out of her eyes. She brushed her arm to the side, jostled slightly by finding there was no one next to her, "Oh! Sato-kun?" She sat up on her elbows, scanning all around the tent. Disappointment sat in her stomach for a moment upon realizing she was completely alone, but Tama recovered, rolling off of the cot and combed her fingers through her hair.

Food had been left out on the table for her but she didn't have an appetite. She left the pavilion, shrugging the sleep out of her limbs. The last time she had woken up Sato had been beside her, and Tama couldn't deny it had given her a very welcome thrill. Granted, he had not been very comfortable with the proximity, but she was glad she had the chance to appreciate his endearing face up close that way. She decided not to take his absence personally since everyone else had been gone too, 'Why did they all leave early? Or...am I just late?'

Tama rounded a corner that lead into the vast inner workings of the construction yard. There was no sign of her team, 'Where should I begin to look for them?' There was a shuffling of feet on the opposite side of a containment unit and she froze when voices followed.

"Did you find that wench yet? If we don't kill her soon we won't get paid the full amount."

A lower voice answered, "No, I just checked the pavilion and it was empty. We'll try the south side of the lot and then the wharf."

Tama peeked her nose just around the edge of the silo, getting a glimpse of the two conspirators. Both were men; the nearest with dirty blonde hair tied in a tight braid down his back, garbed in black leather that showed off his muscular build. His partner stood with his back to Tama, terracotta hair cropped short and also in dark clothes. They turned to leave and she shrunk back, but not after noticing something that made her heart plummet into her gut.
'Rock ninja!' Tama pressed her back against the ridges of the silo, knowing her eyes had not fooled her when she stole a glance at their hitai-ate. She slowed her breathing, listening in silence as they negotiated for another moment until their footsteps faded in the opposite direction. Once she was fairly certain they were gone she bolted.

'They're after Mara! But why? Where is everybody?' Tama crossed through the center of the lot, running quickly and hoping against hope they had not noticed her. She nearly shrieked when someone stepped out in front of her but it was only a construction worker– the one who had lent her the fishing pole, "Er, is everything alright miss?"

"We might be under attack; can you please tell me where Mara is?" She panted breathlessly.

"Sweet lord! Under attack?" He wheezed disbelievingly, "She went off with your lot to the wharf, that's what I heard!"

Tama broke away from her informant immediately, navigating through the construction site back towards the pier. Her worst fear was that she would arrive too late, but thankfully there was no sign of either of the Rock ninja as she raced across the trotter. Workers were already going back to the lot for a break, 'Where is Mara? Do they know?' She stepped onto the opposite bank of the inlet, eyes searching frantically, 'Please let her be--!'"

"Tama-chan?"

The black haired girl whipped around, nose to nose with Hinata, "Gosh...you scared the bejesus out of me, Hinata-chan..."

Fortunately the rest of the team showed up as well with Mara just ahead of them, all appropriately confused. Shikamaru gave his attention to Tama, "I gather you have something to report since you rushed all the way over here?"

"Back in the lot...there was no mistaking it..." She took a moment to catch her breath, "I just went out to find you all and the next thing I know there are two Rock ninja! There could be more, I'm not sure...but they're after Mara."

"Blimey! What's so special about an old crone like me?" The old woman barked in astonishment.

Gaara answered promptly as they moved back out onto the bridge as a group, "You're the leader of this project. It's only natural that you'd be targeted first."

"Do you have any enemies or rivals we should be aware of now?" Shikamaru added.

Her laugh was a smoky rumble in her chest, "Well no one comes to mind...perhaps all those sore losers who I out-drunk in the pubs back home, but...I honestly don't think I've annoyed enough people for this to happen."

"See, I always think that too," Sato empathized with her, "But then there's always some excuse like: You're that idiot who broke my mailbox! Or, Your rent is two months past due! There are always people who consider you a jerk even if you don't outright mess with them."

"It's nice that we had a firsthand account like that." Shikamaru sighed lowly, "Mara, make sure you stay close to Gaara. You'll benefit from his shield."

Mara took a moment to observe the red haired ninja but saw no such device on him, "Shield, eh? I don't know about that...say, what's the function of that big-ass gourd you keep lugging around, boy?"
"It's comprised of sand I use for battle." Gaara answered distractedly and Mara rolled her eyes as if to say, *Fashion fades these days...*

Nearly halfway across the lower access Hinata held out her arm suddenly, halting the entire party. Her eyes had quickly picked up on the two unknowns who were approaching, proving Tama's report true. They moved confidently, wearing smug expressions after locating their objective, and stopped about a dozen yards away from the Leaf ninja.

"Kenkichi Romjin and Yamamoto Sanae request your immediate surrender, Miss...Mara, is it?" The blonde man announced in a husky voice, "This is by order of our employer, Fukuda Tsutomu, for he wishes to acquire this facility peaceably."

"Fukuda?" Mara crowed at the notorious name, "That greedy bastard can't be satisfied even within The Earth Country! He has no business with me, that conceited, rich quack!"

"If you do not leave now we will use deadly force." Gaara warned, his tone somewhat unnerving even for his own teammates. The threat didn't seem to much worry Romjin and Sanae, though. Outwardly it was apparent that the two had been partners for years, and had seen more battles than anyone of the opposing ninja combined.

Even though Shikamaru advised against it, Gaara stepped away from the group to deal with the intruders himself. Romjin, the blonde nukenin, regarded him with a raised eyebrow, "Aren't you supposed to be that Sand ninja who killed Gato? They say you're real trouble in a fight, but know that our accomplishments outweigh yours. Only the elite work for Fukuda."

Gaara raised his hand, sand shivering to life around him, "Then it's a shame he didn't send his best...I was hoping for a challenge."

The insult registered quickly, and though fury glanced across Romjin's face it was Sanae who made a hand seal. A blast from beside the landing punched a hole in the concrete of the bridge, and the force of it knocked Gaara back—unharmed thanks to his sand shield. In response to the opening assault Sato and Hinata hurtled ahead towards the Rock ninja.

The worry on Shikamaru's face did not bode well in Tama's opinion. He spoke sidelong to her, "This is bad...they've got explosives set up around the site, and they could take it out at any moment..."

"I thought they were here for Mara..." Tama pointed out.

"Sure they are, just as they're after the plant— it's simple really." Shikamaru deduced, "If they can't have their way with the chief engineer they blow the place to hell." From behind the black haired kunoichi Mara shuddered at the notion.

The brawl unfolding at the center of the viaduct was fast-paced melee combat. Both Romjin and Sanae were experts in tajutsu. Hinata had wedged herself between Sanae and his partner, a palm directed at each of them and lit with chakra. They weren't serious about fighting such a young girl, but quickly found out what an error it was. Stabs of Jyukken connected with agonizing precision, and while trying to block the blows her chakra scalded their upraised arms. Sato took the opportunity to set a trap while the nukenin were distracted.

The Hatake circled around the Rock ninja, avoiding his white-eyed teammate, and snared a wire around both enemies until their legs were locked. Sato rolled away as a kunai sailed past his head and then drew his hand back, tightening the coil and forcing both nukenin to stop their assault. "You want to do the honors, Sunshine?" The silver haired nin grinned at his teammate.
Hinata lunged ahead, poised for a knockout blow, but Sanae and Romjin balanced their weight and shifted so that her strike snapped the wires that bound them together. The enemy pair dove away in perfect synchronization, avoiding the Hyuga girl's assaults completely. Sato, thankfully, was quick enough to land a blind-sided kick to Sanae's jaw.

The brown haired man stumbled for a moment, which was just long enough for Shikamaru to act, "Kage Mane no Jutsu!" Sanae froze, at the mercy of the Nara, and Tama smiled at Mara's exclamation of triumph from the far side of the landing.

The victory was short-lived once Romjin countered, "Katon: Hell Cat Jutsu!" Shikamaru had no choice but to abort the technique or risk the incoming roar of flames. He and Tama rolled to the side, dodging the charging fire beast. Freed from his brief capture, Sanae immediately regrouped with his partner, keeping a watchful eye as Hinata crept ever nearer — poised to strike.

By then Gaara had recovered from the blast and rejoined the fray. His sand put pressure on the fleet-footed Rock duo, who soon resorted to raising a small army of Mud Clones that rose up from the banks beside the breakwater. The replicas proved to be a wise choice — just as agile as their originals and even more frustrating when Gaara could not pick the fakes from the true nukenin. He crushed all those that came in range, and shielded himself from their ruthless attacks.

The Mud Clones outnumbered the Leaf team two to one. Shikamaru knew the stakes were getting higher as Sanae and Romjin's forces slowly drove their team back along the conduit — closer to where Mara was taking refuge. The best way to deal with this is a counterattack of equal force. Hinata's Shadow Clones can do that.' Shikamaru came up with a strategy on the spot, but was unable to pass it on to his team after he was hammer-fisted in the side by a sneaky Mud doppelganger.

Nearby Sato and Tama were raking through the crowds that were getting too close to Mara, and Hinata was a short distance from where Gaara was embroiled in the worst of the fighting. Without warning several clones coordinated an attack and ganged up on the Sand ninja, pile-driving into him where his shield was weakest. The blow knocked him off the side of the quay, and though his sand swarmed to keep up it could not catch him in time.

Hinata could see Gaara hit the water with her Byakugan. For a long moment she waited for him to surface, hacking through the clones that were responsible for his fall, but quickly realized he was not above water. He can swim, can't he?" Panic gripped her. There was still no progress and her eyes snapped to where Tama had positioned herself directly in front of Mara, hurling kunai at approaching bunshin. To the Hyuga it seemed that she was the only one aware of Gaara's plight.

"Hinata, make some Shadow Clones and we'll clean up the last of them!" Shikamaru finally voiced his idea of how to eliminate the Mud Clones. Sato had already destroyed a fair number of them, but their work was far from over. With muck plentiful beside the inlet more and more replicas were made to replace those lost. Hinata complied, but not in the way Shikamaru had hoped.

It was clear she was distracted after she had made only three duplicates— not nearly enough to fight off the enemy's clones. Hinata abruptly dashed for the side of the viaduct and dove from the railing without any explanation. Great... Shikamaru thought, That just leaves me and Sato to hold them off. He glanced back to where Tama was defending Mara, 'And to be honest I'm not really sure how well Tama can fight...so this ultimately leaves us at a disadvantage.'

The Kage Bunshin Hinata had left behind aided Sato in finishing off the last of the enemy's Mud clones. A pillar of saltwater crashed down moments later, dissipating the Shadow Clones and hurling Sato against the pavement with merciless force. Dizzy, the Hatake struggled to his feet, eyes widening in shock as the real Romjin and Sanae charged for him, "Hey Shika! A little help?"
The Nara's shadow extended across the pavement, reaching futilely for the Rock ninja who were then aware of the technique. They dodged Shikamaru's jutsu and focused their assault on Sato. Overwhelmed, the silver haired nin created several Fire Clones to afford him the chance to escape the crazed pair of nukenin.

Below in the churning waves Hinata had plunged into the icy water after her friend. She was glad to see Gaara was still struggling for the surface, but was clearly inhibited by the heavy calabash secured to his back. She dove down, level with the thick, leather ties that bound him to the sand gourd, and found herself fumbling with the clasps. He also must have had the same problem, Hinata realized.

Knowing the uselessness of trying to free him of the weight, Hinata opted for dragging him bodily out of the water. Her efforts in that regard also failed. Gaara was simply too heavy to breach the surface by that point, and no amount of her frantic tugging and floundering was going to change it. Even after creating a Shadow Clone to help her with the drowning Sand ninja, it was becoming too much for Hinata to attempt on one breath of air alone. For a brief moment Gaara caught the Hyuga girl's eye.

His expression was chillingly calm. Hinata had hoped that there might have been some fight left in him—that he wouldn't have so quickly accepted the fatality of the circumstances. His eyes encouraged her wordlessly to save herself and return to the others, but she wouldn't have it, *What would Naruto-kun think if his friend perished this way? I won't give up!* She motioned for her clone to dive deeper—to the dark waters that tugged them further down.

The Hyuga girl held fast to the drowning jounin, watching as the Shadow Clone just below them threw herself into a tremendous rotation. The impact was painful, granted, but it had been enough to force Gaara out of the water and, thankfully, to the safety of a low jetty. Out of the swirling water Hinata heaved herself up onto the rocks beside Gaara while he hacked up mouthfuls of seawater.

Drenched and shivering, Hinata staggered to her feet, pulling a very waterlogged Gaara up as well. "Thank you." He said solemnly, fiddling uncomfortably with the ties of his calabash, "I...really hate water."

"Haku-kun should have come with us..." Hinata panted, realizing that she was not cut out for high-stress swimming and other such activities, "Are you alright, Gaara-kun?"

"You saved me. I'm perfectly fine." He assured her, and she nodded gladly. As Hinata began to pick her way across the slippery boulders to the shore, Gaara stopped her, "We can't rejoin the rest of the team just yet."

Hinata looked at him quizzically, "Is something wrong?"

He pointed to the underside of the plant's filters. At intervals, beneath the steel beams and concrete were discretely placed explosives that the Rock shinobi had earlier planted. "We need to deal with those bombs first." Gaara recommended, and added, "I won't be able to fight as well either until my sand is dry."

The contents of his sand gourd had already proven how worthless sand was underwater. Still sodden, it would take some time for it to dry out and again become dependable enough for battle. Hinata followed after the Sand ninja as he crossed the jetty to a pillar under the pier.

Above, at the mouth of the conduit, Tama guarded Mara vigilantly. After Romjin and Sanae had concentrated their assault on Sato the mass of Mud Clones had dissipated. While it was good to not fear for their own safety at the time, Tama could only look on worriedly as the silver haired nin dove
away from his thrashing foes—leaving his clones to be pummeled in his place. 'He's in trouble...and Shikamaru can't get in close enough to help.' Tama had wondered if Gaara and Hinata would appear sometime soon, 'But I haven't seen them...and there's no use in waiting. I just hope they're alright!'

The tension in the girl's posture was evident, and Mara was through with being a spectator, "Listen up, Missy, your lot's in trouble out there. Go back them up and I'll lay low in one of the storage sheds back in the stocking yard."

"But you'll be vulnerable! I couldn't—"

"No more vulnerable than I am now." Mara grunted pointedly, "With those two maniacs out there busy fighting you ninja they won't give me the time of day until you're all disposed of. My chances are better if I'm out of sight, plain and simple."

It didn't take much more to convince Tama. She and Mara split up, the old woman returning back to the construction area and the kunoichi back to her team.

Tama watched as Sanae plunged his fist into one of Sato's clones, effectively destroying it. She leapt up while he was unprepared, catching him in the jaw with a furious wheel-kick. He fell backwards with a yowl, startling his partner. Sato quickly joined the kunoichi, both standing back to back as the nukenin regrouped ahead of them.

"Nice entry, right there." The silver haired nin chuckled, "Any more bright ideas?"

"Hit them while they're down?" She suggested, to which she received a nod of approval.

Though Shikamaru's distant shout was probably meant to stop them, both Tama and Sato charged ahead towards the pair of Rock ninja. They fought with synchronization that would do Gai proud had he been present, and though they were fearsome and swift, both nukenin possessed equally formidable mimicry. Sanae had recovered from Tama's ambush, and countered the Leaf shinobi alongside his partner with an impatient grimace.

As the blows volleyed Tama quickly analyzed the situation. She ducked beneath a punch from Romjin that left an alarming crater in the concrete just beside her. 'They're stronger than us...much stronger! If Shikamaru or one of the others doesn't step in we might get—'

To Sato (and Tama's) shock the Rock ninja changed strategy, and again ganged up on the Hatake. Two sharp kicks connected with Sato in the gut that sent him crashing to the far railing with a pained grunt.

Rage boiled up in her stomach, but before Tama could retaliate against the dirty trick, Romjin had tossed down several smoke bombs. He and Sanae disappeared into the fog, and as visibility diminished Tama found herself wandering along the bridge—completely directionless.

Unseen to her on the far side of the bridge, Shikamaru hauled Sato to his feet. "They hit really hard..." Sato admitted, holding his throbbing sides, "You may actually be the wisest one here...hanging back..."

Shikamaru snorted, "I told you not to get too close but you did anyway. Until Hinata and Gaara get back here we're at the disadvantage."

There was an abrupt commotion, unmistakably Tama's cry as she fought off an enemy. Sato reacted instinctively, tearing himself away from the team leader and rushing back towards the billowing cloud. More shuffling followed, and Shikamaru blinked upon seeing the kunoichi hurl Sanae out into the open. Clearly visible, the Nara took a shot at the nukenin, successfully snaring him with his
shadow.

'Great…and that idiot just ran back into the smoke.' Shikamaru thought glumly after Sato had vanished. Tama obeyed when Shikamaru told her to stay put, "No one else is going in there! These guys have used this tactic before, I'm willing to bet."

It became apparent that Sato and Romjin had at length detected each other in the smoke cover after streaks of white chakra sliced hither and thither through the air. Sato's attacks were sloppy, and Shikamaru figured from the distinct sound of caroming metal that Romjin was wielding a weapon as well. The Nara flicked his gaze from Tama, who stood rigidly several meters away, to Sanae—who reflected the exact posture of his captor. At least with one of them trapped, he thought, the other would probably compromise.

A sudden clash snapped Shikamaru out of his thoughts. From within the haze there was the sound of a dropped sword skidding over pavement, 'Someone's lost their weapon…it's a fifty-fifty chance that it was the enemy's.' His hope was crushed after Sato howled out in pain. Tama took a step forward but Shikamaru cut her off, "Don't move, I told you!"

"But Sato—!"

"Is reckless—he got himself into this because he can't obey orders!" Shikamaru grumbled, even when he too feared for the Hatake's life. There was both a feeling of relief and dread when the vapor cleared.

Sato was on the ground, his right hand reaching desperately for his kodachi that Romjin had kicked aside. His second blade was in Romjin's hand, and Shikamaru feared Romjin was more than a match for the Hatake regarding weaponry. Tama, a short distance away, felt her breath hitch.

Romjin had run his own sword straight through Sato's shoulder, pinning him to the ground. Sato struggled weakly, unable to stem the flow of blood that was rapidly staining the pavement. Romjin's stare focused on Shikamaru, "You'll release Sanae immediately, or this one dies!"

Shikamaru heaved a sigh. The situation had worsened but at least their enemy was out in the open. "Finish him off, Tama." Shikamaru instructed, "He's let his guard down."

"Did you hear what I just said? I'll kill this little pinhead!" Romjin repeated fiercely, "Don't fuck around—let Sanae go!"

Shikamaru kept his gaze level on the dark haired kunoichi, nodding placatingly. Her attack was certain to end the fight, but she was unable to move. Tama stood rooted to the spot, her eyes transfixed on her best friend caught beneath the enemy's blade. She shook her head roughly—Shikamaru's idea was unthinkable! "I c-can't…" She whispered apologetically, "I don't want…anything to happen to h-him…"

"Hey! I'm…f-fine…" Sato rasped from his place on the ground, "Go ahead, Tama! Beat the snot out of this son of a—"

Romjin stuck his sword deeper into his victim in an effort to silence him. It didn't have the desired effect, however, when Sato let out a bone-chilling wail as the sword snapped through bone and drove its way out through the back of his shoulder. Tama froze up again, terrified, and Shikamaru knew there was no way he was going to get her to cooperate, 'Looks like I'll have to take this upon myself, then…'

Shikamaru directed his captive towards Romjin, snatching up the discarded kodachi on the way, and
sent the Rock ninja to attack his own partner. Romjin countered the clever tactic, defending against Sanae's assault with Sato's other kodachi. The Hatake lashed out with a sudden kick that swept Romjin's legs out from under him, and rolled away from the two fighting nukenin.

Shikamaru's effective conducting of Sanae had won back Sato's second sword, and even drove Romjin back towards the opposite side of the conduit. The desperate Rock shinobi resorted to ninjutsu, "Suiton: Water Dragon Blast!" A current of seawater ripped up over the railing and charged down at the Leaf ninja. Shikamaru avoided the attack with Sanae still ensnared, but that was all Romjin needed to put some distance between himself and his partner.

Romjin rounded on Sato, who was still disabled with a sword in his shoulder, 'They seem to be pretty fond of this one...if I nick him off they probably won't fight as hard.' Before he could draw his sword again Tama plowed into him from behind.

His head brushed the pavement as he soared forward from the impact, but Romjin quickly righted himself in the air, getting a clear view of the furious kunoichi. There was a sharp spike in her chakra that he immediately picked up on, 'That explains it...this wench can open Chakra Gates.' He rubbed his nose nonchalantly, 'But she's just some prissy chick! That last punch was a lucky shot!'

Though Romjin had entered the fight initially believing that women did not wield much physical strength, he soon realized how mistaken he was. Tama rushed at him with ever-increasing speed, returning every one of his blows with twice the force. She landed a brutal knee-kick on his back that threw him against the railing, and Romjin, overwhelmed, used a hand seal to activate a detonating tag nearby.

The blast tore off a sizeable piece of the bridge, and both combating shinobi disappeared in the resulting cloud of dust. Sato staggered to his feet, panicked that Tama had been so close to the explosion. Shikamaru puppetted Sanae over in an attempt to restrain him. "You're wounded badly, don't even think about going out there again!" The Nara warned in exasperation.

"But she...she might be..." Sato's face was contorted with pain and fear. Never before had he been on a mission with Tama, nor had he ever expected her life to be in mortal peril. He and Shikamaru edged over to the blast site as the dust settled, catching sight of two ninja out on the waves of the inlet.

Even after a chunk of the bridge had been ripped off both kunoichi and nukenin found the time to evade and continue their brawl. Over the water Tama was an impressive sight, chakra focused enough to keep her feet safely on the surface, yet harsh enough to kick up a small gale. Romjin was quickly losing confidence as Tama danced around his attacks. Without warning, she struck the Rock ninja at an angle that shot him into the air.

Sato's eyes widened as he watched the girl follow through, leaping up and kicking Romjin repeatedly— higher and higher towards the ocean'spray clouds up above. It was then he understood his uncle's reservations. It was obvious that when Tama had not graduated to genin level on schedule those years ago, her uncle was still more than happy to tutor her on their family's Lotus technique. 'Back when she wasn't even qualified!' Sato thought to himself, 'But it looks like she definitely knows what she's doing...'

He blinked again, there was a spark, and where Tama had once been there was only a dying tongue of flames. She streaked down in the finishing whirl of the Front Lotus, literally burning, and plunged a badly burned Romjin into the salty sting of the bay with anguishful force. For a moment Sato stared breathlessly out over the waves, in awe of the spectacle. Even Shikamaru couldn't sniff at the unexpected and brutal power the kunoichi had displayed. Tama peaked clumsily over the waves, and thankfully her opponent was deep beneath the surface, unlikely to rise again.
Shikamaru, with Sanae still held fast in his shadow, stood beside Sato, watching in horror as the foolish Hatake pulled the sword out of his shoulder with a hiss of pain. "Have you lost that scrap of a mind of yours?" The Nara hollered at him, "You're going to bleed to death now that you took that out!"

A small, crackling lump of white chakra came to life in the Hatake's hand. "My family's chakra is very malleable, my uncle told me." Sato informed his team leader, brushing the fizzling light over his wound, "Ehehe…oh…it sure burns like shit too." After a moment Shikamaru conceded that the injury was thoroughly cauterized, but was still unable to budge on the stupidity of his subordinate.

"Kakashi showed me that trick once, sorry if it freaked you out, Shika-kun." Sato apologized, strolling over to the railing, "But I couldn't very well go get Tama looking like a shish-kabob now could I?" He leapt off the side of the viaduct and crossed the waves to where the exhausted kunoichi was struggling to stay on top of the water.

Shikamaru, then on his own, scratched his nose and watched as a very disinclined Sanae did the same. The Nara broke the silence, "Looks like I'm just about out of chakra myself now…oh well." He made Sanae discard the sword and then released his captive with a sigh. Uninterested, he continued to deal with his itching nose.

Sanae leapt back, wildly happy to be free again, and rounded on Shikamaru, "It's about time for some payback! Any last words, dickhead?"

"Not really." The Nara was totally calm, and in the brief moment Sanae puzzled over such behavior a cloud of sand swarmed and enveloped him from behind.

The Rock ninja panicked, having thought the Sand ninja had long since been finished. In a last ditch effort he made hand seals, but none of the explosives he had set up were responding. He looked over his shoulder, calling futilely for his teammate, "Romjin! Something's not right! This place should be up in smoke right now!"

Hinata came to stand beside Gaara, her soaking jacket folded neatly in her arms. "We dismantled all of those bombs near the filters." She told the Rock ninja in a quiet voice, "You won't be hurting anyone here as long as we have anything to say about it."

Sanae struggled even more fervently as sand encased him with increasing pressure. Gaara, looking worse for the wear beside the Hyuga girl, then spoke up, "I'll be mindful of this Fukuda Tsutomu who sent you, from now on…but so far his mercenaries haven't proven to be very competent." The sand imploded abruptly, instantly crushing Sanae. With the enemy's termination everyone breathed a sigh of relief.

Shortly after the battle's conclusion Sato returned, carrying a chakra-spent Tama on his back. "Thank you very much for your chivalry, Sato-kun, but you're hurt more than I am." She reminded him gently, "You can put me down now—I think I can walk."

"Well it does hurt pretty bad…" He whined pathetically, lowering her down, "I wouldn't wish something like that on anyone unless they were a pompous, inconsiderate person!" Neji's name flashed in his mind for a moment but Sato sharply corrected himself on that fact, 'Sunshine says he's changed…and I hear he's already has his fair share of stab-wounds.'

Mara rejoined the group, looking very pleased with the outcome of the skirmish. "Good work, all of you!" The old woman turned to Tama, "Especially you, Missy. Watching you from the sheds I realized you bring a lot more to the table than just a pretty face." Tama chuckled uncomfortably and then thanked her client.
By noon everyone had gone back to the pavilion to recuperate. Though the Rock ninja had done some damage to the plant, Mara had assured the team that her workers could fix the viaducts within a month if weather permitted. Tama laid down to take a well-deserved nap shortly afterwards, and Hinata went to work on Sato's injured shoulder. They stayed the night to make certain there would be no further disturbances. Since all was quiet they were able to rest peacefully, with the exception of Gaara, and in the morning Mara thanked them again for their tremendous work before dismissing them.

After setting out back North along the coast, a sea breeze seemed to congratulate them and dispelled the desert heat as they scaled the cliff sides. "All things considered," Gaara said at length, "This group functioned surprisingly well..." He smiled to himself, "I'll be sure to keep your names in mind if there is a mission open in the future."

He pulled Shikamaru aside to have a short debriefing, and while the Sand ninja and the team leader chatted, Sato claimed the moment was a pristine photo-op. "Just look at that ocean over there! And the lighting is great!" He set the timer on his camera and sat it on top of a log of driftwood, "Everyone huddle!"

Gaara did not immediately cooperate but after Hinata had pulled him into the frame the picture seemed to take itself. Every male with the exception of Sato (his arm in a sling) looked awkward, while Tama and Hinata looked like there was nowhere else they would rather be in that moment. As they continued on into the dunes of the Wind Country, every other request Sato made for a picture was denied. The one he did successfully obtain would have to do.

At the border of the River Country they stopped again, only this time it was in parting. "Do you have strength enough to get back to Leaf without me?" Gaara checked, mostly directing the question at Sato and Tama.

They looked contemplative, but Shikamaru answered for them, "I get the feeling we'll make it. Guess I'll see you around, Gaara."

They said their cheerful goodbyes, although Hinata's hug lasted maybe a second longer than normal. The Sand ninja understood her hesitation, and after the group of Leaf shinobi set out in the opposite direction, Gaara waited until they were completely out of sight.

My friends, you know only half as well as I that this could be the last time we ever see each other. 'But I suppose that's up to her.'

Naruto kept a half step behind Jiraiya as Sumaru led them into the heart of the Star Village. In all his time living in Leaf not once had he ever heard of a village like this. Naruto, aware that he may not get another chance to visit in the future, eagerly took in the sights.

Densely packed conifers and resilient shrubs dotted the mountainous landscape. The environment was an unwelcoming, unusual place for shinobi to want to set up a ninja village, the blonde boy thought, 'In the middle of the godforsaken wilderness...that's gotta be why they call this place the Land of Bears.' Descending a hill ridden with cattails Naruto finally caught a glimpse of Sumaru's home.

Below in the valley, the town was nothing more than a series of brick buildings and log cabins in uniform rows. The imposing woodland was mixed in with the lodges, providing some natural shelter from invaders. A few people traversed the dirt roads, calling greetings and trading goods, but for the most part the place seemed deserted.
"Where is everybody?" Naruto asked his teacher in a low voice.

"An excellent point." Jiraiya agreed, unsure of the answer himself, "One statistic to keep in mind while we're here, squirt. This village has the highest concentration per capita of ninja than any of the five recognized villages."

"I'm not following…" Naruto admitted.

Jiraiya glanced ahead at the young Star ninja guiding them, "Almost every resident here is a ninja. A place this small can't afford to have a weak military or they'd have been stomped out long ago. So it's fair to assume that most of them are on missions or patrols…which would leave the homestead more open to an attack."

The blonde boy folded his arms behind his head, "This place seems pretty safe to me. Who the heck would want to bust their ass coming all the way up here just to see some forests and cabins?"

"You'd be surprised. This place has a treasure that many countries would love to get their hands on…" Jiraiya answered.

They fell silent when Sumaru stopped and looked back at them. The boy was frowning, slightly distrustful, "I sincerely hope neither of you are here to cause trouble, because we've had guests in the past who have caused us grief. Our hospitality has dwindled over the years as a result and I'd hate to have a reason to turn you away."

"Never you mind our whispering, kid, I'm just trying to instill some last minute manners in my pupil before we meet with your leader," Jiraiya mussed Naruto's hair, "He's kind of a social retard and speaks before he thinks."

"Way to put it nicely you ass!" Naruto bit back, slightly perturbed.

The Toad Sage sighed, "See what I mean?"

Sumaru actually smiled at the exchange, and then continued on up the steps of a huge log mansion, ushering the Leaf ninja to follow. Inside the estate the high ceilings and waxed wood floors gave an instant impression of power. Sumaru propelled them past the washitsu into a warm room where a man was seated patiently on the tatami mats.

"Do as he does." Jiraiya reminded Naruto quietly. The suggestion came just in time, because Sumaru quickly kneeled down and prostrated before the man and Jiraiya's student respectfully did the same. Jiraiya simply kneeled across from the lavender haired man regarding them, and gave a soft laugh, "It's been some time hasn't it Akahoshi? Seeing you now I'm starting to feel my age."

"We're not that old." Akahoshi answered in a chuckle, "Welcome, Jiraiya-sama." He glanced over to Sumaru and the Leaf genin beside him, "Please rise, Sumaru, and introduce this young man."

Sumaru sat on his knees again and spoke, "This person is Uzumaki Naruto, apprentice to Jiraiya of the Legendary Three."

Akahoshi's dull slate eyes crossed over to the blonde, "Ah, so you're Jiraiya's student? You should be honored. The Toad Sage does not take on just any ninja to be his apprentice."

"Er, thank you, Akahoshi-sama." Naruto replied, slightly stilted by the cryptic remark.

Jiraiya chimed in, "I know our visit is a bit sudden, Akahoshi. Naruto and I have been training cross-country because his skills could use some fine-tuning. I just recently heard what happened to your
late Hoshikage, and I'm very sorry for your loss."

Naruto watched Sumaru's chin drop a bit at the comment, but somehow Akahoshi's expression remained the same as he thanked Jiraiya for his compassion.

"I don't mean to sound like a snoot, but I can't understand how a remote place like this could have a Kage leader."

Naruto said, noting how Jiraiya's eyebrows raised a margin, "It's just...I've never even heard of this place until this morning."

"Are we not allowed to make our own decisions? One day this village will be as great as one of the five main villages!" Sumaru snapped at the young Leaf nin, "At that time, I will become the true Hoshikage!"

Naruto was surprised by how the Star ninja possessed a dream parallel to his own. Rather than being affronted, Naruto found himself grinning with anticipation, 'He may be kind of yippity...but he's cut from the same cloth as me!'

"Be silent. Your comments are unnecessary." Akahoshi said sidelong to Sumaru, "And yes, you are correct in saying that our shinobi have no qualifications for being a Kage, Uzumaki-san, but this village has the star that is envied by all the five villages. Using that star's powers, we may have the potential to elect the sixth Kage."

"No kidding? Sounds cool." Naruto was impressed.

The substitute Hoshikage continued, "Jiraiya-sama, your arrival here is most fortunate. I've received intelligence that an individual intends to steal our star. I would much appreciate it if you and your apprentice stayed for a few days to help with surveillance that might disprove these rumors."

"I'd be happy to agree as long as food and board is included in that package." Jiraiya tacked on some luxuries they'd been without for the past week.

"You will have accommodations here in the palace should you choose to stay." Akahoshi offered, and Jiraiya promptly agreed to the terms.

When the meeting concluded, the Sage advised Naruto stick close to Sumaru, "I'll catch up with you later. While you're here make sure you find someone to give you a tour...we probably won't be coming back."

"I figured as much." Naruto agreed before dashing after Sumaru. The moody Star ninja descended the front steps in silence, and Naruto got the impression that there was a rift between Sumaru and Akahoshi that went beyond what he had seen back in the mansion. "Hey! So, uh...what a neat place. You think maybe I could hang out with you and see the—?"

"No." Sumaru stopped in the middle of the street, "No, I will not show you around my village. It's best if you just mind your own business while you're here."

Naruto persistently followed after the Star ninja who was trying to shake him. Around every curve and corner, Naruto kept up with Sumaru's pace, "Look, dude, I totally get it. You're just trying to protect your village's secrets; I'd do the same if I was in your shoes."

Sumaru was not convinced and quickly tiring of the Leaf ninja. Naruto wracked his brain for proof of his good intentions, "Consider this: Ero-sennin called me socially retarded earlier...so how do you expect someone like that to cause problems in your village? Besides, well...annoying people?"

"You are...very strange." Sumaru answered finally, "There's no need for you to be self-effacing. I
suppose I'm just not used to outsiders so much, so please forgive me if I've been rude."

"I'll forgive you as long as you tell me there's a place to get some chow around here." Naruto agreed, unable to ignore his empty stomach.

Sumaru cut across the square in the opposite direction and Naruto followed, listening as the Star ninja spoke voluntarily, "I always imagined that foreign shinobi would be condescending know-it-alls...so I wasn't expecting a person like you to arrive here. Much has happened to my village and I find it difficult to trust people sometimes."

"That makes sense I suppose." Naruto agreed, and then asked, "I do wonder though...that guy Akahoshi...he didn't let you get a word in edgewise when I was asking questions. Is he always uptight like that?"

"When the Third Hoshikage died just recently Akahoshi-sama stepped in. He said it was Hoshikage-sama's wish that Akahoshi watch over the village when he passed, and he's been under a lot of stress." Sumaru frowned to himself, "But I don't ever remember a time when he's been so strict. Perhaps it has something to do with the resumption of the Star's training..." 

"The Star's what?" Naruto repeated.

"I'm not at liberty to discuss that, I'm afraid." Sumaru answered, leading the way into a roadside bar that was emitting a pleasing aroma.

"Well damn! This place may be in the middle of nowhere but at least it has barbeque!" Naruto cheered, pulling up a stool and placing an order while Sumaru watched him with a very unguarded expression.

'He's too distracted to be a threat...' Sumaru finally concluded to himself, 'I guess it wouldn't be so bad sharing the village with an outsider who has good intentions.'

The proprietor came by and served the two ninja their meals, and while Naruto inhaled the meat off of a skewer he also managed to make conversation. Rather than being invasive and inquiring about Sumaru's home, he talked about Leaf— about missions, his friends, and his aspirations to be Hokage. "You got any friends out here?" He asked the dark haired boy.

Sumaru took a sip of a very strange herbal tea, "Well...yes. My two closest friends are also ninja."

"Great! When can I meet them?"

"I don't think now would be a good time." The Star ninja replied, but then amended, "Rather...now is as bad a time as any. I guess we should find them after this."

Naruto generously picked up the bill for the both of them once they had finished their meal. Reluctantly, Sumaru showed the blonde boy down a path that lead out of the village and out to an enormous, ancient crater that had leveled both hills and trees alike. In the center of the basin a temple had been erected beside another lodge, and Naruto suspected that it was the place most ninja in the area would gravitate to.

They entered the building silently, and Naruto beheld several trainees gathered in a ring around a pedestal, all in deep meditation. A tranquil violet aura surrounded the genin, and Naruto recognized the energy from earlier, 'Their chakra is visible...just like Sumaru's was back near the ravine! What the heck do they do to get it like that?'

"What's that rock?" Naruto whispered to his companion, "The one on the pedestal?"
"That is the Star that our village was founded for. Shinobi in training here try to harness its power to intensify our own chakra." Sumaru answered lowly, "The Star is the reason so many villages envy this place."

Though Naruto understood the appeal, he was about to contest the idea since Leaf had no interest whatsoever in the Star, that was until one of the meditating ninja dropped to the floor from exhaustion.

"Mizura?" Sumaru rushed ahead to the fallen boy, startled by his collapse.

The other meditating genin ceased their training and gathered around their fatigued comrade, asking if he was all right. A tall brunette girl kneeled closely beside Mizura, muttering soft reprimands while she and Sumaru hoisted him to his feet. "I told you not to continue with the training…it tires you out too quickly." The pretty girl reminded him, "We're taking you out of here so you can rest properly."

Mizura gave a hushed sound of protest, but Sumaru had swung the shorter boy's arm across his shoulder and helped the kunoichi lead him to the exit. Naruto held the door for the retreating shinobi while the other Star ninja resumed their training. Naruto had wanted to ask how simple meditation could have hurt Mizura so, or if he had been in a fight recently, but he kept his questions to himself as he followed Sumaru and his companions to the trainee lodge next door.

The dormitory for the Star Village's genin was dim and spacious. Thick beams supported the high ceilings, and futons were lined in neat rows on either side of the room.

"I've got him, Hokuto." Sumaru told the kunoichi softly. The Star ninja laid Mizura down on a mat, and the girl, Hokuto, retreated to make some tea for their ailing friend. Sumaru sat down beside Naruto, watching as Mizura drew arduous breaths.

"Is he going to be alright?" Naruto asked quietly.

"Mizura has been feeling ill ever since he started training." Sumaru lowered his eyes, "We've been worried that…the Star might be hurting him somehow."

Naruto raised his eyebrows, "But I thought it made you guys stronger!"

"Sumaru! Don't talk about the Star around outsiders!" Mizura rasped before falling into a coughing fit.

Hokuto returned and kneeled down on Mizura's opposite side, tipping some tea into his mouth. He calmed down soon after and fell back, too exhausted to stay alert. Naruto looked to her curiously, "You're name is Hokuto, right?" She nodded and he then asked, "Have you ever gotten sick like this?"

It occurred to her that Sumaru must have confided in him their training methods, so she answered openly, "Training near the Star is very taxing, and almost all shinobi have been strained by it…but I've never seen a case this bad. I'm worried that if he keeps it up he might not recover."

"Just because I get sick like this doesn't make me weak." Mizura had one final word, "Don't underestimate me, Leaf ninja!"

Before Naruto could respond Sumaru laid a hand on his ill friend's shoulder, "Naruto-san isn't the kind of person to judge others so quickly. He showed me that; there's no need to question him."

The blonde boy appreciated the kind words Sumaru had given since the uptight shinobi seldom had anything so gracious to say. Hokuto laid a hand on Mizura's cheek, "He's feverish…" She turned to
Sumaru and asked, "Could you fetch some cold water?"

Naruto stood with Sumaru and followed him across the room. *The Star made him sick...* 'Naruto thought while he walked, *That's some crazy shit. What makes some people stronger makes other people weak?* He looked over his shoulder at the two, and gawked in surprise. Hokuto had bent down and was sharing a discrete lip lock with the ailing boy. Flustered, he turned around to keep pace with Sumaru.

In an adjacent storeroom there was a tap, and Sumaru filled a bowl with cold water while Naruto found a spare towel. The silence was long and uncomfortable, and Naruto was beginning to suspect that he was intruding on the Star ninja's privacy. "Pay them no mind." Sumaru said finally, already aware of what Naruto had witnessed, "Hokuto has always loved Mizura. She's become exceedingly protective of him since he started becoming ill."

Naruto scratched his chin thoughtfully, "Huh. It must be rough when your friends are that close. Does it get...weird?"

"Is that really any of your business?" Sumaru sniffed, turning the faucet off, "Let's go and don't make me regret taking you here."

"Jeez! Just when I thought you were loosening up..." Naruto sighed.

Hokuto thanked them for their help when they returned, and placed the damp cloth on Mizura's head. "What are you doing so far away from your village, I wonder?" Hokuto asked the blonde boy, "The Fire Country is a long way off."

"I'm training away from home with my sensei, Jiraiya the Toad Sage— you've heard of him." Naruto explained briefly, "I have a lot of ground to cover before I can even think about going back to Konoha. You don't become Hokage by just sitting on your butt."

"If only it could be that simple!" Hokuto laughed. Sumaru was very aware of the smile that spread on her face and watched her carefully afterwards.

Naruto continued, "Well...even if I sound enthusiastic about it I'm a wreck. I've got to train, meditate, and put up with Ero-sennin every day to the point of blowing a gasket." His eyes lowered, "And...I miss my friends all the time."

Hokuto exchanged a look with Sumaru before saying, "We've never been outside The Bear Country...so it's difficult to imagine how stressful traveling can be."

"Don't get me wrong— the traveling is great, it's the homesick part that stinks." Naruto amended with a chuckle, "You're missing a lot if you just stay here forever, I mean, I've found about twenty new places I love to eat at just by coming this far!"

"That's enough chat for now." Sumaru decided, having heard enough of Naruto's goofy anecdotes, "We should let Mizura get some undisturbed rest."

Those present agreed and Hokuto separated from them for the evening. Outside of the dormitory the sun had set and the sky was bleeding amber into indigo. Sumaru rounded on the blonde boy abruptly, "I would much prefer it if you didn't put ideas into my friends' heads, Naruto-san."

Naruto was perplexed, "What does that mean?"

"They don't need to get excited about faraway places when they should be focusing on the betterment of our own village!" Sumaru clarified, "You can at least respect that can't you?"
"What's got you in a bad mood all of the sudden?" Naruto quipped, "There's nothing wrong with having aspirations, at least in my book."

"We have a long way to go before we can hope to contend with the Five Main Villages, so stop romanticizing and start concentrating on what you're here for: surveillance."

Naruto refused to let the Star ninja's temper badger him, "You need to relax, man. There's no need to be such a tight ass about emulating the Five Villages."

His slightly insensitive comment was the last straw for Sumaru, and, having worn out his escort's welcome, Naruto was promptly/immediately dropped off at the Hoshikage's estate. "Nice hanging out with you too!" Naruto called to the retreating boy's back.

The blonde nin climbed the steps and entered the large mahogany doors of the mansion. 'Sheesh. He didn't have a beef with me that whole time before we got to the temple.' Naruto observed indignantly, 'Maybe it's got something to do with Mizura and Hokuto. He was all uncomfortable by then, so... maybe it wasn't me. Maybe they upset him?'

He passed a server in the hallway that was kind enough to direct him to Jiraiya's current location. Near the back of the palace there was a private area fenced off for hot springs. Jiraiya dozed in the water, face flushed, looking absolutely thrilled to have found a luxurious place to relax. He noticed Naruto sulking out on the veranda, "Hey, kid. Why don't you take a load off and tell me how the tour went?"

Naruto stripped in a changing room before he settled into the geothermal water. The Toad Sage quickly noticed a lack of rambling on his student's part, "What's the matter? You don't like this village?"

"There's nothing wrong with the village— it's the ambitious, stuck-up people who live in it!" Naruto answered, adjusting the washcloth on his head, "It gets pretty annoying after a while...but I suppose I can't hold it against them when they live all the way out in the middle of nowhere."

"I won't say I told you so but I sure am thinking about it." Jiraiya sighed, "But every place has a flipside to it, I'm sure you've noticed by now. The same vents that feed toxic gas into Hell's Ravine back near the forest are the same ones responsible for such wonderful springs, like the one we're enjoying now...it does wonders for your health..."

"Pft! Health..." Naruto snorted at the notion, "People around here are consistently getting sick."

"How do you figure?"

"It's that rock— that Star of theirs." Naruto clarified, "The genin who train near it get really weak for some reason."

Jiraiya raised an eyebrow, "That's...very troubling. I'm starting to wonder about that Star myself if it's the object of so much turmoil."

After unwinding in the hot springs the two guests of the Star Village were provided with a room in the eastern hall of the estate. "Add the next set tonight." Jiraiya told his pupil abruptly, and Naruto gave him a quizzical look. "Your leg weights, Naruto. You've adjusted to the incremental increases over the past few weeks, so it's time to put more weight on and start pushing yourself."

"Oh, right!" Naruto nodded in understanding, "But...for the Body Flicker, tell me what's the next step after that, Ero-sensei?"
"See… that's where I can't help you squirt." Jiraiya said quietly, lighting his pipe. The blonde boy stopped halfway through clipping more resistance to his legs, with an expression similar to having been slapped in the face.

"Right now you know just as much as I do about it in regards to the seal mechanics and the required speed..." Jiraiya admitted, exhaling a plume of smoke, "So really the next step is whatever you decide to do."

"Er… I guess that makes sense." Naruto agreed weakly. He finished adjusting his leg weights and left so that his teacher could retire for the night. Naruto exited the palace, only vaguely aware of the chilled night air as he crossed the road to a dirt path that wound up the forested hill.

He thought while he navigated through the dark, 'Whatever I decide to do? This wasn't a Do-It-Yourself training trip last I checked. If Ero-sennin can't point me in the right direction anymore how the hell does he expect me to figure it out?'

Naruto finally acknowledged how he had reached a plateau in his learning. Without Jiraiya to pull the concepts together for him he felt as if the ground had fallen out from under him. Mastering new techniques had been a breeze when Gaara and Haku had been by his side, but those days seemed ancient and foreign to him now.

"What do I do, guys?" Naruto asked himself, as if they were standing with him. His brow knitted into a frown, and he figured soul-searching wouldn't do him any good at the moment. 'I'll stick to what I do know for sure…' Naruto concluded, 'And that's practice over and over until I collapse somewhere!'

Naruto jogged up the meandering stone stairs behind the palace, further into the shadowed woods. He was most concerned with finding 'a spot.' This was defined simply as an undisturbed place where one can clearly hear their innermost thoughts and be at peace with the environment. 'Or whatever mumbo-jumbo Old Roushi was talkin' about…'

A boulder sat inconspicuously beside the path, and Naruto settled there to meditate. Naruto had learned to quiet his mind during his brief meeting with Roushi. Keeping his thoughts still, he was told, would calm even the Kyuubi on a bad day. The blonde boy sat cross-legged on the boulder, unmoving, and retreated into his mind where even the nocturnal sounds of the forest fell silent.

He decided a brief check in would be best, or at least, the least painful. Oddly enough, behind the luminous glowing bars of the demon's prison, the gigantic fox was breathing easy as if in sleep. Deciding not to spark another argument with his furry captive, Naruto left nearly as quickly as he had arrived. The Fox faded from view and Naruto opened his eyes, adjusting them to the creeping dark of the forest.

As per usual, a vast flow of chakra was circulating through his system after visiting the Kyuubi. Naruto shot off of his perch, bulleting through the underbrush with a low huff of adrenalin. 'If I'm gonna get the Body Flicker perfect I have to take advantage of any training time I can get!' His muscles sang with the blissful power he had tapped into, allowing him to soar through the forest, whipping past trees so blindingly fast their leaves shook free from the stems.

Naruto kept the Fourth's knife in hand while he sped through the uncharted woodland, waiting, however irrationally, for a reaction. 'When is it gonna work? When? They can't just expect me to figure it out magically!' There was no response. He flew through the trees with unprecedented speed but could not awaken the three-pronged kunai.

Before he had become fully aware of his surroundings again Naruto found himself at the top of the
hill where the valley crested, and yielded a small opening from the dense forest. To his immense surprise, Sumaru was standing quietly in the clearing. Naruto let his Kyuubi chakra simmer down before he approached the Star ninja. He knew Sumaru wasn't very comfortable around him, but Naruto could not ignore his curiosity.

The olive haired boy noticed Naruto after a moment and gave him a dry look. Without a word, Sumaru returned his attention to the night sky. The blonde nin stood beside him, rubbing his neck uncertainly, "I didn't follow you out here or anything, I promise! I was training in the woods and you were up here so I just figured I'd stop over and see..." He paused to take a breath, "If...you're doing okay?"

"You needn't waste your concern on me." Sumaru answered roughly, then added, "But...yes, I am fine now. I apologize if I was being unreasonable earlier. My temper gets the better of me sometimes."

"One of my buddies is like that too, so no worries," Naruto grinned at the thought of Gaara, "I'll endure! But...what are you doing out here anyway?"

"I come here to think when I...need to be alone." He replied simply.

Naruto nodded, "It's nice out here. You can see the sky so clear from these mountains..." A particularly bright star glimmered just off of the horizon, and Naruto found it singularly appealing. "That one there," He pointed out, "It's red, isn't it? I don't do much star-gazing but that's kind of unusual I would think."

Sumaru immediately knew the one Naruto was speaking of, "That is Mars, most commonly known as Natsuhiboshi in these parts. It isn't technically a star...but I know..." He trailed off for a moment, "I know that it watches after me." He unconsciously gripped a crimson pendant that hung at his neck. Naruto had not noticed it earlier, but he assumed it must have been one of Sumaru's treasures.

"I wish I had someone looking after me." Naruto said lowly. Certainly he had his friends, his sensei, and of course, his inner demon backing him up— but Naruto had never felt a spiritual connection with a guardian. He figured the closest he could get to one was Hinata, or possibly Jiraiya or Tsunade. 'I don't exactly rank high on peoples' priority lists of protection.' For once he cursed his tempered spirit and defenses. There was no armor against loneliness.

"You know...you probably shouldn't be training alone in the forest at night." Sumaru advised after a long silence, "It might catch patrolling ninja of my village off guard to see you here."

"Oh." Naruto scratched his head, "Well in that case I'll come by tomorrow morning." He turned on his heel, taking the hint to leave. Suddenly he stopped and called back, "Uh, hey! Sumaru! Why don't you swing by too and we can spar together?"

Sumaru mulled it over, appearing hesitant as always. To Naruto's surprise he answered, "I might just do that..."

Naruto then made his way back to the palace to retire for the night. On his way down the hill he could have sworn he heard Sumaru crooning a lullaby. *That guy...is definitely not as tough as he lets on...* Naruto concluded.

After a few moments, however, he was unable to help it. Naruto was humming the melody as well as he retraced his steps by starlight.
Jiraiya blinked sleep from his eyes. The first rays of dawn glimpsed through the frosted glass of the window, and to his surprise, his student was still slumbering peacefully. Naruto lay on his bed on the far side of the room, position skewed, stomach innocently exposed beneath his ruffled tee.

The old man sat up and stretched, listening to the resounding cracks of his aged joints. His eyes crossed back to his pupil. How he loved the goofball. 'With him around I almost regret not having children of my own. He's like a grandkid except way higher maintenance…' As an afterthought, 'The other two knuckleheads included: my really weird misfit grandchildren.'

It was unusual that Naruto had slept in since he was accustomed to rising at the ass crack of dawn each day (by Jiraiya's order.) But seeing him there…so quiet and serene… "Ah— I'll let the kid sleep in I guess." Jiraiya decided, yawning, and hauled himself to his feet. He dressed in silence before leaving his pupil to doze.

The corridors of the palace were chilled with drafts from cracked windows. He knew that he wasn't exactly at liberty to peruse the mansion at his leisure, but Jiraiya felt that his investigation could afford no more delays, 'All these rumors I've been hearing are real shady, just like Roushi warned.' It then occurred to him that they might have come with an advantage if the Four Tailed container had gone to The Star Village with them.

'Akahoshi wouldn't have been thrilled about that.' Jiraiya snickered mentally, 'Besides, Roushi must have returned to Hidden Rock by now…I just hope the Akatsuki stay off his trail.' He rounded a corner and entered the kitchens. None of the workers had arrived yet to start serving meals, so Jiraiya happily fixed himself some tea and breakfast before continuing his exploration.

While he munched, his wandering took him to the second floor of the mansion. The hallways echoed with a soft, mechanized buzz. He strayed right down a waxed wood passage, alert, and then glimpsed into a room where the sound originated. He was taken aback. Two children were hooked up to respirators, completely bedridden. Jiraiya stared in confusion for a few more moments before a startled attendant walked by.

"Excuse m-me, sir?" The nurse stuttered, "Is there something I can h-help you with?"

Jiraiya eyed the small man suspiciously, "What is this? Akahoshi failed to mention how the children of this village are in such bad shape."

"Just a few, really." The nurse corrected him quickly, "I think it might be the Star that weakens them…not all of the trainees have a resistance to it like the older shinobi did…"

"Older shinobi?" Jiraiya pressed.

The man hesitated, and then said, "It's been over ten years now. Akahoshi-sama only recently reinstated the Star training."

"You mean you haven't allowed training near the Star for a decade?" The Sage repeated, confused, "Why the sudden change?"

The medic shrugged, "I'm not sure. Akahoshi-sama thought it was the right thing to do, being the Third died so abruptly…"
Jiraiya moved along and the nurse scuttled into the sick ward, glad to not have to answer any more nosy questions. Jiraiya continued down the empty halls, lost in thought, 'I don't understand. How could a village leader condone training that will risk the health of their genin?'

He stopped near an open window. Realizing the palace wouldn't hold many more answers Jiraiya took off into the village, ready for some legitimate reconnaissance.

"Gah! I overslept!" Naruto woke with a start. He stumbled from his bed, shuddering in the early morning cold, and attempted to clothe himself while brushing his teeth.

He had planned to train earlier that morning, but it was already halfway to noon and he knew Sumaru wouldn't appreciate the wait. He charged out of the bedroom, rocketing out of the window, and ran along the roof tiles until he was within jumping distance of the nearest tree. He stuck to the canopy until he came to the forest clearing he had found the night before.

To his relief, Sumaru had just arrived as well, and waved a brief greeting as Naruto touched down. "Hey there! Good morning!" Naruto laughed, "Did, uh…you sleep in too?"

Sumaru raised his eyebrows questioningly, "I don't make a habit of that."

Naruto chuckled and then changed the subject, "So— Mizura! How's he doing since last night, I wonder?"

"He's much better now, thankfully." Sumaru replied calmly.

Afterwards they agreed to not use weaponry while they fought, and were surprised to find how formidable their respective opponent was while they sparred. Naruto again witnessed the unique plume of chakra Sumaru's jutsu created, and could not easily devise a way to counter against it. He struck with speed, and easily avoided the tail-swipes of violet chakra Sumaru cast at him.

Sumaru was discouraged by how he had to contend defensively. Naruto's speed and strength were far superior to his own, and letting up on his ninjutsu even for a moment would leave him open to a brutal attack. Naruto's taijutsu was like nothing he had seen before in the Star Village. One punch would have him flat on his back…on the opposite side of the field.

Sumaru dodged a kick that leveled an oak tree, but the force of it had knocked Naruto off balance. The blonde boy hopped back to avoid the plummeting tree trunk, 'Man…these leg weights are a slight inconvenience.' Though it wasn't as if he needed to take them off anyway, Sumaru could not match his speed.

A coil of violet chakra struck Naruto head-on, tossing him like a rag doll into the branches. Sumaru wore a pleased smirk, "Don't let your guard down, Naruto! I'm stronger than I am quick!"

The Leaf ninja mumbled in pain as he detangled himself from the wild limbs and leapt down, only to get assailed by Sumaru's plume once more. To the Star ninja's surprise, his opponent dispersed into smoke. Naruto took advantage of his clone's distraction to land a shattering tackle that launched Sumaru to the far edge of the tree line. The Star ninja was sprawled on the ground, completely winded, aghast at how such a simple tactic had deceived him. As it so happened, Naruto was a very gracious winner.

The Leaf nin extended his hand and helped his friend to his feet, "Good fight there, buddy!" He wiped a bead of blood from his eye, "Your jutsu hurts like a bitch…"

"All the same, your power is…amazing." Sumaru admitted, slightly discouraged, "The Star Village
is very far behind if the five main villages wield such strength…"

"Will you quit going on about the main villages already?" Naruto sighed, "You can't rely on that Star for everything…draw on your own power and you'll see you're just as strong as any ninja from my country."

"We are different from you people— our power is drawn only from our Star!" Sumaru contested stubbornly.

"No, you've got it wrong, and believe me…I'm not this strong on my own." Naruto said quietly, "I have help. The only time you become really strong is when you're risking yourself for the people you care for— not worshipping some space rock."

Sumaru was silent for a long moment, and Naruto briefly wondered if he might have unintentionally insulted the Star ninja. Sumaru turned as if to leave, but stopped himself, "I understand what you're trying to say, Naruto…but our way of life depends on the Star. People have died to protect it and to learn from it. Without it we would be just like everyone else…it gives us powers many ninja cannot even imagine."

Naruto could concede that the tangible chakra the Star ninja possessed was unusual if not downright extraordinary. *The only time I've ever seen raw chakra throw someone that way…would probably be my Kyuubi chakra on the loose.* 'This thought worried him, *If that's the case…what the hell kind of chakra does that rock give off? It can't be all that safe…'*

Somehow they managed to avoid an argument. They continued training for the rest of the morning, with Naruto using his speed advantage to avoid being clobbered by chakra feathers. Once Naruto began complaining about food Sumaru called it quits and suggested breakfast.

Back in town they settled again at Sumaru's favorite restaurant, and while waiting for their orders Hokuto passed by on her way to the temple. Naruto looked to his friend beside him, amused at how Sumaru's eyes followed the path of the lovely kunoichi. He called her over welcomingly and she took a seat beside him. Naruto felt his gut churn, 'Jeez...he sure does like her. But with her all over that other guy yesterday…' His stomach dropped completely, 'Oh crap. They're not really friends at all! This is a...what do they call it? A pentagon. No. Triangle!'

While Naruto's thoughts spiraled Sumaru made small talk, "He's doing better today, I hope?"

"Mizura wanted to train but we made him stay in the dormitory. He'll be doing fine after a few days' rest." Hokuto answered brightly, "You look a bit disheveled, Sumaru. Have you been training with Naruto today?"

"I have." He confirmed, "He's...something else." He turned to his blonde friend curiously, "You're oddly quiet. Is everything alright, Naruto?"

"Ehehe! Fine!" Naruto was unbelievably grateful when the food arrived, "Itadakimasu!" He stuffed his face, hoping he wouldn't say something to incriminate himself with either of the Star ninja. Somehow Hokuto remained blissfully unaware of Naruto's awkward behavior as well as Sumaru's burning eyes.

She left to go train after they had finished eating, and while Naruto followed Sumaru down the street he felt he couldn't ignore the situation any longer. "I'm not as dense as I used to be about this sort of thing." He said quietly, "But you have a big crush on her and it might get you into trouble, you know?"
"Again, this is a matter that isn't any of your business."

"I know, and I'm sorry that I brought it up, but it's even freaking me out." Naruto apologized quickly, "It's just...somehow I know how you feel. Things get complicated...but I don't think my girlfriend has ever liked another guy before me..."

Sumaru blanched for a moment, and then said, "It is what it is."

Even if he sounded resigned about it, Naruto thought, he was clearly bitter. It was a wonder he could still remain friends with Mizura through it all. Naruto felt terrible he had exposed the other boy's pain, and wished there was a way he could take it back.

Just past the border of the village the two ninja stopped on a rock ledge. Sumaru gazed down into the crater that housed the Star temple, his face expressing an eerie detachment from his environment. Without warning of any kind, a figure bolted from the entrance of the temple, doors nearly blown from their hinges, and furious shrieks followed. Sumaru made a start, and Naruto hopped down from the ledge, unsure of what had happened.

Their stares followed the fugitive as he raced along the basin floor with something tucked under his arm. Something that exuded an unmistakable haze of mauve chakra...

"He's stolen the Star!" Sumaru roared, making a life-risking leap down the loose gravel slope. Naruto followed just as recklessly, matching the distraught boy's speed with ease. They were still a fair distance off when Hokuto and a few other trainees had staggered out of the building, looking terrified and crushed all at once.

"They need you, Sumaru!" Naruto insisted, "Go make sure they're alright and I'll take out the shithead who took the Star!"

Sumaru's first intention had been to retrieve the Star himself, but after seeing Hokuto so rattled he immediately went to check his friends first. Naruto diverged, taking a route back up the eastern slope to where the rogue had escaped. His Body Flicker speed had allowed him to gain on the rabble-rouser in less than a minute.

"Hold it there, Sparky!" He landed on a fallen log just ahead of the fleeing ninja.

The unknown shinobi stopped, uncertain of how he had been caught so quickly.

"Polite people know not to take what isn't theirs." Naruto admonished smilingly, holding out his hand, "Please return that rock now so I don't have to kick your ass?"

There was no discernable reaction from the rogue. The Leaf nin took a moment to scrutinize the fugitive, seeing that his foe was wearing a gas mask that concealed his face perfectly, most likely meaning he was aware of the nearby ravine's perils. He was also wearing tattered Black Ops armor that, as far as Naruto could tell, looked to have been stolen and worn out. Quick as lightning, the rogue formed seals and spoke in a muffled voice, "Kujaku Myoho!"

"Not the negotiating type, are ya?" Naruto grumbled, creating half a dozen shadow clones. He was momentarily cowed by the rogue's Star village technique when it generated a massive chakra plume that dwarfed Sumaru's ability by comparison. The sheer volume of chakra rippled in the surrounding air like a heat wave, almost as menacing as demonic chakra yet not quite. The plume changed shape, forming a bulky column that slammed down on the slope in an attempt to eliminate all of the doppelgangers at once.

Naruto's Shadow Clones were too quick and effortlessly avoided the assault. They scattered before
charging the rogue in a combined counterattack. One clone even went as far as to use a jutsu to distract the chakra column that had whipped back around, "Katon: Gokakyu no Jutsu!"

A breath of flames swept over the hillside, breaking futilely on the chakra plume that then seemed to be howling. Kage Bunshin that were nearest to the enemy detonated on their creator's command, gouging a fearsome hole in the slope.

The chakra plume had fanned out just in time to shield its master from the devastating blast. Seeing his favored explosion strategy had been ineffective, Naruto felt a shred of respect for the experienced thief, 'If he wasn't stealing something super valuable right now I'd actually be having a great time! It's a shame…but I'll have to blow him into next week…'

One of his remaining clones assisted Naruto in the creation of a spiraling sphere. The fugitive, unaware of the technique's ferocity, held his ground with his chakra plume, waiting for action.

Naruto pounced, and though he had narrowly missed his target, the Rasengan had leveled the hill completely, tearing away trees and gravel as if a team of bulldozers had gone by. The thief was thrown back, somehow saved by his feathery shield, and quickly realized it was a fight not in his favor. He scurried up what remained of the slope, and Naruto could not find purchase on the destroyed incline to give chase.

He watched in astonishment as the chakra plume morphed again into a pair of swallow-like wings, permitting the unthinkable. The thief flew off into the wild blue yonder with easy grace, dumbfounding Naruto with his technique.

"He flies!" Naruto bellowed, unable to believe it even after seeing it with his own eyes. The fugitive was headed in the direction of Hell's Ravine, and though Naruto considered pursuing him into the canyon, he decided to heed Jiraiya's warning. It would be a reckless if not fatal chase.

Naruto trudged back down the ravaged hillside, taking his time in returning to the temple. Sumaru was definitely not going to be happy about this. His friend was standing over the cluster of alarmed genin, consoling them and also trying to piece together what had happened. Sumaru gave the blonde shinobi an expectant look, "How did you fair, Naruto?"

"I did everything I could at the time, but I'm sorry." Naruto reported, "He got away. We can still track him if—"

Sumaru was livid, "I don't want to hear it. I trusted you to get the Star back!"

"Sheesh! The guy was really powerful and I wasn't expecting it!" Naruto bit back, sick of Sumaru's temper, "My buddy Haku always said that, statistically, you can't win every fight you pick! And is the only thing you care about that damn star? How are THEY doing?"

Hokuto touched Sumaru's arm, calming the boy down. She took a step towards Naruto, answering on her friend's behalf, "I assure you we're all fine, Naruto. For some reason…that ninja didn't hurt anyone. He went out of his way to stun us which I find…" She smiled to herself, "Uncommonly noble for a thief."

Sumaru at last breathed a sigh of relief. At least it had been a painless encounter, but the issue still stood—the Star was lost. Naruto knew he would be dropping a bombshell by stating the next fact, "Listen, I know this is gonna sound crazy…but I am 99 percent sure that thief came from this village."

"That's absurd!" One of the genin shouted.
Sumaru also denied the possibility, "Naruto you're probably mistaken. There's no cause for a Star shinobi to commit such a treasonous act!"

"I'm sure as shit not mistaken about this! The technique that guy was using was your Peacock Jutsu, I know because I've seen you use it." He looked directly at Sumaru, "It wasn't like fighting you, though. This guy had a lot more experience...I was kind of...worried."

There was a silence. Though it was hard to accept, none of the genin could find a reason to disprove the theory. The Peacock Method technique only existed within the Star Village, so logically, a Star ninja was responsible.

Hokuto spoke up after a minute. "It must have been one of the veteran ninja, if that's the case. There aren't many jounin in this village that have altered chakra since they never trained near the Star. But just who could've done this?"

Sumaru immediately knew the severity of the situation, "We have to go after him. He could be using the Star for his own benefit or worse...be trying to sell it off to one of the main villages!"

"Whoa, hold on. If we're gonna nab this guy we should call in back up— or at least tell someone in your village, right?" Naruto didn't want to be hasty, "For all you know he could have a buddy somewhere waiting to nick off trackers or set traps."

"Then you go back and inform Jiraiya-sama. He'll know the best course to take." Sumaru agreed.

Naruto was confused, "Just Ero-sensei? What about Akahoshi?"

"We don't need to shame ourselves further by informing the village leader. We'll get it back before Akahoshi-sama even hears it was missing." Sumaru answered boldly, "Go quickly now, Naruto."

He left without another word. He did consider on his way out of the crater how odd it was that Sumaru did not want to involve the Hoshikage. Of course he could understand. Akahoshi would want to flay those who lost the Star, and as it was, he already disliked Sumaru for some reason. 'Whatever that reason is I suppose I don't want to know.' Naruto decided, passing through a thin block of forest before entering the village.

He and two clones split up, frantically searching for the Toad Sage. One clone spied Jiraiya up on a palace balcony, writing up a draft for his new novel. The Naruto-alternate perched on the railing, and before Jiraiya could even greet him, started rambling, "Okay I'm not really me but it's still me. We have a problem! A ninja who nobody knows just—"

"Wait, Naruto, you're a shadow clone?"

"Yeah, no time to explain! Some guy stole the Star and took off with it. Turns out it's a Star ninja and I couldn't catch him so we'll have to follow him out towards the ravine if we're going to find him."

The clone explained, "What's your verdict, Ero-sennin?"

"Well...that doesn't sound so bad." Jiraiya answered, not all that concerned.

The Shadow Clone was baffled. "Doesn't sound so bad? Should I have made it sound more tragic or do I just bore you?" He snapped.

"You misunderstand me. The Star being gone is actually beneficial. My investigations have lead me to believe that most shinobi who train near it suffer from advanced radiation poisoning." Jiraiya explained, stowing away his draft in his gi, "Though this incident helps the trainees’ health overall I can see why this is a problem. In all likelihood it was stolen to be sold to another village, which
opens a whole new can of worms."

"Alright, I'm going to go back and check on how they're doing. What are you going to do?" Naruto asked his mentor.

"I'll hang back here and keep an eye on Akahoshi. He doesn't need to know what's going on because I have a feeling he already knows. He was anticipating this, wasn't he? It seems fishy that he'd have such great timing." Jiraiya answered, "Watch your step out there, squirt."

The clone released the jutsu, instantly relaying the conversation to the real Naruto who was already on his way back to the crater.

Sumaru did not wait for Naruto to return with help. He and his fellow genin had set out into the dense woodland of the Bear Country, following a route that would take them to the ravine in the shortest amount of time. Every so often they would stop and take a moment to sense the fugitive's chakra to gauge his progress. He had not gotten far, because they could sense someone nearby.

At the brink of the toxic ravine a lone ninja in shabby Black Ops attire stood waiting. Sumaru gave a silent order, and before the thief could even so much as make a hand sign, the squadron of Star shinobi had him completely surrounded. Steel-taught chakra binds lassoed around the criminal from all sides, thoroughly securing him. Sumaru could hear a grunt of discomfort beneath their captive's gas mask.

"You will surrender now and return our Star, or face the immediate consequences!" Sumaru warned venomously, "Do not test us. There will be no restraint."

"What a stunning technique...yet you should be more careful of who you choose to ensnare." The thief said softly. After a few moments some of the genin's hold began to waver. Their chakra strings eventually flickered out and they collapsed to the ground in exhaustion. Sumaru watched in horror as his friends tumbled one after another.

Hokuto caught his eye, "He's draining our chakra!" The news came a fraction too late. He and Hokuto also succumbed to the immense vacuum that extracted chakra through their own jutsu. Sumaru pushed himself to his knees, furious, and yet inwardly fearing how his team had been jeopardized by piteously low chakra reserves.

The thief bent down and lifted Sumaru up by his collar. The Star ninja struggled weakly, but had no energy to retaliate. The thief draped Sumaru over his shoulders like a lamb and stepped over the other genin on his way to the ravine. The briefest of moments later Naruto hurtled out of the tree line, quickly rushing after the fugitive he had let escape once before.

He stopped upon seeing the enemy had Sumaru. 'Aw crap...he's not going to hurt him is he? He already stole the star so why would he need a hostage?' Naruto thought frantically, seeing how all the other genin had been left untouched.

"Just...put him down nice and easy. He's got nothing to do with this." Naruto advised cautiously. The thief did not even remotely consider the idea, "Farewell."

He took a step off the side of the cliff and plummeted into the canyon. Naruto cried out, rushing ahead, but knew it was futile when the malefactor spread wings of chakra and soared off. With night fallen it would be near impossible to track them near the ravine.

"I can't believe I let that happen!" Naruto berated himself, yanking on his hair in frustration. With
Sumaru gone there was going to be a whole lot more grief back in the village. His friends and family would be distraught, and what was worse, the Star was still in enemy hands. All that was left to do was to return the rest of the squadron safely home. Naruto created a dozen Shadow Clones who assisted him in lifting the unconscious genin.

The way back through the dense forest was a dark and confused route. The Leaf ninja and his duplicates only happened upon the Star Village's crater through vague sense of direction and luck. He had expected the genin's dormitory to be abandoned since everyone had gone out to retrieve the Star, but Jiraiya was already there waiting. Naruto felt his stomach twist guiltily. His failure probably wouldn't sit too well with his mentor.

"Looks like the cat is dragging in some real carnage." Jiraiya remarked lightly, "How'd it go, Naruto?"

The blonde nin looked down, "It was...an orchestrated fiasco."

"You can tell me more about it once we see to these guys." Jiraiya suggested, holding the doors open and allowing the long row of Shadow Clones inside.

Mizura was beside himself as he watched his comrades be laid out on futons, utterly spent in energy. He sat beside Hokuto worriedly, but quickly noticed one face was missing. "Naruto-san...where is Sumaru?" He asked quietly.

The clones departed in wisps of smoke. Naruto sat on a stool beside the doorway and sighed before he explained, "They got to that thief way before I did. By the time I showed up they were all down and out and he took off with Sumaru. It probably couldn't have gone much worse..."

"Sumaru-kun." Mizura muttered to himself, "I'll go out and rescue him myself if I have to!" He rose to his feet, unsteady, but Jiraiya laid a hand on the boy's shoulder.

"You of all people should know better than to go out after a thief in this country at night." The Toad Sage admonished, "We'll regroup and start our search tomorrow."

At the first light of dawn Akahoshi ventured to a rugged hilltop with two of his guards. It had a superb view of Hell's Ravine, and overlooked the vastness of the Bear Country. Akahoshi tied a note to a messenger pigeon's foot, and imprinted some of his chakra on the paper. This note would be read and it would be considered.

"You really think this could work, Akahoshi-sama?" One of his attendants asked.

"Without a doubt." Akahoshi let the bird fly and watched as it veered off into the treacherous woods of the Land of Bears.

Akahoshi was convinced that reasoning with the thief would end the hysteria in the village, 'You will return the star to me, Natsuhi.'

The thief removed her gas mask after finally reaching her hideout. The only refuge away from the Star Village was a monolith in the depths of the surrounding forest. Through the top of the stone heap she descended to a tomb of a fellow Star ninja. She drew out the Star from her hip pouch and placed it in the sarcophagus along with a body. "Hotarubi, please protect the star and Sumaru." She said quietly. She left the cavern, sealing it shut behind her.

She wanted to retire for the day after accomplishing her objective, but Natsuhi couldn't overlook the
messenger bird passing overhead. The note tied to its leg was emitting some residual chakra. Natsuhi indulged her curiosity and roped the pigeon down with a chakra string. Before evening opening the message she understood. The chilled, volatile chakra left on the note belonged to Akahoshi. She had a fair idea what his complaints would be, and for the sake of good sportsmanship, she decided to confront him. His loss of the star was definitely stinging, she bet.

Naruto found Jiraiya outside of the temple later in the morning. While smoking his pipe, the Toad Sage gave his pupil the run-down, "I'm going to be staying here in the village. Chances are I can get to the bottom of this with help from the genin. Make sure you stay away from that poison gas when you check out the ravine, got it squirt?"

"I'll be careful, Ero-sensei." Naruto then added, "But you better keep an eye out for Sumaru. He might have gotten away from that thief for all we know."

Jiraiya blew a line of smoke, "Don't get your hopes up, kid."

On a ledge just beside Hell's Ravine, Akahoshi was not disappointed when Natsuhi finally did appear. Her chakra wings dissipated when she touched down on a cliff opposite where the leader of the Star Village was waiting. Behind Akahoshi, his attendants Yotaga and Shisou stood down, supposing it would be a peaceful encounter.

"Your message was…rude to say the least." Natsuhi called down to him, "I'm ready to accept your apology now."

"Did you bring the Star?"

"Certainly not. Do you take me for a simpleton, Akahoshi? I know your game!" She laughed openly at him, "The Star will never again harm anyone in that village, even if that means it must be hidden away forever."

Akahoshi bristled at the statement, "That is not your decision to make! I will take the Star back by force, if you will not cooperate…" He made hand signs, initiating his Peacock Technique, and let a plume of furious chakra sweep across the ravine towards Natsuhi.

She evaded his assaults with little effort. He had never been a match for her, and when she used her own jutsu, she caught the clearest glint of fear in his eyes. Natsuhi's chakra beast tore down, raking apart the edge of the cliff. Akahoshi was thrown back violently, and neither of his guards had the audacity to challenge the rogue kunoichi. They stood by and watched, and even suggested leaving. Akahoshi refused to leave without the Star.

"Do you really want to do this, Natsuhi? Your son will pay dearly for your criminal acts, if that's what it takes to get through to you!" He threatened, using what leverage he had left.

Natsuhi's aloof demeanor faded, "Sumaru…you couldn't…he's done nothing…"

"He's unreliable and flashy, just like his worthless parents!" Akahoshi spat bitterly, "Please, Natsuhi, just give me one reason to kill him! Tear him limb from limb every day you choose not to return the Star…"

She ended her technique, realizing that even if she did put Akahoshi in his place Sumaru would still be at risk. Natsuhi stood across from Akahoshi, unable to meet his eyes. Her resolve was beginning to crumble. Naruto had arrived at the ravine at precisely the most awkward time, as always.
The blonde nin spied Akahoshi standing off against the gas-masked thief, and immediately assumed the worst. *This dirt bag just won't give it up will he! What's he got against this village?* Naruto reasoned that if he beat the thief to a bloody pulp he would end his shenanigans, *And I can get Sumaru back!* Without needing the go-ahead from Akahoshi, Naruto charged for the nukenin while he created several Kage Bunshin.

Natsuhi focused on eliminating the Shadow Clones, which she was exceedingly handy at thanks to her Peacock Jutsu. An enormous violet plume became sharp as steel, eviscerating the clones and dispersing them. The real Leaf ninja had ducked out of the fray, and taking advantage of how the thief had been distracted, Naruto used his Body Flicker to catch her. He landed a devastating uppercut on the thief.

The nukenin flew backwards, stunned, losing her mask in the process. Natsuhi lay crumpled at the brink of the gorge, unable to regain her bearings. Naruto stood frozen after that, for the first time seeing the thief unmasked, *'But it's...a lady. I was so sure that...'* He hesitated to do anything else.

Naruto would have done well to leave by then. To his credit, he did have sense enough to turn back to Akahoshi in the hope of asking what was really going on. Unfortunately, Akahoshi's bestial chakra plume jetted forward on his command, knocking the defenseless kunoichi, and bewildered Leaf nin, off the edge of the ravine. Naruto had been clipped in the head by the blow, and lacked the coherent thought to somehow save himself as he plummeted further down into the noxious gas below.

Natsuhi, in an act of true generosity, extended her chakra wings and held fast to the scruff of Naruto's jacket. She pulled up, soaring out of the gorge with the dead weight of a Leaf ninja, and steered back towards the heart of the forest. Akahoshi would seek her out again for the Star, she knew, but until then, she could only afford to hide and recover.

Jiraiya had returned to the palace to snoop. He had not gone on his own either. With him were Mizura and Hokuto, both in agreement with the Sage that something was amiss in the Star Village. Mizura, who had grown especially close to the old Sage in the short time he had spent with him, was glad to give him any information he asked for.

"Where the blazes did Akahoshi get to?" Jiraiya couldn't figure it, "I scoured the whole damn village twice and he's nowhere to be found in a time of crisis!"

"Gama-sennin...perhaps Akahoshi-sama went out after the Star himself." Mizura pointed out as they skulked down a creaky wood-paneled hallway, "He would never want to endanger the ninja of our village when there's so much at stake."

"Huh." Jiraiya turned a corner, and replied, "He never struck me as an intrepid kind of guy...even back when I met him in the war."

"You mean the Great Shinobi War? You fought in it too, Gama-sennin?" Hokuto asked.

"Of course I did! It was a feud between Rock and Leaf after all...other villages got mixed up too, and thankfully the Star Village sided with Leaf." He paused, "Unusual, since geographically they're nearer to the Earth country and may have suffered major consequences."

"I think we chose well in allying with the Leaf Village." Mizura said firmly.

Jiraiya patted the boy's head, "I appreciate that, kiddo." He abruptly held his arm out to stop the party. A nurse crossed an intersecting hallway, but didn't notice the shinobi that had been prowling...
the palace. When the coast was clear they continued their snooping.

They followed a corridor that lead to the medical wing, which Jiraiya had heard, had sent all of its patients home with a clean slate of health. Odd, since he heard the distinct hum of medical equipment nearby.

"Sir…I don't know what you could possibly expect to find here." Hokuto whispered finally, "The thief is out in the woods somewhere with our Star…so why would we look here?"

"Because I've learned in the past that the source of your troubles is always going to be closer to home than you thought." He replied smugly, and slid open the door to a recovery room that was in use. The person occupying the ward left the two genin stunned.

"Sumaru-kun!" Mizura cried, and rushed to the bed where his friend lay. Hokuto followed shortly after, equally shocked by their discovery.

Jiraiya had suspected some kind of fraud in regards to Sumaru's alleged kidnapping. 'He was in the village safe and sound while everyone worried their heads off.' Jiraiya noted, 'Makes me wonder who's responsible for reporting all this nonsense.'

"I can't believe he's alright…” Hokuto breathed a sigh of relief, "Did he get away from the thief, somehow?"

Jiraiya folded his arms thoughtfully. "Hard to tell. Maybe we should ask him." He had his own suspicions on what had actually transpired.

Mizura quickly discerned from the equipment his friend was hooked up to that Sumaru had inhaled toxic gas. "He should be alright now, if someone had treated him soon enough. Naruto did say that he was taken into the ravine by the thief, so I wonder why…"

Hokuto had stirred Sumaru with a small pat. His clear eyes opened and he almost instantly became alert. He pulled nodes from his skin as he sat up, groaning softly, and slipped a needle out of his arm that was connected to an IV drip. His friends gave him comforting words, assuring him that he was safe. When he told them he felt fine Mizura asked, "Do you remember how you got here?"

Sumaru shook his head, "I don't. I was out…but I do recall that thief. He left the ravine rather quickly and…” He inhaled sharply, "He doubled back to the village."

"He went back?" Hokuto repeated, confused.

"I think so. I know he did, it was the last thing I saw." Sumaru confirmed, "It was…very strange." As the events came back to him he became upset, "What about the others? Did they get back safely?"

"Yes, Naruto returned us to the village after you were taken." Hokuto told him, "That's why we were so worried about you. We didn't know where you were."

A silence settled upon them, and they looked to Jiraiya for guidance. The Sage scratched his chin before saying, "I hate to break it to you squirts, but we've got two thieves on our hands here. One managed to take the Star…and the other is the one that took Sumaru."

"Then we have to get to the bottom of this quickly," Sumaru said, getting to his feet. Jiraiya and Mizura left the ward to keep watch for snitches, and Hokuto gave Sumaru his clothes back that had been put away in a locker. He thanked her quietly before getting dressed.
The group, plus Sumaru, stealthily navigated out of the medical wing and back out to the main hall. Mizura hurried after Jiraiya, glad to finally be of use despite his illness. Sumaru hung back a ways with Hokuto, wishing to speak with her.

"I want to apologize for last night." Sumaru told the kunoichi, "I led you on a pointless search. I should have thought things through before going after an unknown target like that…"

She shook her head, "I don't mind. I'm happy to follow you in whatever you believe is right."

They continued down the corridor slowly, far behind the Toad Sage and Mizura. It may have been better to make haste, but Sumaru couldn't bring himself to rush into another precarious situation. "Has…Mizura been treating you well?" He asked quietly.

Hokuto stopped, a bit nervous about discussing the subject. Since he had brought it up she decided to be honest, "He's good to me…though there are times that he's…hesitant." Her expression reflected doubt, "Maybe it's too soon…am I rushing him? Akahoshi-sama says people our age are not capable of real love."

"Akhahoshi-sama believes in many strange things." Sumaru answered, slightly rebellious, "Just because he says it does not mean it's true."

They stood for a long moment, wondering what more there was to say. "Sumaru…do you…still have feelings for me?" Hokuto asked him softly. They were just outside the atrium of the palace, most likely where Jiraiya would be waiting for them.

"I carry love in my heart always, and it becomes heavy and lonesome because everyone I have ever cared for…I lost." Sumaru pressed his palm against her cheek, "If it means you'd be safe I'd rather you had Mizura-kun. You wouldn't want someone cursed like me." He kissed her gently, just for a moment, and then continued ahead through the archway.

Hokuto followed shortly after into the atrium, dazzled, and not sure what to make of Sumaru's response. Jiraiya gave the two a funny look, "What kept you, huh?" The Sage didn't get a straight answer so he went ahead and added, "I'm worried about Naruto. He should have come back by now…for all I know he's at the bottom of a ditch somewhere."

At the front entrance of the palace it was a small wonder when they ran into Akahoshi and his attendants. The village leader was thoroughly surprised to see Sumaru on his feet, "What are you doing up, Sumaru? Last I saw you were unconscious."

"Can I ask how you knew that?" Jiraiya chimed in airily.

Akhahoshi looked a bit stilted, but replied easily, "Yotaga and Shisou recovered him. He was found this morning near the ravine where the thief must have abandoned him."

"It's true." Shisou confirmed.

The Sage remained silent, suspicious of such good fortune, but Sumaru bowed and thanked the people who had aided him. Akahoshi dismissed the boy's gratitude and said, "I want all ninja to be prepared for battle. I'm sending units into the forest to track the thief and end this tomfoolery once and for all." The genin took the orders dutifully and Akahoshi left as quickly as he had arrived with his guards in tow.

When he had gone Sumaru looked to Jiraiya, "I'm going to help you find Naruto. It's the least I can do."
Hokuto touched Sumaru's arm, "I'm going too."

When Mizura volunteered as well, Jiraiya had to shoot him down, "Sorry kid, but you're still sick from your training. Give your body a chance to recover." He turned to Sumaru, "I think I can trust you to find my goofy pupil."

Jiraiya stayed behind with Mizura as they watched Sumaru and Hokuto join the ranks of ninja who were scrambling to begin a forest raid. The Sage looked to the genin beside him, "You know what's weirdest about all this?"

"I can't pick one event over everything else, I'm afraid." Mizura admitted.

"I get this crazy feeling that right now…Naruto is the one closest to the truth." Jiraiya chuckled, "Even if the truth is in a ditch."

Naruto awoke to find himself resting in a dimly lit cave. He turned his head slowly from where he was spread on a cot, and could see a woman standing over a fire. She was making broth. Seeing no immediate threat, he sat up curiously, and then became aware of the persistent throb in his head.

Natsuhi glanced over to him, "Oh…you're up."

"You saved me?" Naruto clarified, "I…don't understand why you would do that, ma'am. I mean, I attacked you!"

"I don't want any more innocent people to die because of that Star." She told him, "That is why I took it."

That, at least, he could wrap his aching head around, "Yeah, I heard the Star makes shinobi sick. But…you know that theft kind of turned the whole village on its head."

"I promise you I'm only trying to fix things." She smiled, "My name is Natsuhi."

"I'm Naruto." He greeted, and then paused, "Hm…Natsuhi…that sounds familiar." He distantly remembered Sumaru talking about Natsuhiboshi, "Your name is just like that what Sumaru was talking about…"

Natsuhi looked troubled, "That's because Sumaru is my child."

Naruto was astonished and attempted to keep his jaw from hanging ajar. Natsuhi served him soup in a small bowl and he thanked her. "Pardon me, but…if he's your son how is it that you aren't living together in the village?" Naruto inquired.

She took a seat on a chair beside the cot. "My husband, Hotarubi, and I have always held the safety of this village as our first duty. We both trained near the Star from a young age, and were two of the few shinobi who were fortunate enough to complete the Dragon Star Training. We became very powerful and were respected in our village."

Naruto figured that it meant all others had died or been crippled by the endeavor.

"But we knew better than anyone the realities of the Star training. We didn't want our young child to grow up and pursue a path that…might have harmed him." Natsuhi explained, "We left Sumaru to go on a mission, and that night we stole the Star from the temple. We intended to hide it away where it would no longer cause such grief."
"The Third Hoshikage and his Black Ops caught us before we could get very far. He was sympathetic with our cause, but we had still been branded as criminals and could not return to the village without facing consequences." Natsuki lowered her eyes at the memory, "He asked us to stay outside of the village, faking death, so that if the Star ever posed danger to our home again we would be able to step in and stop it if the village leader could not."

"The Third Hoshikage is dead now." Naruto said, starting to see the whole picture.

"He died recently, and now Akahoshi, the scourge of our village is now overseeing things. His reintroduction of the Star training is putting shinobi in jeopardy again, even when the Third expressly forbade it from ever resuming. I had to act, you see…" She sighed, "They think of me as a villain, when the true deviant is Akahoshi. He has always had a lust for power and has a delusion of making the Star Village even better than the five main villages."

"So that's why Sumaru was always so touchy about it!" Naruto understood, "But that's just nuts…no virtuous leader would ever hurt his people just to make the village more powerful."

"You are very wise, Naruto." Natsuki commended him, "I can only hope that Sumaru sees things the same way you do…"

"Lady, your son has a good heart and a great head on his shoulders. I'd count on him in a pinch anytime." Naruto assured her. Those seemed to be the magic words for the tormented mother. She smiled gratefully, swiping at her teary eyes with the back of her hand.

Before Naruto could delve into the discussion further a shockwave ripped through the ground and rattled Natsuki's stone hideout. Naruto ran outside with his new comrade to meet the disturbance. Akahoshi, along with Yotaga and Shisou were waiting on the ground, wanting to get Natsuki's attention.

"The Star." Akahoshi demanded, extending his hand expectantly.

His previous leverage of threatening Sumaru had vanished. Natsuki refused, as before, and Akahoshi attacked with a furious chakra plume. Naruto launched himself at Akahoshi's henchmen, knocking them senseless with a combination assault with Shadow Clones. They hadn't even the time to use their own jutsu. Both guards surrendered at knife-point, and Naruto swiftly teamed up with Natsuki, eager to dish out some justified retribution.

Natsuki's chakra beast tore through Akahoshi's feather defense, and landed a crippling blow that left him reeling and unguarded. Naruto followed through, pinning the treacherous man to the side of the monolith, "It's over!" The blonde boy was promptly bowled over by an unexpected chakra strike.

Sumaru descended on the scene, horrified at what he was seeing, "Are you crazy, Naruto? You can't attack Akahoshi-sama!" He helped his injured leader to his feet.

Naruto quickly tried to reason with his friend, "Jeez, Sumaru, you've got to see that guy isn't trustworthy! If you don't believe me at least believe her!" He gestured to Natsuki who stood at the opposite side of the clearing, "Your mom has been protecting the Star Village all this time from creeps like him."

Sumaru halted, overcome by the sight of her, and then inched closer, "….Mother? But…you were…"

He fell silent again once Akahoshi used a last-resort jutsu, lashing out with a chakra string, a chakra-binding technique that took control of the distraught genin. Sumaru, with the motions of a zombie,
drew a kunai from his leg holster and then pressed it against his own throat.

"Give me the Star or this worthless child dies!" Akahoshi snarled, "Do it now, Natsuhi! I won't be tested any longer!"

Her confidence had again been shattered seeing Sumaru in such imminent danger. Her spirit wilted and she answered almost inaudibly, "I…can't."

Naruto had rushed forward, grasping his friend's hand in an effort to keep the blade away. Sumaru's (Akahoshi's) grip was strong and not easily restrained. "Don't do this!" Naruto rasped, watching Sumaru's blank face, praying for a flicker of lucidity.

Akahoshi spoke gravely, "Are you really willing to let your only child die, Natsuhi? What kind of mother is that?"

She was paralyzed with fear.

"Don't listen to him! He only wants the Star!" Naruto called back to her, "It's okay, I've got this under control!" Naruto recalled Shikamaru's Kage Mane, and assumed that just as in the Nara's technique, attacking the user of the jutsu would set the captive free. Naruto struggled to make a Shadow Clone while prying the kunai away from Sumaru's neck.

The Bunshin charged for Akahoshi, poised to strike, but was caught in a tendril of chakra strings. The remaining troupe of Star shinobi who had been sent to the forest had caught up, and acted quickly to protect their leader, despite not knowing the current situation. Hokuto was the most baffled by the scene, and Naruto desperately appealed to her.

"Hokuto-chan, please! You've gotta help me out!" Naruto hollered, "Sumaru really cares about you, so would you really let this happen to him?"

Realization immediately dawned on her that Sumaru had suddenly become a bargaining chip. Without even stopping to think of the repercussions she rushed to Akahoshi. "Please…Akahoshi-sama…this has all gone too far! Let Sumaru-kun go!" She pleaded, "He's only ever tried to help this village!"

Akahoshi knocked her aside, his mind focused on only one thing, "The Star must be retrieved at all costs! This boy's life will be a small price to pay…"

The other Star ninja looked unsure after their leader had resigned to such extreme measures. They stood unmoving, hesitant to act. Naruto continued to restrain Sumaru from hurting himself. Akahoshi drew a line of blood across the boy's neck and Naruto pulled back, unable to sway the jutsu's control over his friend. He looked back, expecting Natsuhi to help him, but she had gone.

When she reappeared the Star was with her, and the look of defeat about her made Naruto's heart jump into his mouth. He understood. No parent could offer up their child for the sake of a mission, 'Because when someone does that...they're not really a parent at all.' He relaxed when Akahoshi freed Sumaru, and Hokuto stumbled over to them, holding the unconscious boy in her arms protectively.

Naruto made a start towards Akahoshi but the large platoon of Star ninja mirrored him, unwilling to let him attack their leader. Akahoshi lashed out at Natsuhi with a chakra plume and she did not even move to defend herself. She tumbled back, and the Star fell into the possession of the self-proclaimed village leader.

"We may now return to the village. Leave the traitors here." Akahoshi crowed, setting out, and his
platoon followed after him, slightly perturbed by the unorthodox victory.

Naruto did not pursue them. He knew he was outnumbered, and without Jiraiya's support, would not be able to convince the Star Village of Akahoshi's treachery. He checked on Natsuhi instead, who had been knocked out by Akahoshi's previous attack. Hokuto assisted the Leaf ninja in moving mother and son to the safety of the hideout.

The sun was beginning to set. Naruto watched it sink slowly below the horizon as he sat on top of the monolith. He and Hokuto had been working in shifts, one monitoring Sumaru and his mother, and the other guarding the hideout (although this, Naruto assumed, was not an imperative task.)

During Hokuto's watch within the cave Sumaru had finally come to. She smiled at him, but he still looked too disoriented to speak. "I'll go tell Naruto that you're awake now. Don't try to move around too much." She told him before she exited quietly.

After she had gone Sumaru could only stare at his mother nostalgically. How long had he lived and trained fully believing she was dead? It didn't explain why his father was absent too, but at least he had one remaining family member, he thought, to hold onto and treasure. Natsuhi stirred a short time after from where she rested on a futon. She opened her eyes, regarding him for a moment, and then asked, "Do you hate me, Sumaru?"

"W-what?" He stammered.

"It's alright if you resent your father and I for being away all this time. We were perfectly capable of returning, even with the risk of being punished…" Natsuhi was deeply remorseful, "I could never hold it against you if you…felt that way."

Sumaru clutched at his father's necklace around his neck, "No…I couldn't…not when you were protecting us all along." He paused, "Where is father?"

"He passed away. He was very sick from the Star's after effects…" She was still grieving over it, "He wanted to see you one last time before he died, but…it was so sudden. There was nothing I could do for him."

Sumaru fought back a sob. Natsuhi sat up on the mat, "I missed you every day…everything I toiled for was for you. And now…you've grown into a fine and talented ninja. I couldn't be more proud!" She crossed the small gap and embraced her son, joyful for their reunion, but rueful for the poor circumstances.

Hokuto had returned with Naruto. The blonde boy smiled at the two Star ninja before asking, "So…who's up for the trip back to your village?"

Sumaru stood, newly energized to retaliate against Akahoshi's deception. "I'm ready," He said, "But Akahoshi-sama will be expecting us."

"Yeah, but don't forget that my sensei is back there waiting for me." Naruto looked to be hatching a plan, "He'll back us up no problem…but we're still kind of short-handed, huh?"

"If we can expose Akahoshi-sama for the fraud he really is we might get some of the villagers on our side." Hokuto suggested as they left the sanctuary of the hideout.

"That's easier said than done. Right now he has most of the village under the impression of us being the enemy." Sumaru reminded her, "We have our work cut out for us."
Once outside Natsuhi patted Naruto's shoulder, "Could I have a moment with Sumaru and Hokuto?"

"Take several moments, if you want."

She thanked him and then turned to the young Star shinobi. "How far into the Dragon-Star training are you? It's been a few years now."

"I'm…not certain how you want us to gauge it, Mother." Sumaru replied uncertainly.

"You are both able to freely manipulate the shape of your chakra?" She gave a sample indicator.

"I can manage that." Sumaru confirmed, and then smiled at Hokuto, "Hokuto has always had considerable skill with shape manipulation, though."

Natsuhi beamed, "I am glad to hear it."

She demonstrated the technique she wished to teach them by extending her chakra wings, and then explained, "You channel your chakra to form a tail, most often, when you enter a battle. What I'm showing you is not an offensive ability. In this case you will split your chakra to form two separate channels."

They seemed to understand her instructions, even when Naruto clearly didn't. Both Sumaru and Hokuto coaxed their chakra to fan out and take the shape of avian wings. "Good." She told them, "You control your chakra the same way you would command a tail. Flight is sustained through minimal exertion, so flying, you might say, is the easiest part of being a Star ninja."

Naruto grumbled, a bit peeved such an ability didn't exist back where he lived. Before he could comment on the jutsu his friends had taken off, 'Wow. They sure picked that up in a hurry…' Natsuhi smiled at him, "Do you think you'll be able to keep up with us, Naruto?"

"Heh! I'll buy you all ramen if you can find someone faster than me!" He chortled, bolting off into the forest and easily overtaking the ninja soaring overhead.

The sun had set when Naruto plus three Star shinobi reached the crater. They huddled behind a pile of debris that had been gouged up by Natsuhi and Naruto's earlier fight. Out of sight of any possible sentinels they devised a way to take the Star back.

"Usually I'm all about full-frontal offense." Naruto admitted, "But it looks like you guys want to be a little more discreet?"

"Yes, please." Natsuhi smiled.

When the coast was clear they crossed to the temple, figuring it was a good place to begin looking. Sumaru headed up the front, followed closely by Hokuto, while Natsuhi and Naruto brought up the rear. They had not been followed inside, but were quickly discouraged to see the Star was not in its usual resting place. Hokuto mumbled to herself in frustration and jumped when the doors of the temple slammed shut, locking the ninja inside.

Outside a unit of Star ninja fired arrows fixed with exploding tags at the establishment. Akahoshi was grinning when he gave the command, and watched as the shrine went to pieces, smoldering and spewing smoke. His ninja, though loyal, all looked equally disturbed by what they had done. It didn't help ease their guilt when Jiraiya appeared.
The Toad Sage stood a reasonable distance away from Akahoshi, his expression smug, "Why on earth would you be so proud about defeating a bunch of Shadow Clones?"

The fraudulent Hoshikage's face went ashen. He sputtered furiously when Naruto and his cohorts came up from behind him, intending to challenge him directly. Natsuhi, with the moonlight in her hair, looked like a vengeful specter when she spoke, "Surrender the Star now, Akahoshi."

"You really expect me to consent to such demands?" He spat, turning to his squadron, "They want it for themselves, the traitors!"

"It's only commonplace that a Sage like myself would see the truth in a situation like this..." Jiraiya also addressed the Star shinobi with Akahoshi, "But it's a shame that none of you have recognized this man's crimes."

It was the first seed of reasonable doubt that had been placed on Akahoshi. Naruto could see some of the shinobi were already swayed, and his sensei hadn't even begun to explain.

Sumaru, unexpectedly, spoke up, "It's important that you heed Jiraiya-sama. We have only ever had the best interests of this village at heart! If the Star-training ended, students would no longer suffer from its effects."

"They suffer because they are weak!" Akahoshi sneered dismissively, "Only the truly strong are capable of completing the training!"

Mizura came forward to stand between Sumaru and Hokuto. "I know I am not weak, Akahoshi-sama, and I never was...but I also know that I can never complete that training..." He slid his arm out of his sleeve, opening his gi wide enough to show the scars and lesions criss-crossing his chest that had been caused by the Star's radiation.

The older ninja that had already started to doubt their leader's motives were instantly horrified. Years earlier under the rule of the Third, they had skipped the Star training altogether since it had been outlawed. The reason why was now clear.

"We do this to protect the future generations." Natsuhi assured them.

"And this jerk wants it to continue!" Naruto accused Akahoshi who, it looked to the Leaf nin, was beginning to slowly back away from his squadron.

"How could the Sandaime have allowed such training to be reinstated if he was aware of its consequences?" One of the jounin asked in confusion.

Jiraiya looked solemn, "Why don't you ask Akahoshi?"

Silence penetrated the barren crater, and the ninja of the Star village looked questioningly to their dedicated leader, expecting a straight answer. Akahoshi, aware he couldn't avoid the truth, smiled darkly, "Isn't it obvious? No matter how hard I pressed, Hoshikage-sama refused to bring back the training that was legendary to our village..."

"You killed him." Jiraiya announced with composed certainty.

A ripple of astonishment and wrath rang through the present Star ninja. They knew it to be true, and some who had been close friends of the Third had even recoiled as if physically struck by the news.

"He was in the way." Akahoshi admitted lowly, turning to Natsuhi, "You claim to be acting in the village's best interest? No, it's quite the opposite! I want to improve the standard and power of
Hoshigakure so it will equal that of the main villages…exceed that of the main villages!"

"That goal cannot be achieved through your skewed means! You killed the Sandaime and risked the lives of our children!" Natsuhi was prepared and poised to kill him, "I will never forgive you for your crimes!"

Sumaru stepped in front of his mother, knowing her hot-blooded attitude could get her into trouble. "You don't have the strength to fight yet." He reminded her.

The Star ninja who had once followed Akahoshi without question had him surrounded in a wide ring of furious, betrayed villagers. They, along with Natsuhi and their Leaf comrades, demanded the Star's immediate return. Akahoshi clutched it close to his chest, refusing to part with it under such circumstances.

"Don't make the mistake the Third made!" Akahoshi snarled at them, "If any of you have half a brain you'd see-"

A toad's tongue lashed out from behind him like a whip, knocking the breath out of him, and swiped the stone after the village leader had been bowled over.

Jiraiya crossed over to his faithful servant, patting the toad on the head, and then glanced back to Naruto, "Ready to clean up here, Naruto?"

While Akahoshi was spitting furious curses Naruto charged wordlessly. He was more than happy to finish off the baggy-eyed cretin. Yotaga and Shisou, Akahoshi's loyal guards (who had also helped him murder the Third) stood off to the side, unwilling to get their hands dirty a second time. Akahoshi initiated his jutsu, letting chakra rip ahead towards the blond ninja who was multiplying as he crossed the basin floor.

Sumaru made a start to help his friend, but Jiraiya shook his head at him. "Don't sweat it. Naruto is more than a match for your dear leader over there." He lit his pipe and added, "Just enjoy the show."

Akahoshi's chakra tail vectored down, smashing the ground before sweeping along to eradicate the shadow clones closing in. Two of the five clones dissipated, and one of the remaining trio detonated near Akahoshi. His violet plume coiled just in time to shield him from the explosion.

The Star ninja went on the offensive abruptly but Naruto was quicker, "Katon: Gokakyu no Jutsu!" Flames swept down, forcing Akahoshi to retreat to the far side of the crater behind his chakra shield. The watching Star ninja were impressed, if not a little itchy to get in on the action.

Akahoshi split his chakra into two separate beasts, one of which dove down on Naruto and his clones; the other shot back across the basin towards the observing villagers.

Sumaru countered, half expecting a dirty trick from the desperate nin, "Kujaku Myoho!" His own lavender plume of chakra rose up, meeting Akahoshi's strike with nullifying force. Natsuhi looked very pleased with her son's quick response. The second tail swept through the crowd without warning.

Jiraiya had managed to grab Mizura and leap to safety, but the majority of the unsuspecting Star shinobi were toppled over, landing on the rough crag of the crater's slope. Akahoshi had completely abandoned his fight with Naruto and turned on easier prey. The blonde boy countered against tail swipes his enemy threw back to stall him.

'The rotten old guy goes for his own people!' He hurled a storm of shuriken as a chakra beast slammed down next to him. This isn't working very well, is it?' He backed off, reaching back in his
holster and seeing he had tossed just about all of his projectiles, *I might have to summon a weapon from my scroll…*’ Naruto was pleasantly surprise to see he still had one kunai on him.

It dawned on him that it was not a knife he would be too happy about parting with. Naruto gave the three-pronged kunai in his hand a lingering stare before something in the recesses of his mind clicked together. *Did I just say summon?* He smiled to himself, *I had it right, hee hee.* He let his chakra contact the formula seals on the blade. He let it fly.

The knife had been tossed with some of Naruto’s Kyuubi chakra, and it whistled an eerie tune as it shot past Akahoshi with unnatural speed. No one had caught the movement, save for a blink of a golden flash that plowed into Akahoshi. The tremendous speed of the assault tore the traitor’s chakra beast apart, canceling his jutsu, and Akahoshi was flattened against the side of plateau wall much like a discus.

When Naruto reappeared he was off to the left of his defeated opponent, but was not his usual, grinning self after the victory. He looked rattled and ill, possibly moments away from puking.

"Aw…” He muttered, "That kind of sucked." Naruto fell backwards, rigid as a board, and hit the ground with a quiet thud.

Sumaru and his mother had reached the exhausted boy and Jiraiya came up behind them.

The Sage was somewhere between delighted and befuddled by what his student had accomplished. Sumaru tried to gently shake his friend awake but Jiraiya advised against it. "He'll be alright. That was just the Hiraishin…which I did not expect him to master so soon." He pulled the boy up, slinging him over his shoulder, "Not very graceful, was he?"

"It was an incredible spectacle, so the most graceful version of it would be…with more of a flourish?" Sumaru wondered. Little did he know Naruto and victory-swagger had an on/off relationship.

Natsuhi didn't even have to give a command for the other Star ninja to close in. They dragged the crumpled and bleeding Akahoshi, along with his cowardly henchmen, back towards the village in an angry yet vindicated mob. Mizura and Hokuto waited for Sumaru’s half of the group before continuing out of the crater.

"It's hard to believe a shinobi his age could have such enormous ability." Natsuhi commented quietly to the Toad Sage.

"Sweet-cheeks, Naruto got that strong just by his own determination." Jiraiya told her, looking to Sumaru as well, "This village would prosper from following his example…but I guess you've already realized that."

Naruto awoke with the warm caress of sunshine on his face. He was groggy and his eyes were crusty from sleep. He sat up, spotting Jiraiya in a corner of the room smoking while working on a smutty novel. Naruto didn't recognize the room or their current location, for that matter. A few alarmed exclamations were mixed in with his mutterings.

Jiraiya looked over to him, frowning slightly, "What was all that verbal diarrhea you puttered out just now, kid?"

Naruto rubbed at his eyes, "I said: where are we, Ero-sensei?"

"In the Star Village's palace, of course. This is the medical ward." Jiraiya extinguished his pipe,
“You were out for a day and a half, squirt. Not that I blame you; the first time's a bitch, huh?”

The blonde boy nodded, scratching his head, "Next time I'll...brace myself."

His mentor laughed.

There was a brief knock at the door before Sumaru and Natsuhi entered. It was the second time that day they had stopped by to check on Naruto. Naruto waved weakly to them, and Sumaru crossed over, looking far more relaxed than usual, "You're awake, finally. I want to thank you for all of your help...is there any way I can repay you, Naruto?"

"You could lighten up, how about that?" Naruto suggested, "Not everyone from outside your village is untrustworthy."

The Star ninja actually smiled, "I believe that now."

Naruto glanced over to Sumaru's mother, who was positively glowing. She had cleaned up and without dirt and scratches all over her she resembled a princess. The idea was further supported by the fancy robes she was wearing. "Hi, Natsuhi-donno. Er...why are you dressed so weird?"

"That's Hoshikage-sama to you, Naruto." Her smile was radiant, "I was elected shortly after Akahoshi was defeated."

He held up his hand for a high-five of congratulations and Sumaru was a bit peeved when his mother obliged. "That's awesome! You'll definitely set this place on the right track!" Naruto then added, "But what happened to that Star of yours?"

"It's safe in Natsuhi's hands. That's all you need to know, kid." Jiraiya tried to change the subject.

"It's alright, Jiraiya-sama, I want to tell him." Natsuhi trusted Naruto to keep the secret, "It rests now in my husband's grave, and to make sure it is not found again...Sumaru is the Star's guardian."

Sumaru was humbled by his mother's confidence in him.

"He has a strange resilience to it." Jiraiya pointed out, "Sumaru can continue the training on his own if he wants to."

Natsuhi looked to him, "I leave that up to you, son."

He was silent for a moment, considering it, and then said, "I will do my best."

"As for the other students who are still sick," Jiraiya continued, "My friend Tsunade would be happy to help them out. Send a message to the Hokage in the Leaf Village so they can get treatment."

"Thank you for your offer." Natsuhi was grateful for the chance to help the suffering genin.

They left Naruto and his sensei after that, and less than an hour later Naruto was dressed and on his feet again. Jiraiya handed him back the three-pronged kunai he had used, "I'll advise you not to lose this. It's the only one you've got for now."

Naruto thanked his teacher and set out into the village, which was already looking far less gloomy than he remembered. Mizura quickly spotted him and invited him to lunch along with Hokuto and Sumaru. He enjoyed telling them stories about Konoha and his friends, mostly revolving around Gaara and Haku, and several sappy anecdotes about Hinata that Hokuto found endearing. 'Maybe Sumaru too.' Naruto thought, but knew the boy would never admit it.
Later in the afternoon Jiraiya dropped by. "I hate to break up the party, kids, but Naruto and I need to split now." He told them, "We're a bit behind schedule as it is."

With Hoshigakure in capable hands, he knew it would be safe to return should they ever need to.

Mizura and Hokuto weren't ready to see him go, but wished Naruto well and gave him several rations of ramen that he could take with him on his journey. He was very pleased with the gift.

Before he left, he had one last word with Sumaru, "Hey! Just remember that when I'm Hokage... and you're Hoshikage," Sumaru grinned, "Our villages are going to be allies."

The Star ninja figured there was no better time than the present to begin a new friendship, "It would be my honor, Naruto."

Ino and Sakura returned home from their mission with Shizune in very high spirits. That was, if it could be called a mission at all; it had been a routine medical examination for the daimyo's family. The pay from the Lord of the Fire Country was, as always, extravagant, especially since his wife and children checked out with a clean bill of health.

They chatted about their respective patients while they walked, and just outside of the Hokage's tower ran into Shikamaru. With a sigh he handed a small scroll to Sakura and said, "From Gaara."

Ino raised her eyebrows somewhat coquettishly. It appeared Sakura's dating life was still alive and kicking, 'Good for Forehead!' She thought cheerily.

Sakura accepted the message with composure before dashing into the building and whooping loudly on her way up the stairs.

'As if we wouldn't see her do that.' Shikamaru observed the side-effects of a relationship to be strikingly similar to recreational substances. He was in no hurry to check in with Tsunade with his mission report if Sakura was going to be bouncing off the walls of the office.

"So Gaara was with you on your mission, was he?" Ino asked keenly, "That must have been rough, Shika."

"Even when he's in another village he's still a grouch." He didn't deny the hardships he had faced, "I actually had to fight back there. I'm sore all over..."

She consoled him with a pat on the back that lingered just a moment too long. "Where's Chouji?" She asked him.

"Training with his dad, why?"

Ino flashed two slips of paper in front of the Nara's eyes, "The daimyo's wife was really impressed by how I cured her rheumatism. She gave me two passes to an exclusive hot springs as thanks." She explained, "I thought Chouji might want to go since Sakura already turned me down."

Shikamaru felt a twitch in his eye. It wasn't like her to instantly pick Chouji for a high-class outing, ergo he quickly got the hint that it was a subtle, unexplainable jealousy tactic. It hardly made sense to him; they had all been lifelong friends who didn't disagree or bicker...often.

Ino took her friend's expression as a sign of disapproval, "Um...maybe you'd like to unwind from your desert excursion?" She suggested, "What do you say, Shikamaru?"
"I could just as easily unwind napping on a park bench." He informed her, not wanting to be too easy.

"But that's such a predictable routine for you. Why don't you laze about in an uncommon way for once?" With that she added, "I'm going to drop off my stuff at home so you have twenty minutes to decide."

He'd already made his decision; he just didn't like being played like a harp.

"The place is just outside Tanzaku Quarter, so if you're willing to pass up a relaxing afternoon at a serene resort with tranquil, warm waters and great snacks that's really up to you, Shika--"

"I'll go," Shikamaru replied, defeated, "I'll pick you up in twenty minutes."

Like a harp.

On that note, Ino continued on, turning the corner towards home, deciding not to revel in her triumph. She had known all along that he wanted to go; she just wasn't going to communicate that fact with him, *Men just can't agree to something willingly if it wasn't their idea in the first place...*
Sakura had stopped outside of Tsunade's office. She was leaning against the wall, deeply absorbed in reading the note in her hands. There was some urgency, maybe even panic in what Gaara had written down, "He said he needs to see me? He's worried?" Her concerns faded after she read about his nomination to become the Fifth Kazekage and the lack of other candidates.

She had been trying to handle the situation calmly, but there was no helping how her heart was pounding in her chest. Sakura stepped outside onto the balcony for some fresh air. She looked down on the city, and it suddenly looked much different than it had a few minutes ago. The village had been shaded in sepia by the setting sun.

On the one hand she was thrilled for him. Gaara was being recognized for the accomplished warrior he was, and his presence would do immense good for both Sand and Leaf. He was young but unbelievably mature, and she had complete faith that if he did take the position he would most likely be the best Kazekage of their era.

The other hand was a clenched fist. Sakura was bitter over the notion, even slightly envious. Not of her boyfriend, oh no, but the people who would have his time every day…the people who would have his attention. She would be in the back seat after that and, eventually, inevitably, she would phase out of his life completely. She sobbed for a moment and then got a grip on her emotions.

"It's not fair! I only got to have him for a little while and then they just stole him…they stole him away from me!" Inside she was throwing a tantrum. She wanted to point her finger at the officials of the Sand Village, but Gaara, being who he was, was bound to be noticed sooner or later for his ability.

"But he said he was leaving the decision up to ME." She recalled, glancing back down at the message, "I could just say no and that would be that." She also agonized over the fact that just because he wouldn't be the Kazekage didn't mean he would be able to come home to her whenever she beckoned. To deny him the position was almost cruel. But to allow it would be denying herself…something she had grown accustomed to.

"If I had known that I was going to lose you this way I would've kissed you harder." She laughed to herself, "Heck! I would've run away with you too!"

The truth came a bit too late, and she couldn't rewind and decline Tsunade's offer to mentor her. Or, for that matter, go back and beg Gaara not to leave. The choice was here and now. She split down the middle, on an invisible seam of heartache.

Sakura rubbed at her eyes, distraught, 'I'm sorry, Gaara-kun…I guess deep down I'm just as selfish as you said I was…'
home. Business was slow at this particular inn anyway, and servants wished their departing customers a safe trip home on their way out. The Nara felt a bit odd entering the spring that was totally devoid of life, with the exception of himself.

He had been told these were gypsum springs. The minerals were supposed to be good for aches and the suchlike. The water was bitter. Shikamaru sat back against a smooth stone and sighed, letting every care in the world slip away from his consciousness.

He couldn't help but notice the fence to his left shuddering and creaking. The oak divider was the only thing separating the men and women's baths. Shikamaru suspected some pervert to be the culprit trying to poke through, and jumped in startlement when one of the planks was easily wrenched away.

"Shikamaru, you there?"

Of course it was Ino. His nerves settled a bit. "Yeah…Ino, what are you doing?" He grumbled.

"Come over here and talk with me. I'm wearing a towel for God's sake." She hissed, and he scooted over to the gap, "There, that's better!"

"Is this necessary?" Shikamaru asked, nearly whined.

"Well I haven't gotten to say you in days and I'll be damned if I can't talk to you just because of this stupid wall." Ino leaned onto the stone ledge, "So get on with it and tell me about your mission."

He leaned onto the sill as well, beginning to recap it in pieces, "The desert really is the shitiest place to live. I won't be going back to a place as troublesome as that." She nodded, agreeing even though she'd never been there.

"Things improved near the coast. Guard duty was tiring since we were entrusted with overseeing the plant's construction…” He yawned, then continued, "Gaara wasn't a happy camper since I didn't bring Sakura along, but the team I did have with me did well. I was surprised they fought off the thugs as well as they did."

She was lost, "Who? And what thugs?"

He recounted the nukenin who Tama and Sato had held off in an impressive display of teamwork. He skimmed over the parts where they had frozen up in panic, and focused more on the success of the mission.

"We're a formidable team ourselves." Ino observed smugly. She went on to talk about the mission they had gone on with Neji, and how it just wasn't the same. He tried to pay attention, his chin propped up in his palm, but for the life of him couldn't get over how bare she was. Normally Shikamaru made a point to avert his gaze when the kunoichi was indecent, but at the present time he could not help himself.

Ino didn't seem to take notice because by then she was busy rummaging through a shopping bag she had with her. She drew out a pair of sunglasses, and without a word, fitted them on Shikamaru's face. "I got those two days ago in the market. I couldn't resist."

He sighed, watching her from behind the dark lenses. Ino observed him for a moment before commenting, "Wow…I never thought that you could look less enthused than you usually do." She smiled, "You've proven me wrong."

Shikamaru let their hands linger together after she had adjusted the glasses. With his free hand he
pushed the shades up to the crown of his head, "Are these mine to keep, I'm guessing?"

"Sure, just…don't wear them in public, because they're kind of effeminate."

He smirked. She laughed at the thought of it, hoping she could at least get Asuma to see him with them on. There was a strange pause then, and Ino had stopped laughing and realized that Shikamaru was studying her face like he would a puzzle. She jumped a little when he leaned in and captured her lips. She was certainly not expecting a kiss, even though she had been hoping for one.

She settled into it, very pleased with his clueless, never-kissed-a-girl-before technique. She pulled away after a moment and told him, "You know you could have just said something if you had a thing for me, Shika."

"Why would I bother when you were after that Uchiha all the time?" He pointed it out as if there was no contest.

"You actually took that seriously?" Ino raised her eyebrows, "How could I like that guy, I ask you, when he nearly got you and the others killed? That's unforgivable!"

"I don't know…women are mysterious like that."

She rolled her eyes at his excuse and then kissed him again, chasing away his notion of inferiority. Shikamaru found it unfortunate that he couldn't get any closer to her thanks to the gap that was barely over a foot in width. He drew back, frustrated, "This is unbelievably troublesome."

She was laughing again. Shikamaru recalled how a room had come with their passes which he thought preferable to tearing down the rest of the fence. He couldn't pay for damages like that anyway. "It's time to get out of here." He informed her.

Ino wasn't thrilled, "Huh? But I wanted to soak for a while longer…"

"Go to the room, Ino, or this fence is coming down."

She relented, disgruntled, but knew they could always come back later. Shikamaru withdrew from the gap, moving through the water sluggishly before he noticed a sumo wrestler inching his way into the onsen. The newcomer couldn't help but see the conspicuous space in the fence.

"There's some crazy chick trying to get in here." He told the portly man, "Watch yourself." He exited and the wrestler looked concerned.

Shikamaru navigated back to the room where they had left their belongings. Ino was already there, looking a bit stilted when he entered. He closed the door without having to be reminded.

"Turn around please. I want to change." She told him.

He wasn't listening at that point, because he wasn't willing to wait for the next opportunity to kiss her. Ino was a smidgen alarmed by his haste, "Wait…will you? Sheesh…impatient." She managed between breaths, "This is unlike you…where'd the procrastinating go?"

"I'm sick of it." He said, "I'm allowed to change my preferences aren't I?"

She shrugged, supposing it was a welcome change, and sighed when he kissed her deeply. Ino wished she'd had the wherewithal to dry off earlier because she was starting to shiver.

Shikamaru acknowledged how as a Chunin he knew better than this, and how teammates were
unspokenly off-limits. He was unable to heed any of the taboos; he was too busy feeling. Since the Retrieval Mission he felt completely grown up, and along with that the burden of all the missions and lives he had been trusted with had been slowly crushing him. 'I want to be able to depend on someone else.' He thought, 'If I could let my guard down for a bit and the people who need me would still be alright…'

Pushing a requirement like that on Ino was a little unfair, he knew, but he had always been waiting for recognition that saw beyond his unmotivated façade. Inside he was a mess of guilt, worry, and longing; struggling to become a stronger person worthy of the rank he had achieved. Ino had understood that as easily as every other part of him she had witnessed.

She clung to him, her head foggy. "Is this alright?" She asked him for confirmation.

He didn't really know, and the best he could do was kiss her again. Ino had only meant for it to be a relaxing afternoon between friends, but Shikamaru's unpredictability was becoming increasingly predictable. Her back hit the wall and his hands that were once anchored to her waist began to roam. She felt fidgety but found the opportunity to examine him as well. He was not a kid anymore.

Ino couldn't give him enough credit at any other time to admit he was sculpted with a chest and stomach that belied muscles that had probably always been there and been ignored. Her nails traced a line from his elbow to his shoulder and left gooseflesh in their wake. Shikamaru kissed her neck, descending, and she tensed only for a moment when he slipped off her towel. His eyes were scanning her, every curve and detail searing into his retina, completely entranced with her pale form.

She shuddered. Suddenly, Ino could not recall why she wanted to invite Chouji or Sakura before him.

Haku packed only a few necessities for his solo mission. He was going far beyond the Water Country, this time, and inwardly glad that Zabuza would not be shadowing his step. He stopped by Hiroshi's teashop briefly to make some last preparations.

"What possessed you to dress that way today, Haku-kun?" Hiroshi commented on the boy's appearance, "It's a bit stifling, wouldn't you say?"

"Not for where I'm going, Hiroshi-san." Haku assured him. He was wearing weighted clothing of black and dark ash gray. If Hiroshi had been even remotely aware of the amount of concealed senbon quivers that were on him, he may have very well had a breakdown. The added thickness of the material would also compare to light armor, something he was counting on. His task this time had a much higher risk than previous missions.

"You're not going very far, you said?" Hiroshi checked, growing concerned.

"By land, I meant. I'll be crossing the sea." Haku wore a carefree smile, "It's my kind of territory, if you know what I mean."

His fat friend was unable to stop peppering him with questions, "Then it might be dangerous if something should happen? Oh…perhaps it would be best if you didn't go alone this time…"

"Zabuza won't be going with me." He repeated, trying to make it sound as if he didn't need any backup. He found it funny how Hiroshi was beginning to Zabuza as less of a threat and more as an asset. 'But if he ever found out these were missions for a gang boss and not of personal interest…' He didn't want to think of that harangue.

Hiroshi took a seat at one of the tables and sighed deeply. He had tired himself out again just by
worrying. He puffed and dabbed at his forehead with a handkerchief.

"Zabuza knows I'll be gone for at least a week, so don't worry if he stops in here a few times." Haku said with a chuckle, "It'll just mean he's hungry and looking for food. He won't bother you, I saw to that."

"A nukenin in my shop, good lord…" The fat man sighed, "Bless your heart, Haku, for feeding such a terrifying creature."

The dark haired boy laughed. Katsu had run into the teahouse, Pua tailing behind him in a white streak. Usually the boy wasn't up so early in the morning, 'He must have heard that I'm leaving today.'

"You're going on a mission, Haku-kun?" He asked excitedly, "Does this mean I get to babysit Pua again?" 

Haku shook his head, "Not this time, Katsu-chan. I'm actually taking her with me."

Katsu understood and gave the rabbit a pat on the head in farewell, and Haku a hug, "See ya soon…" He and Hiroshi watched as Haku exited the shop with Pua scampering behind him.

Haku recalled as he was leaving Nanakusa, that collecting money was one of the most rudimentary tasks nukenin had to perform. This would be his first attempt, of course, but he was confident it would go smoothly. Inagawa had personally chosen him for the mission because he was even better suited to the environment than Zabuza.

He was instructed to board a ship at the southern harbor that was bound for the Snow Country. Apparently three Snow ninja working for the country's lord had borrowed a gratuitous amount of money from Inagawa, and were running late on one of their payments. One name Haku had ascertained was Nadare Roga, and Inagawa didn't much care about his associates.

Approximately 100 thousand ryo had been loaned out for Nadare's technological pursuits. He was long overdue and still had no real collateral for Inagawa. "If they don't give you the money up front as they're supposed to…" Inagawa had told him, "Kill them all. I won't waste my time with the likes of them if my investments are fruitless."

Haku understood the mission's requirements, but did wonder if things had to end with blood. Being the gentle spirit he was he was silently rooting for the foreign shinobi to finally have their finances in order. Things could go either way, it was clear, and Haku reminded himself that peace was rarely an option when nukenin got involved.

At the southern tip of the island Haku boarded the specified boat, wondering how unforgiving the Land of Snow would be since it was the height of winter in the Water Country. He asked other passengers who predicted common conditions, which were translated to be harsh storms for non-natives. It was a two-day trip by sea.

Most of his food rations consisted of vegetables, since it was something he and his rabbit could subsist on together. Pua was perched on his knees while she chewed on some cabbages leaves. Haku relaxed on the unpopulated starboard deck with her, watching the waves roll by. He tried not thinking about what he had to do. When passengers and crew members did pass by and chat, he left them with the impression that he had family in the Snow Country. He sure did look the type.

The ship let out a hollow-iron moan when it pulled into port. Haku had been a bit disoriented that morning and had to check with a deck hand to be sure they hadn't arrived early. "Lord no, we're
refueling! It's a little way further than this." The sailor promised, "This is a nice island where we drop off and pick up travelers and merchants. You want to watch your step though, there's ninja too."

"Shinobi?" Haku was surprised, "On this spit of land?"

"Ay, you got that right." He replied, then lowered his voice, "Word is a few Rain ninja were seen ducking out on the island. Can't say why they would want to."

Haku thanked him for his help and briefly considered investigating the island. He deemed it an unwise action being that they would be off again in two hours. So far no one had really placed him for a shinobi himself, but just to be sure he wasn't suspected, he retreated to a secluded spot on top of the captain's quarters. After the ship got going again after breakfast he relaxed a fraction.

Later in the day some children took interest in Pua. Haku watched the rabbit scamper around with them, hopping and playing. She was a clever thing, which they had never seen the like of before. He avoided getting to know any of them too well.

The next morning the ship pulled into harbor and the majority of its passengers disembarked, Haku included. This, he was told, was currently the most populated part of the country: the coast. Going inland was a feat not so easily accomplished for most people. As he had expected the temperature had dropped significantly upon their arrival, but he and Pua were well adjusted for the change.

His directions had pointed him to cut through a quick mountain pass to get to Dotou-sama's castle. "Just stay off the road, though." An old man had told him, "Ninja out there pick off folks on the road. 'Course the woods is even worse. You'll die if you go in there, but stay off the road, sonny."

Haku had opted for the wilderness since he was particularly skilled in forest navigation. He became aware of how vastly different it was here than on the mainland. For one, there was the silence. The waist-deep snow banks stretched as far as the eye could see and further; in some places it was deeper than one's head. The blankets of white had smothered sound in the trees, vegetation and ground. It was unnerving while it was harmless.

"Now suppose Naruto-kun was here," Haku spoke sidelong to his rabbit, "This would be an agonizing trip. He would struggle with this quiet, most likely break it constantly and give away our position. Gaara-kun would handle it better, the silence anyway…but he detests snow in a light dusting, never mind fathoms deep."

"Ramen." Pua agreed.

Another issue was warmth. It would be a chore finding enough dry wood and kindling to make a fire. Chances were he'd have to burn his own map if he couldn't find bark that wasn't sopping wet. He could handle the thought of the perilous terrain better than the uncomfortable, more mental concerns. The hills sloped off onto rounded cliffs, blinded with snow, which fed into fatal drops into an abyssal cavern or another slick slope.

Haku and his rabbit kept on top of the drifts with chakra, following a compass-negotiated route towards their destination. At one point the land gave out completely, with only a frail ice bridge connecting the slope Haku was descending with the fir trees on the adjacent ledge. Pua quailed at the sudden drop and ducked behind her master. He picked her up by the extra skin on her back and held her in the crook of his arm, slowly finding his footing down the snow drift.

The rabbit gave a chattering coo as if to say: You aren't really going to try and cross that?

"Hush now." Haku told her. He was more cautious about it than his rabbit had him pegged for. With
his Kekkei Genkai he drew snow down from the opposite hill, watching as it ran down like a miniature model avalanche. He froze it, expanding the ice of the crossing, and dashed across it safely. Pua's chattering ended once they had cleared the gap.

Haku let her down and romp across the snow beside him. This side of the valley had a panoramic view of the ice-capped mountains decorating the horizon. The forest was a swirl of pine-green and white. Snow was caught in the needles of every tree, cradled in the nooks of branches and roots. Boulders and hardy bushes were topped with the stuff.

"This place is really quite beautiful." Haku acknowledged as he trekked, "I might come back here on my own time, someday."

Pua scraped between two knotted roots, digging up some nuts that had been preserved. Haku gladly took them from her, knowing they would be good to eat later. "Don't go too far." He reminded her when he let her bound ahead, "We'll be stopping soon." He wanted to find wood since daylight was shrinking fast. Haku consulted his compass with a glance before turning more easterly in his search.

He snapped at husks of birch bark and dry bramble, breaking branches as he went, finding things were drier than they had appeared. Haku also followed the rabbit's example and stopped near tree roots, keeping an eye open for nuts and the suchlike. It looked like most sustenance available had already been discovered by deer, judging from the tracks. Some birds too. He ventured further up the hill.

Snapping twigs as he went, Haku sang a nostalgic song he had heard a few times back in Nanakusa. His voice reverberated faintly between the conifers, slightly muted by the surrounding snow. He leapt over a rock pile, continuing along the slant of the hill before his voice died off abruptly. In the snow was a person, their upper half visible and stiff. The corpse's head had looked to have been bashed in, and its lips were peeled back over its teeth in a permanent and horrendous snarl.

Dizzied, he stepped away, leaning back against a tree trunk. He had been caught so unaware. The body might have been dumped out here so it wouldn't have been discovered, with a ninja as the most likely culprit. There was no way to tell if the cadaver had been a shinobi or not, there was no mark or headband. A bothering amount of the body's face and torso had been chewed away by ice weasels already. This was not very recent.

Haku turned and leapt down the slope, unable to bear the scene. He passed briefly through the canopy before touching down on the ground where he had started. He whistled and Pua came bounding. She cooed. She could see he was rattled. "I'm fine." He dismissed her look, "Did you find any more food?" She had not.

He cleared the snow from the ground with a few swift hand motions and then kicked a pit into the soft dirt. He set some kindling in the bowl and kneeled down, making hand signs. Haku breathed a wisp of flame on the bramble that easily ignited it and he added more wood to the fire. Pua scuttled closer, butt facing the flames, and warmed her fur up. She looked up at her master, still sensing his disquiet. Haku stroked her ears, "Don't you worry about me, Pua-chan."

The sun had nearly dropped out of the sky completely, and the cloud cover had added to the creeping darkness. Haku used his ice mirrors to form a secure lean-to against a thick oak, leaving an opening at the top for smoke to escape. He let his rabbit have the nuts she had uncovered for dinner, while he settled for a helping of rice and vegetables. By nightfall the fire was robust and comforting, and Haku dozed off with Pua curled against his stomach.

Though his clothing provided extra warmth Haku slept restlessly. The silence of the woods pricked at his senses, and even just an inch beyond the glowing heat of the fire the ground was sharp with
cold. He prodded at the fire a few times during the course of the night. His real source of discomfort had been the body. There had been no way to investigate or understand it. He had dreams of ice weasels gnawing at him.

He woke the next morning with a kink of tension between his shoulder blades. Pua rose when he did, stretching her legs and preening, and Haku imitated her routine. He stretched also, slightly loosening the knot in his back, and rubbed a handful of snow on his face to wake up fully. Haku kicked dirt over the dying embers and dispelled the ice shelter he had made. He felt better after he and Pua set out.

They ate as they traveled, Haku crunching on one wild nut before tossing another over to his rabbit. Breakfast tasted like dirt. He shared water from his canteen with Pua and shortly before noon crested the top of a plateau. Below he could see a plain of compacted ice, possibly a glacier, stretching out before a walled stronghold at the far end.

"Time for the audit." Haku sighed, looking to his rabbit, "Let's be as civil as possible."

"Ramen."

Haku decided speed would be best applied here. Ice was a dear, dear friend. He barely had to expend energy running when he slid across the surface with sheer momentum. Pua mimicked him, skating across the glacier towards the lord's castle. He was impressed by how promptly shinobi had gone out to greet him,  *They must have seen me coming.* 'They met halfway on the ice. There were three of them after all.

"Hello." Haku began cheerily, "I'm here on behalf of Inagawa-san. I am understand you have dues with him and he is expecting your cooperation."

"A collector this soon?" The taller man, Roga, was upset, "Would it be too much trouble to ask Inagawa-san for another month?"

"Not at all." Haku assured him, "Since I've been asked to terminate you on sight."

Roga did not like the answer. He and his teammates attacked on a silent command. They manipulated the snowy terrain with jutsu, and the kunoichi was the first to demonstrate, "Swallow Snow Storm!" Ice shot out, winged, surging in a flock for the dark haired boy. A flick of his wrist sent the attack in a loop, right back at the woman. She screeched in surprise and dove out of the way. A wolf made of snow and ice needles was charging from where Roga had come up on his left. It was sliced in half and also redirected back at the jutsu's user, shards raining down with hellish accuracy. Haku wheeled back, prepared for the bigger man who was rushing for him on a sort of snowboard. He was too quick, avoiding the Snow ninja and creating four shadow clones to assist him. The clones let loose a barrage of Phoenix Eye punches and heel drops on the broad ninja and the kunoichi.

Roga acted quickly to help his teammates, using hand signs to create an ice tower that would have impaled Haku if he had not been so wickedly fast. Ice crystals plunged up from the glacier, their facets smooth as glass, and Haku needed only to infect one surface of the ice with his chakra before he dove into it: a high-jacked mirror. The Snow ninja had no way to fight against Haku while he was using his most favored technique. It would have done them good to be aware of the snow embankment that was crashing down behind them.

An ice flow caught the three unexpectedly while they had been attacking Haku's mirror. The drift had frozen solid, trapping them, and he stepped out to inspect his catch, looking quite menacing to
them…save for the milk-white rabbit that hopped over and settled beside him.

"What are your names?" Haku asked, "I want to be sure I have the correct people."

They were completely unwilling to cooperate, and remained soundless as the forests beyond the glacier. Haku was not frustrated by their resilience. He used his Blood Limit to drop the temperature in the ice they were confined in, torturing any skin exposed outside of their armor. It was about a minute before the woman caved, "I'm Fubuki, okay? Muranaka Fubuki!"

When her companions stayed silent the temperature plunged further.

"Ugh! The lot of you assholes!" Fubuki screamed at the two, "The fat guy is Mizore, and the one with the long, girly hair is Nadare Roga! Satisfied?"

Haku smirked, glad he had earned some cooperation. The temperature again became tolerable but he kept them firmly trapped.

"Wow…Inagawa sent a Snow Devil…" Fubuki said in wonder, "Hey! Nadare! You fought a Snow Devil once, yeah?"

"Is this really the time you twit?" He hissed.

Haku's eyes flashed warily. They had recognized his ability for something called a Snow Devil. That was the first mealy bit of information regarding the Hyoton he had gotten since he had begun training under Zabuza. Roga cleared his throat and pointed out, "You, uh, haven't quite finished us yet."

"I will." Haku said, but his resolve was dwindling.

Fubuki's expression became coy, hiding her apprehension, "Actually, even if you are a tad young for me you're pretty hot…" She smiled at him, "Let me down, sweetheart, and I promise you a good time."

"Don't weasel out of this Fubuki! Help your comrades first!" Mizore scolded her.

She pouted, "But he IS incredibly hot…a nice change from the fish-lips out here!"

"Save your breath." Haku warned, effectively imitating Zabuza's harsh inflection, "I will now allow you the opportunity to offer the money you owe before you are encased in a block of ice. Fair?"

The Snow ninja fell silent, thoroughly and humiliatingly defeated. Roga spoke up, "We're behind, I admit it, apparently enough for Koseki to do away with us. I have half but he won't accept it clearly…" He sighed.

Pua was circling innocently around Haku's boots.

"Kill me, then, and let them go." Roga reasoned, "I'm to blame for this. Besides, Dotou-sama won't appreciate such an end for his head engineers."

"Don't offer yourself like that, Roga…" Mizore said quietly.

The ice began to shift and the Snow ninja flinched, expecting the worst. They were shocked when it receded and they were released.

Haku smiled, "I honestly don't want to hurt someone so selfless." He was speaking to Roga, "I think I also stand to gain something by not killing you, so why don't we think of a way to satisfy Inagawa-
san's debt?"

They were surprised by Haku's generosity, and knew better (by then) than to cross such a powerful shinobi. Fubuki privately wondered if her offer helped change the situation but he didn't look in the least interested.

"Thank you for your patience." Roga said, "You're wise for your age. Come with us so we can settle things diplomatically." He turned, brushing snow off of his shoulders, and his teammates fell into step beside him as they lead Haku back towards the fortress.

"We have developed technologically advanced armor to enhance our jutsu." Roga explained to Haku as they crossed the glacier, "A project so monumental, of course, comes with steep drawbacks. Inagawa-san was under the impression we'd have results by the end of the first year...it's been nearly three years now and several extensions."

"Not to say that we haven't made progress." Fubuki added optimistically, "But our financers don't always understand the line of work we're in. It takes a long time just to get the materials, let alone construct them..."

"It is remarkable." Haku conceded, although their prototypes hadn't been very effective against him.

"We received the mechanical designs long ago from a foreign scientist who works halfway across the world." Roga told him, "For years we've been improving it...but it seems it's still no match for such a Kekkei Genkai."

Part of the wall of the fortress slid aside, allowing them entry. Pua followed closely behind Haku, chattering nervously. It was considerably warmer within, but a little on the dim side. "Fubuki-san called me...a Snow Devil." Haku recalled quietly, "I was wondering what that means."

Fubuki exchanged a glance with Roga. He then asked, "Are you not from a clan, Mister-?"

"My name is Haku." He answered, "And I suppose I have relations to one, but I...lived in the Fire Country for most of my life."

"Ain't that something?" Fubuki mused, "The Fire Country! Is it really on fire like there's snow out here?"

"Most often it's not."

They went up a staircase and turned into a better-lit room with tables and chairs. Mizore immediately set to work making tea. Haku was amused about how average these shinobi were. Roga took a seat and gestured for Haku to do the same. Fubuki rifled around the cupboards looking for teacakes.

"I have seen your ability before." Roga told Haku, "I was caught up in a battle in the Land of Water shortly after joining Inagawa Koseki's circle. He was a very unusual shinobi."

"Do you know his name?" Haku asked, feeling his throat dry up in anticipation.

"I'm afraid I don't know it, I apologize." Roga said, noticing how troubled the younger ninja looked, "I believe he was a rogue, though. The sighting must have been about two years ago, if that helps."

"Just two?" Haku was surprised by how recent the encounter was. Another person with the Hyoton. Two years ago. Things were looking up.

Fubuki sat down and laid foodstuffs on the table, "Let me put it to you this way, Haku. Roga's ass
was so badly kicked in that fight we immediately returned to Snow for fear of our lives."

Haku appreciated their accounts. It was more than Zabuza was willing to discuss, at any rate. Mizore served the tea and it was delicately sweet.

"It would be prudent if Dotou-sama did not find out you are here with us." Roga added at length, "He would be furious to hear about Inagawa-san's sour mood. We try to stay on his good side, you see."

"On that note, it's important that both sides are satisfied." Haku agreed, beginning to devise a solution, "You said you already have half, yes? I can match that amount."

The Snow ninja looked bewildered. How many missions did this kid go on to rake up that much money? Or rather, what did he do on those missions?

"Inagawa will receive the full amount, and in return…we will have an alliance," Haku proposed, "I need assistance in finding other people like me. Snow Devils, you call them. They're ninja who possess a Blood Limit called the Hyoton…and Zabuza-san still hasn't helped me very much in that respect."

"You're partners with Momochi?" Mizore rasped, "It's no surprise you know Koseki, then."

Fubuki had discovered the delight that was Pua a half moment later, "Oh! This rabbit is just an angel in animal form…" She cradled her against her shoulder, "She did pull a knife out on me before I picked her up, but still…"

Pua was a big hit with all of the Snow ninja, interestingly enough. Roga mostly impressed with her abilities and concealed weapons, and Fubuki and Mizore mostly for her loving demeanor. They lounged about the rest of the evening, letting Haku tour the west corridors of the castle at his leisure. They let him rest in a spare room that was out of Dotou's sight, and thanked him for his help and generosity.

It was strange taking a warm bath, Haku thought, after hiking through frozen wilderness for two days. He relaxed in the hot water, Pua sitting on the ledge and cooing, listening while he recapped the day's good fortune.

"I have a lead now. A real one, Pua-chan." He sighed contentedly, "A clan of people like me really exists, or at least…there are still stragglers lingering from the war." For a moment he panicked at the idea that this particular clan had been ravaged, and that the few that remained had no ties to him at all. It could explain why Zabuza never broached the subject.

His rabbit cooed again and he calmed down. 'Yes. There's simply not enough information to start making assumptions. For now I should just make sure Zabuza stays unaware of how much I do know. It's the only leverage he thinks he has on me.'

A short while later he toweled off and dressed again; Pua scampering beside him when he spread out on a futon. She curled up beneath his chin, ears brushing against his cheek. Both slept soundly.

In the morning the money was distributed accordingly and the Snow ninja planned to keep in touch with Haku through Inagawa. "Or you could always send this little one!" Fubuki suggested, giving Pua one last squeeze, "She's always welcome."

Haku thanked them before departing the fortress. They had been surprisingly agreeable people, and he suspected that his earlier wish for peace had somehow secured things. Pua raced alongside him on
the ice, sometimes spinning in doughnuts for fun. Her antics got her master going and he did one or
two turns before nearly spinning out of control and falling on his rear. The only way the mission
could have been more fun was if his friends had been there with him.

Halfway across the glacier Pua spooked. With a small shriek she hid behind Haku's legs, unwilling
to go any farther. He didn't have to ask her what was the matter: out on the ice ahead of them there
was a man.

The lone stranger walked carefully, not very skilled on the ice. He looked cold too. He stopped about
ten yards away from Haku, purposefully, vigilantly, his posture was that of a shinobi's. Haku let out
a slow breath, watching it rise as vapor in the frigid air.

"I'm Shimofuri Koinyu, and you, if I am correct, are Haku." The violet haired man introduced
himself, "Orochimaru-sama has sent me to pay you a visit."

Haku was astonished that he had been tracked all the way to the Land of Snow. It wasn't something
just any ninja could do without skill or good informants. As it was, Haku had been expecting the
encounter sooner or later, since Naruto's message had given fair warning. "Koinyu-san, I've heard of
you. You are from the Hidden Rock Village." Haku answered shortly.

"Very good, you guessed right." He showed a hitai-ate with the Rock Village's symbol that had been
stowed in his belt. "Are you afraid at all, Haku?"

"Not in the slightest."

"You're very brave…to a fault, really, just like Sasuke-sama said." Koinyu observed, "Once I've
finished what I need to do here I will be free to pursue Susumajin. So…let's cut to the chase, shall
we?"

Haku tensed.

Koinyu swiftly drew out two wires strung with two dozen kunai, and he used hand seals, "Ninpo:
Divine Dance of Metal." The knives snapped loose from the string and hung suspended in the air
beside the Rock ninja.

Haku made his move, hurling two quivers full of senbon with expert accuracy. The needles halted in
mid-air, joining Koinyu's hovering arsenal.

"Magnetism is such a damned thing, is it not?" He chuckled darkly, "The iron in one weapon is
repelled by that of another…and with my chakra I can control the level of that attraction."

"Get out of here, Pua." Haku said sidelong to his rabbit, not wanting her to get tangled in the fight.
She dashed off, disappearing with a camouflage technique, and things got serious.

Five water clones materialized from a snowdrift and ganged up on Koinyu, knowing the use of
weaponry would not be effective. Koinyu's rotating ring of blades snapped in individual directions,
plunging into the clones. The real Haku was nowhere in sight by the time the bunshin had been
dispelled.

'Stay calm.' A single thought rang through Koinyu's mind. He was only fighting a kid.

He coughed a mouthful of Haku's boot, not expecting an aerial assault. Koinyu dispersed into a
puddle of water, and Haku landed, figuring his opponent had a few tricks. He wouldn't have wanted
to come to the Snow Country unprepared for the environment. The knives honed in on Haku after he
had destroyed the water clone, but he was quick. He forced up fragments of the glacier at his feet,
forming an ice shield at the last second.

The force of the projectiles shattered the makeshift barrier and Haku tumbled back, making hand signs to use a water jutsu. Koinyu reversed the polarity of his technique and surrounded Haku in a cage of metal, disrupting his chakra. His attempted jutsu was useless, and Haku frantically tried to make contact with any surrounding snow or ice. Not even the snow outside the cage could be manipulated.

Thoroughly trapped, Haku stopped trying to retaliate. Koinyu wore a smug, lopsided grin, 'He'll be easier to deal with now. This should go quickly...' A column of snow nearly crushed him and Koinyu leapt back, aghast at how three Snow ninja had dove into the fray. With his concentration interrupted his jutsu wore off and Haku broke free.

Fubuki landed beside him, "Hey Haku! We noticed the ambush from the tower so we figured we'd honor that alliance-thing we've got going."

Roga and Mizore launched relentless ice attacks at Koinyu while he protected himself with a wall of metal. He was getting fed up. Koinyu found purchase in the metal of his enemy's armor and acted upon it. He manipulated the alloys and slammed them back against a boulder, pinning them.

"I didn't think you'd have friends with you." Koinyu called to Haku, sweeping Fubuki away from him and immobilized her beside her teammates. "I will crush these people if you don't come quietly, Haku. Please be rational, will you?"

Pua, invisible against the snow, set off a smoke bomb to Koinyu's left. In his momentary lapse in attention Haku pitched a spear of ice that impaled the Rock ninja's left arm. He flailed, crying out in anguish, and the magnetic field fluctuated and tore loose an avalanche from the adjacent slope. Haku shot past, delivering the Snow ninja to safety.

"You need to keep your distance." Haku told them, "He'll use your armor against you and I don't know what his range is." They agreed to idea, frustrated, and retreated across the glacier.

Haku let two ice dragons tear over to Koinyu when he had recovered, but the Rock ninja had suddenly become alarmingly fast. He avoided the incoming dragons and came in close, jabbing at Haku with equal skill in taijutsu while slashing at him with his wheel of knives. "How far do I have to push you, I wonder?" Koinyu spat, "Are you as strong as I've heard or was I misinformed?"

Haku retaliated brutally with all of his strength, with every counter Zabuza had taught him, but Koinyu's defense remained impenetrable and his speed troubling. Haku did not give it a second thought when he elected to use his Level Two form.

The cursed seal immediately mutated his body, making him more lithe and aware. He exceeded Koinyu in swiftness and swung around him, barely seen with the naked eye, tearing down the snowy terrain with his Blood Limit and surplus chakra. Koinyu rushed out of the way of the plummeting snow and debris, only to be tripped up by ice spires that jutted out of the glacier in an attempt to eviscerate him, tangling his hovering chakram.

Haku caught up to the Rock shinobi and proceeded to beat him senseless. Koinyu was aware it was a fight he could not win, but he hadn't actually gone there to win it. He tapped Haku's neck harmlessly, and then struggled away from the water nin's grip.

"I know when I'm defeated." Koinyu panted, "But you already are. It won't be long before you're kneeling at Orochimaru-sama's feet."
Very abruptly he vanished, retreating before Haku could get another hit in.

There was stillness, and when a northerly wind swept across the glacier Haku sighed, glad the fight had not dragged out. Not that he precisely understood the meaning of the encounter in the first place. He noticed something was still off, but couldn't put his finger on it. He deactivated his cursed seal, or at least, tried to.

He desperately wanted to leave his Level Two form but could not manage it. The pain normally associated with his seal was absent. He couldn't feel anything, as if he was numbed to it, and his body was unable to recognize that it was time to shift back.

Haku bit back on his terror, knowing that if he didn't stay calm things would only spiral downward much faster. He looked into an ice mirror that was still standing from the battle. His appearance was as haunting as always. Dark skin and a white mane, pale, sharp eyes. On his neck where Koinyu had contacted his seal, 'Oh Gods no,' was a spell tag of some sort, smothering the seal. He immediately tried to remove it.

He scratched until he drew blood, realizing that the paper was fused with his flesh. Trapped. 'If I stay like this…'

The Snow ninja approached, Roga speaking up first, "Hm…that's a very unusual look. How did you come about it?"

"White hair doesn't suit you, I hate to say, sweetie." Fubuki said apologetically.

"Thank you for all of your help." Haku told them. He left, unable to explain further, with a distinct feeling that if he stayed he might have a mental breakdown.

'This cannot be happening.'

He moved much more fluidly across the ice, a sort of bonus to the rut he had stumbled into. Pua caught up with him at the far end of the plain, very attuned to the change. He passed an ice ridge shining with the colors of the rainbow before carefully lifting Pua (he might've shredded her with his claws) and leapt down the valley's slope. His rabbit screamed in fright but he landed lightly, cutting the travel time back to the harbor by a day.

He boarded the ship in a henge of his usual appearance before finding an isolated area below deck. If he was seen he would undoubtedly alarm the passengers. About an hour or so later, he lost track of the time, the ship pulled out of the wharf. Haku was beginning to feel unwell. He was edgy and his tail twitched in agitation as the ship rocked to and fro. He had curled up in the dark of a storage room, staying silent, and fed Pua, finding he had no appetite of his own.

Haku reflected upon the consequences of being stuck in his Level Two form. Not only would he be conspicuous in broad daylight to civilians and ninja, but it was bad for his temper. He was feeling unbelievably upset, or at least chemically unbalanced. He was worried that he would be drawn to Sound by the prolonged effects. 'And Zabuza never wanted me to use the seal again. When he sees me this way he'll be furious.' Haku wondered how he'd manage himself in such a state.

Later in the evening the ship stopped at the mid-way island and he got off under henge, finding the confinement of the ship was ruining his mood. The coastal city was booming with business and entertainment. He stopped at a roadside stand and got some tea before passing through the public areas to the more rural inland. He dropped his henge once he was sure no one else was close by.

A light rain settled over the island unexpectedly and Haku dispelled it without much thought, but
could have sworn he felt a strange chakra present in the drops. Or was it the air? He remembered hearing about how Rain ninja had been rumored to be lurking about. He didn't doubt the possibility.

He followed a forest path through a grove of young saplings, watching tiredly as Pua hopped through the ferns and flowers excitedly. Being outside was her passion. "Don't go too far ahead." Haku warned her, as always, and she disappeared into the vegetation. He'd whistle if he needed her back.

Haku continued to reflect on his seal issue. 'It can be lifted, but I simply don't have the means. The only other person who might be able to besides Orochimaru is sensei.' He found it unthinkable to go looking for Jiraiya now when he had a new lead on his clan. 'And also...he'll be deeply disappointed in me...'. He would not be able to face his mentor in good conscience.

He finished his tea and tracked Pua down a gravel path that lead to an estate on a hilltop. It was a well-kept mansion with beautiful gardens, and out in the open there stood a Rain ninja, much to his amusement. Haku disappeared into the thick of the trees to watch.

On the veranda of the house was a very lovely woman listening to the Rain ninja's tirade. "What do you mean he isn't available? He's the village leader; he's responsible for this kind of shit!" The man snarled impatiently.

"I know you came a long way, Itagaki-san, but you were left in charge. We are on a mission now." She replied calmly.

"How am I supposed to deal with Orochimaru's meddling? That's Pein's job! Just let me talk to him already!"

"No. He is not to be disturbed at this time. Go back to the village; don't dawdle here and make a fool of yourself." She retorted, immovably.

Haku watched in silence, hidden, eyes sharp.

Itagaki was furious, "You think you can tell me what to do just because you're his right-hand bitch? I'll tear you to pieces and then we'll see who has the last word!" He attacked the woman with a blindingly fast swordstrike, but could not touch her. She dispersed into hundreds of slips of paper.

Haku was amazed; he had never witnessed an ability like it before. Itagaki slashed at the sheets floating in the air, futilely, and the kunoichi reformed her body in an herb garden off of the veranda. The Rain ninja pursued her, blood boiling.

Haku was horrified to see that Pua had been loitering in the flowerbed near the woman, her white fur gleaming. She was caught between attacker and target, and the frightened rabbit reacted by lashing out at Itagaki with a weighted wire. He tripped and stumbled, his eyes quickly locking onto the culprit. He slashed the wire, huffing, and stood up, "You have yourself a pet, huh?" He kicked Pua and she sailed across the garden. When she landed she did not move.

Haku had acted thoughtlessly, and with his Level Two form fully visible struck out against the offender. He rammed his claws, up to the knuckle, into Itagaki's stomach. Itagaki reeled for a moment, "Who the fuck are you!" He brought his sword down on Haku's right shoulder. The weighted clothing buffered the blow somewhat, but blood was drawn.

"I'll kill you." Haku said.

Itagaki retched, the stranger's claws were slicing at his intestines and god only knew what else. Haku lifted Itagaki's sword up with his free hand and snapped the blade off. He continued to rake his talons
through Itagaki's gut, pleased with the man's screaming.

The kunoichi stood absolutely frozen, eyes locked on the struggle. She knew one wrong move would drag her into the fight.

Itagaki pried himself away, struggling for breath, and held his stomach as he limped backwards. The blood was everywhere. The man was crying like a child.

"You shouldn't have touched her!" Haku growled, raising up water from a nearby carp pond.

"I didn't!" Itagaki sobbed, and then paused, realizing he wasn't referring to the kunoichi, "You mean... that fucking rabbit? What's wrong with you? It's... just an anim-!"

A wedge of ice sliced into his throat and Itagaki fell backwards, lifeless, into the foliage. Haku took a long moment to suppress his aggression, which was astonishingly difficult to do, and then turned. The kunoichi was crouched near the ground, holding Pua in her arms.

"I won't say you overreacted because you seem quite fond of this little one. You'll be glad to know she's perfectly fine." She looked down at the rabbit, "Just scared, it seems."

"Ramen." Pua told her cheerfully. The woman raised her eyebrows.

Haku stalked a few paces closer and then knelted down, "Come here, Pua." She rushed to him and he inspected her and found that she was, for the most part, unharmed.

"Never before have I seen a rabbit trained that way." The kunoichi said, "It is very strange."

Haku held Pua against his chest and an exhausted growl trilled from his throat. He did not trust this person. Not yet.

"Are you a sea monster?" She asked.

"No." He was incredulous at the idea, "I'm a human."

"You don't look human. At first glance perhaps a kappa, but I've heard other water creatures dwell in this world." She conceded, "Do you have a name then, human?"

"My name is Haku." He stood up, relaxing a margin, "And I don't always appear this way. I had an unfortunate run-in with a shinobi named Shimofuri Koinyu."

"That's an unfortunate encounter indeed." She agreed, "He did this to you?"

"With a seal, yes."

"Maybe I can help you, follow me." She turned and walked back to the veranda, adding, "My name is Konan."

He did follow, letting Pua hop beside him, and the kunoichi told him to take his shoes off before coming inside. He did. Within the mansion there was soft lantern light, and Konan took Haku down a long hallway into a spacious room with paper divides. She asked him to sit. "What is the nature of your problem?" She asked.

"I have a cursed seal of Heaven on my neck." He told her.

"Orochimaru is filth. To spread his poison to you this way, no less trap you in it..." She muttered, clearly acquainted with the snake, "Show me."
Haku pulled his collar down for her to see and did his best to relax. Anyone who hated Orochimaru was definitely a friend. His tail curled neatly around him and Pua sat contentedly in his lap. Konan looked at his neck, seeing it was lined with scratches. Most of the blood had dried, but she stood and entered the next room over. She returned with a basin of water and blotted the wound with a cloth, "You don't mend very well…whatever you did to hurt yourself…"

"Why was that man causing so much strife?" He asked her.

"He brought something valuable a long way to my partner and I." She explained, "He also had complaints about his new duties. We don't like to be disturbed during one of our assignments."

"I hope I didn't cause any trouble by killing him."

"It was no loss. We'll just get someone else." She shrugged.

After she cleaned him up she examined the seal and the spell tag disturbing it, "This looks simple… trying to block your nerve endings. You can't feel it, can you?"

"I can't."

"That's why you've lost control. One moment." She made a hand seal, and prodded at his neck. The tag that had once been merged with his skin lifted up with ease, "Paper will always follow the rules."

Haku took a deep breath and then left his Level Two form. The relief washed over him like a flood, and Konan watched as his titanium white hair faded back to its original ebony hue. He thanked her.

"You'll have to give yourself some time to heal. Your body is still in shock." She told him.

It was then the exhaustion hit him. It had been subdued by his cursed seal. Konan pointed to the table behind him and told him to eat. It was spread with takeout, which he found mildly comical. "He," She meant Itagaki, "Interrupted dinner." She went to the table and gathered a few morsels onto a plate, "I will go check on my partner while I eat. He is resting now."

"Your friend isn't feeling well?" Haku asked.

"He's…recovering," She paused, "Well…yes…he is my friend." Konan stood, brushing past Haku. "You can rest here for the night but leave in the morning. You won't be allowed to stay any longer than that." She said.

"I understand." Haku answered, "Thank you."

Konan opened a door and walked out with the food. Haku was unbelievably relieved that Koinyu's seal-trap was foiled. 'I must have been born under a lucky star.' He and Pua ate lightly as the sun set outside the window.

Haku woke in the morning, groggy, and with Pua nestled against his back. He had slept like the dead. He stretched, rolling off of the futon and patted his rabbit until she woke. He had slept in his clothes, so once Pua was alert he immediately slipped out into the corridor, prepared to leave as he had promised.

In his morning daze he was a little lost in navigating the mansion's hallways. He walked quietly, a little clumsy even, rubbing at his eyes and yawning. He was mostly wondering where he'd left his boots. He stumbled upon a room in which the door had been left slightly ajar. Haku couldn't help but steal a peek inside.
Konan was asleep and slumbering beside her was a man with ginger hair. He had a good deal more piercings than she. They were tangled together on a futon with cloaks draped over them for warmth. Haku did not linger to thank Konan for her kindness. He would thank her by leaving and respecting her wishes.

He eventually found his way out and pulled on his boots on the veranda. Itagaki's body was still out in the garden but he passed it by, having nothing more to do with the wretch.

Haku had gone back to the town on the water, resigned to the fact that the ship supposed to ferry him back to the Water Country had long since departed. The only other early risers around were fisherman, one of whom told him that the next ship for the Land of Water wouldn't be in port for another day or two. 'I wonder if that Rock ninja will be on that same ship heading back from Snow?' Haku thought, 'He said he was looking for Susumajin or whatever that is…it may be on the mainland.'

He didn't want to risk another encounter with Koinyu, so he decided to find an alternate means of transport. Haku walked along the docks with Pua, and at the second pier found what he was looking for. A small crew of three young men were preparing a privately owned vessel to cross the sea. They were chatting about their highly anticipated trip to the Tea Country.

'If they're headed west when I need to go north…chances are they won't give me a ride.' He deduced, 'Now…how to commandeer it?'

Haku cast a low-level genjutsu on the unsuspecting sailors. It was a rather mean trick to project an illusion of two small children drowning, but they leapt into the water without hesitation, suspecting nothing. The men floundered around for a few minutes, confused, and even fearing the children had gone under. What they did see was their ship pulling out of the wharf. Their cries of outrage followed after it.

Haku had created three shadow clones to help him manage the sailboat. Three remained topside while he went below deck. The cabin had a place to rest and food and water stored. A lot of it. He went back up, watching Pua circle one of his replicas that was at the helm, charting the quickest course back to the Water Country. Another clone was adjusting the sail. He pulled out of the bay with little hassle.

It was a short while later that the rightful owners of the boat (being experienced on the water) caught up in a dinghy. Haku leaned over the side, "I really am sorry about this! You should at least be grateful I didn't ambush you or anything…"

They hurled objects at him and screamed obscenities. He felt terrible about ruining their plans, much less robbing them of their prized vessel right out from under their noses. Haku froze the water surrounding the men's boat, trapping them in ice so they could not follow. He called back another apology. By the time they thawed out he would be long gone. Haku then noted what an incredibly effective pirate he would make, but acknowledged that Pua was most comfortable on land. Piracy would have to stay a part-time hobby.

He sped the boat along with the help of his Kekkei Genkai, since the wind wasn't particularly suited for a cruise north. Haku and his shadow clones took turns navigating and propelling the boat on. Pua's energy seemed to shrink due to the lack of plant life. She napped in the sun, sometimes waking up in search of a snack.

Haku slept lightly, alternating duties with his replicas. By morning land was in sight. 'Wow.' He thought to himself, yawning, 'We must've got back early since we're not on a commercial vessel.' He couldn't complain. The south harbor was no busier than usual, and he was lucky enough to find an
empty quay to land on.

Pua perked up when her feet touched the wood planks of the dock. Haku and two clones tied the boat's mooring lines with a twinge of satisfaction. Stealing wasn't something he took pride in, but this time it had been genuinely enjoyable. He and his rabbit set out across town for Inagawa's building, 'It's a wonder that after all that ruckus I still completed this mission…'

Haku, being a regular at the hideout, was let in with a nod from a sentry. Inagawa was lighting a cigarette when the dark haired boy entered his office, "Ah! There he is! How did it go, Haku-kun?"

"Smoothly." Haku tossed a packet of notes onto the man's desk, "That's the full amount."

"Huh." He scratched his chin, stupefied, "Eh…I truthfully didn't expect Roga’s group to pull it together…" He took a drag and then added, "Well they scraped this up, so they must be doing better than I thought."

"I ought to mention how I acquired a boat yesterday. It's tied up in the harbor and stocked." Haku didn't want it to go to waste after one use.

"Excellent, I'll have my boys check it out. Nice rabbit." Inagawa pointed to Pua on the floor. She was scratching her ear.

The boss gave Haku his commission and said, "Listen, tell Zabuza to quit slacking. At this rate you'll pull the rug right out from under him in terms of work. Take it easy, kid."

Haku thanked him and left with his rabbit at his heels. His trip back to Nanakusa was a bit feverish, flying through the canopy of the connecting forest. It was very foggy.

He was so exhausted that when he arrived he didn't even stop in Hiroshi's shop to say hello. Haku went directly to the hideout, Pua on his shoulder, and dropped his travel gear beside the kitchen table. It was silent. Zabuza wasn't around. Haku collapsed onto the couch, not bothering to change into more comfortable clothes. Pua curled up on his chest and he fell into a dreamless sleep.

Haku woke to find Zabuza standing over him. "Oh." He sat up and stretched, "You're back, Zabuza-san." He even sounded tired. The sleep hadn't done him much good considering it had only been an hour or two. He wanted an entire night, at least.

"Your mission?" Zabuza asked succinctly.

Haku did not want to fill Zabuza in about the pact he had made with the Snow ninja or his lead on Snow Devils. He outlined the journey, the fights, and his buccaneer return that was unexpectedly entertaining. Pua sat at Zabuza's feet, crooning in salutations.

Zabuza was not as oblivious as Haku had hoped he would be, "What's that shit there?" Haku looked puzzled, "The wounds on your shoulder, twit."

"I scratched myself."

"With what? A fucking knife?" Zabuza pulled on his shirt collar roughly, "You used that seal again." He was able to equate the location of the curse mark and Haku's claws.

Pua hid under the sofa, sensing the thundercloud of rage building. Haku wondered what his chances were of weaseling out of punishment. Zabuza's face was unbound, chin stubbled, and his scowl didn't seem too deadly.
"I did." Haku was too exhausted to care about the consequences, "It all turned out well-"

Zabuza hoisted him up by his shirt, turning swiftly and slammed the insolent whelp against the adjacent wall. Haku flinched. Shards of plaster crumbled down in white and grey granules. "I told you not to use it. You disregarded me." He growled.

"It isn't my welfare that matters to you." Haku spat backboldly, "You're protecting an investment, but my power is-

"Gonna get your retarded ass killed. Those seals are dangerous and prone to malfunction." Zabuza clearly knew more than he let on, or was just very good at guessing, "If you end up dead I will have wasted half a year's worth of training and money. Do it again and I'll make you suffer for it."

Haku, eyes wide in disbelief, was astounded that Zabuza had foreseen the seal's dangers. It didn't help much that he'd already gone through hell for it. Haku softly agreed to the terms.

Zabuza let go of the dark haired boy, practically dropping him. He stalked across the room to a cabinet and pulled out a bottle and shot glass. Haku brushed himself off, leaning on the arm of the couch. He watched Zabuza prepare some alcohol that he probably needed very badly.

Haku was feeling snidely, even after the threat, "Investment or not, you have to admit...I'm the best company you've have for some time. Who would you argue with if I weren't around?"

He swallowed, replying, "Stop talking like a fucktard."

Haku laughed very hard, recognizing that Zabuza did have some sort of attachment to him. It was definitely not rooted in friendship, but it was definitely and painfully there.
"We are not the same persons this year as last; nor are those we love. It is a happy chance if we, changing, continue to love a changed person." - W. Somerset Maugham

Obito laid very still with only a thin, watercolor-print sheet draped over him. It was a strange time of day to be in bed. He was very accustomed to strange times of days, and of strange places during said times. He kept still, breathing slowly.

With his cheek pressed half-comfortably on a flat pillow he let his eyes peer down. Where his shoulder used to be was some foreign material, designed by ninja who had not had the best intentions when he had first met them. Cut up, feverish, and dying on a plywood table he remembered the sharp silhouettes of the people who sawed off his mangled arm. They replaced it with this. This artificial limb that functioned superbly, won him many a battle, and saved his life on several occasions.

Obito let go a minute sigh. But he could not feel, not at all, not a speck, of the skin of the woman beside him. Of course, as he brushed Rin with his opposite hand unthinkingly, there was a small surge. The tingle of contact. She was there and he could confirm it most assuredly.

He glanced over the right half of his body, briefly surveying the damage that was still evident. The patchwork replacement limbs that had been bolted onto his body long ago. Obito could remember being ashamed of his mutilation when he was younger. He could remember closing his eyes and denying it. Hating how he hid himself and the scars on his face, and his smile from his friends. He also remembered when Rin touched him and he suddenly felt as if he was whole again and more. He breathed a bit more harshly at the thought, puffing a strand of hair from his face.

Belly-down still he shifted, turning his head to the right and watched her sleep with that unconcerned look on her face. He did this often. Rin would sleep and he would stare in wonder, pondering if this was really his life or if he was due to wake up any moment as a perpetually tardy, thirteen-year-old who wanted to catch lunch with sensei and beat the snot out of Kakashi. Obito touched the bare nape of her neck with purpose this time. She woke up.

Rin yawned, tongue-curling, and blinked at her husband. He looked very thoughtful. He usually looked that way when they were naked, she noted. "Hello, hello…" She greeted, stretching luxuriantly beneath the sheet, "What time is it?"

"Um." He didn't know, so he glanced at the improvised clock on the far side of the room, "Looks like half past noon to me."

"I wonder if Yuma's eaten lunch?"

"I doubt Char would let him go hungry." Obito told her. They often sent the boy into town with Sesshu when they were looking for undisturbed, quote, "mommy-daddy" time.

Having spent the whole morning having sex Rin was very aware her own hunger. They had not eaten since yesterday afternoon, she wagered. Yuma always ate, but his parents not always. They distracted easily. Rin sat up on her knees, stretching again, "Time to eat. What do you want, Obito? We have leftovers, I think…we should probably pick up more food later though…"

His mind was not on eating. He told her what he wanted instead, but she frowned, "No. I would like
to walk today, thank-you." She hopped off of the bed, gathering up her scattered clothes from where they’d been flung about the room. "There's some beef stew. That'll be good…” She said.

Obito called to her futilely, but was unable to summon her back to the warm spot that was now empty. He groaned, annoyed. Rin told him to get up and get dressed, "Or I'll send you into town to pick up your son as you are."

He laughed and pulled his pants on, although he knew she was serious. Both clothed they ventured out into the sunlit hallway, and he held Rin's hand for a little while before she let go and began tearing apart the kitchen in search of a meal. There was stew after all, and she was shoveling it into bowls.

Obito furrowed his brow, "Hey! Save some for me! You're ravenous all of a sudden…"

She waved him off, "It's evenly distributed, I promise." She didn't really mean it and he didn't really mind. Obito crossed over to some of her medicinal plants on the windowsill and watered them with a spray can. She was heating up the food and chattering about what they had planned for the day in town. He stared down at the herbs, lost in thought, in a memory that was so much like this day.

Char's recovery was nothing short of miraculous. Though he had fought off pneumonia Rin still had to treat him every so often to maintain his health, and that gentle smile of his. Eventually she negotiated with her landlords in Nashi, Topatsu and Anzu, to live a short distance away in Shincha. They made her promise to come back and visit once in a while.

Char's fellow villagers were glad to see a new physician in town, but had no place for her to stay. Obito, known to everyone else as Tobi, offered her shelter without a second thought. Outside of the village she forced him to take his mask off, "Stop hiding behind that, it's just me!"

"Habit." He defended, and removed it. He was smiling. She smiled back.

They trekked up the mountainside with Sesshu bounding in and out of the foliage, stirring up voles and rabbits. About halfway, the climb became a bit more tricky, and Obito at one point grabbed Rin's wrist and pulled her back. "Watch out there." He told her, pointing to half-buried pipe she had nearly stepped on, "Power lines for the village. You'll get a nasty shock if you touch that one."

"This goes up to your house?" She asked, visibly surprised.

"Yeah. I've got gas and hot water too!" He was proud, "Utilities aren't exactly commonplace out here, but it's been improving."

Rin thought about how he had a house of his own, and then thought about the Uchiha estate. She'd been there a few times when they had been genin, and it had always been, she thought, the pinnacle of a home even compared to her own. Here Obito was acting as if a roof and four walls was a miracle. She decided against bringing his old home up, since he wasn't very interested in discussing his clan back in Leaf.

At the top of the hill the place was a bit underwhelming. Slightly dilapidated and paint chipped, it looked like a home out of farming story. "The previous owners abandoned this place five years ago when they left for the Tea Country." Obito explained, "It needed work. Still does, but it's better than the way I found it, I'd say."

Sesshu tested the rickety steps up to the porch, "Hm…this wood is rotting away. Should we replace it?"
Obito raised his eyebrows, "You don't need to help out with stuff like that."

"But if we're going to live here we'd be more than happy to." Rin told him. She went ahead after Sesshu up the steps.

Inside the building was more spacious than it had outwardly appeared. Obito had made improvements, it was clear, from the unusual choice of paint to the weapons hung on the walls more for use than decoration. Sesshu was sniffing like mad, and ended up burying his nose beneath the couch and staying there for a while. Rin perused on, into a corridor that was wretchedly bland until she turned a corner.

There was a room that had a stack of books in the corner that nearly reached the ceiling. She was even more impressed by the beautiful ink paintings displayed on the walls. Rin crossed over to a painting of a koi fish that was very simple but eye catching. Obito poked his head into the room, "There you are. How's the exploring going?"

"I love this." Rin pointed to the painting, and the ones beside it, "All of these Sumi-e…where did you get them?"

He was quiet for a moment. Rin waited, and then he said, "Well…I made those."

She grinned, "I love them."

He felt his chest swell at the words. She had used 'I' and 'love' but the last word did not belong. Obito thanked her humbly. They had really been just something to do in spare time besides reading, feeding himself, and fighting for his life.

"Could you give me a demonstration, sometime?" Rin asked.

"The funny thing is, I did. I showed you once before a mission years ago." He told her a bit reluctantly, "But I was really bad back then so thank God you don't remember."

Her stomach flipped with regret.

"I'll show you sometime." He said. His one remaining eye looked stormy and nostalgic.

Rin felt her excited curiosity beginning to slip away with guilt replacing it. She pointed to the books, "You've read…all of those, Obito?"

"Most. Two or three are dictionaries and I wasn't desperate enough to flip through those." He said, smiling, "You probably wouldn't believe it, but this country is a literature gold mine. The mythology is pretty awesome." He reached over and swiped a book from the pile, glanced at it, and then handed it to her.

"Dream of the Red Chamber." She read the title aloud, "How was this one?"


She flipped through a few pages, skimming, and then glanced back at the Sumi-e hung on the wall. "How about we make this your room? I'll clean it out and make it nice." He suggested, "I bet I can dream up a few more paintings for you too."

Rin was thrilled. He walked out and she followed after him with her book in hand. There was another study across the wall mostly devoted to scrolls, and she could only imagine how many jutsu he now possessed. There was also a sunroom and a water closet, and on the left was his bedroom.
Obito passed it by back to the living area, but Rin popped in, curious.

It was very pleasantly under-decorated. Three paintings, one of which was a portrait of someone she did not know. A lamp, a clock, some more weaponry. She had the inane urge to jump on the bed it looked so comfy, but she figured she wouldn't be sending the right message by doing so. Rin's breath hitched when she saw the faint, dusty glimmer of a hitai-ate on top of a dresser near the corner. She reached out to it tentatively, and it surely was his old Leaf headband, badly scarred and battered. She put it back, feeling the same sinking feeling in her stomach as she had before. She left quietly.

"You've been snooping." Sesshu observed from where he was lounging on the couch, "You really can't wait to make this place your nest, can you?"

"Shut your yap. He didn't tell me I couldn't look around." She snapped back lowly.

Rin could hear Obito bumbling around the back of the house outside, and proceeded to investigate the kitchen. The pantry was sealed off by folding double doors and when she looked into it she was confused by what she found. The rations seemed to fall into a specific type of category. Canned peaches, canned pineapple, canned pears, canned cantaloupe, canned every fruit imaginable and at least a dozen of each. Not a container of rice or noodles to be found, and definitely no jerky either which had her slightly miffed. What kind of diet was this?

Obito returned, noticing her puzzlement, "What's up?" He had two bottles of moonshine with him that he had taken in from a shed.

"All of your food is fruit." Her voice cracked, betraying her concern.

He laughed. "No! I just like that stuff since it's kind of hard to come by. They don't even sell that in the Rock Village, so whenever I come across it in my travels I stock up."

"No fooling?" She mumbled, "I see...so, what else do you eat?"

He pointed across the way to several cabinets, which she realized did in fact contain other dietary essentials like meat and grain. "Whew. For a minute there I thought you were one of those vegans."

Rin sighed, "I have absolutely nothing against them, but I can't live without meat."

Obito sat down at the table, laughing lightly, "I know that."

Of course he knew, she thought. He knew a lot about her since they had been genin together. Sadly, Rin realized, she knew a lot more factually about Kakashi than she did her other teammate. She sat down across from Obito. She felt compelled to quiz him on his memory, "Can I ask you some things?"

"Of course." He was pouring the moonshine into cups.

"When's my birthday?"

"Huh. November...15th."

She added, "Favorite weapon?"

"You use senbon most often but you prefer chains." He smiled, "If you can get your hands on one."

"Why do I prefer them?"

"Because you make someone else hold the other end to help you strangle an enemy."
“You helped me once.” She said.

“I know. That’s the only reason I remembered.” He pushed some alcohol in front of her, “Try that.”

“What about my favorite color?”

Obito was silent for a moment. He took a sip of the whiskey, thinking, and then ventured, “It must be silver.”

“It is.”

“I can tell you why too.” He told her, “It’s because that’s the color of Kakashi’s hair and the lining of clouds. You were always so sentimental back then.”

Rin stared down at the cup in front of her. He had gotten everything correct. She tasted the moonshine and it was nothing short of motor oil. She coughed, adjusting to it, and took another sip when Obito started chuckling at her reaction.

“Probably not the best thing for a dainty lady to drink.” He noted, “This town is famous for booze, though, so I’ll have to train you to hold your liquor.”

“Gee.” She said, eyes squinting, sipping the stuff like it was acid.

“Now I’m going to ask you questions.” Obito told her, “If you don’t mind?”

She shook her head, but feared she wouldn’t be as sharp as he had been.

“I’ll start off easy. What are the names of my big sisters?”

Rin could answer that confidently, since the two blockheads often palled around with Tsume, “Uraho and Maohe.”

“How about my birthday?”

“February…” She trailed off, not remembering the day exactly.

He raised an eyebrow, “I’ll let that slide.”

She was very sheepish, so she guessed the twelfth.

“The tenth, actually. Next: Where did I take you for our first date?”

She blushed. She had no idea, but made the best educated guess she could, “Ichiraku Ramen?”

“That’s kind of a trick question. Every time I asked you out you turned me down.” He chuckled darkly.

Rin’s stomach nearly dropped out of her completely. Her nerves were gone, and she cursed herself for never settling for just one bowl of ramen with the poor man. She shot down the rest of the moonshine and it made her feel a bit better as it burned down her throat. She could then understand its appeal.

“Enough of that crap, huh? We’ll talk straight because it’s been a while since we last saw each other.” Obito understood twenty questions wasn’t helping, “How’s everything back in Leaf? Are Minato-sensei and Kakashi doing alright?”
Sensei and Kakashi. Leaf. Everything she had fled from and he was now asking her to drag it back. "Oh. Well…they’re doing alright. Last I checked…" She answered quietly. She felt like such an idiot when she got teary, getting choked up just thinking about it. There was no way she could hold a conversation when a name or two would set her off.

Obito was aware of how much it had bothered her to reply. "Don't answer that, okay?" He told her, standing up, "I'll make some dinner."

She nodded and he crossed the room looking for supplies. She cried silently with her head bowed on the table, wondering why she couldn't get a grip, and why silver suddenly seemed so pallid and ugly to her. Sesshu came in, claws clicking on the linoleum and settled his muzzle wordlessly on her thigh, wishing to comfort her. She patted his head for a minute or two until she relaxed.

Rin stood and helped Obito chop up some vegetables for a stir-fry. He placed his hand on the small of her back and thanked her softly.

"I'm alright, just tired out from this week I guess." She assured him. She glanced down at Sesshu and he gave a grunt of approval and wagged his tail. Rin told him to go find some dinner.

"I think I will." The ninja hound set out, ready to hunt for his own meal in the surrounding woods.

After a short while the dish was ready, and while they sat and ate Rin watched her friend's face intently. Obito would not look at her directly, but his shyness had less to do with her and more to do with his scratched up face. Being stared at for too long made him uncomfortable. Rin was interested in a more specific trait of his.

"Obito."

"Mn?" His mouth was full.

"Does it ever bother you that you only have one eye now?" She asked him innocuously.

He smiled, "Please don't worry about that, Rin."

"Answer the question, Obito."

He was silent, chewing. She would not stop looking at him. At length he admitted, "When I was younger…it was difficult for me to adjust. I had a hard time learning to fight with my vision impaired, but these days I barely even notice. I don't give it much thought."

She nodded in understanding, but inside there was no banishing the swell of guilt that had found a permanent seat in her stomach. She could not take back what she had done, and there was probably no way to make up for it. She ate in silence after that, and listened while Obito spoke about the village. Sesshu returned with a pheasant in his jaws but Rin told him to eat outside, "You're going to make a mess of feathers everywhere!"

The dog walked back out, muttering in irritation.

They spent the next few days adapting to life together. Rin took an equal share of responsibilities around the house, including cleaning and weapon maintenance, but hardly ever cooking because Obito had some skill that she did not want to infringe upon. She did the best she could, but she suspected her friend was withholding work from her. Rin made up for it by taking walks with him through the forest in their free time. She showed him many plants that could be used medicinally, and often brought roots back home to be made into salves. She taught him how to do it himself too.
One day she was struck by an idea on their walk. "If we start cultivating these herbs and shoots in larger quantities we could probably make enough medicine to help out the neighboring villages." Rin proposed, "It will take a lot of work...and we'll need some level land...but I want to try. It's not like the Rock Village is aiding these people."

"I like the sound of that." Obito was in full agreement.

The house began to fill up with plants then after, most of which he used to think had been poisonous. When there was no room left in or around the household they requested if they could use Char's garden. He was happy to oblige. Rin's vast knowledge as a medic quickly imprinted onto Obito, and he held her in even higher esteem than he had before.

She sparred with him daily, keeping their skills sharp, but as he did with housework he held back when he fought too. Rin openly complained about it, but usually he satiated her with a new jutsu.

Rin and Sesshu became familiar faces in Shincha over the course of the next month. They were easy people to befriend; affable, despite the overwhelming poverty, and probably the most un-materialistic humans gracing the planet. Another routine call at the end of the week came from a young man who had been unable to seek medical help outside of his village. Rin and her ninken stopped by his home, and a woman with frown lines and crows feet answered.

"You must be that new doctor." She said in a smoker's voice, "I'm Urabe's aunt. He's just in here." Rin followed her into a bright room and was a bit stilted when she just left her with the patient.

Urabe was sitting on his bed, and he looked like a healthy young man, only a year younger than Rin. His complexion looked healthy and his dark hair had a lively sheen to it. Sesshu sat near the doorway and Rin cleared her throat to announce her presence. Urabe looked up from his book, brow raising, "Oh wow. Hi, Miss Doctor. I guess auntie brought you in, did she?"

"Hello, Urabe-san." Rin crossed over to him and shook his hand, "My name is Rin. Your aunt was a bit unclear on what's been ailing you." She set her bag down and rifled through it to find a stethoscope.

"She's just tired of repeating herself, is all. So many physicians have come out here already but can't help." He told her, "They say it's a pulmonary embolism. I've had it for over a year now but everything that they did couldn't budge it."

Rin stared at him for a few moments. This was a bit beyond her usual scope. "I see..." She said quietly, "How long did you say you've had it?"

"14 months maybe. Some days are better than others." Urabe sounded frustrated.

She asked him to pull up his shirt and she listened to his breathing and heartbeat. There were clear abnormalities and already she was feeling the pressure. "I'll have to do some more tests." Rin announced, "You may need a new heart if you haven't been responding to treatment. This is already dangerous and on top of it..." She sighed, "I've never dealt with a case like this out in the field before."

He nodded, "Don't stress yourself out. I'm not really afraid of dying, to be honest."

Rin quickly took a liking to her patient, and worked tirelessly the following week to make some headway on Urabe's condition. As predicted, he did not respond to treatment, and the blood clot seemed incapable of dissolving. On one of her visits she began feverish considerations on how to obtain a heart for him. "There's little to no possibility that I can go to Rock or Grass, which would've
been my first choice…I've run tests on several people your age in this village and no one shares your blood type." She trailed off, staring through the window, "The…only other thing I can think of is to go out and capture an Iwa nin."

"What?" Urabe looked from his book to Rin, horrified.

"They haven't exactly been baking cookies or planting pansies for your village, you know." Rin reminded him of the hardships he'd endured, "If I could pick off one shinobi who matches you this could work out-

"Absolutely not!" He protested, "How could I go on living knowing that someone died just because of me? I won't…that just isn't right." He frowned, "And what was that Hippocratic Oath? Harm none. How could you say things like that, Rin-san?"

"These are ninja from the Rock Village. They pillage your homes at their leisure. They've tried to kill me and nearly let Char-san, your neighbor, die! Harm none is a flexible concept when you're a ninja, and you should be thanking me for being willing to go that far to help you!" Rin was bitter towards Iwagakure, but still knew she probably never would've gone through with the idea.

Urabe still refused. What was worse was that after Rin's scheme to steal a heart, he'd completely turned down any further treatment.

"I'm exhausted and I just want this to end…" He had told her a day later, "Please try to understand."

"No. You can't give up now." She had told him stubbornly. Of course she did understand his position and his weariness. In the back of her mind she also acknowledged how even if she did come upon a heart she had none of the anti-rejection medications that he would need. Every idea was a dead end.

That night she had gone home, furious that she had no resources and had to watch good people die. Obito had found her pacing the hallway and was immediately concerned.

"Is something wrong with your patient?" He asked her.

"He's dying, of course there's something wrong with him!" She growled, "There's nothing I can do. I may know how to help him but that doesn't mean I'm able to…"

Obito put a comforting hand on her shoulder, "Sometimes it happens. You've done the best you could, so don't beat yourself up about it."

She tugged away. "What do you know?" Rin snapped, "There might be a way to save him and he just wants to roll over and die!"

Obito backed off. He muttered something inaudible and then walked away, shutting himself up in his room. He'd give her space if she was breathing fire.

Sesshu had told her that she was being childish but she disregarded him, fleeing to her small quarters and curling up on her bed. She cried herself to sleep, miserable, and all through the night Obito listened to her sobs through the wall.

The following morning Rin had woke in her clothes, and when she had rushed out to apologize to Obito he wasn't home. Just thinking about how she had treated her friend only worsened her mood. She went to visit Urabe by herself later when his crotchety aunt wasn't about. She had come to terms with the truth.
"I know you've heard this a million times before, but...there's nothing I can do for you." Rin had said softly, "I'm so sorry."

"I had a feeling this would happen, but it's okay." He smiled genuinely, "You pulled out all the stops for me, and that's more than anyone else has done."

She just managed to laugh.

"I try not to think about dying. You see I've been reading this book that one of my friends wrote...I just want to finish it." Urabe explained, "I have thirty pages left, and I want to see it through."

"You have plenty of time." Rin said encouragingly.

He thanked her for her confidence.

"Could I...maybe ask a favor?" Rin asked and he nodded, happy at the idea of being capable of something, "You see, Urabe...I have this friend and he only has one eye..."

"And you want me to donate one of mine? Sure!" He sounded excited, "Better make myself useful somehow. Does he need an ear and a nose too?"

That cracked Rin up. "An arm and a leg, actually, but that's an impossible surgery." She answered, chuckling.

"Sounds like this guy is a mess."

"He really isn't, but...I just owe it to him, you know?" Rin truly felt that something had to come out of the encounter.

Urabe asked her if her friend knew about the new eye he was getting.

"No." She admitted, "But I'm sure he'll appreciate it."

Later in the day she went home to find Obito had prepared a meal and was waiting for her. Her mood much improved, she thanked him. She apologized about her behavior but he waved it off and told her to eat, "You've been working way too hard, Rin."

She figured there was no easy way of broaching the subject of Urabe's donation so she was very forthcoming. "Obito...I can get you another eye." She watched him nearly drop a full glass of wine, "Just come with me into town tomorrow and we'll-"

"No, thank you." He turned down the offer politely, "I don't want one."

"I insist! This is a special opportunity-!"

"No insisting! I gave you my answer, didn't I? Stop trying to fix me, Rin, because there's nothing wrong with the way I am now." He snapped defensively.

"Of course there isn't!" Her eyes were sad. She wanted to try and reason with him but realized it would only be egging him on more. That was the last time they discussed it.

Sesshu curled up beside Rin in bed and asked her how she had secured an eye. "Urabe is willing to give one since he's dying...not all that different from Obito, come to think of it." She mused.

"It's a nice offer, but Obito feels so vulnerable about it he's too stubborn to accept." Sesshu pointed out.
"It's worth a try." Rin replied.

Obito woke the next morning, still shaken up by what Rin had suggested. He was surprised, but pleasantly so, when he found a huge bouquet of wildflowers outside his door. Not that he had any real use for them, but her compassion was what he cherished. He donned his mask and then went into town to find her.

She was near a well beneath cherry trees at the far end of the village, helping an old lady fetch water. After the elderly woman had left Obito thanked Rin for the gesture.

"I'm sorry. Things have just been chaotic lately but I'm back with you now." Rin promised, hugging him, "Try not to freak out when I get like this."

He accepted her apology again, "I know you mean well. I suppose I was just being sensitive about things." He brightened, "How about a quick spar? What do you..." He felt a prick in his left arm.

He looked down slowly, not fully comprehending why she'd injected him with a syringe. In a hazed moment Obito tried to communicate his alarm, but his head was heavy and she was advising him to count backwards.

"Trust me." She said, "Everything will be alright."

He stepped back from her, wondering why she did it, "What did you just stick me with?"

"It's a low-grade anesthetic." Rin told him, "Just relax, we'll have to lay you down somewhere."

"I didn't ask to be tranquilized." Obito hissed.

"I insist." She said softly.

He finally understood, and turned to leave but the sedative was hitting him. He stumbled and Rin caught him. She needed Sesshu's help to move him off the road. Obito made the tiniest struggle against her when they turned around in the direction of Urabe's home. After reaching the house without drawing anyone's attention Rin let herself in, startling Urabe's aunt.

The woman stood up from where she'd been reading a newspaper in the kitchen and hurried over. "Rin-san? What on earth happened to Tobi-kun?" She wheezed.

"I'll explain later." Rin told her shortly, hauling Obito inside with Sesshu at her heels.

Urabe greeted her and lead her into a guest room, surprised by who would be receiving his eye. "Tobi-kun, huh? He's always protected the village so bravely...I never realized he was so banged up."

"You learn something new every day."

Urabe's aunt poked her head into the room, clueless as to what was going on. "Can we please get this dog out of the house?" She pointed to Sesshu.

"Of course, ma'am, excuse me." Sesshu said, trotting out politely and confounding the poor woman.

"This man needs an eye transplant, Miss Tsugada." Rin explained, "Your nephew has agreed to donate one of his own."

Urabe's aunt looked to him, unnerved, then to the man Rin was laying down on a mat on the floor. "No, Urabe-kun." She began to panic, "Don't be fooled into self-mutilation! You don't have to
consent to this!"

"I already have, auntie. I want to help him." He was firm in his decision.

Obito, completely unconscious, could no longer protest. Rin motioned for Urabe to settle down a short distance away from him and she gave him a sedative as well. His aunt looked on irately, "So this is what you do to patients you can't save? Give away their body parts because they don't need them much longer? If I had known what a cop-out you really were I never would've asked you to come here in the first place!"

Rin paused in her work. The words struck deep.

"Shut up, auntie!" Urabe spat, "I volunteered for this, so just get out and let her do what she needs to do." He looked to Rin, "Don't fret, Rin-san. I'm fine."

Urabe's aunt left, closing the door forcefully behind her. Rin took a shuddering breath and pulled her bag closer, looking for the instruments she would need.

Once both men were under Rin set to work. She started with Obito first, reviving inactive nerve cells in his left eye. It was a tricky jutsu, but after she had rejuvenated the chakra pathways that had long been inert she stopped, knowing she would have to take Urabe's eye quickly. While she removed the boy's eye she thought back to how she had first done the procedure when she was a Chunin. What goes around, they say, comes around.

She replaced the eye into Obito's socket, using another carefully timed jutsu to attach the stem to nerve endings. She hoped it would function. There was no guarantee that it would, since it had been a long time since Obito's last surgery. After forty-five minutes of cautious work she concluded the procedure. She had given Obito another tiny dose of sedative to keep him from waking too quickly.

Urabe woke up stiffly, and gingerly touched the bandages over his left eye. "Welcome back." Rin said softly.

"My head feels a bit funny." He mumbled, "Good thing I finished my book last night, because it would be pretty difficult to read now, huh?" He glanced over to Obito sleeping a short distance away. "Hm. I've never seen Tobi's face before…it's not bad at all. Is he going to wake up soon?"

"It'll be a while before he's conscious." She said, "I'll take him home and look after him there."

"You should probably do that. Surprisingly…I feel alright." He smiled but it was lopsided beneath the bandages.

Rin packed up, and after hauling Obito's dead weight onto her back departed with Sesshu. She avoided Miss Tsugada's scowl on the way out.

Obito did not wake for a long time.

The sunset's orange rays glinted in through the window, and Obito stirred gradually. He had no idea what time it was. He tried to sit up but his head was throbbing terribly. It was then he noticed something at the foot of his bed and he sat bolt upright, prepared to fight, but saw it was only Rin.

She sat watching him with that stare of her's. Obito felt his stomach constrict with dread, vaguely remembering what she had done earlier.

He brought his hand up to the side of his face, feeling the bandages. His expression was one of disbelief. "How could you do this?" He whispered, "How deeply…you've disrespected me…I-I...
"Say thank you." She replied, "I did what I had to do because I owed it to you."

He threw the blanket off and it hit her with a feathery flop. "I won't thank you for this, I can't stand it!" Obito howled, "How can I trust you, Rin, if you're so willing to go behind my back?"

"It was just this once, Obito. Now never again no matter what." Rin told him sincerely. "You wouldn't have known what you were missing because you've forgotten."

He wouldn't look at her. He turned his head and shut his eye, trying to ignore how she was sitting across from him with that beautiful, angelic face of her's.

"Try it out and if you still hate it..." Her voice lowered, "I'll take it out for you."

Obito was taken aback by the idea. Throwing away Urabe's sacrifice would be insensitive. He still felt like he'd been taken advantage of, or at the least had his feelings trampled on. Rin had been very good at doing that back when they were trainees together, but this was just ridiculous.

He sighed, and then asked, "When can the bandages come off?"

"Now, actually. You've been out for a while." She crawled over and took a seat beside him. With a sharp nail she snipped off the end of the gauze and slowly began to unravel it. "Keep your eye closed." She told him, "It's going to be sore so take it easy."

"I can already tell."

She tossed the gauze into a wastebasket when she'd gotten all of it off. Obito sat silently, his new eye shut, and tensed up because it felt so different now that something was there all of a sudden.

"Okay...now very carefully try to open your eye. Don't rush." Rin advised softly.

His lashes parted, and Rin had a glimpse of a dark iris but it snapped closed. "Gah!" Obito covered his eye with his palm, and Rin asked if he was in pain. "No...just too bright." He said.

She chuckled in relief, "I'm glad it works, but it might be working too well. You have to give it a minute to adjust and then try again."

Obito, over the next few minutes, kept peeking his eye open and shut, trying to get accustomed to the heightened sense. He squinted at the floor where the dresser cast a long shadow. It was easier to look there because it was darker. A while later he said, "It's getting better."

He opened his eye fully, taking a hissing breath, but he could tolerate it. He immediately looked at Rin. Surprise was written on Obito's face. In the evening light, with her warm skin, she looked even more beautiful than she had before with his new perspective. He was not nearly so bothered by her stare as he had been previously.

Rin was pleased with the improvement. She noticed in slight wonder how the new iris was a deep slate gray, compared to his own eye which was pure ebony. The different shades somehow went nicely. She held up a pen in front of his face and told him to follow it.

"It'll take some diligent therapy to get this one as strong as your other eye. We don't want it to get lazy either, or you'll be cross-eyed all the time!" She laughed happily.

He performed the exercise with remarkable aptitude. Rin noticed how unsettled his silence had
become and she asked him if he was feeling alright.

"I'm doing…shockingly great." Obito frowned to himself, "I'm sorry about how I treated you earlier."

She smiled, shrugging it off, "It's okay. I'm glad it was a success for you, mostly. So…you want to keep it?"

He touched her cheek, "Yes."

Rin was flustered, but she kind of liked it. Obito ran a long finger down and across her chin, then back up to her button nose. He was taking in the sights like he was seeing it all for the first time.

"I didn't know that…you'd look different." He told her, "Sort of bright and glowing." He gave a quick glance about the room, "Come to think of it, everything got a hundred percent clearer. Maybe my Sharingan's been tiring this eye out…"

"We'll investigate that some other time." Rin said, standing up, "Let's go celebrate with Char-san tonight, what do you think?"

He agreed, "Drinks are on me."

Though Neji had not finished the anthology of old Earth Country folklore in *The Tale of the First Shinobi*, he had agreed to lend the book to Lee. Lee was a very fast, very absorbent reader. He had almost caught up to where the Hyuga was in the novel.

They had been training all morning in the courtyard of the Hyuga compound. It had snowed briefly that morning but was nothing more than a light dusting on the ground. Neither of them knew where Tenten had disappeared to, and Lee had even gone looking for her at her apartment and forge. She would appear when she wanted to, he reasoned.

They took a break, since the frigid air tired them out quickly. Hinata had been kind enough to serve them some hot tea before leaving to meet her own team. While they relaxed Lee discussed the story.

"So Yuanjia returned after all those years." He recounted, "That was a clever ploy on Ukigarusu-sama's part. With her student home again Tian Tian was sure to stay home and avoid trouble."

"I already read that part, Lee." Neji said disinterestedly, "Yuanjia returned to serve the lord of his clan and through a stroke of luck was reunited with his teacher."

Lee poured himself some more of the Gyokuro tea, finding he liked it. "So what did you think of the part when they got married?" He asked his friend, taking a sip.

Neji nearly choked while he was swallowing. He hadn't read that. "Someone got married?" He repeated.

"Yes! Yuanjia and Tian Tian acknowledged their love for each other after spending time in the village. She actually proposed to him in a most provocative way…" Lee sighed dreamily, "I liked that part."

"I haven't read it yet." Neji told him.

"Oh! Have I spoiled it for you? I am sorry, Neji!"

"I plan to skip that chapter now, so you may as well narrate the rest of it." Neji said stiffly.
Lee took another sip of tea and then continued, "Well let's see…Tian Tian sees that her student has grown into a respectable man and she makes some, er…advances on him…" Neji didn't want to know the specifics.

"Yuanjia felt strongly for her as well, so they were married, much to Ukigaru’s delight. Tian Tian's new joy inspired a great deal of envy in her sister, Hanone, though. She ran away a few days after the wedding and broke her parent's hearts." Lee scratched his head, "That's as far as I have gotten."

"It was a riveting tale." Neji poked fun.

"I edited out the…sexual encounters, none of which I expected." Lee admitted, "I got to thinking, though, how odd it would be- a teacher and student marrying. Like Tenten and Gai-sensei…"

"That is so assuredly impossible it's not even a good analogy." Neji retorted, adding, "Gai in general is not marriage material. He's only capable of concentrating on one passion at a time."

"You are so harsh, Neji, to be critical of sensei like that!" Lee still agreed with him, "But yes…it would make more sense if Tenten decided to marry her future student-"

"Tenten and Tian Tian are nothing alike."

"Really? I was under the impression that they are strikingly-"

"They are different people…with different fates." Neji had one final word before snatching the book back from the table. He stood on the veranda and stalked off, clearly annoyed by the debate.

Lee finished his tea with a slurp and smiled to himself, "I suppose he's a bit touchy about the idea…"

Gaara leapt back, deflecting several rapid jouhyou lashes with his sand shield. "That's enough, Matsuri." He called out to his pupil. Her weapon flew back and wrapped expertly around her arm with the spar's conclusion.

She walked with Gaara back to the mansion, excited about the B-Rank mission that was scheduled for tomorrow, "Is Temari-sama coming with us, Gaara-sensei? She said she might!"

"She did confirm with me, yes." He told her, and her squeal of delight was reward enough.

Once home, Gaara found his brother napping on the couch. He jabbed Kankuro in the shoulder, waking him, "Shoes off. This place doesn't clean itself."

"Ugh." Kankuro removed his sandals and tossed them near the door, still mostly asleep.

Matsuri tottered off to take a bath since she was filthy, and Gaara went to his room, feeling a little weary from the day. He sure missed sleeping. It was a habit he was sorry he broke. He was halfway through changing clothes when a messenger hawk appeared at his window.

He crossed over to it, chest bare, and accepted the note it had delivered from the Leaf Village. Gaara was very aware of who it was from. He hesitated before opening it, and could smell Sakura on the dry parchment.

The note was unexpectedly concise: Dear Gaara-kun, please accept the position of Kazekage. Not only will it give me bragging rights, but it'll make Naruto go bonkers. See you soon. Love, Sakura

He looked out of the window, feeling at ease. Twilight had spilled a rainbow of colors into the sky and he swore Sakura had done it herself.
'Yes.' He thought, 'This will definitely stir Naruto-kun up.'
Sakura had not been too thrilled about Ino dragging her to a clothing outlet for some shopping. She had merely mentioned, back in Tsunade's office, how Kiba had traded his coat for a more sleek and maneuverable black jacket that he pulled off well, in her opinion. Ino had gotten a tad cranky over the subject of attire and improving fashion sense. She immediately began drilling Sakura on Tama's outfits.

"She wears a lot of cute stuff, I mean, she's older and has more money than we do." The pink haired girl quipped, "Can you just let this go, Ino? It's not a big deal."

"But she can't just waltz in and upstage us like that! Your team is rapidly becoming the best-dressed in this village…"

"Is that so wrong?" Sakura snickered.

Ino was done agonizing over it and instead took action. Sakura was coerced into the shopping trip, consequently, and did her best not to sound unappreciative even though she did have a report to file.

"It's important for a kunoichi to be aware of her appearance, but never obsess about it." Ino quoted from one of their old Academy lectures, "That's something we should take to heart."

"Says you, the chick who's obsessed with being wire-thin." Sakura commented playfully.

Ino rounded a corner, spying some more revealing garments. "I'm actually way more comfortable with my body now. Nothing about me really needs changing." Ino observed, wearing a distant look, "And even if I say otherwise in the future, you're not so bad yourself, Sakura."

"Gee, thanks." Sakura picked up a low-cut top that was just the shade of anthurium red she liked. Ino regarded it for a sixth of a second, rejected it, and then plucked it from her friend's hands.

"Your boobs aren't big enough to fill this one out." The blonde informed her friend, "Look for something that will compliment your itty-bitties."

"You're a hoot today, Ino." Sakura huffed, swiping the shirt back and slamming the hanger down on the rack.

They migrated across the row in search of something suitable. Sakura occasionally picked up a shirt or mini-dress, but Ino need not touch anything to know if it was worth trying on. She spotted clothes at hawk's-eye distance and descended on them just as quickly. Call it a skill perfected by the fashion-forward.

"So what made you change your mind?" Sakura asked at length.

"Change my mind about what?"

"Your body image. It's a pretty drastic switch for you. Drastic; but great just the same." The Hokage's apprentice added.

Ino smiled, "I just…feel better."
Sakura raised a fine eyebrow, "What's up with you? It's almost like you have a man in your life now."

Ino did not answer, and for the first time since their arrival held a top up to her chest inquisitively. She put it back down, trying another in a different wash of violet.

"Whoa." Sakura caught on quick, "Who is he?"

"Shikamaru." She said his name with a hint of pride, "I'll stay on the safe side and say we're kind of an item."

"Jeez...not what I expected." Sakura admitted lowly, "He must be a great kisser if your mood's improved this much."

"He's fairly good. It can almost forgive his intolerable laziness, up until a point." Ino said, "Given he's been cramming it into my head for years that I need to eat more, but it helps when someone can convince you."

"I don't even want to know." Sakura muttered, but she could already imagine her friend having sex. That was a mental image she would have preferred not to pop into her mind at the time. Ino was glowing, though, and looked better than she ever had. It couldn't all be psychological, could it?

'That still doesn't make it proper.' Sakura reminded herself. She wouldn't preach though, since she couldn't guarantee she wouldn't be in the same position had it not been for the fact that her boyfriend was a hop, skip, and a jump away in the desert.

"This one." Ino pushed a top on Sakura, snapping the girl out of her contemplation, "I'll be a monkey's aunt if that doesn't look fantastic."

Sakura took the shirt, liking its white and ruby tones. Her thoughts strayed again as she watched Ino float down the next aisle, 'Not until I'm good and married. Right, Gaara-kun?'

Temari glanced over to Matsuri beside her. They were scaling a sand dune with home just in sight, and she couldn't help but grin at the girl who had once been the runt of her class...and was now an official killer. 'Gaara's done his job, alright.'

"Good fight back there, kiddo." She told the genin, permitting one of her scarce compliments.

Matsuri raised her eyes modestly, "Thank you, Temari-sama. I really couldn't have done it if you and sensei had not been there."

Temari waved it off, but it was still a valid point. They'd taken out the jounin to leave easier, slower prey for their youngest group member. The mission had been a radiant success, and when Temari glanced to her youngest brother just a few paces behind his student, she could see even he was in higher spirits.

Gaara was actually reflecting on how he had accepted the title of Kazekage before the council, prior to going on the mission the day before. It had been relatively painless, aside from the nausea he had put up with for most of the morning. His inauguration was set for next week, but he had yet to tell Matsuri about the matter. His brother and sister were already aware of his decision.

Once home they washed up (Matsuri had become a sort of permanent resident at the mansion) and relaxed for a while. They would check in with Baki for the mission report later on. Kankuro turned up about an hour later.
His face paint was unusual that day: three short vertical lines, one on either cheek and also on the bridge of his nose. He had a half-constructed puppet with him, and again, he forgot to take his shoes off before coming inside. Gaara tiredly warned him how he was tracking dirt all over the floor, "This is technically my house now…"

"Aw man, Gaara, listen to this!" His brother overrode him, "There's an ambassador from the Cloud Village here asking for you at the tower. She's got to be the hottest woman alive, you won't believe it!"

Temari stood in the doorway of the dining hall, looking annoyed. "Gaara's attached, you idiot." She informed Kankuro, in case he forgot Sakura existed.

"Well so were you last I checked, but that didn't stop you from hooking up with that guy last weekend-" Temari pounced, punching her brother squarely in the ribs.

Kankuro hobbled away, muttering in pain.

Gaara looked at his sister, a bit somber. He knew that Temari had been trying to move on from Haku, although he didn't necessarily approve of her loose methods. Sometimes he believed she did what she did out of spite. He could only hope that his friend, wherever he was in his travels, was also moving on from Temari.

Kankuro, after confirming none of his ribs were broken, went ahead to make lunch for Matsuri. Temari wanted Gaara to join them but he elected to go to the tower instead, not wanting to be rude to a visitor.

He took his time on the streets, pleased that the majority of the villagers were buzzed with excitement. Few actually knew about his acceptance for the position of Godaime. What had really turned Sand on its head was the new availability of water. Mara's treatment facility a few miles south on the coast had proven an indispensable asset for Sunagakure. More water meant more money was available, which meant the people had more to live on.

The timing could not have been more ideal for a new village leader, he figured. He could only hope he'd get a lukewarm reception. Not too many people trusted him, despite his contributions to the village.

Just outside the tower he was approached by someone. It was, in fact, the kunoichi Kankuro had told him about. She was a tall woman with dirty blonde hair tied back in an aristocratic braid. She had a direct and graceful stride. He could see why Kankuro had blown things out of proportion.

"Gaara of the Sand." She greeted, her eyes were cloud grey, "I am Nii Yugito of Kumogakure." They bowed formally to each other.

He gestured to the building a few steps away, "Would you care to go inside, Yugito-san?"

"No thank you, it's too stuffy and dark in there." She'd probably been sitting in the office for an hour or so, "I was informed by your friend named Baki that you will be made the next Kazekage."

"He told you that did he?" He walked down the street with the woman who was a full head taller than him, "It's not official yet."

"That doesn't make it any less true. Baki is actually the one that asked me to come here." Yugito told him.

"He did not mention this to me." Gaara said quietly. He wondered if it had something to do with the
Cloud Village. Hopefully they weren't preparing to attempt another feather-brained invasion.

"I'm here to help you learn to control the biju inside of you." Yugito said, "It would be best, I'm sure you would agree, if the beast was fully under your power during your time as Kazekage."

Gaara was unnerved that she knew so much, but she didn't seem untrustworthy. He accepted her offer with a quiet nod. Yugito requested they go somewhere open and private to discuss it further, preferably outside the village walls. Gaara knew that if she was trying to pull a fast-one he could just crush her to a sandy pulp, but perhaps she was expecting that?

He moved west quickly, leading her just outside of the barrier, and to escape the sun's intense rays stopped in the overcast shadow of a plateau. 'If she expects me to transform...I don't want to be too close to the village.' He paused, 'I have no idea what she expects.' The unexpected, probably.

"You are quite young to be a village leader." She conceded, wiping a bead of sweat from her face. Maybe the heat was getting to her? The prayer beads on her left arm jingled when she moved.

"The youngest in history." Gaara informed her, and he wasn't too pompous about it.

Yugito cracked a small smile, amused by his dryness. She had heard the One-Tailed Container of the Sand Village had actually been a prankster in his younger years, as well as a close friend of the fearsome Nine-Tails. It seemed his humor had dried up once he had returned to the desert.

"I am one of two jinchuriki within the Cloud Village. I assumed you would not want me to say too much aloud in public since...your people are a bit sensitive to the subject." Yugito told him, "Please understand that your time as Kazekage can change that. Unlike other villages, Demon Containers are cherished and respected in Kumo. You could say we are ahead of the times in our country, but that would be an exaggeration."

"You believe I could change this village's opinion entirely?" Gaara asked.

"Perhaps. Not everyone can be swayed, but if you are as virtuous and pure," She eyed him, realizing his youth probably didn't grant him much innocence, "As most are expecting, and as they need you to be...you could set a better example."

He agreed, "That is what I intend to do. If others continue to live in fear they could never really understand or get to know a jinchuriki."

"Well then, I suppose it's time we got to know each other." Yugito said, flaring her chakra around her. It sparked into blue flames, surrounding her in a cloak of energy, and then took shape.

A fiery, blue cat towered over him, two tails thrashing, and Gaara had a moment to ponder his safety before she attacked. A fast-one, as he had predicted. His sand shield rose up with its usual promptness, guarding him from the fireballs that rained down from the beast's mouth.

'She just turned herself over to that Nekomata completely...' He was horrified by the notion, 'The Shukaku would gladly devour my soul if I did the same. To trust a Demon that way?' He didn't understand. He wanted to ask her how she did it, but the cat was too busy scuttling around like a kitten after a mouse.

Gaara retreated, his sand shield warding off blows, and watched as giant paws buffed apart sand dunes. The enormous cat let out a squeal of delight, breathing flames, and then pounced again. Claws the size of full-grown men hacked down beside him, missing only by a margin. Oh the humanity- just home from a mission and already new hurdles to leap!
The young jounin went on the offense, letting sand blast up in a shockwave, tossing the cat with its burning hackles raised. It landed on its feet, of course, and breathed fire again. This time it was not as playful as it had been before. In fact, it was hissing rather furiously after a giant coffin of sand had swirled around it, smothering the chakra flames. With a burst of demonic chakra the cat broke free, shaking its mane of sand.

Gaara shielded himself from the firestorm. This was a battle he could not win. Yugito was drawing on the Demon's chakra and the only way he could retaliate effectively, he knew, was to use his own. It was not worth the risk. He considered fleeing but did not have to. The cat shrank in size, flames dying out, and soon Yugito was standing before him brushing sand off of her uniform and shaking it out of her hair.

The cat had obediently, willingly, relinquished control at Yugito's say-so. That was an ability Gaara coveted above all else. He wasn't very appreciative of how she had attacked him, though.

"Why did you do that?" He asked, not having to go into the details of how it could have endangered the village.

"You were speaking about people getting to know jinchuriki." She reminded him, aloof, "Fighting is one of the fastest ways to do that, so please forgive me if I was rude." Amusement flickered in her eyes, "Your defense is impeccable. There isn't a scratch on you."

He hadn't even really been trying to defend himself, as it turned out. Gaara told her his sand responded automatically to protect him.

"That is a perk. Most biju come with them." Yugito said, adding, "If that's the case, perhaps we should go again…and I will attack seriously."

Before she could put that plan into action Baki and two Black Ops descended. They looked guarded, but when Baki saw Gaara with Yugito he told his companions to stand down. "We felt chakra flare out here and suspected a raid." He explained, "Apparently it's just you."

"Just us." Gaara repeated. Maybe Baki could've shown more concern over two jinchuriki being responsible for the outburst. Maybe he was too accustomed to it.

The Black Ops cautioned them to be more careful before departing, and Yugito returned to the village with Gaara. Baki parted with them on the street, and Gaara then thought it fair to question her profound knowledge of demons.

"They are entities manifested from nature…and forces beyond our alleged mortal comprehension." Her tone was sharp, "The Nibi is not an animal. It is vengeance and envy," She looked sidelong to Gaara, "It has the mentality of a scorned woman from long ago, and similarly she is calculating and cunning. Her wrath knows no limits."

"Are they all like that?" He wondered. The Shukaku seemed comparably uncontrollable.

Yugito half-shrugged, "I could not know. That's why it's imperative that you contact your own demon."

The Shukaku and negotiations were two subjects on complete opposite ends of a rational spectrum. Gaara refused to indulge the idea, and he told her so.

"You do realize that if you do not make an effort to confront the One-Tail you will never have its willing assistance?" She prompted, eyes narrow, "That's foolish; a waste of your potential."
"I don't want its assistance, if it can even be called that." Gaara replied.

Yugito tried a different approach as they stopped near an armory. "Your willpower is far greater than it was when you were a child, if that's why you hesitate." She assured him, "You have little to fear. After all, our biju are on the lower end of the power scale."

Gaara did consider the idea for a moment. Yugito continued, "Up to the Sanbi, demons are easier for a vessel to control. Tails four through six are more difficult, relatively. Seven through nine…well, you can imagine how they are more dominant over their containers. Their strength is boundless. It can hurt the shinobi who holds them."

"Why is there such a difference?" He wanted to know.

"Higher-level beasts are more intellectual than they are primal." She told him, "They are the keepers of the lesser biju."

"And the Kyuubi?" He couldn't stop thinking about Naruto's predicament.

"Nine-Tails, the Paragon. He is a lord of lords, and like any ruler, hates to be told what to do." Yugito answered, "Matatabi believes that he would be most difficult for a jinchuriki to deal with. If you let him, he will steal your life away from you and make it his own."

Gaara was silent for a long while. There was a rising sense of dread when he reflected on his friend's possible future. Conversely, he had it easiest of all, in theory. He at least felt more confident in that respect.

"Don't underestimate the Ichibi." The kunoichi warned him, "It's true he is weak in reason and thought, but he is powerful in rage and desire." She relayed any advice the Nibi was able to supply. Yugito advised Gaara to keep his emotions in check when he contacted the beast.

He deliberated when would be the most appropriate time to attempt it. 'Not when I am near sleep.' As if he could manage it anymore from stress, he thought, but the Shukaku did have a sweet-tooth for unguarded souls.

"I want to stop for lunch now. We can finish our chat later, little Kazekage." Yugito told him, pressing on with her cat-like gait and gave a short wave of departure.

Gaara thought it was a reasonable encounter, and with similar intentions he too left in the direction of the mansion. Baki spied him alone on his way back, and stopped him on the side of the street. "I've been told the jinchuriki of Cloud like to stir up trouble." He said, "She wasn't out of line at all, was she?"

"Hardly more than I." Gaara had a sort of respect for the no-nonsense woman.

Tenten had to conclude training with Neji early after he had used a new technique. From several yards away he'd struck her with a non-physical Jyukken strike so intense that she crumpled to the ground. He had asked her if she was alright, looking slightly concerned. She told him she was fine with watering eyes, and let him examine her back where he had hit her. A welt the size of a grapefruit was puckering at her skin, an angry shade of plum.

"I'm sorry." He said. Neji sat down with her on the veranda, her shirt hiked up slightly so she had access to the wound. His skilled hands traced soothing patterns near the bruise, probably having dealt with similar injuries before. Chances were, Tenten noted, his life in the Hyuga clan had afforded him some medical knowledge to supplement all of their Gentle-Fist battery.
She sighed deeply. Neji paused in his work, looking at the back of her neck thoughtfully. Tenten noticed the sound had distracted him, ‘Just a dude-reaction, they're common. Snap him back to reality…’

"That's one hell of a technique, Neji. But for first time's sake you think you could've let up a little?" She pointed out amicably.

"Empty Palm." He told her, "I nearly have it right. Clearly it's…" He didn't elaborate. Not that he had too, she was suffering the effects. His touch lingered on her back needlessly and Tenten eventually adjusted her shirt, standing up.

"Thank you, for that." She said, smiling to disguise the pain she was experiencing. 'Gah! It's like I was shot at and then kicked in the same spot- I hate that jutsu!'

Neji opened his mouth to say something but kept silent; a few doors down his uncle appeared. "You're running late, Neji." Hiashi told him, "Please join me now." He turned to continue east down the walkway before rounding the corner for the courtyard.

Neji made a noise of evident irritation. Tenten's eyebrows titled upward almost apologetically. She didn't really believe in karma, but karma believed in Neji. Just another you-will-take-my-place-someday-smackdown Hiashi intended to begin, something his nephew had tired of after the first week they had begun.

"Man up, old boy." She patted Neji's shoulder, "At least he's not breathing down your neck all the time."

He stood, lightly sweeping her hand away. "Hiashi-sama tends to repeat himself." He said lowly, "Perhaps because I don't make it clear how I understand what is expected of me."

"You make your points pretty vividly, I'd say." Tenten assured him.

Neji eyed her with an acute scrutiny, "You've been missing, lately. Lee and I can never find you when you don't show up for training."

"Work. I'm sorry." She answered curtly. Neji caught the lie but dismissed it.

"Don't disappear this afternoon. We have a mission and we leave tonight." He reminded her.

Tenten promised she would be prompt, and with that, Neji stalked off to the courtyard after his uncle. She released a breath she hadn't realized she'd been holding. Of course she was going to go snooping again, as she had been all week. 'I'll just have to mind the time…'

She couldn't deny that it was not very wise of her to have made friends with Hikune, especially without Neji's approval. It had also been odd to meet someone so affectionate and honest. Tenten was unable to stop visiting, regardless. Like a hummingbird to a geranium, she was bound to return.

She poked around Hikune's usual haunt, just near the edge of the Main House's garden. Only Fujita was there, sitting on a flat-sided rock and scraping the mud from his sandals. He looked up at her with his watery opal eyes, smiling, "Hello Tenten-san! Are you looking for my brother?"

"Not particularly." She chuckled uneasily, "But do you happen to know where he is?"

"He was out front last I checked. He might still be there." The boy paused, briefly using his Byakugan to confirm it, "Oh, yes, there he is."
Tenten thanked him and swung around the far side of the garden, hoping to avoid the courtyard. If Neji was using his Byakugan at the moment, he would surely notice how she was loitering. 'Not like he's going to think much of it.' Her mind supplied dryly. Circumventing the entryway to the Main household, Tenten crossed the lawn, spying Hikune.

She quickly noticed that he was not alone. Beside Hikune was a wiry-looking man in a flak vest, his hair a mess of chestnut spikes, and brown eyes bright with laughter. He was cut off mid-sentence when Hikune turned to face the kunoichi. "Good afternoon, Tenten." He was always so formal, but he was smiling.

"Hey Hikune, I, uh…could come back later if you're-"

"No, stay, please!" He ushered her over, "This fellow here is my teammate and good friend, Runruna Mion." Hikune looked to his friend, "This is Tenten, Mion-kun. You remember?"

"Oh! Well would ya look at this…" Mion eyed the kunoichi, eyebrows aloft, "So this is the pretty Tenten! Hikune-kun loves talking about you..." One immediate turn-off about Mion, Tenten realized, was his tone. He spoke through his nose, and it was incredibly annoying.

Tenten cleared her throat, "Ah, well, nice to meet you Mion." She looked at Hikune, "Do you have any other teammates?"

"Our sensei is retired now, but we still have Shoda-kun. Oftentimes he's busy at the hospital- he's a medic-nin, you see." Hikune filled her in, "You'll get to meet him too, sometime."

Mion stood by, keeping his comments to himself, although his shoulders were quaking with restrained laughter. 'Ohoho...hee...looks like Hikune's really taken with this one! He's never been this open since...' He broke the silence by prattling on about Shoda's current projects, as well as yesterday's mission.

"Step this way. We're going for a walk." Hikune told her. They left the grounds together and entered town.

Tenten's first impression of Mion was not so genial. She found him chatty, dim-witted, and ineloquent, 'Buh! That voice! Shut him up already...’ But just as he was Hikune's polar opposite he was still his friend, and making...a bumbling effort to be sociable. His personality was what Tenten would label "cutesy."

"Excuse me now, folks. I'll see you later." Mion diverged from the sidewalk and crossed the street to where a young woman was waiting. He kissed her like a gentleman in greeting, and then followed her into a tea shop.

"Huh. I didn't take him for the type that'd be able to keep a girlfriend." Tenten admitted. It didn't quite fit his personality, but what did she know? She had just met the guy.

"Is that so? As long as I've known him Mion has been steadfast in everything he does. It so happens those two will be husband and wife in a few months’ time." Hikune looked sidelong to Tenten as they walked, and laughed at her shocked expression.

"Mion-kun can be...dithering at times. But beneath it all he is a wise and dependable shinobi." He told her, "He is my best friend."

She half regretted her earlier assessment of Mion. In some ways he was similar to Lee, what with the over-abundant energy and open displays of affection. Along with that, there was certainly wisdom and skill evident in the both of them, and it was unfair to overlook it. "How old is he?" Tenten
wondered aloud, "If he's getting married already, I'm just curious.”

"Hm…he'll be eighteen in three months. He has nearly a year on me." He gave Tenten a thoughtful look, "Does he seem too young?"

"I can't really judge. You just don't see a lot of people that age…getting married. Even old people don't get married very often these days." She pointed out.

Hikune shed some light on the matter, "You'd be surprised. Many marriages are still arranged in this village, and some will marry as young as fifteen, since law in the Fire Country permits. Mion-kun is the exception since he's already expecting a child-"

"No way!"

"Erm…I've said too much." He quickly changed the subject, "What matters is that he will be a good husband," He saw Tenten's pointed look so he added, "and a very good father because he never shirks responsibility. I also assure you I'm not advocating for him simply because he's my friend. He really has made a difference in many people's lives."

"That was a very big tip of the hat to a guy who's having a shotgun wedding." She was smirking.

"Like you said: who are we to judge?" He smiled, and opened a hinged-panel gate so they could cut across private property. Tenten looked around and surveyed the new location hesitantly. This district wasn't very popular, as far as she knew.

"Where are we going, exactly?" She asked.

"This, Tenten, is one of my favorite places in the village. Second only to the Hokage Monument, in my opinion. This way." Hikune led her out the back of a super-upscale restaurant, 'Of course he's not taking me out to eat here…' and stopped beneath an awning.

In the shade several tables were set up, devoted almost entirely to shogi and go, although it appeared that some people were playing a card game at one station. It was, in essence, a congregation of old-timers who spent the afternoon playing board games. Not necessarily the most absorbing past-time she could think of.

"Have a seat here, Tenten." Hikune pointed to an empty bench which she reluctantly moved to. He sat across from her, resetting some of the game pieces that had been scattered carelessly. "Do you know how to play?" He asked.

"I used to play with Hayate when he babysat for me." She confessed, "But mind you that was a long time ago."

"This will be a refresher round, then." He decided. They began, and as it turned out, she was not as bad as she had anticipated she would be. They were fairly evenly matched, though it was clear Hikune had more experience. He told her that he stopped by this place nearly every other day, and on occasion Nara Shikamaru would be his opponent. She found it intriguing.

What was better than the actual chess-match were the stories. Players at nearby tables would recount tales from their youth, and Tenten quickly caught on that Hikune liked to listen in on the narratives. They were entertaining to say the least, and some were downright outrageous.

One of the old players was obviously a retired shinobi. He had been the sensei of Uchiha Fugaku. He recalled how his student and Hyuga Hiashi had always been butting heads when they were young- rivals who had been the heirs to their respective clans. Tenten was fascinated by the history
they had lived through.

Hikune watched her from across the table, his eyes moon-hued, and let her win purposefully. She informed him that she disliked surrender. He dismissed it, and then said, "I had a feeling you would like this place. Not many people know to come here for a relaxing time, but I hope you will in the future."

"So long as you stop letting me win every damn time."

He laughed, "Fair enough."

One of the old players to their left turned to Hikune, grinning, "I'm glad to see you stopped by again, Hikune-kun. How are your parents doing?"

"Mother and Father are well, thank you, Kurashamo-san." He replied politely.

Kurashamo asked about his younger brother, and Hikune was proud to announce how Fujita had achieved genin rank early.

"Is that so?" The older gentleman was pleased, "Why it seemed like only yesterday he was a little babe in Hideyasu's arms. He'll be a talented shinobi, just like you and your father."

"Some of Fujita's ability should be credited to Tenten here." He pointed out, and the kunoichi flushed at her mentioning, "Without her he would've struggled more in learning to wield senbon. Even I was unable to help him much with that."

Across from Kurashamo a middle-aged man with unruly stubble leaned over, examining Tenten with squinted eyes. "Tenten..." He repeated, "Tenten...hm. Why does that sound-?"

She regarded the man, brow furrowed, but did not know him at all. 'He might be mistaking me for someone else...'

"Oh! Is that you? You're taicho's daughter!" He burst out, suddenly recognizing her, "Yes, I know! God do I miss him...Takaharu and your mother..."

Tenten's eyes were wide, "You knew them? How?"

"He was my captain- your father. Back in the old days we were all part of the Black Ops."

"That's right." She nodded, sitting up straighter, "I'm glad they have friends who still remember them."

The ex-ANBU smiled sadly at her, "Not those two...I won't ever forget them. The times we had..." He sighed, "I'm just sorry that they aren't here now."

Tenten wasn't in the mood to chat about it further. Hikune won the next game, as she had requested, and after talking with the old folks a short while longer they left. Tenten was not quite sure if the mentioning of her parents had brightened or worsened her mood. She was engrossed in silent contemplation on the walk back across the village. Hikune walked beside her, unnerved slightly, "Is everything alright, Tenten?"

"Sure. I'm just...trying to decide if I want to go back there sometime." She answered.

"I think you should." He then amended, "I liked playing with you; you're a clever opponent. You also don't need to discuss your parents with the others if you don't want to."
"No. No… I liked it. It's not everyday someone mentions them like that." She smiled to herself, "It took me by surprise, is all. But they're really quite a crowd. Nice guys."

"I'm glad you think so."

She stopped abruptly, realizing that he had walked with her the entire way. They were just outside the forge, and a few paces more standing outside of her apartment building. It was a charming gesture. Tenten thanked him for the outing and turned to head in, shoulders hunched.

"Tenten?" He asked again, "Are you certain you're alright?"

She stood at the door for a fraction longer than what was necessary. She hadn't even made a move to open it. Truthfully she'd had a good time; she was just slightly conflicted that she spent a lot quality time with Hikune… against her conscience's contrary demands. *What the hell am I doing?* She thought pointedly, *I don't play shogi and I don't talk to old geezers… but why is it that now it feels like I should?*

It was a step outside of her comfort zone but she turned on her heel and faced Hikune. He was a step below, just eye level with her, and she could make out his sharp intake of breath upon seeing her unflinching expression. She was tired of feeling like she was doing something wrong, so she had confronted the root of the problem.

"We should definitely do that again sometime." She agreed belatedly.

He smiled, laughing lightly to himself. He'd been concerned that the thought of her parents had upset her. It didn't seem like it. And though he'd already learned from a past error he leaned in and pecked her cheek anyway, hoping a sign of goodwill would help her lighten up. She did not fidget in the least. Hikune blinked in surprise. She stood in wait.

"Oh…" He said faintly, "I see." He stepped up and kissed her mouth, but she made no immediate response. He placed a gentle hand on the back of her neck, drawing her down an inch, and deepened the kiss. Her half-lidded eyes flew open, and for a beat she struggled internally before drawing back, startled by his forwardness.

"Yeah… that'll have to do for now. For the week, actually." She said quickly.

"There it is again." He said, highly amused, "You acted just like that when I kissed you the last time too."

"Ah, well… it just doesn't feel like something I should be doing." She explained her predicament as simply as she could.

"Because you like Neji?" He observed keenly.

She winced slightly, "That's right."

And in a very unnecessary, very uncalled-for move, he asked, "And does he care for you?"

That one stung, although Tenten didn't believe he did it do it to hurt her feelings. It was more of a rhetorical question anyway- very, very unfortunately. "No. I don't believe he does." She answered in a thick voice, coming to grips with reality.

"I do." His fingers brushed lightly across her cheek, "I know I do, and we have not known each other for very long. Neji has known you for years and… I do not understand how he couldn't-"
"That's enough. Right there, that's enough!" She snapped, frustrated, and smacked his hand away, "I don't need you to analyze this for me. I know how it looks. But I'm not desperate and I don't, definitely don't need a guy around to keep me happy. I have a career!"

He smiled understandingly, "So do I."

"Will you cut that out?" She groaned, troubled by her weakness for that warm expression.

"You're strong-willed and independent. You're adaptable and courageous." Hikune observed, "But you don't need to hide. You don't need to be alone, even if he makes you think that way."

"And why would Neji be responsible for that?"

"Because he is always on his own. He's setting a bad example. Don't take it too seriously." He advised, "It's not his fault, but it certainly isn't yours. Don't isolate yourself...I want to be around you. I want to talk to you and-"

The door shut in his face. Tenten was still having denial issues. Not even that, per se, just issues. Hikune stood on the step for a long moment, a smidgen hurt, but was also aware of how she wasn't doing much better. He could take a hint, and the next time he would know better than to point out the obstacles in her relationship with Neji. He'd just keep his overly-caring mouth zipped.

"Sato, did you do all of your homework?"

"No, Dad. We didn't even have any assignments today."

"Oh, that's good."

"You know...I don't even go to the Academy anymore, Dad."

"Ah, that's right. I'm sorry I forgot."

"Dad?"

"Yes, son?"

"You're dead."

"I...I'm sorry about that too..."

Sato blinked his eyes open, feeling the last shreds of his dream shrink to the back of his consciousness. How many times had he dreamed up that conversation? It was trivial and pointless, but he'd give anything to have one.

He sat up in bed and rubbed the sand from his eyes. It was the start of another day, and if he recalled correctly, Kurenai-sensei had mandated he take a solo mission the day before. His team was busy with their respective clans as it was, so it was a good way to bide time until they could return to the team. He didn't necessarily feel up for a mission today, but he rolled out of bed anyway, strolling in his boxers over to a dresser with a mirror perched on top.

Sato regarded his reflection for a moment. He wasn't very aware of how he'd gotten taller in the past few months, but the fine stubble on his chin did signal his entry into manhood. He reveled in the small but noticeable changes, and most often Tama had to point them out to him: i.e. 'You've put on more muscle, it looks like!' He mussed his hair, deciding that it was tidy enough as it was, and then
scrounged around for an outfit.

While rummaging through drawers for pants Sato came across a few stray pictures. The photographs were old, before his time, so someone else must have taken them. One of them was of Kakashi, to his surprise, who was much younger and shorter in the shot. The other picture made his heart twist. It was of his parents, long ago, it seemed. His mother was just as beautiful as he'd always remembered her to be, but his father was like a bolt from the blue every time he laid eyes on him.

He had wild, white hair, but also the sky hued-eyes his son had inherited. *'Yes that's right...that's what he looks like.'* He felt a bit guilty that he could forget sometimes. For future reference, Sato elected to keep that particular shot on his person at all times, *'Just in case my memory gets foggy again...'* He tucked it in his jacket pocket before clipping a weapons holster around his thigh.

He wasn't terribly surprised to find Tama in the kitchen, preparing breakfast. She smiled at him, "Good morning! I let myself in."

"That's cool. S'pose I'll just have to get used to seeing you around here at odd hours." Sato chuckled, pouring some of the coffee. He offered her some but she politely declined.

"I like hanging around here...it's good practice for the future." Tama said, her cheeks dusted pink.

Sato looked at her for a long moment before he understood. "Yeah, sure." He agreed weakly. Her face dimmed a bit. Even if his enthusiasm for marrying her amounted to a towering zero, the least he could do was show her a little compassion, he thought. "So what do you have there with you? Smells good." He chirped.

Tama pushed a plate of sweet buns in front of him. "My mother made these this morning. Help yourself, Sato-kun." Her voice was resigned, slightly mechanical.

The silver haired boy happily did, and he wolfed down his breakfast without even taking a seat at the table. He was disconcerted to see Tama had not touched anything. Not the tea in the thermos she'd brought with her, or the food her mother had prepared. "Aren't you going to eat anything, Tama?"

She was scrubbing some of the neglected mugs in his sink. "No thanks, Sato-kun. I'm not hungry." Tama replied, her eyes a bit lost as they trained themselves on the wall.

He turned the tap off and handed her a dishtowel. "Tell me what's wrong. You always wash my dishes when you're upset, you know." Sato said perceptively.

Tama dried her hands off and sighed. She faced the boy fully, deciding to be truthful, "There's just...something I've been wanting to try...if that's okay with you?"

"Sure, so long as it isn't destructive."

Tama stepped forward, and gently took his arms, wrapping them around her waist. For a moment he thought she wanted to practice another routine, but she made no motions that indicated a dance. She simply stood there in his embrace, marveling at how he was now her equal in height. She let the faintest breath escape her, gingerly resting her hands on his shoulders. Sato didn't look like he particularly understood the contact, but he permitted it nonetheless.

"Don't you...ever get lonely, Sato-kun?" She asked him quietly.

His brow furrowed slightly, "I guess...sometimes I do."

"Tell me."
"I just miss Mom, really…and Dad, you could say. It'd be nice to have a family dynamic…unwind when you come home from a mission instead of looking after yourself constantly." Sato divulged, pondering over how she seemed to know what was on his mind.

"I do the best I can…" She mumbled.

"What?"

"What I mean is, I try to make it easier for you. I know it was hard losing your mother." Tama told him, running a finger along the curve of his neck, "I don't want things to be stressful when you've already got so much to worry about. If there's anything else I can do."

"Please don't worry about that, okay?" Sato said quickly, pulling away from her hold, "I appreciate everything you do for me, Tama, but I'm grown now. I can look after myself; it doesn't bother me."

He crossed the kitchen, dumping out the rest of the coffee in the sink. Tama stood very still, staring at the floor. Sato couldn't place her behavior, 'What am I missing? Is she really worried about me or…is there something she isn't saying?' Time was still ticking by.

"Listen, thank you for coming over, it always helps. I'm taking a mission today so I might not be back for a while…" As an afterthought he added, "And tell your Mom I liked the cakes! She's awesome. I've got to run…"

Sato was in motion but Tama had caught him by the sleeve of his jacket. "Don't…go yet…" She choked out. The tears in her eyes scared the hell out of him.

"Tama?" He whipped around, clutching her face in his hands, "God…just tell me what's wrong! Why do you hold it in? Did I do something?"

"N-No…"

"Is it Kakashi? Is he being an ass?"

"Of course not…"

Sato grimaced, "Kiba?"

Tama shook her head, "Not Kiba-kun…"

His eyebrows were inquiring, "Er…Sakura-chan?"

"No." She laughed lightly.

"Why can't you tell me?" He felt so powerless, "Why do you come here if I can't help you? I want you to…stop being such an adult…"

"One more time...okay?" She was getting a grip on herself. Sato understood, and this time he held her genuinely, still frightened of leaving on a mission when his friend was suddenly so emotionally fragile.

Sato had rarely ever seen Tama so troubled. He'd known her all of his life, but seldom witnessed her heartaches. 'That's one of the problems with Tama...she'll have a problem and never talk about it…' She practically hoarded her woes and locked them away. Her focus was always on others, and Sato, frankly, didn't approve of it.

She was light in his arms, in such a pleasant way that he couldn't help but run his hand absently
through her hair. Tama sighed again, but he could sense pain was still there and he knew she would definitely not tell him what was bothering her. It was not in her nature to do so.

"Alright…" He said gently, "Let's go now. You're coming with me."

"Huh? B-But…" She couldn't protest when he led her out of the apartment by her hand. Sato thought about knocking on Tenten's door just down the way, but thought better of it. She wasn't quite the right girl to handle emotional distress, he acknowledged.

Tama tagged alongside Sato, embarrassed by her disheveled appearance in public. Sato cut across town, not letting go of her hand once, and was finally stopped by a rather irate-looking Ino who was outside of her family's shop.

The blonde girl took in the scene instantly, "What's wrong with Tama-chan? Were you being a jerk, Hatake, or-"

"No! Sato's been nothing but kind!" Tama breathed, "Ino…don't…"

"Could you take care of Tama for me, maybe?" Sato asked, "She's got the blues and I've got a mission and I want to take her but…that may not be a very good idea."

Ino's eyes softened, "Oh…sure. That's fine, you should hang out with me for a while, Tama-chan. What do you say?"

"I…" She glanced back to Sato, her heart thrumming at the sight of his understanding smile. "Thank you, Ino." She gave the silver haired boy's hand a slight squeeze before letting go.

"Feel better, okay? When I get back I'll take you out to dinner." His eyes brightened with a better idea, "How about breakfast, lunch, and dinner?"

She hiccupped but managed to nod to him. Sato took off after that, seeing she was in good hands. Ino untied her work apron and folded it over her arm. "I really hate to say this, Tama, but you're a regular wreck." She told the older girl, "And that's saying something, since you can make even a broken leg look good."

"I can't believe I broke down like that…" Tama pressed her palm to her forehead, leaning against the flower display, "I was only having breakfast with him and then I just…I…"

"It happens, take it from someone who knows." Ino smiled, "Honestly, you're an open book. Your face just screams: Hatake Sato I'm madly in love with you- get over your hang-ups already and just marry me! He's got to be dense in that field, huh?"

Tama laughed, "You…have no idea."

Ino quirked an eyebrow, "That so? Well I say, if it can be done with Shikamaru then anything's possible."

"You should thank your sensei for recommending you for a solo mission. She has unquestionable faith in her students, it seems." Tsunade informed the boy standing in front of her desk.

Sato smiled, "I'll definitely thank her, Hokage-sama." Although usually his gratitude amounted to alcoholic beverages, Kurenai appreciated it all the same.

"Your stealth and tracking skills are well suited for this task, Sato." The Hokage flipped a page in the
report, "We've received a message from a small town called Kaido in the southern part of the Fire Country. Apparently the people there have been putting up with a vigilante who claims to be a freedom fighter, but whatever he's rebelling against I haven't the foggiest." She sighed, "So it's safe to say they have a regular trouble-maker on their hands."

"By any chance is the perpetrator Naruto?" The Hatake joked.

Tsunade sniffed, "Hardly. Last I heard from Jiraiya, he and Naruto were somewhere near the Valley Country."

Sato quailed. That was a place so far west it was neglected from almost every map he'd looked at.

"But don't let your guard down, regardless of how this sounds. In all likelihood the vigilante is a ninja, which explains why he's avoided the authorities for so long." Tsunade continued, "When you reach Kaido you are to stake out the vigilante's activities and, if possible, assist the community in his arrest. I expect you back within the next three weeks."

"That's…a while." Sato commented.

The Hokage arched a blonde eyebrow at him, "Is there something here that requires your attention, then?"

"Well…" His thoughts rushed back to Tama, and he wasn't sure he could trust others to look after her for so long. What if she had another breakdown? He had an idea though. "If it's not too much to ask, Hokage-sama, it'd be nice if Ino could stay in touch with me, in the event she has anything important to tell me while I'm away. I could send an owl back to stay informed."

"That is a fair request." Tsunade fell silent and thought about it for a moment. Why on earth would he need to hear anything from the Yamanaka girl? She laced her hands beneath her chin and stared at the Hatake from where she sat. There was only one logical explanation that came to mind.

"Before I dismiss you, Sato, I need a candid answer from you that pertains to your health." The Hokage told him.

"That's fine."

"Are you sexually active?"

Sato thought his head might spin three hundred and sixty degrees on his shoulders. That was a question he had not been prepared for. He had to think: did masturbating count? Probably not. It then occurred to him that she had only asked because he'd mentioned Ino.

"Ew." It was his only response.

"You could have just said no." The Hokage quipped, "Never mind then. It slipped my mind that you're betrothed to Gai's niece. Is this by any chance about her?"

"Yes. She's been a bit of an emotional train wreck since this morning. I figured spending some time with her friends might help her out." Sato clarified, "And Ino's already got a boyfriend, by the way."

Tsunade looked intrigued. "Really? Well, Shizune and Sakura are not bringing in nearly enough gossip for me these days…I'll pester them later. You're dismissed."

Sato left the office feeling a little awkward.
Kurenai had also charmingly advised three days earlier that Sato refrain from traveling by owl. If he recalled correctly, she had phrased it, "Flying has made you inexcusably lazy." He went by foot reluctantly, all the while wondering what her opinion of Shikamaru's verve must have been.

He moved quickly and was able to reach the village by noon. It was a serene, unassuming city of linear design, easy on the eyes with a balance of business development and garden themes scattered throughout. The people, Sato found, were far more colorful than their native city. Foremost, they loved to hear themselves talk. Secondly, he discovered almost as quickly, was that they worked for a pittance. Though, overall, they seemed very cheerful.

After consulting with three people along the main avenue, Sato had no trouble learning about the village's elusive vigilante. He was referred to by many things, ranging from "Shadow" to "Skunk." One man had even affectionately nicknamed him "Swifty" for his quickness. For the most part, townspeople Sato spoke with painted him a picture more of a man of the people rather than a criminal.

Though he would've liked nothing more than to have relied on the people's word alone, he had to get the other side of the story. Sato was directed to the mayor's office, and quickly welcomed in by the secretary. The mayor was a round man with a squinted face. Nothing about him seemed imaginative. He was straightforward, balding, and smelled of cheap cologne.

"Um, Seung-san?" Sato began, stepping into a spacious office and spotting the mayor seated at his desk, "I'm a shinobi from the Hidden Leaf Village; my name is Hatake Sato-"

"Ah yes! Good to see you, good to see you…" The mayor prattled, "Come in, don't be shy Leaf ninja! Now, I suppose you're curious about why we need your village's help, hm?"

"Well-"

"The fact is there is a shame-faced criminal among us, young sir." Seung continued in his guttural tone, "This vigilante is a thief, pure and simple! I could tell you stories- ohoho, I could tell you-!"

"What exactly has this person done?" Sato cut to the chase.

The mayor sighed and wiped his brow with a handkerchief, "He's been active for quite some time now, and all of our investigations have proven futile. He's burglarized several homes belonging to public officials and avoided any and all detection. The vigilante makes a point to be popular with the townspeople too, the mongrel, thinking they'll defend him if he ever is caught!"

The silver haired nin folded his arms, "It does seem that way from what I've heard."

"Will you aid us in our continuing investigations, Hatake-san?"

"This really does seem to be an issue, so of course, I'll look into it." Sato agreed, "He won't avoid me so easily…"

"Excellent! I really can't tell you how grateful I am to have Leaf's support…" Seung cleared his throat with a trill, "Now as for accommodations we have a discreet guest house in the garden borough you may stay in while you investigate. Here we are-"

An envelope with a key was thrust into Sato's hands, and the mayor did not waste a moment before steering him toward the door. "Thank you so much, young master, please make yourself comfortable in your new quarters! Report back when you find any substantial clues, and until then, good luck!"

"Um, sir-?"
"I'm a very busy man, I'm sure you can tell, Hatake-san! Now please make yourself comfortable…"

"Seung-san, is there any specific-"

"Good evening!"

The door shut with a click. Sato blinked hard and frowned to himself. He had never been handled by a public official before, but he figured there was a first time for everything. He was not particularly a fan of Mayor Seung, but he assumed the only valuable information for locating the bandit was already the gossip he'd collected from the common folk.

Sato stepped out of the building into the fading afternoon light. Upon further inspection of the city, he could not help but notice the glaring divisions of class and wealth. After passing through an impoverished district, complete with ramshackle roofs and stray dogs, he entered the more up-scale, more heavily guarded garden borough. The inequality of affluence, not to mention paved roads, was oddly disturbing. It was as if the city was cut up into quarters and assigned varying monetary ranks.

The guest house sat demurely on the corner of a street lined with flowerbeds. Though it was designed with the intention of welcoming more desirable citizens, Sato found the district sterile and rigid. After unlocking the door to the box-like flat the silver haired nin shrugged off his formal mission attitude and hurled his pack onto a sofa across the room.

He sighed heavily. This would normally be the part where Shino would announce some sort of contingency plan. On his own Sato figured he could exercise a more laid-back approach.

Sato examined his quarters which he found to be what he'd expected: cramped and modern. There was nothing in the refrigerator, but he had planned on eating out anyway. The bed looked like a puzzle board with a sheet thrown over it. He guessed there would be no use in requesting a futon. 'Wow. The mayor sure knows how to keep his clientele comfy…'

Bored with his new dwelling in a matter of seconds, Sato decided it was time to begin investigating.

He untied his kodachi from his bag and fitted them to his belt. Sato slung his camera around his neck, and after equipping himself with necessities he exited his temporary shelter. 'So…where's the fun at?' Sato thought bouncily, 'I want to catch a troublemaker so I don't have to stick around this synthetic municipality!'

The process of familiarizing himself with the village was not as dull as Sato had anticipated. Around the garden borough, the upper-class villagers used colorful language to describe the outlaw’s pursuits. They favored the nickname "Skunk" save for those more fearful, who referred to the thief with a bit more respect. Many households as well as civilians had been robbed blind or had something precious stolen, usually in paper form. It was an odd pattern, Sato noted.

In the crummy districts he listened to recycled stories of the lower class. A few in particular caught his attention.

"You said your house was foreclosed?" Sato asked an older woman sharing her tale.

"They took everything…my sons and I were out on the street." She nodded grimly, "It was nothing short of a miracle, though. While staying at my friend's home, in the middle of the night, everything was returned to us!"

Sato looked perplexed, "Pardon?"

"Documents, the deed to the house and the bakery…and money enough to pay off the mortgage!" She clapped her hands in delight, "Swifty got it back for us! He did that for two other families, ask
them if you don't believe me! Word is that he never keeps what he takes."

"Stealing is still illegal." Sato pointed out gently.

The woman patted his shoulder, "I know Leaf ninja, but the fact is, we have a roof over our heads and now it won't be taken away."

He did not want to immediately assume the criminal had pure intentions just because he had won over the lower class with good deeds, but Sato did continue fact-checking. A man of the upper class provided some startling information.

"His attacks can be brutal, I actually witnessed my business partner get jumped." The merchant told Sato with a shudder, "You should know what you're up against, sonny. This fellow is not just some run-of-the-mill shinobi: he has a Kekkei Genkai."

Sato's thoughts wheeled to Sasuke, but he hesitated with the notion. _That would be so incredibly unlikely it's…yep…that's out. Why the hell would he establish himself out here…but then again, who would?_

Standard procedure questions followed the accusation of the bloodline limit. "Well, I know it may be difficult for you to remember details, but did you happen to notice what the thief could do?" Sato inquired, "Did he use his eyes in a strange way? Could he manipulate things?"

"I can't say that I know concretely. He did use a sword…mind you it was not made of metal!" The man recalled, "I don't think he did anything with his eyes though…"

"That's alright. Thank you for your help."

Sato also found that some of the lower-class were reluctant or even refused to share information about the bandit. Their support was evident, and Sato found himself puzzled as to what kind of person, exactly, he was looking for: a chivalrous ninja or a lucrative robber. In-between interviews Sato shopped for small food items, primarily pocky. With gardens and flowers abound he managed to snap a few scenic photos as well.

By dusk he was ready to retire from interviewing people. Sato crossed a path from the lower district that would bring him to the garden borough more quickly. Yet before he came close to the well-to-do area he was stopped in his tracks.

"Hey you!"

Sato turned about, spotting a clearly aggravated woman with a gasping young lady tucked beneath her arm. He pointed to himself, "Er-"

"Yeah numbnuts, you!" She repeated, "Get over here and help me already! Have you not yet noticed the crisis at hand?"

Sato rushed to her side and could then see what the raucous was about. The young woman breathing doggedly was hugely pregnant and quite possibly in labor. A holler of pain stood his hair on end, and he could then admit his true, inexcusable weakness as a male. The aggravated woman situated Sato to help support the pregnant lady on the opposite side.

"What's your name?" She huffed impatiently.

"Hata-"
"Never mind! I don't really care right now. We need to get Shihoni to my house immediately, there's no way we can get to the clinic in time…"

"Excuse me, but are you even licensed to-"

"Licensed? You read the paperwork on me like you were supposed to, right? Toshisue Sarincha, right? Why do they send me the slow one!" She was walking briskly, but with great care for Shihoni, "I'm the resident medic of this village, and when we get through this, I might have to smack you- you incompetent!"

Shihoni gave an incoherent wail, and neither medic nor Leaf nin spoke again.

Once at Sarincha's place of residence things seemed to move in a static fuzz of fast-forward. Her first demand as she laid the small quaking woman to mats on the floor was issued, "Hot water, towels, aspirator!"

Sato's eyes were saucers, "What?"

"NOW!"

He fled, scrambling through the house in search of the required items. The wailing combined with Sarincha's mix of assurances and demands had Sato's head spinning. 'How the hell did I get swept up into this?"

Sato floundered around a hall closet and thankfully discovered a pile of fresh towels. He delivered them with feverish speed, battle speed even, and gave little thought to the large pot he hauled out of a kitchen cabinet and filled with scalding water in the sink. With great care not to burn his trembling hands Sato returned with the water.

Sarincha regarded him with the pot, disbelieving, "No."

"But it's-!"

"Boiling! It's goddamn boiling water- remedy that!" She looked around, "Aspirator?"

"Wha-? Is that the thing that cleans nostrils-"

"You're ASKING?" Sarincha shrieked, "Go get it yarn-for-brains!"

Sato vanished, and after much clanging and ripping open of drawers he reappeared with a bag of ice, bulb syringe, and an unnecessary pair of tongs. The boiling water was modified and the tools were in line, and he had arrived just in time for Sarincha's coaching. Shihoni's yukata was open and Sato's eyes were carefully averted. Bellows followed each of Sarincha's countdowns, and Sato kept close by, for fear of leaving and being beaten to death by a furious medic.

An hour passed. Sarincha demanded other odds and ends while she attended Shihoni. Another hour and a half. Time switched between crawling and flying by.

Just when Shihoni's screams seemed to peak in agony, Sarincha began cheering, "That's it! You're almost there!"

Somewhere in the swirl of fear and confusion settled in Sato's gut, a light of excitement went on. He may not have asked to witness a birth, and he certainly wasn't watching, but so far things sounded like they were progressing well. Shihoni let out an admirable cry and Sarincha ordered, "Towel."
Sato handed it over, and then in a moment of stillness, a small yelp of life.

He had to look. He was taken aback by the mess. A discolored, slimy, screaming body. Sarincha worked with utmost priority, and in moments the unknown organism assumed the appearance of a tiny human being. Wrapped in a warm towel Sarincha handed the infant to Shihoni, who was crying in relief, "Here's your little boy!"

The new mother began crooning and Sato then forgave whatever force that had decided to drag him into the event. The mess was horrific, but thankfully Sarincha dismissed the majority of ruined materials disposable. Once the clean-up was concluded and Shihoni was tended to, Sarincha pulled Sato aside in another room.

She was smiling in approval, "Not bad for a first-timer. Good job!"

He laughed sheepishly, scratching his head, "Well, uh…you see I'm probably not who you think I am."

"I figured that out after a while." Sarincha chuckled, "But even if you weren't the medical student I'd been expecting today, you did me proud. What's your name?"

"I'm Hatake Sato, a shinobi from Konohagakure."

"Toshisue Sarincha." She shook his hand, "I'm sorry about the mix-up, Sato. I was frantic and I was just so angry that the assistant I've been waiting for the government to appoint me has just not shown up. Childbirth was something I assumed a student to be familiar with…in your case though-"

"I'll get over it after some therapy."

She laughed softly.

Shihoni's husband and sister arrived shortly after taking a lucky guess why she was not at the clinic. Sarincha had been watching her patient carefully, and made sure she received the proper care. The entire family thanked her with smiles and excited chatter. Sarincha offered them the spare room to stay in until Shihoni had enough strength to return home.

Sato did not go unrewarded either.

"Please stay for dinner, Sato-kun." Sarincha offered, "It's really the least I can do after pulling you off the street and scaring the crap out of you."

"I really appreciate it, Sarincha-san, but I need to focus on my mission." He declined politely.

"Alright then, stop by tomorrow so I can make it up to you, okay?" She added, "I think you'll also want to check on the baby once his eyes open."

Sato nodded, "Yeah, I would like that."

They bade each other goodnight and Sato made haste through the city back to his quarters. He observed that when Sarincha was not in "medic-mode" shouting, she was truly a generous, compassionate person. He was strangely compelled to do what she said.

After boiling noodles for a quick meal, Sato could not help but reflect on how he had helped deliver a baby. His respect for child-rearing women had multiplied tenfold. He settled on the square, uncomfortable bed and succumbed to an uneasy sleep. He needed energy to continue his search for the next day.
The following morning Sato set out through the garden borough he was surprised to be flagged down by a man in formal attire. He got the feeling he was about to be assaulted with some unsolicited information about the thief, so he braced himself cognitively.

"You are the shinobi Seung-sama hired to investigate, yes?" The man asked.

"Word sure does travel fast around here." Sato replied, nodding.

"I'm sure you've heard a million stories already, but my master would like a word with you." The man said, "If you would please step this way…"

Sato followed the servant onto the magnificent property, and was straightaway asked to disarm by a guard at the gate. With no complaint Sato handed over his holsters and kodachi, and then paused, "So…do I tip you later?"

The guard gave him a confused look.

Sato was guided into the estate by the willowy servant, and was brought to a tatami room where a lavishly dressed lord sat having his morning tea. The servant excused himself after introducing Sato, and the Leaf nin gave a small, awkward bow before taking a seat across from the wealthy man.

"I do apologize for my abruptness, good ninja, but I was told you were listening to victim's accounts. I asked my retainer to keep watch for you if you happened by." The lord began, fanning himself idly, "Do you have time?"

"It's no trouble sir." Sato assured him.

"I feel that you should know that the renegade is a repeat-offender. He has robbed my household three times." The lord reported, "Having said that, many other families in this area have also been raided."

"When did this happen?"

"All within the last six months. The first two times my home was burglarized many of my treasures were stolen. The thief avoided detection as he wronged this estate." The man's face was red with rage.

Sato allowed the lord to continue, "The third incident occurred upon my return from a council meeting. I came face to face with the brute! He overpowered me and a great deal of money was taken from my person."

"I see." Sato said quietly, "Were your wounds serious?"

"The injuries were mainly for insult, after all, why would that charlatan want to harm a steady source of income?" The lord spat.

"Well if there are multiple targets and frequent abuses, this is a much bigger problem than I thought." Sato acknowledged, "I'll observe your property and the local area and stay alert for any signs of him. Thank you for sharing sir."

Sato was dismissed with little ceremony, and after receiving his weapons at the gate he traveled back across town. He walked aimlessly with his hands in his pockets. He mulled over his findings, determining the best course of action. 'It seems that the best chance I have of sighting this guy is at night. The last reported robbery was four days ago so I better keep my eyes peeled…'
He received a few more narratives throughout the lower district, for the most part positive, and happened upon the same road he had yesterday. Sato quickly remembered assisting Sarincha, and peered down the street towards her home. The house was nestled in greenery in a tidy yard, and was by far larger than every other home in the district. She was well-to-do, but chose to be near those who needed her. Sato cracked a smile at the thought.

Though it was awfully predictable Sato ended up knocking on the front door a few moments later. The medic answered, her smile bright, "Welcome back Leaf ninja. I'm glad you could stop by!"

"Well this seemed like an auspicious direction to walk in."

Sato was welcomed inside and quickly introduced to the new parents huddled up in the guest room. Shihoni would be staying one more night to recuperate under Sarincha's watch. Her husband thanked Sato for his stalwart actions the previous night. The baby boy had large topaz eyes that were locked for the most part on his father.

He settled for a cup of tea with Sarincha in the sunlit kitchen. She sat across from him wearing an expectant expression, "So? What's a Leaf ninja doing in quaint little village like Kaido, eh?"

"I think everyone knows why outside shinobi are stepping in here." Sato responded coolly, "I can't really disclose how I'm going about it, but hopefully I'll be able to go home soon."

"A wise answer, Sato-kun." She propped her chin up in her palm, "You know I used to be a kunoichi myself?"

He blinked hard before taking a sip of tea, "I got that impression last night when you were yelling at me."

She chuckled, "Sorry about that. I used to be a shinobi of the Hidden Grass Village. I came here with my husband after my father retired so I could oversee the clinic."

"There's a hospital here?"

"On the far, far side of town- yes. I would have brought Shihoni-san there to have her baby, but she wouldn't have made it." Sarincha explained, "Better that she was at my home rather than collapsing out on the street."

"What's it like running a clinic? With the way you give orders I bet it's a tight ship." Sato poked fun.

"It can be exhausting work but I live to help people." She smiled, "I do look forward to getting back to work tomorrow once Shihoni is on her feet again."

Sato nodded, "Come to think of it, I better get back to work too."

After finishing his tea Sato thanked the medic for her hospitality. He was invited to come back whenever he wished, and he figured he might just take her up on the offer.

Since he felt he had gotten a fair mix of good and bad reports already, Sato elected not to fact-check. For the rest of the afternoon he walked the border of the upper and lower districts, noting the blending of pristine gardens and roadside carts selling knick-knacks.

More than once he stopped to snap a picture of the impressive topiaries and flower arrangements. 'Sunshine will like these for sure…' He was also fortunate to find a large, iridescent beetle with war-paint patterns on its exterior perched on a rhododendron leaf. Zooming in on the specimen, Sato captured a photo that he knew Shino would commend.
He ate a light meal before taking a nap for the remainder of the day, and by nightfall was prepared for surveillance duty. Sato kept watch over the garden borough in the dark, half-expecting some sort of action. He roosted in his inconspicuous stakeout for hours. There was no hint of movement. The night was eventless, and Sato's eyelids began to droop. 'Should have gone for a double shot of espresso…'.

Begrudged over a lack of an encounter he returned to his quarters where he flopped face-first onto his bed. 'For all the hype these people have been generating, not much is going on out there.' He chickled when another thought struck him funny, 'Hey…maybe I'll get robbed tonight and my search can go all the quicker.'

Sato remained undisturbed until late the next morning. He made the effort to shower before catching lunch, since breakfast apparently stopped existing at noon in Kaido.

The ramen he had was more or less dismal while he sat comparing it to Konoha's quality of deliciousness. Naruto would have immediately demanded a refund, Sato suspected, but he knew better than to make a fuss while he was "under cover."

When an unshaven, clearly homeless man sat down on the stool beside Sato in order to sing Swifty's praises Sato excused himself, "Yes that's nice sir but I have to be on my way now. I have a nasty case of pink eye- really contagious." He wasn't followed.

Sato believed he was about to make a clean getaway when a commotion up the road broke out. A regular teenage brawl erupted and was just as quickly broken up. Two young men had their fists trapped in the grip of a man who intended to keep the peace.

A wave of recognition washed over Sato. He stood in shock. His brain could have sworn up and down he was staring at the photograph of his parents.

The man chastening the unruly boys ahead, unmistakably, unequivocally had to be his father. Was his father. A recognized shinobi. Flak jounin vest, the white mop of hair down to the strand, and the face and eyes that Sato himself had inherited. The world spun. Sato was unable to process the onslaught of questions that boiled in his mind in that moment.

The gang of teens shrank away from Sato's father. The two combatants, however, held their ground, still determined for a fight to ensue.

"This is not how to set an example for your community, gentleman." The jounin spoke sternly, "I don't want to have to correct you again."

'My father.' Sato was frozen in thought, 'For real.'

The hooligans couldn't take a hint, and wanted to bolster the rest of their entourage by retorting. "Face it, Snowy! You're not even that tough- you don't fight! There's no way you're a real ninja…” Laughter followed and people on the side of the street stopped to watch.

Another jeered, "And why the hell would we take orders from some outsider? You just moved here you fruitpie!"

Sato felt the most searing bolt of rage drip down his spine. He did not move, but he did want to kick several asses. The feeling skyrocketed when a sneaky thug came up in the jounin's blind spot with a kunai in hand. Then Sato moved, sped by a frantic feeling, but his father moved much faster.

The white-haired nin side stepped the bumbling attack and tripped his assailant. The instant the boy toppled over the others sprang in a mass. Sato's father fell into a rigid cross stance, fluidly followed
by a round of punches that sent the children crumpling to the ground. The ringleader drew his own
knife and leapt, only to be mercifully swept aside by a round kick.

Others were back on their feet, hot-blooded, and charged again baying in fury. Sato pummeled three
of the juveniles from behind, and a swift sweep kick sent another tumbling. The rest were put in their
place by the jounin, and it was really rather pathetic that they hopped to their feet to resume the
beating.

The white-haired shinobi's polished counters put the teens to shame, and even Sato was
acknowledged with fear when he countered a knife-strike with his kodachi. It was not long before
the children accepted their inability to contend with shinobi. They scattered and ran, and roadside
onlookers berated their cowardice as they retreated.

Sato sheathed his blade and turned to the jounin, "Dad! Are you alright?" He was a bit out of breath,
"What are you…doing here?"

The white haired man regarded Sato strangely. "Can I help you with something?" He asked.
"I'm Sato. I know you probably didn't meet me because you disappeared before I was born…"

"You must be confus-"

"You lived with my mother in the Leaf Village!" Sato insisted, "Your name is Riei!"
"My name is Toshisue Anyo and I have never set foot in that village in my life." The man replied
firmly.

"Maybe something happened to you and you can't remember.-"

"I assure you that you are mistaken." Anyo maintained in a clipped tone. He turned quickly to leave
but Sato was at his heels, claiming they were related. The man just as vehemently denied it.

"But you have to be…"

Anyo stopped outside of a pharmacy and faced Sato, visibly perturbed. "I am a shinobi of the
Hidden Grass Village. I appreciate that you aided me in disciplining the local delinquents, but you
are obviously off in your judgment. Please leave me in peace and I can afford you the same."

"Just hear me out!" Sato followed the man down the remainder of the road.

Anyo took to the rooftops, grumbling and demanding that Sato leave him be. The agile Leaf nin
could not be shaken, and Anyo eventually returned to the ground and turned sharply. The jounin
disappeared, much quicker than the genin. Sato was in luck, however- out in the distance of the
lower district, Anyo had reappeared on Sarincha's front lawn.

By the time Sato had caught up to his objective Sarincha had stepped outside, looking nonplussed.
"What's going on here?" She asked worriedly.

"A deranged pest has been following me for the better part of a mile." Anyo said dryly.

Very slowly, like extracting a splinter, the truth dawned on Sato. He had made a mistake.

'First off,' A voice admonished in Sato's head, 'He gave a family name. That should have
immediately signaled the incorrect identity, right Hatake?'
Sato stared at the hardwood floor. He was once again seated in Sarincha's kitchen, listening to her mediate and settle the misunderstanding with her husband.

'Second: logic would dictate that your father would not even realize he was a father regardless… considering he was gone before you were born.' His hands fisted on his knees. It was a uniquely horrible feeling.

"Sato-kun?"

He looked up at Sarincha, his expression smeared with disappointment and embarrassment.

"Would it be okay if we cleared up a few things by giving you our brief history?" She asked.

Sato nodded. It was not as if he still had illusions about Anyo being his father anymore. The man sitting across from him frowning, with his arms stiffly folded, could not be related to him.

"As I've mentioned before, Anyo and I are from Kusagakure. We have been married nearly two years now…let's see, what else? Anyo once rescued me from a house fire and is a recovered substance abuser and has been clean for, oh- five years?" Her husband gave her a very peeved look and she chuckled sheepishly. "And as for some trivia about me: I've never drank or smoked in my life. I can play three kinds of instruments…"

"I think that ought to do it, Sarincha." Anyo assured her.

"We moved here recently after my father retired. He was the supervisor of the health clinic in Kaido, and Anyo felt that it would be best if we took over for him." Sarincha concluded, "Other than that we're fairly boring."

The bits of information did not make Sato feel much better. He was still mortified about the mix-up. He stood and gave a formal bow to the young couple, "I know I jumped to conclusions earlier, and I suppose it was because it was a matter weighing heavy on my heart. I sincerely apologize."

"Please, it's just fine." Sarincha waved it off, "Though I take it your father resembles Anyo if you were so insistent before."

"I can show you if you like."

Sarincha and Anyo exchanged a glance before accepting the photo the Leaf nin handed them. Sarincha did let out a small gasp of surprise. Anyo himself did appear taken aback by the similarity.

"That really is something..." Sarincha said quietly, "It's a coincidence that I hope hasn't cut you too deeply, Sato-kun."

He shrugged, "I'll get over it."

"There are some things you probably did not take into account earlier when you were excited. For example, Anyo has tattoos that distinguish him from others." She pointed out the intricate colored line-work of vines, leaves and flowers on his neck, "Also this picture seems dated. Your father would be older now, and most likely not look as young as he did in the photo- or look as young as Anyo."

Anyo huffed, excused himself lowly, and left the room.

Sato nodded, sighing, "You're right. I reacted too quickly to even consider that."
"Though this misinterpretation isn't anything to fret about!" Sarincha declared, "You are always welcome to spend time with us, Sato-kun! Anyo could use some company, he doesn't have very many friends outside of Kusa."

"No thank you, I'd rather not bother Anyo-san more than I already have." Sato declined politely, "I do appreciate your hospitality though, Sarincha-san."

"It was no trouble, Sato-kun." She answered fondly.

On his way out Sato passed a dimly lit room and spotted Anyo pouring himself a drink. When he turned to face Sato, the Hatake bowed again in apology, "Please forgive me for my rash actions earlier. I was mistaken and I meant no offense."

Anyo arched an eyebrow, "I'm not offended in the slightest. Though I do wonder if you ambush every man who resembles your father."

"You're the first and the last, sorry about that!" Sato told him, "Not to worry. The hope is thoroughly crushed- so I won't make the same mistake twice."

The Leaf nin exited the house promptly.

Sarincha popped into the den to check on her husband, "Did you at least show him a little compassion?"

"I know who that kid works for." Anyo replied quietly, "Ignorant or not, I owe him nothing."

Sato had not gotten far before he was stopped by a man smoking on a street corner. "You the fella who's gonna catch Swifty?" He asked, then held the carton to him, "Cig?"

"No thanks." Sato sighed, "You have something to tell me too?"

"Sure. He has a blood limit, or whatever you ninja folk call it."

"I've heard." Sato replied rubbing his temples, "But frankly sir that doesn't help me figure out what I'm up against."

"No kid, I mean I've seen him use it." The smoker reiterated before taking a drag.

Sato studied the man for a long moment before asking what he had seen exactly.

"Two weeks ago, I think it was. I've seen Swifty plenty times before then, but it was this particular night when me and my buddies were going home when we happened across him..." He began, smoke puffing from his nostrils like a double chimney, "Anyhow, some rich fella got jumped. We didn't try to step in, of course, we woulda been thrashed. But the man he took out...Swifty didn't even touch him."

"What do you mean?" Sato was alarmed.

"He didn't get close to the guy. Poor slob just collapsed on the street and Swifty took his stuff!" The smoker recounted, "It sounds crazy, I know, but that's what I saw!"

That really does sound like the Sharingan...but what the hell?" Sato's thoughts spiraled, 'That just doesn't make sense! And the crimes are so mundane...it just doesn't add up."

"Could you tell what kind of ability it might have been? A doujutsu maybe?" Sato asked.
"Nope. He just stood there- I had no clue what he was doing." The smoker admitted, "Like I said, I didn't step in otherwise I would have found out firsthand, right?"

The Hatake was quiet for a moment, and then inquired, "So...you're telling me you let that man get beaten or...whatever happened, and did nothing? You witnessed an attack, so you're kind of obligated to report it to the authorities!" Sato was visibly frustrated.

"Kid that's not my style." He chuckled, "Besides, the jerk that got wiped wasn't exactly the upstanding type- I knew him personally."

"Really?" Sato growled.

"Yeah, the bastard closed up my shop with all that foreclosure-jargon they've been using lately. He put me and ten employees out of work- with families to feed!" He defended, "He got what was coming to him. He re-developed that tiny plot of land for what? Not money...he had plenty of that! He never liked me, is what did it!"

The Leaf nin considered it, "You're telling me...the thief AVENGED you?"

"Sort of. He's a lifesaver to the lower class out here, literally." The man stomped out the butt of his cigarette, "Since he first appeared he's been like our own guardian angel."

"He's a criminal."

"So he is." The smoker agreed, "But just you remember one thing: you may be doing the hot-shots of this town a big favor by exposing him...but every underprivileged family within a mile of this place will hate your ever-loving guts."

"It's not like I'm happy about the conditions these people live under!" Sato snorted, "But there is a difference between a vigilante and a hero."

"That's right. Now the question is, Leaf: do you know the difference?" The man stalked off after having made his point.

Though Sato did not amass much more information that day, he did rule out Uchiha as possible threats. It was a name people were familiar with due to wanted reports, and many doubted an Uchiha had ever passed through Kaido at all. Still, Sato was unclear on what kind of ability he needed to look out for.

He had returned to his quarters when night fell, resolving not to keep watch for the bandit. Sato knew a good rest would refresh him. He ate little of his dinner, though the dumplings he had bought from a takeout place were exquisite. He unwound from the long day further by soaking in the bath tub, staring at the ceiling listlessly.

His thought processes followed a circuitous route. The frustration of searching for a skilled shinobi who would not appear melded into reflecting on Sarincha's kindness, which in turn made him think of Anyo- and ultimately his father. Sato's head lolled so that he could glance at the photograph of his parents that he'd slipped into the frame of the mirror. His assessment of the picture had not changed much since the last time he had scrutinized it.

Sato leaned back in the hot water and closed his eyes. It was purely coincidence that Anyo looked like his young father. His father was a mystery- merely an intangible concept that was applied by logic. Everyone had a father. Not everyone encounters this person, Sato acknowledged. 'Even if I had met my dad...he might have been the biggest jerk on the planet. There's no guarantee he was a great guy judging by the evidence I have.'
"You had better be dead, then." Sato said out loud, "To tell the truth I prefer you dead."

Some small part of his brain contested that it was not entirely true. There was no real reason Sato could have resented his father, he knew. Every negative thing Kakashi had disclosed about Riei couldn't have been accurate, 'I mean, how well did my socially awkward uncle really know the guy?'

The only real reason Sato felt aggression towards his father was the pain of his absence. He was certain the sadness he felt was the same sadness his mother had felt. 'Mom was probably much lonelier than I am right now. She suffered all by herself with a child until she died, which is definitely why Kakashi is so resentful.'

"So you had better be dead…" Sato reaffirmed.

That way he and his mother could be happy in the afterlife together.

Sato stood from the bath and barely had the presence of mind to towel off. He was drained mentally. He managed to pull pants on before crumpling on the bed. Sleep came quickly, and at first he had vague visions of Kakashi. When he tried to picture his father something had changed. What Sato saw in his dream was Anyo's face.

The next day Sato found that there was not much use in poking around for more information. People tended to repeat stories over and over. Near the center of town he staked out a sheltered rooftop that would serve as a good lookout during the night. If the vigilante entered the upper district during his night watch, Sato knew he would spot him there. With little else to do in terms of investigating, the Leaf shinobi cut across town to the clinic.

There was no sign of Sarincha in the lobby, and when Sato asked for her at the kiosk he was asked to wait, "She's busy right now. We'll notify her when she is finished with her patient."

Sato took a seat in a leather armchair. If he couldn't find anything else to do, he figured he would leave the clinic and seek out good lighting for some photos.

"Excuse me?"

Sato looked up at a man who had his arm in a sling. Though he was banged up he was smiling amicably. "Excuse me, but are you a Leaf ninja?" He asked.

"Twenty-four/seven." Sato replied.

The man chuckled, "Ah that's great! You know just a few weeks ago I met another Leaf shinobi named Inuzuka Kiba. He passes through here often for missions or something. Is he a friend of yours by any chance?"

"Uh…I guess you could say that."

"Give him my best when you see him, will you?" He asked, "Tell him Pap said hi."

Sato nodded, "Sure."

Pap walked off, leaving Sato to ponder Kiba's popularity. 'Sheesh…he's not all that cool.' He chuckled to himself, 'All Kiba's got going for him is that he has an awesome dog compadre!'

Sarincha appeared at the front desk wearing a lab coat, and before she could turn around Sato had caught up to her. "Would it be okay if I talked to you for a bit, Sarincha-san?"
"I don't see why not, I'm on my break now." She smiled, "How are you, Sato-kun?"

"Slightly bored, and definitely sick of listening to people's stories." He admitted, "How about I buy you lunch? I really owe you for helping me out yesterday."

"It was no trouble really!" She assured him. Still, Sato had picked up the tab for their meals in the cafeteria. When they sat down to eat Sato asked about how Shihoni and her baby were doing.

"They are both exceptionally healthy. As a matter of fact they went home this morning." Sarincha reported happily, "Things couldn't have gone better even if we were back in Kusa."

"I wonder, do you miss Grass at all?" Sato asked.

"Sure I do. We have friends back there we don't see as often now…but I do like it here…I'm doing good work for this village." She divulged, then gave Sato a curious look, "How are things in Leaf?"

"Peaceful again. My teammates are busy for the time being-"

"A solo mission, huh? You must be tough!" Sarincha chimed.

Sato scratched his cheek, "Er…when the occasion calls for it. Really, my teammates are significantly more talented than I am."

"Just who are they then?"

"A Hyuga and an Aburame." Sato smiled, "The new faces of their clans to boot, might I add."

Sarincha's eyes danced in fascination, "Hyuga and Aburame! How unusual…"

Sato took a careless bite of his salad, adding, "Yep. Their abilities are invaluable. So is there friendship…but Sarincha-san, I've been wondering, how much do you know about Kekkei Genkai?"

"Kekkei Genkai, you say?" She raised her eyebrows, "Well I'd say I know enough, and that your village has some very interesting ones."

"Do you know anyone in this town who has one, by any chance?" Sato got to the point.

Sarincha fell silent, and dropped her gaze to her food tray solemnly. When she spoke it was hesitantly, "Thank you for lunch, Sato-kun, but I…I think I should get back to work."

"But I thought you-"

"I'll see you around sometime." She said over her shoulder as she hustled off.

Sato rested his hands on the table and folded them. It seemed that the subject of a blood limit in Kaido had scared her off. What was more was that she had fled with her lunch tray, 'At least I'm getting my money's worth!'

While reflecting on their brief conversation Sato found he was getting a weird vibe. 'Is it possible that…Sarincha has a Kekkei Genkai? That could mean…' Sato crammed several mouthfuls of salad into his mouth before standing from the table. There would not be much use in pursuing Sarincha through the clinic, but it would be prudent to uncover some more information about her. Sato disposed of the trash and left the hospital.

'Holy crap! I might have a lead!' Sato doubled back across town, towards the lower district, 'True I'm not thrilled that Sarincha might be a possible suspect…but something about that just didn't add
Sato did a double take when he reached Sarincha's house. The windows were darkened, and Sato felt it was safe to assume Anyo was not at home. What did baffle the Leaf nin was the sudden abundance of flowers in the front yard. Additionally, the hedges along the walkway were bursting with color that he was certain had not been there the last time he had visited the property.

He stood indecisively on the front step and folded his arms across his chest. Sato could not bring himself to break into and enter the house in pursuit of evidence. These people had treated him with kindness! He also remained skeptical about Sarincha being the culprit he was after.

"Aw nuts!" Sato growled, turning heel and walking off. He would approach the situation from a different angle, somehow.

He stalked up the street, walking past a friendly-looking police officer. "How's it going, Shinobi-san?" He greeted politely, "Almost got 'em?"

"Yeah, sure." Sato's tone dripped with sarcasm, "We just got out of lunch."

Night was a welcome change of atmosphere. The perch he had selected earlier was even more advantageous than he had previously thought. The main areas of concern, or rather, the congregation of wealthy estates, was in plain view of the lookout. With minimal light and sound, Sato kept watch in a still crouch.

For hours all that he could detect was the breeze in the treetops and shopkeepers closing up, throwing out garbage. All was quiet…and his eyes were getting lazy as time dragged on. Sato discreetly summoned two tiny screech owls, "Aree and Aroo, listen, I need you to keep watch for another shinobi who might appear in this part of town." He informed them, "Let me know if you spot him, alright?"

They crooned softly and then soared off into the darkness.

Sato settled down again to wait. Surely with Hinata's help this investigation would have been tied up and gift-wrapped already…not to mention Shino's impeccable ability to wheedle information from the local insect population. 'Well they've been preoccupied! And you're getting soft Hatake, not everything you do in life is done in teams.' He reasoned.

And within a span of twenty minutes, before either Aree or Aroo returned, there was movement. He was certainly fast, as Sato could see- plunging over rooftops with a definite destination in mind. In silence, Sato trailed after the vigilante.

Predictably, the trouble-making shinobi stopped on top of a wall surrounding the residence of wealthy citizen. Sato had no doubt that this was an intended break-in. While keeping out of sight, Sato had a Fire Clone transform into the likeness of a guard, and sent it traipsing onto the property. Hook, line, and sinker the criminal took the bait.

The unknown ninja dove down upon the clone, sputtering just for a moment when the henge dropped. The vigilante did not at all quail at the appearance of a Leaf shinobi. The offender dealt a round kick with such insane speed the Fire Clone’s flames could barely lick at him. Sato descended quickly behind the nin in an effort to counter, but he was obscenely fast and Sato was pushed to dance and weave away from the brutal strikes.

Sato regarded the figure, deciphering that it was unquestionably male, despite the hood and scarf. "Haven't you caused enough trouble around here?" The silver haired nin growled.
"You should stay out of this." A low, impatient retort.

"I'm making it my business to take you down!" Sato smirked at his foe's swaying posture. He was not going to run, that was for sure. He was pissed enough to keep fighting.

"Don't waste my time!" The shinobi raced forward, fleet-footed and sure, right into an igniting Chidori. Sato knew goading an enemy was a cheap way to land a hit, but it would be a priority to cripple a ninja who was so crazily fast. The sizzling light raked at the vigilante's sleeve, though the thief was narrowly able to avoid the hit.

Sato sensed a pattern of attack in the taisjutsu the thief used. The kicks were devastating, much like Lee's, Sato thought absently. He was so fast it was a chore to avoid him, and even more infuriating to hit him.

'Alright Swifty! Try fighting gravity for a change…' Sato drew his tagged wires from his holsters, preparing for a small-scale gravity bomb. It could possibly damage the property, but it would be well-worth it. Guards rushed out of the house after hearing the commotion, but kept their distance from the combat.

The opposing ninja could not take out all of the Fire Clones preparing the trap. Sato was prepared to vacate to higher ground when something changed. The vigilante stopped, turned to a nearby tree and tore down a large palm leaf. The leaf lengthened in the thief's hand, hardening, its edges already micron-thin and deadly. Sato suspected it would serve as a sword just through observation.

'This would count as a blood limit for sure…' Sato conceded.

The vigilante slashed through the trap wires and charged. The attack pattern was completely different this time, and Sato could barely anticipate his opponent's moves. Sato countered frantically with his kodachi, surprised that the leaf blade was every bit as sharp as a real weapon. Guards watching from the veranda called out to Sato to be cautious.

Before Sato could get his bearings the whole courtyard came to life. The grass shot up nearly a foot from the soil, surging with energy. The trees groaned as leaves rained down in a pin-like flurry. 'The plants! He's using the plants!' Sato could not label what kind of an ability it was, but he feared it was going to cost him his life.

Snaking vines and bramble immobilized the Leaf shinobi, growing back just as quickly as they were hacked away. The thief had no use for speed anymore. The environment's flora happily obliged to partake in the fight.

Sato struggled for a half of an oxygen deprived moment before making swift hand signs. It was a simple fireball jutsu but it wreaked havoc on the writhing plants. They shrank away and shriveled, and Sato found a glaring weakness in the thief's Kekkei Genkai, 'Can't use a plant that's dead…'

The thief was already aware that fire would pose a major threat. As the alarm on the estate sounded, he quickly withdrew over the outer wall, and Sato gave chase. He pumped chakra into his legs, straining to keep up with his target.

Ahead on a rooftop the criminal came to a startled halt when an intensely hot ring of flames flared to life around him. He glanced around for a few moments before realizing he had been caught in an illusion. He broke the genjutsu just in time to get a running kick square in the back. The thief crumpled, tumbling across the roof tiles. Sato's owls swooped in upon locating the specified ninja, and pecked and clawed relentlessly.
With a cry of frustration the vigilante swiped at the birds, staggering to his feet. The scarf had been torn from his face, and Sato quickly placed the glimmer of white hair.

"Wait! Stop!" Sato called off his owls, "That's enough- I know him."

Anyo glared at Sato from across the rooftop, pulling shreds of cloth from his shoulders. "Are you satisfied, Leaf investigator?" Anyo snapped, "Tch! I knew you were a meddler from the beginning…"

"This can't be right…you're a cool guy…but you're a criminal!" Sato was astounded.

"I'm offended by that word. You have no idea how hard I work to help the people of this village."

Anyo retorted.

"By committing crimes?"

"No! By giving back what is rightfully theirs."

"What are you talking about?" Sato was frowning, and slowly sheathed his kodachi.

"The aristocrats of this village are the real thieves." A smirk slowly spread across Anyo's face, "And I can prove it too, if you would be willing to work with me."

The Leaf ninja nearly rolled his eyes, "How can I believe anything you say?"

"You'll just have to trust me." Anyo said simply.

Sato did not buy it, "Does your wife know about this?"

At this Anyo lowered his gaze, "I don't want to involve her. It's dangerous and unnecessary."

"Dangerous, yes- but probably necessary." Sato pointed out, "She's a kunoichi, right? She can handle herself…but man she's going to bust you good when-"

"Enough. We can continue this discussion somewhere less conspicuous." Anyo interrupted, "Come with me."

Sato followed after the older man, though good sense implored him not to.

Thankfully Sarincha had been working a night shift at the clinic, and was not due to return until late the next morning. Anyo was comfortable enough allowing Sato back into his house, only with the assurance that it was not a welcome place to fight.

"Before you arrest me, let me make my point." Anyo asked.

Sato leaned on the jamb of the doorway, wary and agitated.

Anyo took a moment to wash his face over the kitchen sink, and Sato glimpsed the tattoos lining the man's neck. Vines and flowers of all kinds were painted on his skin.

"Those markings…" Sato inquired, "Do they have any relation to your Kekkei Genkai?"

The white haired man dried his face with a hand towel. He faced Sato, suddenly seeming approachable and less threatening. "They do." He told Sato, "It is tradition for each Toshisue, man or woman, to represent their ability- Banryoku: Myriad Green Leaves."
"Why would you want to make it more obvious?"

"Because…" Anyo pulled up a chair and collapsed into it before continuing, "The blood limit of our family has died out. We did not thrive in Kusagakure as we should have…too many wars."

"The others died?"

"I had three older brothers who were revered shinobi, and had great mastery over the Banryoku," Anyo wore a small, wistful smile, "They were all killed."

Sato's eyes widened, "What? Isn't there anyone else?"

"No. My father died shortly after my mother. Our extended family has too much mixed blood and has not seen our ability in many generations. After me, Sato, it is lost."

"That sounds kind of like what the Uchiha are going through…" The Leaf nin said quietly.

"Save for the fact that we were not so inclined to kill off our clan."

"Good point." Sato agreed, "So…what exactly does it do?"

"That's more information than I'm willing to discuss."

"Aw come on! If you want me to hear you out fully you might as well be honest with me!" Sato pressed.

Anyo sighed, "The Banryoku is manipulation of plant-life, not unlike your village's Mokuton, which acts more exclusively through trees. Our control is broader and less specialized, which means no one Banryoku user's techniques are the same as another's."

Sato was impressed, "Cool! I take it you like swords?"

"It's not really a vital technique of mine, and I don't think you'd like to see my jutsu for yourself. It may make you think twice about walking across someone's lawn."

Sato expression revealed slight apprehension.

"I digress. I think it'd be prudent to make it clear how I have the best intentions for this village." Anyo continued.

The Hatake furrowed his brow, "Try and convince me."

"Have you noticed the absence of a middle-class here? Doesn't that seem unusual for a prosperous city?"

"I've interviewed plenty of people, yeah."

"For sixteen years tax rates in Kaido have been rising uncontrollably. Legislation is in favor of the bureaucracy, and this is all on record…there are documents, Sato, documents that make it inescapably clear how the people have been lied to, stolen from, and jailed by money-mongering business tycoons." Anyo locked eyes with the Leaf shinobi, "They keep this information under lock and key, some of which I've recovered. However, I'm still looking for a statement that is under heavy guard…one that will create a legal case so scandalous they'd all commit suicide before revealing the shame of their acts."

Sato blinked, "That sounds…big."
"Things like deeds to property and legal papers is what I've been returning to these people. Money cannot help them since it would quickly be siphoned away anyway."

"Okay. So let's say I believe this sad story of yours." Sato speculated, "Your wife really isn't in on it?"

"She believes the police will do right by the people, but they are too busy chasing a 'vigilante' to pay attention to citizens' needs."

"How can your wife not know it's you?"

"I take precautions. I can't put her through something like this. She has suffered too much because of me already." Anyo said quietly.

"Jeez, you can't really be that bad of a husband, can you?"

The white haired man looked listlessly out through the kitchen window, "For the time before I was her husband…well…let's say I'm not proud of how I treated her."

"Fine, I get it- you don't want her to get hurt." Sato could relate to that feeling, "Actually, a friend of mine is also in bad shape right now."

"You mustn't speak a word of this to Sarincha if you and I are to cooperate." Anyo warned additionally.

"Cooperate? I'm letting you off easy by going along with this!" Sato snapped.

Anyo held up a seed he had pulled from his pants pocket, "I could kill you now, if you prefer, and save both of us the trouble."

"What…is that?"

"A sunflower seed."

"Alright. I don't want to know what you plan to do with that, but I bet it sucks." Sato assumed, "I'll help you…I guess."

"A wise choice."

"How do we explain this to your wife, though?" The Leaf nin wondered.

"She thought some bonding time with you would do me some good, she had said. Just say we're friends and Sarincha will be pleased."

"It's one thing to say it." Sato laughed, "But can you act it?"

The following day Sarincha caught wind of Anyo's change of heart, and immediately pursued Sato, coercing him to stay in the guest room of their house. It wasn't long before Sato locked up the guest lodge and returned to the Toshisue residence. He hoped that Anyo would keep his word and be accommodating.

Sarincha, in many ways, reminded Sato of Tama. She hovered until she was sure everyone was happy and satisfied, and her emotions were nearly as unpredictable. One thing Sato picked up on quickly was how protective Anyo was of his wife.
He was never more than a few steps from her. While she cooked he assisted without question. He could fetch things without her having to name them specifically, finish her thoughts for her, and Sato felt that two people who were so tuned to each other definitely had a successful marriage. *That and they're both shinobi. They've probably been doing this for years!* He was very impressed.

It was slightly unnerving that Sarincha was unaware of Anyo's nightly escapades, Sato noted. She would not react very well to the news, he imagined. Yet for the most part, life in the Toshisue household was functional, very pleasant, and what Sato would have liked to have experienced growing up.

Sarincha did not hesitate to put Sato to work. With great care, he sorted her chinaware and put it away in a glass cabinet. They made small talk while Anyo was out bringing lunch to Shihoni's family.

"I've known Anyo all of my life." Sarincha chuckled lightly at a memory, "I always thought he was so brave when we were genin…he was a born leader-type and I truly admired him."

Sato held his pinky out suggestively, "So you two have been an item for a while, huh?"

She shook her head, "Goodness no! To him, I was no better than the mud on his shoes! I was quiet and studious, and he turned out to be a flamboyant jerk who was all too aware of how gifted he was."

"Eek." Sato muttered.

"But times changed. His father died. Then his eldest brother…and then his other brothers. He was on his own and he made destructive decisions because he was in so much pain. The only people there to support him through thick and thin were his teammates." Sarincha stared down at the cloth she was mending, "I wanted to support him too, but…my feelings were crushed. I couldn't stand to be around someone so tumultuous. He was a storm when he was young and I decided to stay focused on my career."

The Leaf nin did not reply. This story was sounding a little familiar.

Sarincha winked at Sato, "Don't look so upset! Things worked out, as you can see! We grew up and came to understand that the world does not revolve around our selfish impulses…but our compulsion to give."

Sato smiled, "Now that's a revolutionary idea."

"Of course! It was my idea." She laughed.

"So do you think now that you've settled down out here that you'll have kids?" Sato asked, keeping in mind the plight of the Toshisue's blood limit.

Sarincha looked at Sato for a long moment before continuing her needlework. "We are not going to have children." She told Sato in a distant voice, "Anyo has expressed many times how he is completely averse to that."

"Oh." Sato knew his reply was not comforting, but he did not know how else to respond. To him, it sounded as if it had been an executive decision on Anyo's part, because Sarincha looked terribly disturbed by the drawback of her marriage. He could tell it would not be wise to press the matter further. Sato went back to work storing the china.

Sato spent the rest of the day in town with Anyo. After giving it another glance, he did notice many
of the things Anyo had been talking about. Kaido was broken up into separate microcosms, containing various cultures which all shared one commonality: poverty even while living in a prosperous village.

Anyo blamed the prevalent social issues on the local government. Sato felt that he would not need much more convincing. *But if this is really how it's going down...how can the mayor not be aware of the abuses?* Sato wondered, *'Unless of course...Anyo's not telling me the whole truth and nothing but the truth so help him God...'*

And while Sato weighed the inconsistencies of Kaido's economic distress and success, against Anyo's married-man image and criminal visage, their time observing the town concluded. Anyo led the young ninja to a secluded training spot, out of public reach.

Sunshine peeked through the dense tree cover, and a murmur of a breeze was the only hint of winter. It seemed a friendly spar was in order.

Anyo commenced the session by asking, "Who introduced you to swordsmanship?"

Sato patted his kodachi, quite proud of his ability, "Well I'm primarily self-taught, but I had a few pointers from Tenten, the resident weapon's master of my village."

Anyo sniffed, "Your technique is dismal. You shame your weapon's master with your sloppy form."

"What? Oh- and I suppose you had such a great teacher!" Sato retorted, highly insulted. *'I'm pretty damn good! He shouldn't be criticizing me!'*

"I was trained by my elder brothers when I was young...and was generously taken under the wing of Pitekuyo when I became a chunin."

Sato scratched his head, "Huh. Why's that name ringing a bell?"

"Pitekuyo is the leader of the Hidden Grass Village." Anyo reminded gently.

"Ah." Sato let out a shallow breath, shamefaced.

"Credit me with some skill, please. I haven't brought you here to ridicule you; I had thought that you would appreciate some formal training, Sato." Anyo offered, "You can decline if you wish. I know you want to take your mission seriously-"

"I appreciate it." Sato answered quietly. Though Sarincha had described Anyo as a pompous windbag when he had been young, he had probably had some respect smacked into him over the years. He was more humble than Sato could have ever expected.

Sato paid close attention as Anyo corrected Sato on stance and posture, although he did commend Sato that he already knew how to handle his weapon well.

"I don't typically use short swords." Anyo said, pulling a maple leaf from a tree, "This ought to do."

Sato watched as the leaf shook in his hands, invaded with chakra, and lengthened in size. It was modified where the stem became thick and useable, while the red leaf took on a metallic sheen. Sato wondered what kind of jutsu could remake a plant.

Anyo spun the blade in his palm, "Don't be fooled. This came from a tree but it can tear you to shreds. I am going to teach you some forms that you will find useful."
And Sato learned, dancing away from attacks while seizing opportunities to slash at his opponent. The Leaf nin focused, watching as Anyo parried his blows with easy grace, and Sato vowed that he would take the Grass ninja's lessons seriously. These would be an education exclusive to him, he knew. His teammates nor his sensei could take part; not even Kakashi would know. As the afternoon dragged on they took a break, and Sato still had many questions to ask.

"You learned a lot from your brothers didn't you?" Sato inquired, seated on a tree stump, "It would be nice to have siblings. I don't have any."

"Yes I am very grateful to all of them." Anyo said quietly, "But now they are all dead, along with my father. There must be…a curse on those who possess the Banryoku. We are doomed to die young."

"That's ridiculous!"

Anyo shot the boy a sharp glare, "Really? Then prove me wrong! Where has my family gone, Leaf ninja? Even you can't tell me that…"

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean it that way." Sato apologized, "It's just…I believe that you have more in store for you. I think you have a lot to offer while you're alive."

Anyo's gaze softened, "What makes you say that?"

"Well, because…" Sato stood and brushed his pants off, "I found you didn't I? I might have made a mistake early on, but our meeting has got to count for something."

The white haired man watched the boy cross the clearing and walk back towards town. It had been a very long time since he had received kind words from a stranger. The young Leaf shinobi would be easy to get along with after all, Anyo thought.

Sato sent his fastest messenger owl to Leaf to check on Tama. Within five hours he had a response, and after dinner he settled in the guest room of the Toshisue household to read it.

Tama appeared to be feeling much better, judging from her reply. She was impressed with Sato's good work, and was surprised to hear about his misjudgment and his discovery of a man who was not actually his father. You still made a friend, didn't you? She had said. Sato was not precisely sure. Things seemed to be going smoothly enough, but the investigation was still ongoing. Tama recommended that he behave well while he was a guest in a lady's house and to not hesitate to call for backup if things began to go badly. Sato smiled to himself, 'She must be antsy for a mission too…'

Sato fell asleep to the hushed conversation of Anyo and Sarincha in the tea room. It was a thick, dreamless sleep that helped him rise wide-eyed and perky the next morning.

While perusing Kaido the next day Sato thought it best to check in with the mayor for updates. Seung was bustling around the building, picking up and tossing reports from every desk in sight.

"Yes, yes, good to see you Leaf investigator! I have some good news for you- some very good news!" The mayor lit a cigarette and puffed heartily, "There was an anonymous tip sent in last night pertaining to where the thief will strike next!" His cheeks were bright red with excitement, "I will be tightening security around the location in question and perhaps we will finally subdue the culprit!"

Sato's expression reflected concern, "That is…good, I suppose, Seung-san. But I've made some progress myself and I-"
"Oh I have no doubts about that, my friend! But just consider it- the vigilante may be caught even without your assistance! Now that'll put public security back in the spotlight now wouldn't it?" The mayor laughed, "But of course I still expect that you will be present to assist our efforts?"

"Of course, Seung-san." Sato stopped at the doorway and added, "Though I should warn you…don't be overconfident. Your enemy may not be one you can put in chains."

After the Leaf nin's departure the Mayor took a moment to consider the advice. He trudged down the hallway with his head wreathed in smoke.

Sato continued honing his swordsmanship with Anyo for the rest of the day. The Grass ninja challenged him to think creatively and polish his attacks.

"The more well-rounded you are the greater service you will be of to your teammates," Anyo told him, "You would like that wouldn't you? So concentrate!"

By the afternoon Sato was keeping up like never before, and he made use of his white chakra to keep Anyo on his toes. Anyo was impressed with his ability, and was still encouraging while he demanded more of Sato.

Sarincha was pleased to see them arrive back in time for the evening meal. She greeted them at the front door, "Welcome back you two! Phew! Gosh, you smell!" She covered her nose and shooed them away, "Go wash up first!"

Sato began to let the surreal environment get to him. He practically floated to the bathroom, so utterly enraptured with having two parent figures available. He cleaned up quickly, 'Wow I do stink…' and then joined Anyo and Sarincha in the dining room. The table was spread with a variety of cuisine native to the area, and Sarincha urged them to dig in. Sato hesitated, staying silent as he looked down into his lap.

"What's wrong, Sato-kun?" Sarincha's brow furrowed with worry.

He looked up finally, "It's just…I really can't thank you two enough. You really took me in, despite the fact that I can be spastic and fallible. I really want to say…" Sato gave them a small, polite bow, "Thank you very much Sarincha-san and Anyo-san!"

Anyo actually smiled, "Enough. Just eat, you can thank us later, Sato."

And dinner was very enjoyable.

After cleaning up Sarincha did not have much time before she was expected at the clinic. She had a shift that would push well into the morning, and so she prepared herself hastily before she was out the door.

The sun looked very much like a tangerine on the violet horizon.

"Dusk." Anyo observed, "And now we make our move."

Sato glanced over his shoulder from where he was doing dishes, "What are you talking about?"

"This will be the final strike; it will determine the fate of this town."

"That's a bit dramatic isn't it?" Sato whimpered.
"Stop what you're doing and get ready." Anyo told him, "We're going soon."

Sato had a short while to consider what he was getting himself into as he fitted himself with weaponry. His investigation had yielded some startling revelations: Anyo was in fact the "vigilante" causing such an uproar, and the townspeople were actually being aided by said vigilante. 'And now, if I follow this through logically...Anyo is about to take me on one of his escapades.' Sato reasoned, 'Have I just become a turncoat?'

He followed Anyo through town, in the darkness, moving swiftly over roof tops. 'No! Don't think like that! For all you know they're backstabbers trying to lure you into their plot with compassion and good meals! You have to stay focused, Hatake! Do not jump to conclusions again!'

By the cover of night Sato and Anyo watched the estate from a high perch. In the dim light they waited for the guard on duty to turn a blind eye. They snuck onto the property undetected, and Sato followed stealthily behind Anyo as he climbed up the side of the building. 'An open window, of course...could he make me feel any more like a criminal?' Sato thought wearily as he squeezed in a tiny porthole just beneath the roof of the building.

"You have got to be kidding me!" Sato hissed at his partner, "The mayor's building?" Anyo motioned for him to stay silent. It was so: the hallways and offices were the very same ones he had seen the day before.

Guards patrolled the hallways diligently, and it then occurred to Sato that they had infiltrated the building with the tightest security the village had to offer. 'Crap.' He stayed low behind Anyo, moving quickly, turning down hallways and hiding in rafters when they came too close to guards.

When it looked as if they could get no farther unnoticed Anyo motioned for Sato's attention.

"Cover your nose." He whispered.

"Um-"

"Now!"

Sato did as he was told and watched as the Grass ninja scooped some sort of powder from his belt tie. "That's not harmful is it?" Sato whispered.

"They're spores. Cover your nose." Anyo repeated.

Sato watched in fascination as Anyo blew the tiny, floating seedlings down to the hallway below. The guard on duty immediately fell over, clueless as to what hit him. Anyo dropped down from the rafter and told Sato to follow him. "He's asleep, I assure you." Anyo promised, "However he will be awake in twenty minutes so I suggest we hurry."

Sato observed as Anyo repeated the process down each of the long corridors as they neared their destination. Guards drifted to sleep without a care in the world; settled and cozy on the limestone floors. After what seemed like ages, Anyo stopped at a set of thick double doors. A root coiled out of the Grass ninja's sleeve and began to fiddle with the door lock. Sato scoffed, "You can't be serious-"

The door clicked open.

Sato cleared his throat and followed after Anyo. "Where are we?" The Leaf nin asked.

"This is the mayor's office."
Sato's jaw nearly dropped, "What? But his office is on the first floor-"

"Or so he makes it seem." Anyo replied, closing the door behind them, "It took quite a lot of research and insider information to locate this room, Sato, believe me…"

Anyo began rummaging around and Sato stood, perplexed, at the center of the lavish room. With high-vaulted ceilings and chic décor Sato quickly accepted that it would take a large amount of money for the mayor to have a place to himself so exquisite. 'I bet he didn't get that money from his aristocrat friends either…'

"Sato." Anyo beckoned the young Leaf ninja over to a filing cabinet, "Strange that the locks here have so many tumblers…I think we've found our query."

"And what is that, exactly?"

The Grass ninja fingered through files, taking a few of interest out to inspect. After skimming through the documents Anyo stopped at one and sighed, "This one may be of interest to you, Sato."

Sato took the document and looked it over, 'Hm…it's talking about failed negotiations with the Leaf Village and…whoa! Items possessed through non-specific seizure? What the hell…'

Sato looked gravely at the older man, "They haven't just been stealing from this village…but Leaf too…"

"Do you believe me now?" Anyo asked.

"I do. I'm sorry I ever doubted you." Sato apologized.

They set to work pulling out records of "repossessed" and seized property, as well as deals with towns throughout the Fire Country that had gone awry. "Oh the daimyo is not going to like this at all…" Anyo muttered, "How do you suppose he will deal with these thieves?"

"Severely." Sato smirked.

After collecting enough files that would convince the Hokage twice over, Anyo carefully picked the office window. They scaled the side of the building in silence, down into the dark of a courtyard. Anyo dusted his hands off and smiled at his counterpart, "Well done, Sato. I know it may look criminal, but not all happy outcomes are set on a righteous path."

"I'll keep that in mind." Sato chuckled, making hand signs, "I'll summon an owl so we can get to Konoha faster-"

A voice sounded from the edge of the courtyard, "Oh come now! You really must stay…"

Leaf and Grass shinobi wheeled around to see the mayor himself with a lantern in hand. Sato exchanged a glance with Anyo before speaking, "You know Seung-san we would be delighted to continue playing your game, but we have some files here that the Hokage needs to see!"

"Now, now, Hatake-san…we wouldn't want to do anything too hasty now would we?" The mayor chortled, and from behind him a flood of guards emerged. While being encircled by hired thugs was bad enough, it was made all that much worse when Sarincha was dragged into view.

"Sarincha!" Anyo cried, suddenly confronted with the shame of his acts.

"Hatake-san…you have something I want." Seung pointed to Anyo, "For a while now we have
suspected the culprit to be Toshisue Anyo, after all, he does fit the bill doesn't he? A man of the people who only arrived here recently...about the same time the break-ins began! He has caused enough trouble and I'm sure you would not want to share his fate would you?"

"Don't think for a second that I'll cooperate!" Sato snarled, "You can't take him! Not while I'm here!"

Sarincha, with her hands bound behind her, struggled against her captors, "Anyo!" She shouted, "You have a lot of nerve keeping this from me!"

"Sarincha I swear, the mayor has been up to no good-"

"Well I figured that part out for myself, thanks!" She retorted, "It turns out he's been embezzling money from my clinic! But honestly, Anyo, I can't believe you didn't tell me..." She smiled, "I wanted to help."

Sato was grinning. Somehow it had worked out after all.

"Hand over those files now and this woman will be spared the suffering you have brought upon yourselves!" The mayor warned.

"No matter what you do here, right now...the Leaf Village will still find out about your crime ring." Sato drew his kodachi, "You can make this easy or really, really hard, Mayor."

Seung quickly ordered an attack. As expected a knife was drawn on Sarincha, but Anyo was too fast. Grass knots locked her captors in place and Anyo dove ahead, freeing her with a slash of a leaf.

She reacted instantly, drawing out a chain-scythe that made short work of the men who had restrained her. She stood beside Sato, wheeling her chain-scythe, prepared to fight.

Guards everywhere charged from all directions and Anyo's Kekkei Genkai was a thing to behold. All forms of flora came to life, trapping and attacking the small mob. Plants miraculously ignored the presence of Sarincha and Sato, focusing only on the enemy. The mayor watched from the sidelines, horrified, as his own courtyard turned on his men.

Sato had successfully besotted a few guards in a genjutsu moments before the snafu. A lantern had been shattered on the ground and engulfed a portion of the courtyard in flames. The attacking plants faltered, signaling Seung's men to add to the fire. In a matter of seconds, lanterns were impacting the yard, razing the plants Anyo had been manipulating. Sato clashed blades against a large brute, knowing that the fight was going to become much more difficult. While Sarincha held her own very well, Sato could see Anyo had resorted to his sword skills to keep the guards at bay.

White chakra flew from Sato's blade tips, battering any who came near. *We may be outnumbered... but we're not outmatched!*

Victory still seemed far off when two additional figures descended on the scene. Anyo was taken aback to see a pair of shinobi sweep through the courtyard, tripping and bashing unsuspecting guards. The three remaining thugs deemed it wise to flee the area, leaving behind a very vulnerable, very frightened mayor. Two swords were positioned on either side of Seung's neck.

The Leaf jounin looked sidelong to Sato, "Hatake Sato?"

Sato nodded, quickly recognizing his backup: Hayate and Yugao.

"The Hokage was informed that an agent in Kaido exposed a crime ring that has been elusive for nearly a year now." Yugao reported, "A report from Grass confirms this."
Sato glanced over to Sarincha and she smiled.

"Seung Nofuji, you are hereby under arrest for violating your contract with the Hidden Leaf Village." Hayate announced, binding the fat man's hands, "Don't struggle. Yugao won't take kindly to it."

The mayor looked meekly at the violet haired woman who was clearly peeved.

"Thanks for getting here so quick. I'm glad Hokage-sama sent me the back-up that I requested." Sato gave a grateful bow to his superiors.

"All in a day's work. We'll take it from here." Hayate glanced at the Grass shinobi across the way, "Make sure your friends are alright before returning to the village."

And nearly as quickly as they had arrived, Hayate and Yugao departed with their prisoner.

Sato was instantly scooped up into a warm hug by Sarincha. "You did everything right!" She cheered, "Oh Sato-kun! You don't know what this means to our village…things will improve finally!"

The Leaf nin chuckled sheepishly, "Well I'm not used to doing things on my own…I was just doing what came naturally to me."

"I am grateful for your help, Sato." Anyo told him, "We are indebted to the Leaf Village."

"Are you guys going to be alright? Should I send some people to help you set things straight here?" Sato asked.

Anyo looked at his wife and then back to Sato, "No Sato, I think we can repair things now…the proper way."

He hugged Sarincha one last time before collecting the documents.

"Come back and visit us sometime, okay Sato-kun?" Sarincha suggested, "It was a joy having you with us."

After a thoughtless summoning jutsu Sato nodded, smiling tiredly, and then clambered up onto the back of Gyorai. The huge black owl regarded the Grass ninja for a moment before spreading his wings.

Anyo and his wife watched the Leaf ninja disappear into the night sky. They kicked dirt on the last of the embers as the lantern flames about the yard began to dwindle.

"I don't know if I should head back to the clinic now or just…" Sarincha heaved a sigh, "Go to bed…I am beat."

"Bed it is." Anyo decided, taking her by the hand, "I am surprised…"

"Surprised about what?"

"He did very well considering he was a complete outsider to this place." Anyo acknowledged, adding quietly, "And I…I would have been proud if he had been ours."
The Inuzuka residence was uncannily quiet that morning. The floorboards creaked as Kiba made his way down the hallway dressed in scraggily pajamas, with Akamaru at his heels. His sister was already seated at the table sipping tea when he entered the kitchen. He greeted Hana with a sleepy chuff as he settled down, and patted Akamaru before the mutt slipped out the side door to join his sister’s dogs for mealtime.

Kiba reached for a plate of rolls but Hana shook her head, “Keep away from those, they belong to Mom.”

Kiba scratched his cheek, “Dang. Where is she anyway? She’s usually done eating by now.”

Hana gestured with her chin towards the porch on the far side of the room. Tsume was silently pacing outside reading a piece of paper, and was clearly very distressed; not in her usual amicable mood.

“What’s up with her?” Kiba yawned, pulling other edibles onto his plate.

Hana shook her head, “I really have no clue. I tried speaking to her earlier and she’s simply...inconsolable. I can’t get her to divulge anything.” She took a bite of meat, “And that’s saying something, considering I can always get her to spill, you know?”

“Yeah…that is a bit distressing.” Her brother agreed. Kiba ate his fill, glancing every so often out to the porch where his mother contemplated. After finishing his breakfast, Kiba asked his sister to say hello to Sakura for him, and he exited through the side door to avoid disturbing his mother.

The backyard was vast and green, and dogs romped where they pleased; some ninken and some domesticated. Kiba gave a short whistle and his partner came bounding, “Good, it’s time to clean you up, furball!”

Akamaru gave a soft *hmm* of protest as he followed Kiba to the side of the house. Kiba scrounged through an outdoor cupboard and withdrew a shampoo bottle. He regarded his doleful dog. “Aw come on, don’t look at me like that! You know you’re too big for the tub now. Let’s just get this over with, alright? You want to be handsome again, don’t you boy?”

And with that Akamaru willingly stepped beneath the hose Kiba had picked up. He behaved as he was lathered and rinsed, partly pleased that his master was also getting wet and sudsy. Kiba scrubbed until the ninken’s fur went from French grey to its original white. He turned the tap off and stood back, letting Akamaru shake himself vigorously.

“And a second…” Kiba crossed a gravel path to the community clothesline, unclipping a large towel. He assisted Akamaru in drying off, and nearly finished before he spotted Kuromaru.

“Hey! Kuromaru!” Kiba called, catching the attention of his mother’s hound as he passed, “What’s up with Mom today?”

The old dog stopped to take care of an itch on his flank. He turned his good eye to Kiba, “It’s not my
place to discuss, really…”

“Come on! She won’t even talk to Hana!”

“Mind your own business, boy, at least until Tsume is ready to explain things herself.” Kuromaru rasped back, “And it’s high-time you bathed Akamaru. He was beginning to look mangy.”

Kuromaru stalked off, and Kiba shouted after the grouchy dog, “Oh yeah! Because you look so great! Pirate mutt…”

Concluding it would be better to uncover his mother’s stressor later in the day; Kiba went back inside and dressed in his room. Akamaru took a gander at himself in a wall mirror, and while he could not see in color he wagged his tail at his handsome image. Kiba shed his ill-fitting, soggy sleepwear and donned his black jacket.

Kiba smiled to himself. He recalled how Sakura had learned from a reliable source that their team (excluding Kakashi) was the best-dressed in the village. ‘Too bad there’s no merit in that for shinobi…” Kiba thought, fastening a holster to his thigh. Once he was thoroughly presentable Kiba left his room, greeting a few relatives he passed in the main corridor.

The front of the Inuzuka household had a clear view of the courtyard Tsume was loitering in. Kiba gazed at his mother, curious for only a moment, and then motioned for Akamaru to follow him as he departed from the grounds.

Kiba arrived at his team’s designated training spot shortly after Tama, but nearly twenty minutes before Kakashi materialized.

“You are really friggin’ lucky that your reputation compensates for your tardiness.” Kiba informed his master, “Do you think the Hokage, or anyone for that matter, would put up with your crap if you were less qualified?”

“No. I gather everybody would dislike it.” Kakashi agreed, cracking open a copy of Icha Icha, “Ergo, I plan to show up late to every non-professional gathering that requires my presence… because I can.” His visible eye crinkled in delight and his students looked slightly peeved.

Sakura would be absent for the next few days while she trained with Tsunade, affording Kiba the perfect opportunity to bond with his new teammate. Kakashi advised them to work on their substitutions while they trained together. The jounin planted himself on a collapsed training post and began to read the latest installment of his favorite series. Tama gave a shout of warning before she charged at Kiba with whirlwind kicks.

While he was reluctant to admit it, Kiba could see what Sakura meant when she sometimes referred to Tama as “Female Lee.”

Tama’s repertoire of techniques was parallel to Lee’s, albeit she did possess a few added skills. Most notably there was her increased use of fire jutsu. She knew two techniques from Sato and was developing more on her own. Kakashi had tested her chakra affinity and it was, as expected: fire, though it was difficult to pinpoint why her chakra nature had so easily manifested.

“Kunoichi, on the average, express their chakra affinities more easily than men.” Kakashi had explained, “It’s been speculated that women have inherently better chakra control, which can, and often does, facilitate the use of one’s chakra nature. There needn’t be any hoopla about that, though, because I have seen just as many men tap into their natures too.”
‘No need for hoopla, sure!’ Kiba snickered mentally, ducking under a fiery version of Leaf Hurricane that singed nearby vegetation. She was an opponent he never went easy on, simply because if he did, she would mop the forest floor with him. The dedication and focus Tama had inherited from Gai, while not as audible as Lee’s, was just as formidable during a fight.

“Gatsuuga!” Kiba lunged forward, gouging a trench in the ground before striking the kunoichi…her substitute, rather, and blocked her counterstrike as she drove down from above. Akamaru ran around, wanting in on the action, but received no signal from Kiba to assist. The dog stayed nearby, paying close attention to the sparring session.

Punch for punch, the young woman was just as strong as Kiba. While neither of them had learned the secret to Sakura’s (i.e. Tsunade’s) absolutely horrific strength, they were only just behind her in terms of wrecking power. Kakashi ignored the destruction of his surroundings as he read.

Over the course of three hours they took several water breaks, chatting cordially, and then resumed the intense fighting in order to test other staple jutsu. It was around noontime when Kakashi called for them to stop, “Good work pupils, but you can give it a rest now- you’re making me tired just looking at you.”

“Yeah, I’ll bet reading that genre puts such a strain on you, Kaka-sensei.” Kiba retorted, stripping off his jacket to cool down.

“You want to go get some lunch, Kiba-kun?” Tama asked, dabbing her neck with a towel, “I’m starved!”

“Sure, it’ll be my treat.” He gave her a toothy grin.

Tama gave a polite objection to his offer, but Kiba insisted. A moment after the exchange Kakashi beckoned the Inuzuka over to his reading spot, beyond Tama’s earshot.

“What’s up, Sensei?”

“I can see that you’ve warmed up to our team’s new addition.” Kakashi assured Kiba, “And it’s good that you nurture your friendship with Tama-chan…but please be advised not to turn it into something more, alright?”

Kiba wrinkled his nose, frustrated, “Thanks, but I don’t know if any of that is your business, Sensei.”

“Well you see it is my business, Kiba-kun. This is family business, and I expect my nephew to marry Tama-chan according to our family agreement.” Kakashi closed his book, unabashed.

“You can’t be serious…” Kiba scoffed. Just the thought of Sato prevailing, however improbable it was, made him sick to his stomach.

Kakashi’s voice was a bit stern, “This time I am serious. We have to keep our promises, Kiba.”

“I can make promises too, Sensei…and I promise that I’ll make her happy.” Kiba replied evenly. He turned and crossed the field back to Tama and Akamaru, hoping what he felt inside was not visible on his face.

The kunoichi did not question what Kiba and their sensei had discussed, and she suggested they go to a small café she was fond of. On the way they made small talk, mainly concerned with Sakura’s busy schedule. Tama also had obligations to keep. With both kunoichi away from the team temporarily Kiba needed to adjust to solitary work again.
“I’m sorry that we won’t be around for the next few days.” Tama did look mildly concerned, “Are you still going to take a solo mission? You didn’t really elaborate…”

“Nah, Tsunade-sama likes appointing substitutes these days, so I’ll go along with whoever she picks out.” Kiba shrugged it off, “It’s not a big deal if it’s C-ranked.”

Her smile was bright, “Have you always been this adaptable?”

“Well, not always…” He scratched his head, replying, “I guess post-Retrieval Mission, yeah, I changed.”

Her face dropped, aware that he had lost a friend and a teammate. It was, essentially, the reason she had even been offered a spot on Kakashi’s team. They never had considered her a real replacement for Sasuke, claiming that she truly belonged and had earned her own place on the team. Yet there were times when Tama still felt like plaster, spread thin and trying to cover a very, very noticeable hole.

“Hey…don’t get upset.” Kiba smiled, keen to her unspoken musing, “This is a good change for our team. You may not believe this right now, Tama, but Sasuke didn’t leave big shoes to fill. We were a box for him to step off of, when all was said and done.”

“That sounds so-”

“Yeah, okay, maybe I was projecting my take on his betrayal. Sakura, well, at least he wanted to keep her in his life…” His voice became a touch rougher, “Me? No, he couldn’t be bothered. I could’ve ended up dead or worse going out there to look for him…why the hell would he factor in people who would risk life and limb for him?”

At the café they sat at a table beneath an awning, where the sunlight bounced off of the intricate metalwork of the building. A server took their orders before darting off. Tama watched the Inuzuka’s face for a long moment as he stared blankly at the tablecloth. Akamaru gave a soft whine of discomfort from his seat. She rested her elbows on the table, looking thoughtful.

“What if…he came back?” She asked, and more optimistically, added, “What if he makes amends? Would you still be so bitter, Kiba-kun?”

“That depends, I guess.” He muttered, juvenily prodding a salt shaker.

“On what?”

“If you get to stay on the team.” Kiba said, locking eyes with her, “I won’t let another friend go so easily.”

She blushed, “I’m sure I’d hang around…”

“But honestly, that event is so unlikely I won’t give it another thought.” He brightened a bit, “You’re here to stay, that I know for sure.”

Tama kept her composure. The conversation veered away from the subject of old friends when the food arrived, and in no time Tama had worked Kiba back out of his emotional shell. While he was, like any Inuzuka, outgoing, loud, and opinionated, Tama found that Kiba hesitated to voice his true feelings- usually trying to disguise them with aggression or a sarcastic comment. When relaxed, the young man’s eyes were clear and bright. He had an easy laugh and a bewitching white smile (the Inuzuka clan did take grand care of their teeth.)
After spending more time with Kakashi’s team, Tama observed how Kiba became less of a
categorized “Inuzuka” and more of an individual. She could say that he was not very unlike Sato:
expressive, clever, and very loyal. Kiba did possess, if marginally, more maturity than the latter. And
while Tama was charmed with both boys and their individuality, she chose to remain steadfast and
supportive. She and Sato were for each other, as she understood. No exceptions.

And as she considered all of this over her seafood, as if on cue, her fiancée appeared.

Kiba need only sniff once to know who had rounded the corner. Tama’s eyes had lit up. He did not
move to look over his shoulder because it was really guaranteed the young Hatake would interrupt
things without invitation. Not one to discriminate, though, Akamaru greeted the newcomer with a tail
shake and a lick. Kiba made a sound under his breath to discourage the good behavior.

“Mind if I join you?” Sato asked and Tama quickly had him seated adjacent to her.

The Hatake, though aware of Kiba’s disdain for him, kept with formalities, “How have you been,
Kiba? I haven’t seen you since—”

“Great, thanks.” Kiba looked down at his plate as he chewed.

“Pap says hi.” Sato added, hoping it would ease the tension.

Kiba looked up, visibly startled. His expression softened infinitesimally, “So…you met the old guy
in Kaido. Is he doing better?”

“He looked fine to me. I go there pretty often now since I’ve made some new friends.” Sato tacked
on a friendly smile and Kiba’s gut churned.

‘Ugh…what a fruitcake. He can do no fucking wrong.’ Kiba’s eyes narrowed again. Sato was
finishing up the shrimp Tama did not want to eat. They chatted almost as if Kiba had gone
transparent. ‘He shows up and she just changes modes- she caters to all of her future husband’s
wishes…ich, at least wait until he takes you to the altar…’

Kiba found he picked on Sato most when he was unhappy with himself; granted that he would never
in his right mind admit it to anyone. Sato only looked great once Kiba began internally taking stock
of his own flaws. That, coupled with Sato being the gravitational center of Tama’s attention, left
Kiba feeling like a flea. Unwanted and so commonly overlooked.

‘This is about the part in my brooding when someone would just slap me and tell me to get over it.’
Kiba observed, standing from the table, ‘I’ve got way better things to do than squeeze myself into an
attraction-triangle.’

By acknowledging the futility of it all, and willingly removing himself from it (for the time being) he
felt a fraction better. He patted Akamaru’s head; even if the mutt liked the Hatake. Even if Tama
liked the Hatake. Whatever. His time could be much better spent on anything other than
contemplation of what was missing and irretrievable…like an Uchiha he used to think he knew.

“Well this was really nice, Tama,” Kiba announced, setting a few bills on the table, “But I really
have to get going now.”

“Please stay.” Her eyes were repentant, almost, “We can go do something together! Sato just
mentioned—”

He cut in so he would not have to feel obligated, “Some other time, I promise. There’s some…weird
stuff going on back at home and it needs to be taken care of.”
Tama nodded in understanding and Sato chimed in, “Next time then?”

The Inuzuka rolled his eyes at the silver haired boy, taking his leave. Sato did accept the gesture since, this time; Kiba was not hatefully slugging him in the face.

While on Inuzuka grounds Kiba trained with Akamaru, taking pride in his ninken’s greater size and strength. The dog shredded substitutes with his teeth like tissue paper. Kiba enjoyed the distraction. Soon he would end up thinking about Tama again. Or his mother. Or the next day’s mission. ‘Life used to be so damn simple.’ He mused, still knowing that even back then it had still been very complicated. He just had not been concerned with any of the “crap.”

He was fairly convinced some sort of “crap” from the past was causing his mother to pace the yard all day long. Tsume was no Confucius. Rather than pondering the world’s idiosyncrasies she went out and busted heads, “It saves time!” That was practically her nindo. Now, seeing her subdued and…he shuddered at the thought: worried behavior, Kiba was beginning to expect the worst.

‘How bad can it be?’ He had an odd way of rating issues, ‘On a scale of one to Sasuke, what is it? Mom can’t really be having a nervous breakdown…’ Yet it seemed that way.

After washing up indoors Kiba braced himself and tracked his mother down. She was seated in the kitchen looking rather tranquil.

“There you are, son.” She looked at him with tired eyes, “Come here. We need to talk.”

“I figured.” He took a seat across from her.

Tsume flashed a piece of parchment for Kiba to see, “This here…is from your father.”

Kiba was nonplussed. He had been expecting war.

“I won’t bore you with the details, but the gist of it is your father admits making a mistake in leaving and he misses us.” She heaved a sigh, “Re-eeally out of the blue, isn’t it? Yet…the sincerity of it has me nearly convinced.”

A look of utter bewilderment was written on Kiba’s face.

Tsume broke the silence with a surprisingly good-natured belly laugh. She grinned widely at Kiba, flummoxing him further.

“Woo! To think I was going to ask you how you feel about this, Kiba!” She broke down into mad chuckles again.

“Well, uh…hm.” Kiba blinked hard, gathering his wits, “Mom…I don’t care if he comes back or stays gone. That’s what I think.” He then added sagely, “The worst thing that can happen is that he leaves again…and we survived that.”

Tsume gave her son a long, piercing look. “I see. So what should I say, Kiba? I can’t ask your sister; she would just cry…and I just…I don’t have an answer for him myself.”

“Tell him to come back and earn our respect.” Kiba suggested, smirking.

Her grin widened, “That’s my son.”

Kiba, then recovered from the initial shock of his discovery, excused himself. So this was the
mystery, was it? His father, a man he had imagined so spineless that he could not even brave his own marriage, was now begging to be welcomed back home. Akamaru was unruffled as he trotted down the hallway with his master. The dog had never known Tsume’s husband. He had been born nearly three years after he had taken off.

Kiba bathed quickly, suddenly preoccupied with how the family dynamic was about to be turned on its head again. He scrubbed feverishly, remembering how his father had taught him to tie knots and survive the wilds when he had been younger. He could smell the sharpness of the man’s aftershave-walking home from school beside the man. Laughing. Being picked up after goofing off with his age-mates in the park. Being scolded.

The tough “man’s man” who had not been tough enough, as it turned out. Unfit for the rowdy lifestyle of the Inuzuka- and a wife who called the shots.

The young man towelled off, and then glanced sidelong to Akamaru. Quietly he confessed, “I miss Dad.”

The following day Kiba stood in the Hokage’s office getting briefed on his assignment. Tsunade had given him a temporary teammate- a small, doe-eyed Hyuga from the Main Branch by the name of Fujita. Kiba recalled seeing the young genin around the village here and there, but since he was such a new addition he was scarcely seen on higher-level missions.

Fujita stood with his hands at his sides, slightly rigid, eyes darting to Akamaru curiously while trying to keep his attention on the Hokage. While he looked little more than an inexperienced twerp, Kiba decided to give the youngster the benefit of the doubt. He had apparently graduated early, gained Tsunade’s favor, and still had that Hyuga-visage that so many considered formidable.

“I expect you back here in less than six days, understood?” Tsunade snapped Kiba out of his observation, “Since this is basic information retrieval you two should do well. Just keep your distance from Cloud ninja patrols and they won’t bother you. New treaties have been signed to-” She looked at the Hyuga boy before continuing, “Prohibit senseless violence.”

“I understand, Hokage-sama.” Kiba responded, his subordinate echoing the reply, and they were promptly dismissed.

Out in the hallway Kiba turned to Fujita, “Listen up kid, we can bang out this mission in no time! The quicker we get back here the better reputation you can build.”

The Hyuga was wearing a small frown, “Well we can still-”

“Meet me at the village gate with your stuff in an hour!” Kiba trotted off with his ninken before Fujita could express himself.

The genin walked down the hallway, mulling over his impression of his new partner. ‘He’s not one of those extreme Type-A personalities…but he does seem motivated, maybe even aggressive.’ Fujita figured that if he could keep up with Rock Lee decently on a mission, this Inuzuka fellow (who seemed friendly enough) would not wear him out too much.

Back at the compound the sky was overcast and a chilling wind raced across the lawn. Fujita stopped to have a brief lunch with his parents (his mother smothered him with affection and praise) before packing necessities. His father gave him a gentle smile before saying goodbye.

Fujita was aware that he had gotten lucky with his familial circumstance. As the younger of two sons, Fujita had been considered for the Branch family as an infant. Hikune had been promising from
the start- bright, compassionate, and infinitely talented. Fujita’s mediocrity was excused in part because of his parents’ political voices, and his family’s lack of an immediate relative in the Branch. Along with a few other “prioritized” children, Fujita lived a comfortable life within the Main family in the shadow of his older sibling.

It did help that his father, Hideyasu, was a close friend of Hiashi’s, and a respected veteran. The elders had never been fond of Hideyasu’s “soft” ways, most especially his campaign for abolishing the Caged Bird Seal.

The boy smiled to himself, certain that when Hikune was seasoned enough to attend Hyuga council meetings, he would aid Hideyasu and Hiashi in their struggle to create a unified clan.

He secured his satchel on his back, taking a peek around the household with his Byakugan. It was a funny thing when he and his brother used their Blood Limit simultaneously, which in that particular moment they were, and they spotted each other with a surprised jolt through a number of walls and screens. Fujita could make out his brother’s impish grin before deactivating his Kekkei Genkai. ‘Maybe I can get out of here before he does something embarrassing…’

Fujita did make a break for it, but could not escape his older brother in the central corridor of the Main house. When Hikune caught him he ruffled his brother’s hair, “Off again? As a genin I never took missions as frequently as you do, Fujita! Such a go-getter…” He chuckled as Fujita ducked away from him.

“You were only a genin for two months before you were promoted.” Fujita retorted, “In terms of skill I-”

“You’re doing just fine.” Hikune patted his shoulder, “Come back safely.”

Fujita gave his brother a hug out of habit, and then hustled out of the compound, respectfully acknowledging his elders along the way.

After joining up with the young genin, Kiba set a swift pace for the Lightning Country. Right away it was clear to the Inuzuka that his partner was anxious. His was over-alert and clearly uncomfortable following behind Kiba. Fujita had asked how he could have gotten a risky mission so easily.

“I have experience with travelling. Trackers are required to go places and learn the territories.” Kiba tried to be patient with the boy, “If you’re worried because we’re headed towards the Lightning Country you can relax now. I’ll know wa-aay in advance if we have company.”

“I’m not worried. Besides, I’d be able to spot an intruder just as quickly.” His defense was brittle.

Kiba raised an eyebrow, giving the newbie a sharp look, “That so? So you’re questioning my competence?”

“Well no-”

“Then lighten up! We’re going to the boundary outpost, picking up the report, and heading straight back to Leaf. Simple stuff!” Kiba barked, “Trust me, if you quit it with that Hyuga-arrogance bullshit and cooperate you might even find this enjoyable.”

Fujita was quiet for a while, trailing behind the Inuzuka through the treetops. When he spoke again he apologized, “I’m sorry, Kiba-san. I have never travelled so far from Leaf before in a two-team cell. I’ll try to be a good teammate.”
There was a slight twinge of nostalgia in Kiba’s chest when he heard the boy’s comment. “It’s alright. You can handle tougher missions; otherwise the Hokage wouldn’t have considered you.” He grinned, “This is a great opportunity for you to prove that you’re worth your salt, and I’ll be a witness.”

Akamaru gave a rolling bark of agreement.

The tension was nearly extinguished after their exchange, and they made good time through the Fire Country. Continuing northeast during the evening, the pair rested only once to eat. Kiba was glad he had given the novice credit; for a short, thin aristocrat he sure had remarkable endurance. They crossed the grassy countryside and looming woods, and were not far from the Land of Lightning when daylight had expired.

By firelight Fujita opened up about how few academy students graduated to become genin in the past year. Many had even quit after living through the horrors of battle during the Sound invasion.

“I had a good friend in school who I was so sure was going to be my teammate.” Fujita said distantly, staring into the fire, “It didn’t work out…and now I hardly seem him. Why is it that your group…shinobi your age…are so much more-?” He struggled to find the word.

“Committed?” He offered. Kiba took a bite of jerky before offering the meat to the dog splayed out beside him.

Fujita nodded, “I suppose that’s it.”

“Because we had a lot more support than you new ‘up-and-comers’ have now.” Kiba told him, tossing a few sticks into the fire pit, “Before the village was attacked we had more shinobi. The jounin had an easier time training us before and, to put it bluntly…we recently made a lot of unexpected enemies. Our forces are spread thin now with high-level missions, fewer jounin to train novices, and just too much pressure on genin.”

The Hyuga ate wordlessly, visibly troubled. He reasoned that it was highly unlikely, after what Kiba had explained, that he would ever belong to a complete team.

“But don’t forget, kid, our age-group had some crazy genin mixed with exceptionally gifted genin.” Kiba continued thoughtfully, “Take Uzumaki Naruto’s team as an example. They pretty much blew everyone out of the water during the Chunin Exams. No one really expected much from them, but the weirdest team ended up being the most successful. We were inspired by the wild stuff they did.”

“What about your team?” Fujita asked innocuously.

There was a pause. Kiba sighed, “We have the best Sensei, to tell the truth. Sakura is studying under Tsunade when she can, and Tama…she is Maito Gai’s niece in many respects.”

“Wow.” Fujita cracked a smile, “That sounds like a challenge.”

“It’s a welcome one.” Kiba agreed.

“I was just thinking…wasn’t Uchiha Sasuke on your team before, well, you know…” Fujita trailed off, aware that it was a sorely personal subject. The songs of nocturnal insects filled in the gap of silence.

Akamaru rolled over, closer to Fujita, and solicited a tummy rub from the boy. Kiba finally began to speak, stumbling with the memories of his old squad.
“Yeah, Sasuke was part of our team.” Kiba acknowledged, “And for a while things went smoothly, I mean, I never fought with him. It was one of those rare situations in which I agreed with someone almost all of the time. His judgment was always solid up until he had to think of what happened to his clan…and then he twisted.”

Fujita listened in silence as the firelight danced before his pearly eyes.

“Before he let vengeance swallow him up, we could accomplish anything because we supported each other…that’s how it is when you get along with your team.” Kiba explained, adding tersely, “But at the drop of a hat he left. He screwed things up. He wouldn’t have done that if he gave two shits about our friendship!” Fujita flinched at the sting in Kiba’s words.

“Do you think that you can bring him back to the village?” The boy ventured in a small voice.

“I don’t know what I think.” Kiba sighed heavily, “Sure I’d drag him back here and make him atone for all that he did. Though…” A ghost of a smile appeared on his face, “I don’t think I can do it. I couldn’t bring him back last time. No one could. I wonder if we should try to save him even while he goes to extreme lengths not to be saved.”

“I would try.” Fujita empathized.

Kiba reached out and mussed the young shinobi’s head, “Yeah, take a few more missions, kid, and tell me that you still feel that way…”

When the sun rose it produced the most perfect swatch of tangerine in the sky. Kiba wasted no time in waking Fujita and setting out at the first hint of dawn. The boy rose with no complaint.

Kiba was aware that he and the young Hyuga, however briefly they had known each other, had established a decent rapport and understanding of the other’s endeavors. Drawing from his initial impression, Kiba felt that Fujita was a shockingly well-balanced member of the Main Branch whom, he speculated, had incredible combat and tactical potential. ‘He can definitely work on his self-esteem, but then again, most kids his age should work on their self-esteem…”

They cut through a valley blanketed in withered grass, where rolling hills gave way to barren farmland. The land became increasingly forbidding, and as they left the sheltered face of the looming mountain the weather deteriorated. Sharp winds made it a delicate trek scaling a craggy gorge. Loose stones catalyzed rockslides that they were quick to avoid, but had left Fujita somewhat shaken.

“Take it easy, I’ve been through this area a few times before.” Kiba was hoping to reassure the rookie. When Fujita gave him an uncertain look Kiba added, “We’re almost out of here anyway. It’s about another mile or two, check with those eyes of yours if you don’t believe me!”

Once Fujita did observe their surroundings he gave a small sigh of thanks. Beyond the next plateau was sprawling woodland and a building that looked to be inhabited. Kiba smirked at the careworn Hyuga.

Around the time they stopped for lunch the overcast sky broke in a pounding deluge.

Rather than taking cover beneath a rocky overhang, the two Leaf shinobi and their dog companion scrambled up over the lip of the gorge and into the forest. Fujita voiced his discomfort in nonsensical grumbling and Kiba delighted in the young genin’s expressivity. They made a dash in the dim light through the tangle of ancient trees and finally reached their destination- a cabin outpost with no apparent allegiance to the Lightning Country.
The two stopped on the porch of the house, glad to have escaped the storm. Kiba and Akamaru shook themselves thoroughly while Fujita, a few paces away, slicked the water from his exposed skin, frowning. "That was a relatively short trip, huh?" Kiba was grinning at his partner, "But it gets better from here out, so quit scowling."

"I'm not scowling!"

"I don’t care, whatever it is, it’s an unhappy face.” Kiba retorted, knocking on a thick, oak-wood door, “Hey! Anyone home?”

Fujita folded his arms and tried to relax, despite the fact that he was soaked to the bone. He had never felt so violated by bad weather. The sound of heavy rain prevailed for a long minute before an older gentleman answered the door. “Can I help you?” He asked in a rough voice.

Kiba explained to the man that they had stopped by to pick up a report that had been dropped off at the location by an informant. When the gentleman confirmed he had the scroll Kiba thanked him.

"Why don’t you wait out the rain here? You are welcome to stay the night and rest before you return to your country.” The old man offered, “I believe my granddaughter is preparing a meal now…”

Hearing about food sealed the deal for Kiba, and he happily accepted the old man’s request. The lodge was actually a shop where the old man and his children produced charcoal. 'Which explains the woodpiles everywhere…' Fujita noted, trying not to trip over anything in the house.

While Kiba followed the gentleman into a back room to retrieve the report, Fujita took a seat by the fire. The old man’s granddaughter was about his age. She was pale with dark hair and eyes, kneeling beside the hearth. She stirred a stew pot and wore a pink-and-white checkered kimono. The girl looked discreetly toward him, shy, and gave him a small smile. Fujita smiled back, if a little awkwardly.

"Would you care for a dry robe?” The girl asked quietly, “You’re drenched.”

"If you could spare one, please.” He answered, and watched as she stood and scurried from the room, all a-flutter. She reminded Fujita of the way Hinata behaved, or rather, before she had developed any kind of self-confidence.

When the girl returned with a navy cover-up he thanked her. He removed his shirt and pulled the robe on, instantly warmed by the thick material. Though Fujita had little experience with girls, he got the impression this one was intrigued by his presence.

He accepted a mug of tea from her with gratitude, “Thank you very much for your hospitality, Miss-?"

“Chiru.” She replied, keeping her eyes on the cinders in the hearth, “It really is no trouble, shinobi-san. We do not get very many visitors around here except for shinobi. My grandfather and I open our home to weary travelers in these parts.”

“I am very grateful for that.” Fujita told her, “And please, call me Fujita.”

Her face was quickly dusted pink. Fujita could see that Chiru was not accustomed to being acknowledged by visitors, particularly by any her age. ‘These people were kind to welcome Kiba-san and I into their home when they really have no reason to trust us.’ Fujita considered, knowing that they could have just as easily been stuck out in the rainstorm.

When Kiba and Chiru’s grandfather returned Kiba’s grin was ear to ear. His face suggested
something about the young girl seated across from the Hyuga, and Fujita actually did scowl at Kiba.

“Chiru! Are you taking proper care of this shinobi?” Her grandfather gruffed, “Give him something to eat so he can warm up! Warriors lead a much harder life than we do!”

The girl quailed, hastily spooning the contents of the pot into bowls, “Forgive me, Grandpa! I won’t be so absent-minded.”

Her grandfather sighed, gently adding that she should relax. Chiru’s grandfather crossed to a cupboard to look for smoking tobacco. Kiba took a seat beside Fujita, and the old man also settled beside the fire.

“Chiru and I will try to make sure your stay is comfortable, because the next few days of your journey won’t be, I can assure you.” The man said, lighting his pipe, “My granddaughter will provide you with whatever you need. Your village has been very good in protecting and supporting my family’s business.”

Fujita exchanged a glance with Kiba before he replied, “We are very happy to return the favor.”

“That’s nice of you to say, young man, because this girl here is going to need a husband one day.” The gentleman replied casually, with his pipe clenched in the corner of his mouth, and he began to spoon stew into his bowl.

Kiba exhaled, trying to disguise his laughter as Fujita’s face heated up with embarrassment. ‘This Hyuga kid is great. I’ve got to take him on more missions…’

Rested, the Leaf shinobi departed the following morning before their hosts woke. The weather was uncooperative- the air stagnant and thick with fog. Kiba was mindful as he picked his way through the forest, distinctly remembering a shortcut that would take them south.

“I know this looks risky, but if we cut down the side of this mountain, we’ll completely bypass the valley.” Kiba told his companion, “See- it makes more sense going down than coming up. I’ve found this is the best way to get back.”

“I’ll remember it.” Fujita nodded.

Kiba had to hand it to the newbie; he had turned out to be pleasant company. While he was thin as a bean-pole and skittish as a bird, Fujita had proved to be intelligent and adaptable. ‘Working with him is like the middle-ground between Neji and Hinata…except that he’s way shorter…’

Just as they began to descend the steep, misted slopes, Akamaru’s ears swiveled. The hound remained silent, but it was enough of an indication for Kiba to ask his partner to take a look.

Fujita was taken aback by what his Blood Limit uncovered, “Cloud ninja. We never would have noticed them…they’re pretty far off.”

“Good.” Kiba breathed.

“It looks like…a battle. They are having problems with this fog as well.” Fujita reported, resting his eyes.

“How unfortunate for them! But we’re well equipped for these conditions, huh?” The Inuzuka grinned as he lead the way, “Better still, we’re downwind from them, even if the weather changes. Don’t sweat it, kid.”
The group kept alert on the hike down, occasionally stopping to pick out a manageable route. The climate did not improve as they continued, and Kiba began to get the impression he should not have chosen the short cut.

‘This is a very commonly used path. It’s safe. That’s why it appeals to shinobi more than the canyon route…’ He shook his head, ‘Just because Fujita saw a skirmish doesn’t mean we’ll be noticed. Heck! He has the Byakugan, and no one without it will see much out here...’

He did take note that the thick air was making it difficult to pick up a scent. Akamaru’s nose was frantically pressed against the ground, trying to detect any abnormalities. Kiba could hear the faint rattling of what sounded like jutsu off in the distance. The fog absorbed most of the noise.

When the boys reached a plateau, a cough rasped out of the haze. Immediately Fujita scanned their surroundings and grimaced.

Kiba did not approve of the expression, “Aw great…”

The stranger in the mist was surprised by Kiba’s comment, having not expected to encounter anyone else. In a moment of confusion and chatter, Kiba and the unknown shinobi dashed ahead towards each other, stealing a glimpse of the respective newcomer before disappearing again. Fujita remained watchful, relaying information to Kiba, “He’s clearly lost and he cannot see us. Shall I deal with him?”

Kiba chuckled, folding his arms, “Please, by all means.”

Fujita, eyes tense, moved ahead. Akamaru took a seat beside his master, listening to the sounds of the young Hyuga beating the defenseless, disoriented ninja. Painful Jyukken strikes crippled the ninja until he pleaded for it to end, “Knock it off!”

Fujita stepped away, still within the stranger’s line of sight. Kiba also emerged from the fog and spoke, “Yo, what’s your problem? You shouldn’t be out here on your own.”

“How nice of you to point out, but for your information I was with my platoon earlier…” The man stood, wiping his lip, “Ugh...we’re supposed to be disarming old traps that have started malfunctioning out here. It was bad enough when the explosives reacted badly to the weather...then we got ambushed by some punk!”

“Did the punk realize what important work you were doing?” Fujita asked.

“Obviously not!” The Cloud ninja retorted, “This is no time for me to chat! If I don’t find my team, we’re all going to have problems!”

Checking with his Byakugan, Fujita pointed the shinobi in the right direction and he departed to find his comrades. Akamaru made a low sound, inquiring about the encounter.

“Nah, he’ll probably get lost again.” Kiba sighed, “Come on, we need to keep moving.”

Akamaru kept a visual lock on both of his bipedal counterparts, circling them in a figure-eight motion.

After they had resituated themselves on a path back down the mountainside, an explosion roared. Shaken, the Leaf shinobi proceeded, but the increasing volume of fighting only confirmed what Fujita reported, “They are coming this way...someone is after them!”

Akamaru clamped his mouth around Kiba’s arm and pulled him down, tripping Fujita in the process.
Kiba and the Hyuga tumbled, scraping against sharp gravel. Kiba could see that their next step would have triggered a wired trap. Kiba patted the dog’s head, “Keep it up, boy!”

They bolted back up the plateau, stumbling, avoiding the blind combatants that floundered around, triggering snares. The hilltop cleared somewhat of the haze as blows were exchanged, and Kiba could then understand what Fujita had been talking about.

It was a decent sized squadron of Cloud shinobi, and the “punk” who had been driving them down the slopes into their own traps darted in and out of the fog, too quick to be spotted.

Rocks flew and Kiba raked them apart with his claws, unsure if Fujita would be able to defend against the multitude of jutsu being used. A fireball impacted the mountainside, scattering the Kumo nin, and for a brief moment, Kiba could see. Just a few yards ahead, unmistakably, was Sasuke.

“Oh shit…” Kiba ducked back, glancing to Fujita, who hadn’t a clue in the world who the attacker was. Akamaru scrambled to avoid a Cloud ninja’s poorly timed Earth Jutsu, growling indignantly.

“Do we stay out of it?” Fujita hollered, also trying to keep his distance, “We have no part in this!”

“Yes, we can try to stay out of it, but they’ve noticed us.” Kiba informed him, watching as a Cloud ninja rounded on them during the confusion.

The Cloud shinobi struck out at Fujita, who countered bravely even when he was half the height of his attacker. The Kumo nin paused, realizing he was not facing his earlier enemy. Kiba landed a powerful kick on the nin’s back, rocketing him into the dense fog with a cry. He told Fujita to keep his distance, and ordered his ninken to watch the boy.

With little thought Kiba raced into the fray, ignoring his partner’s protests. There was a dreamlike moment in which the Inuzuka could clearly distinguish the squadron from Cloud organizing an attack. Across from them was his former teammate, whose face belied no emotion. He let his instincts dictate his reaction, “Gatsuuga!”

He tore through the group of Cloud ninja, forcing them apart and into the haze.

There was no word of gratitude from Sasuke for the distraction. Sasuke did promptly retreat, and Kiba followed, certain that Fujita would catch up.

‘This is about as far-fetched as it gets. Luck, fate, coincidence…none of that has ever happened to me!’ Kiba strained to keep his old teammate in his sight, ‘When the kid asked what I would do about this kind of thing, I didn’t actually think I’d have to stand by what I said…’

Sasuke was considerably fast in spite of the perilous landscape. Kiba could credit it to his skilled eyes, and he kept up as the Uchiha launched himself up a chiseled precipice and into the woods beyond. Undaunted, Kiba followed, eerily reminded of the Retrieval Mission. He could hear Fujita calling after him- a good sign.

In a short amount of time a great distance was covered by pursed and pursuer. Tracking the Uchiha back up the mountain nullified whatever progress Kiba and Fujita had made on their return journey.

‘It’ll be worth it! Even if he outruns me, beats the shit out of me, whatever- at least it can be said that I saw him with my own two eyes…’ Kiba thought.

At first, Kiba considered how he may have been under the effects of a genjutsu when he saw Sasuke had halted several yards ahead. His sense of smell, however, confidently suggested that his target was not manipulating him at all. In a sheltered stretch of forest the two stopped. Dim, filtered light washed the environment out in sepia tones.
Exhausted, Kiba rested against the trunk of a tree to catch his breath, watching Sasuke vigilantly. He did not appear intimidated in the least and he was looking in Kiba’s direction. That was an acknowledgement, however small.

Kiba could scent Fujita and Akamaru approaching. He blinked in surprise when Sasuke slowly leaned against a tree and slid down to sit at its base. He’d had a long day after all. Kiba straightened up and inclined his head, “Hey.”

Sasuke made no response. Fujita entered the clearing with Akamaru. He looked incredulously at Kiba who shook his head at the younger boy. They drew near the Uchiha, stopping just across from him. The Hyuga personally found it bizarre how no altercation had erupted. The atmosphere was calm, with both parties worn down.

Kiba took a seat and relaxed, patting Akamaru’s flank. He looked at Sasuke. The boy’s eyes were glassed over but he was watching them. ‘I don’t think he’s going to try anything…he’s never considered me a threat. The only reason he’s still here is because he wants to be.’

“Chatty as ever, huh?” Kiba observed, “Who should break the ice this time, you or me?”

The Uchiha made no reply, and his attention shifted to Fujita, instantly unsettling the young genin. Kiba could tell the Hyuga was terrified, judging by his abrupt intake of air. Fujita had deduced for himself who the mysterious newcomer was.

“Quit creeping the kid out!” Kiba snapped.

At length, Sasuke spoke, “Who is he?”

“Psh. Don’t ask me like he’s not standing right in front of you!”

Sasuke made a low sound and then spoke again, “He’s clearly too frightened to speak to me directly.”

Kiba growled, “Gee, I wonder about that…”

Fujita cleared his throat, managing some composure. He introduced himself, “I am Hyuga Fujita.”

“How dull.”

“Cut the crap!” Kiba warned, “There’s no need to bully the kid.”

The Inuzuka took a moment to take stock of Sasuke’s features. He was taller, leaner, and dressed in attire typical of Sound. There was a blade at his side as well. His hair was longer, disheveled, and his face had narrowed. Eyes that had once revealed emotion so readily, Kiba remembered, now looked paralyzed and incapable of communication. He had gone stale like a piece of old bread, Kiba estimated.

Kiba belatedly noticed Akamaru pad over to Sasuke when he had extended his hand. He patted the dog’s head, outwardly impressed with Akamaru’s growth. The dog, naïve to the extent of his doggy treachery, happily sat beside the once-teammate.

“It looks like you missed someone.” Kiba prodded, wondering whether or not this mild interaction could mean anything good.

“I am capable of nostalgia.” His gaze fell on Kiba, “There are many things you don’t know I am capable of.”
That was certainly true, Kiba thought, ‘Among other things…I never would have guessed you were capable of becoming a traitor like your brother…’

Akamaru returned to his master’s side when Kiba called him. The dog was completely relaxed when Kiba put his hands on him, ‘Well, if Akamaru hasn’t sensed a disturbance…then Sasuke isn’t up to anything. Let’s see what he wants…’

“What are you doing out here, Sasuke?” Kiba asked.

“I’ve been tracking an individual who betrayed Sound for Cloud.” Sasuke had no problem disclosing the information, “The climate has allowed this person to avoid detection…for now.”

“Ah, well, don’t expect any help from us.”

“I don’t. Neither of you could improve my search anyway.”

Kiba ground his teeth, retorting, “You really have become more insufferable…”

“If you feel that way I can leave.” Sasuke told him, standing.

It would only be a moment between Sasuke still being in the clearing and being long gone. The facts lined up in Kiba’s head at the last possible moment, and he baited his old teammate with something he would not casually walk away from.

“I’m surprised you haven’t asked about Sakura yet.” Kiba added.

The Uchiha gave him a dirty look. He never would have taken Kiba as the blackmailing type, but it seemed he had grown cleverer during their time apart.

“Look, ultimately it doesn’t matter whether you leave or stay,” Kiba shrugged, “You’ll wind up back in Leaf eventually.”

Sasuke made a sound of amusement before walking away.

Fujita, alarmed by the missed opportunity, sprang to his feet, “Shouldn’t we-?”

“Kid, cool it! Sit down.” Kiba yanked on the younger boy’s sleeve, “He’s not going anywhere, that I know for sure. Sasuke is just sick of talking to us for the time being.”

The genin gradually began to piece it together, “He won’t leave…until you’ve told him something?”

“Yes, and that gives us an advantage…although it’s not much.” Kiba frowned after speaking, thinking to himself, ‘A temporary advantage, that’s what it is…once I spill the beans we won’t be sitting pretty for much longer.’

“He wants to know about your teammate Sakura.” Fujita said quietly, “Why?”

“Because he’s in love with her and he knows he screwed things up.” Kiba summarized, “Whatever I tell him may influence the choices he makes…so try to understand, kid, why I’m not running my mouth off over here.”

Fujita wore a contemplative look. His round, childish face betrayed how young and inexperienced he was. He used his Byakugan for a short time to spot where Sasuke had sulked off to, and then considered what Kiba had told him.

“What do we do?” The boy wondered, “Should we try to bring him back to the village?”
Kiba’s expression was solemn. “Now if I were really courageous I’d say yes…we’d try to bring him back, but I know you won’t be able to take him. It’s my responsibility to make sure you live to fight another day and…it’d be messy.” He answered truthfully, “It’s ill-advised, kid, and honestly…I don’t really want to bring him back.”

“Why not?” Fujita protested.

“It’s simple: he hasn’t achieved what he set out to do yet.” Kiba explained, “I’m not going to be the one to take that away from him. As his friend, I just can’t.”

A silence fell upon them. Fujita sighed, taking time to absorb Kiba’s reasoning. No good friend would deny a comrade of avenging his or her family. What was clearer than that, Kiba had also mentioned, was that they were not likely to survive the attempt. ‘Kiba did not say it, but Sasuke is surely stronger than the both of us combined…’

“Even after what you’ve been through, you are still his friend.” Fujita clarified, adding, “I don’t have any friends who think that highly of me.”

“Don’t sweat it!” Kiba clapped the boy on the shoulder, “You’re making a friend right now who will.”

Fujita smiled to himself. For a decidedly straightforward person, Kiba was very agreeable.

“Just for the hell of it, though, check where he’s gotten to.” Kiba tacked on.

The Hyuga verified Sasuke’s position, finding that he had covered considerable ground. “He very well may be leaving after all…” Fujita frowned, “Do you think we should let him go?”

Kiba stood, brushing his pants off, “Nope. Let’s move it.”

The day wore thin as the pair neglected their return to Leaf, in favor of a wild goose chase through rugged terrain. After tracking the missing-nin down, they ended up in an elevated, more secluded expanse of forest. Sasuke did not show himself to them openly, but Kiba counted on the fact that he would stick around for curiosity’s sake. ‘He probably wanted to put some distance between us and Kumo…they’re definitely pissed.’

Daylight diminished and evening clouds carpeted the sky. Fujita remained alert as he gathered wood for a campfire. Kiba went to hunt with Akamaru, promising a swift return.

‘He says we should stay overnight so we can speak to Sasuke…and possibly negotiate with him.’ Fujita thought with a shudder, ‘But he’s intimidating…he’s been watching me this whole time since Kiba left…’ According to his Byakugan, Sasuke was contentedly perched in the treetops, well hidden, and watching him in silence.

Fujita dug a crude fire pit before lining it with wood and bark. He nearly jumped out of his skin when Sasuke suddenly appeared, descending from his loft.

Sasuke glanced at Fujita, noting how he had startled the boy. He rolled his eyes.

Fujita backed off, unable to read the social signals, ‘He’s been trying to scare me for the better part of a day…and then he acts as if I have nothing to fear! Like I’m some jittery child!’ Which, to a degree, he knew he was.

Sasuke breathed life into the fire, a very generous gesture, before taking a seat near it. Still at a loss,
Fujita kept his distance, but he also sat down. Kiba returned shortly afterward with a juvenile boar, and Akamaru had his meal dangling from his jaws.

“Ah, now this is an improvement.” Kiba remarked after seeing them. He dropped the game and proceeded to expertly skin it, “Kid, get over here and learn how to feed yourself!” Fujita observed how Kiba prepared the animal before staking it over the fire.

At some point during the lesson Sasuke stood without comment and departed.

Kiba ignored him, figuring he had gone to find something to eat for himself. By nightfall Fujita and Kiba were cutting strips of meat from the kill, enjoying a moment of rest. Akamaru had finished off the hare he had caught earlier, but he eyed the roasting meat longingly. Kiba offered strips to the hungry dog, grinning, “I know you’re a growing boy…”

As full dark swallowed the mountain Fujita did one last check for Sasuke.

“He’s gone.” He reported, disappointed, “Maybe I should have-”

“Sasuke is not gone.” Kiba assured him, “Don’t blame yourself. He just wants to make our lives difficult. Think about it, he’s not happy that I’ve been making him stick around for information he ought not to beat out of me. It’s just his way of returning the pesky favor.”

“You’ve been right so far.” Fujita shrugged, spreading out to lay down with a full stomach, “But just in case he doesn’t come back…can we please go home? We’re already pushing our deadline with Hokage-sama.”

“Alright.” Kiba agreed, having his fill, and he offered what remained of dinner to Akamaru.

They stretched out close to the cracking fire, drifting slowly into a food-induced sleep.

“Do you think…” Fujita was still anxious, “He’ll try to kill us while we sleep?”

Kiba laughed at the thought, “Well, if he does, he’ll be a gentleman and we won’t even know what hit us. Come on, kid, get some rest…”

And after a long string of racing thoughts and worries, Fujita was overcome by sleep.

In the middle of the night Kiba’s eyes batted open groggily and beheld Sasuke adding more wood to the fire. A small bag that he supposed belonged to the Uchiha sat a short distance away. Sasuke had no bedroll, so he made himself comfortable and laid back against the bag. He slipped his arms beneath his head and stared up at the plume of campfire smoke that rose into the sky in gray tendrils.

Kiba rolled onto his side to face his former teammate.

“I’m sure you agree,” He said, “That it’s kind of weird for you to be here.”

“I agree.” Sasuke replied.

“Are you hanging around just so you can hear about Sakura?”

“Yes.”

“Can’t you see I’m trying to sleep? Me and the kid have a long return trip ahead of us now.”

“I can see that.”
Kiba sighed and then propped his chin up with his hand. He then added, “So…I guess you really
don’t care that I’m around, huh? Or what I went through to try to get you back?”

A few beats passed before Sasuke answered, “It’s good that you’re alive.”

Kiba chuckled grimly. ‘I seriously doubt he meant that in a nice way!’ He thought to himself.

“It’s good that I’m alive because I’ll be able to tell you about Sakura, right?” Kiba prodded.

Sasuke turned his head to stare at Kiba. Flames divided them. Low, flickering flames.

“That’s why.” Sasuke confirmed.

‘I figured as much…’ Kiba proceeded, “Well…did you ever consider me your friend at all?”

The ex-teammate continued to stare but said nothing. It was sort of polite of him not to answer that
question. Either way, it would sting. He had still defected from Leaf and caused damage; whether
they were friends or not.

Kiba rolled onto his back again, refusing to let grief settle in. He really couldn’t tell how the Uchiha
felt about this situation. He did not know what was worse: being helpless in returning Sasuke to the
village, or not being acknowledged or cared for in any way after all their time as Team 7. ‘I still can’t
believe I spoke about this sort of thing to both Tama and Fujita…I mean, really? Is there some sort
of cosmic clock that has my misery on a timer? I just can’t get through to him. I knew it would be
this way…but it really bites…’

After a long silence Kiba spoke up again, “Sasuke, look…I’m not gonna try to bring you back. I
actually want you to do what you have to do. And though you make it seem like you don’t need
anyone’s help…” He glanced over to the other boy, “You and I both know you can’t do it by
yourself.”

A tch sound escaped the Uchiha. He then retorted, “You can’t even begin to fathom how much my
power has grown. I will make Itachi pay.”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah…tell me something I don’t know…” Kiba yawned.

Sasuke scowled, “Do you want me to kill you?”

Kiba chuckled again, “No. Not really, no. Honestly, though, Sakura would be more upset about me
being dead than you never coming back, probably. Yeah, actually…she’d be devastated to lose me.
Think about that for a while…”

“You tempt your fate.” Sasuke growled.

“Pft! Are you serious?” Kiba looked over to the Uchiha, very amused that he was getting some kind
of emotion out of him. “You don’t want to make her sad! Not after all that bullshit you put her
through! There’s a lot going on in Sakura’s life and if you really care about her you’ll get your act
together!”

Sasuke looked away again, but his eyes roamed. The smoke, the trees, the insects darting by in the
night air…His thoughts had taken off like a runaway train and Kiba was watching it occur.

‘I can’t believe this is happening.’ Kiba thought, taken aback, ‘Maybe I can say stuff to get through
to him! He cares. He cares enough about her to be unsure of himself…so…what do I do now?’
Kiba glanced over to Fujita who was slumbering quietly a few paces away. Akamaru was spread out beside him, his flank rising and falling with peaceful breaths. Across the fire pit, Sasuke was trying to rest but could not snap out of his spiraling contemplation. Kiba approved.

“If I even begin to tell you about what Sakura’s been doing since you left…” Kiba halted his words and then shook his head, “Forget it. You couldn’t take it. You’re not here for her anyway…you’re just completing some stupid mission for people who are just trying to use you. It’s too bad you don’t try to help the people who really care about you.”

The Inuzuka stretched out his arm and added another branch to the fire. He readjusted himself to be closer to Akamaru and Fujita, and then murmured over his shoulder, “Take it easy, Sasuke.”

And the Uchiha stayed still for a very long time before letting out a shaky breath. He closed his eyes. For some goddamn reason, he thought to himself, Kiba had a point.

By morning Sasuke had disappeared again. The fire had been reduced to cinders, and the weather had vastly improved. A clear sky shone overhead. Kiba judged that Sasuke would act quickly to locate his target before more Kumo nin arrived to investigate what had happened along the border. He and Fujita were packed and ready to set out. They really could have just gone home…

“Kid, I know this is going to sound absolutely ludicrous, but…” Kiba’s expression was grim, “I think we need to try to do something about Sasuke.”

Fujita looked alarmed, “Why is that?”

“Because last night I said some things that made him think, or maybe even reconsider what he’s been doing.” Kiba told him, “It really is a long-shot. This mission report is going to look terrible as it is, but at least we can spice it up by saying we tried.”

“We will be taking a great risk.”

“I know.” Kiba nodded gravely, “I definitely want you to stay away from all fighting if possible. This was my decision, not yours, and I don’t want you to pay for it. Something tells me that if this kind of an opportunity shows up out of the blue…we damn well better take it…”

Fujita nodded, accepting the new course of action, “Yes, Kiba. I think so too! I will do my best not to compromise our mission, and if I do get hurt or killed…”

“Just shut up, will you? You’re gonna be fine!” Kiba barked, upset at the mention of harm coming to his young teammate. He turned to his ninken, “Let’s start tracking Sasuke, alright boy?”

Akamaru yapped in understanding and set his nose to the ground to pick up the scent. Kiba already had it filling his nostrils. Sasuke had not been gone for very long.

After Fujita had activated his Byakugan to assist the search, the group set out. Following Sasuke’s path would lead them directly into Lightning Country territory, a place they had been expressly warned not to go.

Akamaru directed them over the crest of the mountain, and on the far side they feasted their eyes on a sheer drop marked with cliff ledges and eagle nests. Clouds floated lazily in and above the canyon. Kiba quickly got a bad feeling about the place. The Hidden Cloud Village was still a way’s off…but that didn’t mean that shinobi were not prowling these parts. If Sasuke was here, Kiba thought, he was probably close to finding the person who had betrayed Sound.
Fujita pointed to a rope-and-board bridge that connected their side of the canyon to the other. “This is the only bridge that I can see in this valley…we will have to be careful when we are returning…” The Hyuga reported.

“Got it.” Kiba acknowledged, “Let’s get moving.”

The bridge seemed new and very stable when they crossed it. Fujita began to feel butterflies humming around in his stomach, troubled by being so far into enemy territory. Akamaru’s acute sense of smell led them in a small circle, but after a short bark the dog began sprinting through a patch of forest to the west. Fujita checked their surroundings with the Byakugan for good measure. He held out his hand and silently mouthed, “Wait!”

Kiba and his dog froze, hidden in the darkness of the pines. Beyond the treeline there was a lookout station that was built into the cliffside. Two Cloud shinobi had halted Sasuke in a clearing in front of the outpost. Though Kiba could see words being exchanged he could not hear them clearly. He got the impression things were going to escalate.

Fujita crouched beside Akamaru, staring out into the grassy field. His hands rested on the dog’s shoulders apprehensively, pulling at fur. As they held still Kiba did his best to assess the situation.

From the look of it, two chunin had discovered Sasuke. They appeared to be about his age, Kiba estimated, and they had the characteristic dark skin of people of the Cloud Village. The kunoichi who was exchanging harsh words with Sasuke had red hair tied back in a bandana. Her sharp eyes held Sasuke’s gaze fearlessly. The boy beside her was quiet and chewed anxiously on a lollipop. They were both carrying large swords on their backs. Kiba was trying to square himself with this information.

‘If I had to put money on who was going to win this fight…I would put it all on Sasuke, but…’ He observed the lookout tower a short distance away, ‘There is no way in hell those Kumo nin don’t have backup waiting for them…and Sasuke probably wants to get at whoever is in that tower anyway…’

From the corner of his eye Kiba regarded Fujita, ‘I’ve got to keep the kid out of sight if I can…Cloud ninja are always looking to one-up other ninja villages…and they have been after the Byakugan for quite a while.’ He looked ahead again, grimacing, ‘Worst of all…if Sasuke does lose this one…Cloud will be taking the credit for his capture and use him as a huge bargaining chip…once they conclude dissecting the Sharingan.’

The situation was bleak from all angles. The chances of catching Sasuke and returning him back to Leaf were close to zero…but if by a stroke of terrible luck he were to end up in the clutches of Kumogakure… ‘The Hokage will want to rip my head off and kick it across the village if she hears me utter those words…’ He shuddered, marveling at what a precarious position he was put in presently. Running away would be the safest bet at this point…but if Sasuke was overwhelmed by Cloud ninja and taken, he would be held accountable for inaction. ‘I’m not getting my head ripped off today!’

He was getting a very, very weird feeling that there was someone stronger than Sasuke in that lookout…who was fully aware that the young chunin had stumbled across the missing Uchiha. Kiba did not want to dismiss the gut instinct.

“Pst!” Kiba whispered to his teammate, “Keep watch now…this is all going to turn to shit momentarily. If we see Sasuke doing well on his own we can leave.”

“Why on earth would we want that?” Fujita was incredulous.
“Because it’s one thing if he stays a missing-nin, but it’s a whole new game if the Cloud Village captures him.” Kiba explained, “I’m sorry that this has turned into a status-quo issue, but trust me, we don’t want that happening.”

Understanding the implications, Fujita nodded. A moment later shouting broke out in the clearing. The Leaf ninja and dog tensed, watching as Sasuke raced at the two Cloud ninja.

He breathed out a fireball that parted the kunoichi and her partner in opposite directions. Kiba recognized that Sasuke was intending to pick them off separately. The boy chunin was bitterly locked with Sasuke in close quarter’s combat for a short time before the Sharingan began reading his moves.

The Kumo nin cried out as he was pummeled, and Sasuke lashed out with a move Kiba had never seen before. He made a Chidori that rained down senbon needles onto his opponent, paralyzing him. The boy was doubled-over, hollering for his partner, “Karui! Karui!”

She dove in swiftly, swinging her blade just an inch shy from Sasuke’s face. Kiba and Fujita balked at her speed that was suddenly boosted by chakra or adrenaline, and watched as she slashed at Sasuke with deadly precision. He drew his own sword, countering her blows, and they danced around on the field as the other Cloud ninja recovered.

“Let’s go, Omoi!” Karui shouted, and while evading the spiraling fire jutsu that Sasuke unleashed, the two coordinated. Quicker than the blink of an eye, Karui and Omoi caught Sasuke on both sides. His Sharingan saw the move, and he blocked appropriately, but their swords locked his weapon between their blades and wrenched it out of his grip. Sasuke’s sword flew over the field with a whistle and stuck sharply in a tree branch.

Kiba then understood. The Cloud ninja were sword experts, and by the look of it, Sasuke was still developing his technique. His opponents had a considerable advantage over him in that respect. Sasuke’s ninjutsu, on the other hand, gave them a headache.

Fire encircled them and another volley of Chidori senbon pelted down. Kiba could have sworn that would have caught the two, but substitutions were demolished instead. The two chunin had caught onto Sasuke’s strategy, and were sure to avoid his efforts to divide them. Together their attacks were relentless and unpredictable; barely kept at a distance by Sasuke’s Sharingan.

Sasuke ducked beneath Karui’s swordstrike when Omoi, the timid chunin, broke character without warning. He tripped Sasuke with a sliding tackle. Kiba bolted in to intervene. Sasuke recovered quickly, rolling to his feet, but by then Karui had caught him.

A moment before Karui could put real force into her swing, Kiba caught her sword between his hands, stopping it from coming down on Sasuke. Not wasting a moment, Sasuke regrouped and began chasing after Omoi. Karui stared Kiba down, her golden eyes revealing shock for a moment, “Where did you come from? What do you think you’re doing!”

“I just don’t want Cloud to get credit for Sasuke’s capture.” Kiba grunted, struggling against her force as blood slipped from his hands and down his arms, “Don’t expect me to make it easy for you.”

“Butt out of this, Leaf!”

Kiba yanked Karui with a sudden burst of strength, keeping the sword clamped flat-ways in his palms with chakra, and then jerked back. In a display of chakra control he never thought he could pull off, he snapped her blade in half. He jumped back, tossing away the sword-piece while she screeched in rage. ‘I think that about did it…”
Their taijutsu was near evenly matched, although Kiba felt that Tama hit just a bit harder and far more thoughtfully. Karui’s fury reduced her insight, and Kiba kept a level head as he manipulated her farther away from her screaming teammate. “Karui! He-eelp!” as Sasuke accosted him with numerous jutsu.

Akamaru bounded out from the shelter of the forest and transformed, aiding his master with attacks. Kiba and his ninken out-speeded her with Gatsuuga and met her punches with tenacity, and while Kiba took a few blows, he held his ground.

Kiba looked past Karui’s head as she charged at him, and he made eye contact with Sasuke. In an instant of mutual understanding, Sasuke abandoned Omoi and moved up behind the kunoichi. Kiba ditched his fight with a moment to spare as Chidori senbon stuck into Karui from behind. She howled in pain and then collapsed, flailing on the ground for a moment before her muscles betrayed her. She called out to Omoi to retreat, but Sasuke and Kiba, with Akamaru in tow, had already pounced on him.

‘This feels kind of wrong…ganging up on these poor guys.’ Kiba checked in briefly with his moral compass, ‘What right do I have to help Sasuke? It won’t change anything between us. Maybe I should have just sent a message to Leaf for back-up…’

Omoi struggled valiantly, keeping his opponents at sword’s length, but was no match physically for Sasuke and Kiba combined. The boy was thoroughly cornered, and Kiba could see Omoi’s eyes stray to where Karui lay on the far side of the field. He was worried, Kiba could see, but he also seemed as if he were waiting for something. Kiba’s gut feeling came back.

To Kiba’s surprise, a snake darted out from one of Sasuke’s sleeves. It coiled around Omoi and held tight as the boy tumbled, landing face-first on the ground. Kiba was thankful that Sasuke was not interested in killing either of the chunin, ‘That could provoke another international incident…’ Kiba then considered Fujita, who was tucked away in the forest. He must not have been happy about what he was watching. It certainly didn’t look like Kiba had been trying to bring Sasuke in or prevent Kumo from capturing him…rather he seemed to have been helping Sasuke achieve his own agenda. ‘That kid is probably fed up with me by now. Huh…well at least he listened to me.’

He glanced sidelong to Akamaru. The dog was growling and his fur had bristled. Another Cloud shinobi, an adult jounin by the look of it, had appeared just outside of the entrance of the outpost. He, like Karui and Omoi, was dark skinned and had a sword with him. His expression was utterly calm, and Kiba assumed the arrival of this shinobi was what his intuition had been trying to warn him of. Sasuke had a few seconds to take stock of the newcomer as well.

Without any introduction whatsoever the jounin began a long-distance attack. A dozen white beams of light shot towards them and Kiba noticed Sasuke’s muscles twitch, trying to decide whether or not to move. Kiba elected to flee and Sasuke quickly chose to do the same. Unfortunately, the lightning-style laser beams followed after them as they changed directions and ran.

A heartbeat before the inevitable impact, Sasuke used another Chidori-like technique to shield himself. The beams, though buffered, blasted him back and off his feet. Kiba, on the other hand, had no way to defend against the strange ability. He raised his arms and braced himself just before Akamaru leapt in the way. The brunt force of the attack hit his dog and then barreled into him as well. He hit the ground screaming, hoping that Akamaru was alright. It felt like he had hugged a live fuse box.

Akamaru whimpered in the grass but was in good condition, Kiba assessed. He leapt back up, “Stay!” and his jaw dropped when he saw Sasuke again. He had pulled Karui up by her hair and
pressed his sword (retrieved from the tree branch) against her throat. He was sending a very clear message to the jounin. Kiba, of course, would not stand for it.

“Let go of her!” He tackled Sasuke, a bit too recklessly, and was clipped in the arm with the blade’s edge. They tumbled over Karui who was helpless in the grass, and Kiba heard her gasp before she shouted, “Darui!”

‘Jeez…all of their names are alike.’ Kiba thought, and then he felt Sasuke yank him up to his feet by the collar of his jacket.

“If you want to do this the hard way,” Sasuke hissed furiously. “Then you can get fried by his Kekkei Genkai while I finish him off. Don’t get in my way, Kiba!”

“I won’t if you’d just put me down already!” Kiba growled, and was promptly set down, “But you aren’t killing any innocent bystanders on my watch!”

They were just in time for the next volley of light-beams, ‘So it’s a Kekkei Genkai, huh?’

Before they could determine the best defense against the beams tracking them, Fujita appeared several meters directly in front of them. Kiba felt his heart jump into his throat, ‘He’s lost it!’

He and Sasuke looked on equally stunned as the small boy took his stance.

“Hakkesho: Kaiten!” The boy threw himself into a terrific spin, and his ultimate defense deflected the light-beams in various directions into the ground and trees. When he stopped he swayed on his feet, not capable of much more. Kiba could hardly believe Fujita had pulled it off, and he was also appreciative that he was willing risk himself in an ugly fight.

Sasuke flicked two shuriken off to his right and into the trees. They severed a hidden wire and triggered a trap that had been set near the entrance of the lookout. Dozens and dozens of paper bombs flared to life, but Darui had been expecting them, and he drew his sword as he leapt away from the blast.

Sasuke had finally caught him in close-quarters, and his blade extended into a long Chidori-spear that just nearly had Darui, though he had blocked it with his broadsword. Kiba pondered if Sasuke was considering his Cursed Seal release to put more pressure on the jounin, but he didn’t even have time for that. Darui, shouting, let black lightning in the shape of a cat lash out at Sasuke. His Chidori-defense cracked pathetically and the Uchiha crumpled, not having expected the brutal assault.

Darui’s light-beams shot across the field again, and Fujita attempted a second Kaiten that held for a few moments before puttering out. The liquid-energy beams hit him and then crashed into Kiba, blurring his vision with light as he fell.

He saw Sasuke far off, unmoving on the ground, Fujita falling gracefully to the grass, and then the blue sky overhead as he fell back. Then it was dark.

When Kiba came to he didn’t move. Even before his eyes peeked open he could feel his hands bound behind his back; his ankles were tied to the legs of the stool he was sitting on. His eyes opened just a fraction. He was in a small room made of white stone and plaster, and the door was on the far wall in front of him. Kiba squeezed his eyes shut again. There was someone sitting beside him, patting his arm down with a wet cloth. He could feel his hands had been bandaged.

‘Oh God, please, no…not now.’ He realized that he was a captive. It was not as unbearable as he had imagined, but it was every bit as frightening. ‘Where the hell am I? And where is Akamaru and the
kid?!” Not to mention Sasuke, who was an item of conflict currently in the wrong hands.

He honestly had no idea how long he had been out. For all he knew, they had been detained within the Cloud Village, beyond the hope of being rescued. Leaf would have to negotiate for their release and trade something of value for Sasuke, ‘If they feel like forking him over…’

Then the second wave of horrible thoughts hit him. The odds of Kumo intending to free Fujita were also slim, ‘That’s right…he’s a Main House Hyuga…so they finally have the Byakugan! Two doujutsu in one day! Oh man I have royally fucked this up…’

Kiba felt tears of frustration build up behind his eyes. So what if his dad wanted to return to the family? He would never get the chance to see him. He had failed to foresee any of the good things in the future, and had foolishly traded them for helping Sasuke. He had failed Fujita, who was young, talented, and selfless. His attachment to Sasuke had ruined everything.

“Hey, I know you’re awake so open your eyes.”

Kiba blinked, and looked at Karui who was seated on a stool beside him. Behind her his jacket had been hung on a wall-peg. She rung out the towel she had been using to clean the blood from his arm, and then draped it on the edge of the water bowl. There was a knock at the door and a ninja who he did not recognize entered the room. He had Akamaru with him. Sure the poor dog’s feet were hogtied and his muzzle roped shut, but he was alert and glowing with health.

“This mutt goes with the Inuzuka kid?”

“Yeah,” Karui confirmed, “Just lay him down there, gently.”

The Cloud ninja put Akamaru down beside Kiba’s stool and then left, shutting the door behind him. Karui sighed heavily while she bent down to pick up a jar of ointment. She smeared the pale gel over the cut on Kiba’s arm. It was extremely soothing. He let out a breath he had not realized he had been holding. Karui paused, catching his gaze with her molten gold eyes. They were fearsome.

“Is that better?” She asked.

Kiba nodded weakly. When he had tackled Sasuke, it hadn’t occurred to him how badly the sword had nicked him. He was unsure of what to say. He figured it was best to stay silent until he knew his captor a bit better. Karui wrapped his arm with bandages, knotted them, and then stood. She leaned against the wall and her expression was stern.

“There are some things you’re going to tell me, Inuzuka-san.”

“You’ve got that right, lady.”

“It’s Karui, dog-breath.”

“Alright then, and the name’s Kiba, because I knew you were wondering.”

“I wasn’t.” She said flatly.

From his place on the floor Akamaru wagged his tail. He was way too relaxed to be a hostage.

“Tch! Hey!” Kiba hissed to his canine companion, “Knock it off! She’s not friendly, so don’t you dare be nice to her, Akamaru!”

Karui appeared very smug for a moment, but then continued, “As I was saying, there are some things
you are going to tell me now. First of all, why were you with Uchiha Sasuke?”

“Well…that’s really complicated, but yeah, I owe you that answer.”

“Then start talking.”

“Primarily, I wanted to bring him back to the Leaf village so that he could own up for everything he’s done.” Kiba admitted, “That wasn’t going to jive with him getting snatched by Cloud ninja, you know?”

“I can understand that, but you were risking a lot just for one missing-nin. You interfering with our battle could have gotten you and your partner killed.” Karui reasoned, “Really, how bone-headed are you? That guy is justnot worth it.”

“I guess…it was a reflex. He and I were once teammates.”

“Hmm…the truth comes out…” She shuffled her feet for a second, and then said, “It showed. When I saw you two fighting together, at least for a little while…you were in sync with each other. I’m still trying to achieve that with Omoi.”

“Yeah? Well hopefully you don’t get death threats like I do.”

There was a silence, but Kiba could tell it was only because she was suppressing a chuckle.

“Okay then, how did you find Sasuke initially?”

“The kid and I were returning to Konoha after a mission when we happened across him.” Kiba hung his head, “I knew that we didn’t really have a prayer in returning him to the village. It was a rash decision on my part.”

“It was. So, what’s the name of the genin who was with you?”

Kiba tensed and said nothing. At this point, he felt it was much worse to divulge information about Fujita than Sasuke.

“Come on, we know he’s a Hyuga.”

“Really? Well I bet you’re pleased about that.”

Karui scowled at him. “Look, we aren’t deliberately hunting for the Byakugan these days. I personally couldn’t care less. I just want to know the kid’s name.”

“I’m not telling you.”

“I suggest you don’t be difficult.”

“Too bad.”

Karui shot off of the wall, caught Kiba by the shoulders, and pushed him (stool and all) down to the floor with a thud. Kiba wriggled uselessly beneath her for a moment and then gave up. She brought her face close to his. She was wild-eyed.

“I don’t take shit from anybody. I won’t be taking it from you, Inuzuka. You will cooperate, understand?”

“Sure I understand! But I don’t want to sell out my teammate! It’s my fault he’s in this situation….”
don’t want him to pay for my poor choices.”

Karui stared at him for a while before she closed her eyes, respecting what he had said. She stood and pulled Kiba upright by his shirt. Akamaru continued wagging his tail.

“I see. Will it put you at ease to know that we only need your names so someone can come pick you up? Captain Darui sent a messenger hawk to the Leaf Village. We knew you didn’t want to be mixed up with the Uchiha.”

“Oh.” Kiba looked down, “That’s…good I guess. But then…why are you keeping me tied up?”

She smiled puckishly at him, “It’s for good measure. We just want to be sure no unnecessary brawls start in this lookout. Just try to relax for a while until we get in contact with your people.”

‘We’re in the lookout we fought outside of! So we didn’t go that far after all…” Kiba sighed. He nodded to Karui and took her advice, trying to relax.

“So…you aren’t going to do anything to the kid?”

“What? No. There are new treaties forbidding us from harming any member of the Hyuga clan.” Karui replied, “Besides, he’s practically a baby. My team would never allow such a thing…that’s not what our sensei would want us to do.”

“Thank you.” He said sincerely, “And his name is Fujita, by the way.”

“Good, that’s all I really needed to know. Rest for now.” She picked up the water bowl and made her way to the door.

“Karui, wait.”

The kunoichi looked back at him with her eyebrows raised.

“I’m sorry about your sword.”

She shook her head, “Don’t worry about it. I’ll get it repaired. I’ve…never seen anybody snap a sword with bare hands. It was ballsy.”

And with that she exited the room. Kiba could hear the door being locked from the outside. He heaved a sigh, looking over to Akamaru’s spot on the floor. The dog whined lowly. Akamaru shifted to get comfortable and his eyes expressed to Kiba, ‘What happens now?’

“Well…” Kiba said quietly, “I guess we sit and wait until they let us out…” He reflected on how Karui had mentioned nothing about what they intended to do with Sasuke.

“They’ll probably keep Sasuke…” He mused to his dog, adding, “And I guess this was all just a big waste of effort on our part, right boy?”

His dog replied with a quiet, dismayed sound. Akamaru was just as conscious of the situation as his master was.

“Yeah…I thought I was doing decent with my new leadership role, but I messed it up big time. I’ll be lucky if I get another significant mission after this. Tsunade-sama will be angry and so will Kakashi-sensei…ugh, I don’t even want to think of what Sakura-chan will say to me. If only I had the guts to salvage this clusterfuck before Leaf arrives to pick us up!”

Akamaru held still as he listened.
There was silence before Kiba regarded his ninken and said, “Though this hasn’t been completely terrible…Karui was beautiful wasn’t she?”

Akamaru wagged his tail again at the mention of the kunoichi.

Kiba was dozing lightly as the moon rose in the sky. Akamaru made a soft sound to wake him and Kiba stirred, instantly aware of his surroundings again. The moonbeams coming from the window at his back elongated his shadow in the room, making him consider how much time had passed, ‘I don’t know if they sent a message to Konoha or not by now…or how long it will be before we’re picked up. Did they explain what’s happening to Fujita? He may still be freaking out wherever they are keeping him.’

Come to think of it, he really didn’t feel like being rescued. He would much rather free himself…however unlikely that was. He glanced to his dog companion, “Hey, Akamaru, can you move at all?”

A frustrated mmmrmnnn whimper was a negative response. Kiba sighed, “Guess you won’t be chewing us out of here…but maybe I can…”

Kiba, estimating the height of the stool, guessed that he could feasibly get his ropes off. ‘Well here I go! It’s time to embarrass myself!’

He fell back with a womp, wincing as he pinned his arms against the hard stone floor. The bonds around his wrists and ankles were very stubborn, ‘If only I could get my arms in front of me so I could bite at these…’ He wriggled and squirmed as quietly as he could, ignoring Akamaru’s huffing sounds beside him. Kiba rolled to his side and pulled his knees to his chest, desperately attempting to pull the stool through his looped arms.

‘Gods above…this sucks!’ He felt his shoulders straining and the rough wood of the stool grated against the skin of his aching arms. He writhed and grunted, eventually getting stuck in the awkward position. He took a break, exhausted by the foolish-looking effort. ‘I thought I was pretty flexible but this is just cruel…if I am stuck here looking like this when they get back, I am going to jump off of something later. Something really high…I will not look like a buffoon in front of these people!’

With a burst of determination and energy, he bucked and pushed his legs (with the damn stool attached) through the loop of his arms successfully. He panted, feeling a sharp pain in his shoulder and prayed that he had not dislocated it. Akamaru’s tail was thumping excitedly. Kiba grinned.

While still on the floor, he raised his arms up and began to gnaw through the ropes securing his wrists. His magnificent teeth made short work of them.

In focused silence, Kiba untied his legs and then moved to Akamaru. While cautioning his ninken to be very quiet, he released him, ‘That went better than expected! Hopefully no one heard me flopping around…’

As if on cue, a shadow passed over the crack below the door and Kiba heard the clicking of the lock. ‘Now that’s just fucking unfair! I have some awful timing don’t I?’

He and Akamaru stood patiently, intending to be polite to the Cloud ninja who had stopped by to check on them, ‘I’ll say I just didn’t want to be tied up anymore…they might buy that…’

To his relief, it was Sasuke who entered after picking the door with a metal tool. Sasuke regarded him, a bit surprised there was no need to untie his former teammate.
The relief faded, however, and turned into dread as Kiba observed that Sasuke was a) moving about the Cloud lookout, b) nonchalantly setting him free and c) had blood slathered on his hands and shirt.

“I finished off my target.” Sasuke informed him, “Now let’s get the hell out of here.”

Kiba, scowling, grabbed his jacket off of the wall peg and pulled it on, “Shit…”

The two of them peaked around the corner of the detainee wing, finding the next moonlit hallway empty. On silent feet they slinked onward, and Akamaru sniffed frequently to check for any nearby guards.

“So,” Kiba whispered, “How did you do that? We were only in here for a few hours…you didn’t even get caught!”

“The guards of my cell are still trapped in my genjutsu…and a few doors down from where I was kept I located the traitor. I woke him from his sleep.”

“How nice of you…” Kiba did his best not to show revulsion of how Sasuke had so easily assassinated someone.

Akamaru paused and indicated that a sentry was passing by an adjacent corridor. Once the guard was gone Kiba asked his ninken to begin tracking Fujita’s scent.

“Just leave him,” Sasuke said harshly, “They’ll send him back to Leaf anyway.”

“I don’t want to risk it. Besides, I’ve been leading him on this mission and I don’t want to set a shitty example by running away.”

Sasuke frowned at Kiba and then sighed. Just about everything Kiba said now had a double-meaning that often jabbed at Sasuke’s betrayal of the Leaf Village. He did not argue, and he followed as Kiba and Akamaru navigated to another detainee block. Fujita’s cell was the first in a row of many.

Abruptly, a Cloud ninja exited the stairwell across the way and got an unexpected eyeful of Kiba, Akamaru and Sasuke crouched in front of the prisoner’s room. Kiba cringed and waited for a shout of warning or an attack but neither came. Instead, Sasuke had locked his hypnotic stare with the newcomer’s, catching him in a genjutsu. The man slumped on the steps and went limp.

“Good one.” Kiba said and held out his hand to Sasuke expectantly. Sasuke gave him the lock-picking tool he had used earlier and Kiba went straight to work, fiddling around with it. Fujita jumped up in surprise when the door swung open. He had not been tied up at all and had been resting comfortably on a cot. Kiba gestured with his head that it was time to leave, “Come on, kid! We’re not sticking around.”

Fujita opened his mouth to protest but then thought better of it. Both his travel pack and Kiba’s had been stashed beneath the cot, and they pulled on their bags without a word.

The Hyuga stepped out into the hallway and pointed down the corridor from whence they came, “I was observing this place with my Byakugan earlier…there’s an exit that way.”

Before Kiba could consider it Sasuke objected, “No. You never leave a stronghold like that. Find a place they haven’t tapped with traps or chakra.”

Kiba shrugged. Sasuke probably had a point. He had been up to no good for quite a while now and was accustomed to escaping successfully. Fujita used his Byakugan again and then took off, picking
a winding route of hallways and halting on occasion to avoid guards. They arrived at a window and Fujita undid the latch and swung it open, “From where the sentries are stationed they will not be able to see this window easily. It isn’t booby-trapped either.”

Sasuke, taking his word for it, leapt without any hesitation. Kiba and his companions followed and plummeted a fair distance before landing in soft grass. After making certain that they wouldn’t be seen again, they continued and made a break for it into the forest beyond the clearing. The fresh night air rejuvenated them.

“Wait a second,” Kiba said as they darted through the trees, “Sasuke, where was that captain? He didn’t try to stop you?”

“No, he wasn’t in the tower.”

‘Huh. Well that makes no sense…they have a high-profile captive and then one of their most powerful shinobi just desserts the lookout?’ Kiba wondered, ‘It doesn’t add up. The only reason someone in that position wouldn’t be inside of the tower keeping watch would be if…’ His eyes widened, ‘He’s keeping watch outside.’

He motioned to the young Hyuga, “Fujita! Use your Byakugan! I want you to look for-”

“He’s here!” The boy cried in terror. He had already been scouting ahead with his blood limit. They all dropped from the trees as laser beams rocketed towards them. Scattering, they made a frantic break for the gorge, and Sasuke deflected some of the beams with a lightning-defense. A few loose beams rounded on them and illuminated Darui in the treetops, intent on putting them in their place.

Kiba skidded to a halt as the last of the lasers screeched past them and blasted the rope-bridge. It collapsed in tatters, and Kiba felt his stomach flip in horror as he realized there was no way for him to get Fujita to safety, ‘And I just spat on their offer to contact Leaf for us…”

Akamaru and Fujita stood beside him, also terrified, and Kiba regarded Sasuke who landed nearby, ‘Was he really worth all of this?’

An enormous serpent appeared after a hasty summoning, and Sasuke directed it to lunge (a considerable distance) across the chasm and it bit into a tree on the other side. While very unappealing, it would act as a makeshift bridge.

“Go.” Sasuke demanded, releasing his Cursed Seal form, “This is my battle. You’ve done enough for me.”

Kiba clenched his fists, conflicted, “You expect me to just leave you here?”

“You have to, you’re setting an example for that kid,” Sasuke was implying Fujita, “Don’t be like me.”

There was no time for him to act otherwise. Kiba turned quickly and crossed over with Fujita and Akamaru. Once across, the snake coiled up and rounded on Darui, who was clashing furiously with Sasuke. There was nothing more he could do, he acknowledged. Kiba ran swiftly, keeping his emotions in check as Fujita and Akamaru matched his pace.

The darkness of the woods swallowed them up as lights erupted in the valley.

A short time before dawn they were still moving, covered in dirt, bramble and sweat. They had reached the slopes they had originally found Sasuke on. It was quite startling when a trap triggered as
they went by, and although they were able to avoid it, it had completely jostled what remained of their nerves. Akamaru remained vigilant for any traps that the Cloud ninja had been unable to disarm.

They ventured more cautiously down the rocky mountainside. Kiba chose his footing carefully and checked frequently to make sure that his companions were following the path he picked out. ‘What a nightmare that was. That’s the last time I try to go above and beyond the call of duty.’

As they hiked Kiba glanced over to the younger genin. He was troubled to see tears sliding down Fujita’s cheeks. The boy cried in silence, clearly overwhelmed by all he had been through.

“Hey kid,” Kiba said quietly, “Are you okay? We can stop if you want.”

Fujita did stop and covered his face with his arm. Akamaru stood beside him as the boy took in several shuddering breaths. He wiped at his eyes, trying to get a grip.

“I bet you feel like you just finished off a stupidly dangerous goose-chase, huh?” Kiba asked, empathizing with the young genin. He was disappointed in himself, so it would not be news to him if Fujita was as well.

Fujita shook his head, “No, Kiba-san…I know that you did the best you could. You wanted to change things. It was just…a lot more than we had bargained for.”

Kiba walked up to his teammate and patted him on the back, “I know and I’m sorry for everything. I’ll try to make it up to you.”

Akamaru nudged the boy’s hand to solicit a head-pat and Fujita complied, calming down. They continued on as the sun began to rise, feeling more optimistic as they approached the Fire Country. At the base of the mountain they took a rest beside a bubbling stream and filled their canteens.

They washed up briefly and Kiba took the time to spear fish for a meal. They had not eaten in over a day. The boys could hardly wait for the fish to come off of the fire before they sank their teeth into the food, burning their eager mouths. Akamaru caught a rabbit for himself, preferring it to fish.

‘Good, we can fill up now in the early morning and if we push ourselves…I bet we can make it back to Leaf sometime today.’ Kiba thought to himself, ‘This is assuming we don’t get jumped by any other ninja, of course.’

He glanced over to Fujita who was eating happily. ‘That poor kid was in tears before. I can’t blame him…there have been a few missions which made me want to cry too. I don’t want to put him through anymore. He did what I asked and he could have lost his life doing it…’

“You think you’ll have rested enough after this?” Kiba asked the boy, “We can make it a straight shot to Leaf from here if you’re up to it.”

Fujita nodded, “Of course! I’m ready to go home.”

“Me too.”

After they ate and packed up they followed the shortest course Kiba was able to plot. They moved with delirious speed, desperate to see familiar lands, and felt comforted by the wind at their backs. Kiba kept his mind clear, unwilling to dwell on regrets about the mission. Once Fujita was safely in the Leaf Village then he would let his guard down, but not a moment sooner.

The sun was high in the sky by the time they had breached the Fire Country. They stopped near a narrow stretch of river for a rest. Fujita’s mood had greatly improved and he stretched out on a patch
of grass on the riverbank. Akamaru frolicked around for a short while before he flopped down beside the young genin.

Kiba was considering a nap as well but he caught a whiff of something disconcerting in the breeze. The hairs on the back of his neck were on end. First, he had smelled what was certainly Sasuke’s scent mixed with blood, but soon after he felt the terrible energy accompanying it. Kiba stared up the river and Fujita looked at his teammate’s back curiously.

“Fujita,” Kiba’s voice was firm, “Stay here with Akamaru.”

“What is it, Kiba-san?”

“Sasuke followed us. I’m not sure how he got away from that captain from Cloud…” He sighed, “But I’m going to make sure he doesn’t become a problem for us.”

The boy nodded, “I understand.”

Akamaru sat obediently beside Fujita and watched as Kiba ventured away.

‘I could just run away from him. There’s no way he would follow us all the way back to the village.’ Kiba thought to himself, ‘He’s probably banged up too. Jeez…if he came all the way here to find me I shouldn’t be taking that lightly.’

He stopped at a tree stump and sat down. If his nose was correct, Sasuke was only a few meters away. He tried to relax. It helped when he felt the terrible chakra radiating from Sasuke’s Cursed Seal diminish. Sure enough, when Sasuke appeared he looked normal enough…except with bruises and cuts that had barely scabbed over. He was trying to conceal his exhaustion.

“This is kind of out of the way for you, isn’t it?” Kiba pointed out.

“It is…though we didn’t have a proper goodbye.” His tone oozed sarcasm.

The comment broke through the dam of anger and regret Kiba had been holding back. He was completely worn down from the tangent into Cloud territory. He leapt to his feet and snarled, “Don’t get me started on your proper goodbyes you motherfucker! You don’t know the first thing about them!”

Sasuke seemed unruffled by the outburst. He was struggling to stay on his feet; however he could not afford to show any weakness lest he invite Kiba to try his luck at strangling him. He stood in front of his former teammate who was bristling with rage. Sasuke knew he had worn out his welcome.

After calming down slightly, Kiba broke the silence again, “What? You want to come home now?”

“No.”

“Oh? You had me going there, for a second.”

“Sakura.”

“You have got to be kidding me,” Kiba murmured, his voice rising, “You have the nerve to ask about her when you have no intentions of returning to Leaf? You insult her! She is too busy saving people’s lives to even think about you!”

“Is she really training with Tsunade, then?”
“Yes, she is.”

Sasuke’s expression seemed as close to happy as it could get, considering his facial muscles were frozen.

“What have you been doing then?” Sasuke asked.

Kiba was taken aback, ‘Whoa, what should I say? He can’t actually care, but…’

“You know…helping the village and the people who need me.” He said scathingly, “Oh wait, you don’t know how to do that, do you?”

Sasuke glowered at him, his face finally unfrozen, and said, “I suggest you chose your words more carefully. I have been incredibly patient with you. Now tell me what Sakura has been doing.”

“I already told you that you can’t handle it.”

“You underestimate me.”

“Well, I’m just gauging it by how you are choosing to deal with your older brother. My guess is that you just don’t have what it takes to rise above your pain for the sake of others.” Kiba was quiet for a moment, “She’s moved on, if you want to know.”

“She wants to be with me.”

“She did.” Kiba acknowledged, “She’s stronger now and she relies on herself. Quite frankly, I haven’t heard her mention you in a while.”

“Tell me the truth.”

“The truth? Really?” He sighed, “Here it is, then: she loves someone else.”

“I’m not convinced.”

“I don’t care if you’re convinced or not. You asked for the truth. She loves Gaara and he’s treating her a-heck of a lot better than you-”

Kiba was toppled over before he realized Sasuke had even moved. He was squashed into the leaves and weeds in the underbrush, his lungs deflating from the pressure. A snake coiled around his throat and flicked its tongue against his cheek inquisitively. Sasuke had pinned him and was glaring at him furiously with the Sharingan illuminating his eyes. That was the straw that Kiba absolutely knew would break the camel’s back. He would be lucky to live through this predicament.

“The fucking sand-user? She would never-!”

“Get off!” Kiba wheezed breathlessly.

“No.” Sasuke said through gritted teeth, pressing a kunai against Kiba’s ribcage, “I’ve been nice. I took hits for you and broke you out…but I think I’ve had enough of you.”

“Asshole! You asked!” Kiba was seeing spots, “Go ahead…kill the messenger who didn’t want to underestimate you.”

Sasuke paused in thought. As it turned out, killing Kiba was not going to improve anything. It was Gaara, Sasuke believed, who had to be dealt with accordingly. He backed off and Kiba sat up, hacking violently and gulping in air.
“Where is Gaara?”

“Why do you need to know?” Kiba growled, “Want to drop by and say hi?”

“Exactly.”

“He’s an elite Jounin now.”

“I’ve dealt with those before.”

Kiba stood up slowly and brushed leaves and twigs off of his jacket.

“Sasuke…don’t you hear yourself? You want to kill a person who Sakura loves and who has been doing the right thing by her consistently.” He said, adding, “She’s better off without you. There’s no way a selfish, sadistic bastard is going to make her happy and feel loved. You are out of touch with your priorities…and I am fucking tired of trying to help your sorry ass.”

“I never asked for help.”

“Then why are you with Orochimaru? You training with him doesn’t qualify as help?”

“It doesn’t.”

“You are so full of shit.” Kiba muttered. Sasuke was too far-gone to reach out to. He had earlier believed that Sasuke may have reexamined his actions, but he had only been interested in learning about Sakura. Now that he was aware of what was going on in the kunoichi’s life, he was sorry he had asked.

“I’ve always been your friend.” Kiba said, “Now please, if you do care about anyone in this world besides yourself and your crushed feelings…leave us in peace.”

And he walked away without looking back.

More than halfway to the Leaf Village the numbness that had overcome Kiba began to wear off. He could understand why Fujita had cried. The encounter had weighed so heavily on his spirit that he felt like a helpless failure. He had bit off more than he could chew when he had attempted to throw a lasso around Sasuke. It had been utter foolishness.

‘I don’t cry. I especially can’t cry now that Fujita already had a moment of weakness.’ Kiba thought to himself, ‘I would have to trade in my man-card if I endured all of that crap just to break down now…’

But it hurt. It hurt so acutely in such a unique, one-sided way that his friendship was the equivalent of dung in the Uchiha’s eyes. He had stuck out his neck for Sasuke again, and was met with the same disappointment. What could he tell Sakura and Kakashi? Oh, well, we were rejected again despite our best efforts…but there’s always next year! There was nothing encouraging to be said. He would report with sincerity that Sasuke was as selfish and single-minded as any horrible nukenin running amok.

Their energy reserves were so run down that they did not realize they had entered a patrol area. Kiba, Fujita and Akamaru jumped in surprise when a Black-Ops squadron suddenly encircled them in the treetops. For one insane moment, they felt like the criminals.

“Kiba!”
The Inuzuka sighed in relief. Thank goodness Kakashi was with them. His sensei leapt up to him and put a steadying hand on his shoulder. Kakashi looked just as shocked as Kiba and Fujita had.

"Are you alright? What are you even doing here? The Hokage just received word from a captain of a Cloud platoon that you went after Sasuke!"

Kiba nodded weakly.

One of the masked Black-Ops spoke, “We were under the impression that you were still in the care of the Cloud. How did you return to the village so quickly?”

Fujita gulped nervously. Kiba spoke up, knowing he was responsible for what had transpired.

“Sasuke broke us out of the lookout.” He answered truthfully, “It’s a long story and I have a lot to answer for, but I would prefer to tell it all to Tsunade-sama.”

Kakashi met his gaze confidently and nodded to him. It felt good to have the support of his sensei. At least Kakashi could understand without being told that Kiba had done everything in his power to reach out to Sasuke. He had a feeling whoever was going to hear his report was going to be less understanding.

It had been determined that Fujita was not required for a debriefing and he was promptly sent home. Kakashi stood in the corridor outside of Tsunade’s office. Kiba was there explaining what had happened to her in a one-on-one session. At times, Tsunade’s voice boomed with anger and scolded Kiba for each dumb action he had taken. For the most part, however, her voice was soft as she asked questions. Over an hour passed before Kiba was permitted to leave.

Kiba and Akamaru left the office. The young man looked wearily at Kakashi, hoping he didn’t need to explain again what he had gone through.

“I eavesdropped for a while, so I got the gist of it.” Kakashi assured him, “While I agree with the Hokage that you should have immediately sent for help when you found Sasuke…I don’t see how you could have acted any other way.”

“Thanks I guess.”

“That’s a compliment, Kiba. Your plight was a tricky one and you did remarkably well.”

Kiba’s lip quivered for a moment and he looked away, out an open window. He inhaled deeply in order to relax.

“You know what the worst part is, Kaka-sensei? Now I have to explain to Sakura that I blabbed about her while I was under duress. She won’t like that.” Kiba admitted, “It’s a whole new problem, or as Tsunade-sama put it, a new opportunity to catch Sasuke if he decides to go after Gaara. It still sucks that I mentioned his name and involved him in this…but I get the feeling…he can probably handle Sasuke.”

‘Certainly he can.’ Kakashi acknowledged it inwardly, ‘Otherwise he wouldn’t have been selected to become the next Kazekage.’

“I agree. I imagine Gaara will appreciate the advanced-warning and prepare himself.” His sensei speculated, “And don’t forget, Gaara is well-protected. He has the support of the village, his siblings and Haku-kun standing beside him. Sasuke may want to think twice before acting that rashly.”
“Yup. Well…this wasn’t so bad. I kind of expected Tsunade-sama to demote me or punish me somehow.”

“Did you really?”

“Yeah.”

“You kept Fujita in excellent health while devising a way to capture a missing-nin in our Bingo Book. That, to me, sounds like something that should be commended.”

“I wish I could say the same, but,” Kiba shook his head sadly, putting his fist over his heart, “It feels like I was stabbed here over and over. I don’t feel like I accomplished anything. Sasuke really screwed with my head.”

“It’ll work out, Kiba, you’ll see. Now would you like me to walk you home?”

“Nah…I’ve got it. I’m sure my mom has a thing or two to say to me and I don’t want you to be around for that.”

“Alright then, I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Bye, Kaka-sensei.”

Kiba left, dragging his feet, with his faithful canine companion trotting beside him. Kakashi watched them round the corner beyond his sight before he looked back at Tsunade who was leaving her office.

“I’m taking a break. My head is _pounding_ after listening to that report…” She said as she walked past Kakashi, “By the way…that student of yours is on his way to becoming a chunin. I can hardly believe he did so well all on his own…with a subordinate to protect, no less.”

Beneath his mask, Kakashi was smiling proudly, “I am thrilled. He has been exceeding my expectations lately and I guess I am going to have to get used to it.”

A small smile spread on Tsunade’s face as well, “Indeed. It was even mentioned that when Kiba spoke to Sasuke he was able to make him doubt his course of action. Later Kiba stated that it was all a ruse, but I highly doubt it. If Sasuke was reconsidering his decisions even for a second…there is hope yet. Kiba did well.”

“That may be an understatement, Hokage-sama. He just did something neither of us could do.”
“Today’s special is all you can eat for only 1,200 ryo! So if we split it four ways that means we only spend…uh…”

“It will be 300 ryo a person, Chouji.” Sakura promptly informed him, “That is much better than usual.”

Sakura took a seat across from Ino and Chouji at the table and after a moment Hinata chose the spot beside her.

Asuma’s students had just returned from a mission and upon arriving Shikamaru had been summoned to Tsunade’s office. When their stomachs all growled in unison Shikamaru only sighed, “Just go ahead to Yakiniku Q…I’ll catch you later.”

Chouji had been talking about the new deal for two days. They had to go.

To be more economical Ino and Chouji had extended the lunch invitation to Sakura and Hinata, who had earlier been practicing the Mystical Palm Technique together. They had worked on it all morning with no breaks and they had also worked up an appetite. It was sure to be a pleasant affair.

“How did your mission go?” Hinata asked politely.

“You know; the same old song and dance…pick up an old, priceless chest from one castle and escort it to another…typical C-rank.” Ino replied, resting her chin on her hand. “What have you ladies been up to?”

“Hinata-chan’s gotten the hang of the Mystical Palm jutsu.” Sakura was smiling with pride, “Her chakra control is the best I’ve seen since Tsunade-shishou’s. Have you been practicing as well, Ino?”

“Well I haven’t for a few days…”

“Practice with us tomorrow morning!” Hinata suggested, “The medical corps have been letting us heal small injuries in the hospital lobby. Hokage-sama said that was fine.”

“Yeah, that is better than practicing on kittens and fish.” Ino agreed, “After I open the shop tomorrow I’ll stop by.”

“You guys have really been advancing quickly…” Chouji observed, “I’m going to need to double-up on my training with Dad…”

Sakura leaned in over the table, wearing a sneaky expression, “That’s a good idea, Chouji. In fact, we should all be pushing ourselves harder for a while. I have some exclusive news that no one but Shizune-san and I know yet…not even the jounin!”

Wide-eyed, her friends all turned to her expectantly. The waitress arrived. They hastily ordered the meats they wanted to barbeque and then urged Sakura to spill the beans.

Sakura smiled cleverly, “Tsunade-shishou is beginning to organize the next Chunin Exam! She’s been trying to get approval from the daimyo this past week…and she’s had her work cut out for her
trying to convince officials that Konoha will be a suitable host this time.”

“How soon will it be, do you think?” Hinata chirped.

“We have to keep our mouths shut, but it will most likely take place six months from now. Maybe sooner if she can get approval and funding…” Sakura reported excitedly, “So when I say keep our mouths shut, let’s tell our friends and remind them to not blab about it to the chunin and jounin!”

“Wow, this gives us such an edge! Advance-warning!” Ino was thrilled, “Now we can get started right away instead of waiting for Asuma-sensei to prep us a few weeks before!”

“Yes, if it’s approved then we are good to go! And if not, we are still preparing for an exam that may just be hosted in another village…probably Hidden Sand!” She added cheerily.

“Just one thing…” Chouji interjected, “Shikamaru can’t compete with us. He’s already a Chunin. How can we qualify if we don’t find another Genin-level teammate?”

“That’s true…there really aren’t many other Genin besides our class-group…” Sakura acknowledged.

“That should be no trouble.” Hinata assured him, “Fujita-kun is now a Genin. He is very gifted. I’m sure Tsunade-sama would allow him to participate with you and Ino-chan!”

“Alright!” Ino was blissful, “Sakura, Hinata…thanks for bringing us great news!”

“Yeah!” Chouji agreed, clapping his hands when the dishes of meat were set on the table.

“Kiba-kun spoke very highly of your cousin.” Sakura pointed out, “I haven’t met him yet. Is he your first cousin just like Neji-san?”

“Oh no, we’re second cousins! We have the same great-grandfather.” Hinata clarified, “But they are also part of the Main Branch and are highly skilled in our clan’s techniques.”

“I heard he and Kiba tried to bring Sasuke back to the village on their own, even after they got captured by Cloud ninja!” Chouji added.

Sakura’s eyebrows rose. She nodded, finding she could not comment on the topic that was still a little too raw for her. Thankfully Hinata changed the subject and maintained the upbeat mood. While her friends roasted their food on the charcoal braziers and chatted, Sakura retreated into her own thoughts.

It had not been easy for Kiba to explain the ordeal to her. They had sat on a lakeside bench on the outskirts of the village. She did her best to keep an open mind and listened as he chronicled the mission to her in great detail. At the point when Sasuke made an appearance she felt her chest clench. It disturbed her even more that he had pestered Kiba for information about her.

Sakura had debated her choice of dating Gaara a few times. They cared for each other a great deal. Gaara would never put her in jeopardy or harm her. He was honorable and successful. Overall he was the sensible choice, but Sasuke had been her first choice. She acknowledged that initially she had promised Sasuke the future he was asking for, and that perhaps he was still within his rights to be angry with her after Kiba announced her relationship with Gaara.

‘And now…Sasuke may do something to hurt Gaara because of me.’ She wrestled the thought away, ‘No. He’s the selfish one hurting people! He left me in the middle of nowhere when he ran off to
Orochimaru! Why the **hell** should I feel guilty when he put **everyone** through so much?'

Sakura slapped two slices of pork on the grill and watched them hiss.

‘**Excuse me for trying to get on with my life!**’ She thought venomously, ‘**I deserve to be treated right! Suck it up and come back to Leaf if you feel like you’ve been wounded so badly!**’

Yet it gave her pause when she reflected and still felt strongly for Sasuke. She could not condemn him to walk the dark and destructive path he had embarked on…but he had lost his chance of being with her. Moving on and loving Gaara came naturally; it was not a scarring or confusing process at all. It was difficult being apart from him, but she could say with confidence he would never betray anyone he cared about, ‘**Most especially me.**’

And with this firm new outlook she had earlier patted Kiba on the shoulder and told him to relax.

“**Gaara-kun can handle it.**” She told him, “I love him. That may drive Sasuke crazy if he hasn’t gone crazy already, but I don’t regret it.”

Her priority was making the most of Tsunade’s instruction and training to become stronger. Gaara, Naruto and Haku had always harped on the importance of forging onward, and like them she too refused to bend.

“I think that’s burning, Sakura.” Ino gestured to the meat she had forgotten on the brazier.

“Oh.” Sakura snapped out of her thoughts and with a pair of tongs snatched up the charred meat, “Sorry! I zoned out for a bit.”

She examined it and frowned, “Hm. I guess I’m not eating this.”

“Here Sakura-chan, this is ready.” Chouji thought nothing of sharing his barbeque with her, “So will Naruto be back in time for the exam?”

Hinata perked up after hearing the question. She chewed a bit faster when she considered it. In his previous message, five days earlier, he had made no mention of returning to Leaf anytime soon.

Sakura had also deliberated briefly before concluding, “I don’t know. Tsunade-shishou said he and Jiraiya-sama had traveled far past the Land of Bears…and that isn’t a short trip to begin with.”

“I…I don’t think he’ll make it.” Hinata shook her head, “He is too far away and has not made preparations to return yet.”

Ino clucked her tongue, “It’s a shame he’ll miss it.”

“What about Gaara and Haku? Do you think they’ll be participating?” Chouji wondered.

“I don’t know about Haku-kun, he may want to. He’s in Hidden Sand with Gaara so I’m sure he can make the trip when the time comes.” Sakura speculated, “And Gaara, well…”

Ino quirked an eyebrow and asked, “What about him?”

“He is already a jounin. He may come to watch the exam and cheer us on, though.” Sakura continued, thinking to herself, ‘**Sure he’ll be here to watch…he’ll be the Kazekage presiding over the Final Rounds! Heck yeah!**’

“Ha! I’d like to see if Gaara knows how to cheer!” Chouji found it very amusing.
“Hm…Gaara-kun’s cheering may be a quieter kind of encouragement.” Hinata suggested in all seriousness.

Her friends turned to her and laughed heartily.

After an enjoyable lunch the friends all pitched in to cover the bill. While leaving the restaurant Sakura mulled over what she needed to do later in the day, ‘I promised Tama-chan that I would train with her once I wrapped things up with Tsunade-shishou. I think mom asked me to pick up some things from the store too…”

“Thanks for eating out with us ladies!” Ino was very pleased, “We’ll be sure to spread the good news to the appropriate ears!”

Sakura nodded, “Of course! But don’t forget to keep it from-”

She fell silent. A huge shadow moved over them as they stood in the street.

Ino and Chouji looked down and watched it race by, quickly determining it was no Nara-manifested shadow. Hinata quickly looked up and gasped. Her friends did the same.

A woman flew over the heads, gliding elegantly through the sky over the Leaf Village.

Ino and Sakura shouted in unison, “What is that?”

Hinata used her Byakugan to come up with a hasty approximation, “That shinobi is using chakra manipulation like I have never seen before! There are others with her as well!”

A moment later two more shinobi, though younger in appearance, flew over their heads on translucent wings.

They made sounds of confusion and awe, wondering if it was time to be alarmed. Outside shinobi were often a bad sign, and it could not have been good if they managed to enter the village so easily. Sakura managed to wrap her head around what was happening.

“Well…Shishou did say that she was expecting guests from another village today.” She told her friends, “Although I didn’t think they’d be flying here.”

They were interrupted again by Sato as he raced over rooftops, giving chase to the flying ninja. He called down to Hinata below, “Sunshine! Are you seeing this?”

His camera flashes followed in quick succession.

“Thank you for coming, Natsuhi.” Tsunade smiled as she welcomed the Star kunoichi, “You could have waited at the village gate for an escort, you know. I think you scared the daylights out of some of my villagers.”

“Forgive me, Tsunade-sama. I wanted to get here as quickly as possible to speak with you.” Natsuhi apologized.

Tsunade smiled at her and thought to herself, ‘I can see why Jiraiya urged me to meet with this woman. She certainly is a beauty…and the leader of her village. She’s a kunoichi after my own heart!’
Natsuhi turned to the two shinobi standing beside her, “These are my students. This is Hokuto,” She gestured to the friendly-looking girl, “And my son, Sumaru.” She rested her hand on the young man’s shoulder.

They both bowed to the Hokage respectfully. Sumaru’s dark green braid slipped off of his shoulder when he greeted Tsunade. They appeared disciplined and confident when they spoke, “It’s an honor to meet you, Hokage-sama.”

“It’s good to meet the both of you as well. I’ve been told you are the only two shinobi in your village to continue Dragon Star Training under the supervision of Natsuhi. That’s impressive.” Tsunade laced her hands under her chin and leaned against her desk, “I should introduce my shinobi as well…this is my assistant Shizune,” Shizune nodded and readjusted Ton-Ton in her arms, “And this is one of my newly promoted Chunin, Nara Shikamaru.”

He nodded from where he stood at the side of the room, “It’s nice to meet you. I actually didn’t know Star was a real village.”

“It’s a good thing people consider it a myth.” Sumaru replied, “The people who do know it exists usually give us trouble.”

Shikamaru considered it, still out of the loop on what made Star ninja so formidable.

Natsuhi stated her purpose, “I know that we discussed this some time ago, but I am here to escort a team of yours to my village. Hopefully you will be able to discover a way to help the young ninja who have been harmed by the star’s power.”

“I will be sending my apprentice to oversee the particulars for the examinations, as well as a group who can support her. Once she determines the extent of those affected they will be transported to Konoha. It could take some time to study their symptoms and treat them.”

She nodded, “I understand, Tsunade-sama. I am truly grateful for your help.”

Before Natsuhi could enquire how so many sick children would travel hundreds of miles the door of the office opened. A group of young ninja entered, curious about the Hokage’s visitors.

“Oh, good!” Tsunade was pleased, “This lot makes up the team I will be sending to Star with you.” She turned to the genin, “You have good timing! I was just about to send for you for a briefing.”

“Really, Shishou?” Sakura was surprised.

“Yes.” She turned to Natsuhi, “This is my apprentice, Haruno Sakura.” Sakura smiled and nodded to the woman with the Star headband.

“Sato, Hinata; you are both available for a mission, yes? I needed Shino elsewhere but I know you two will be more than enough to accompany Sakura to the Hidden Star Village.” Tsunade addressed them, “I’ve asked a jounin to go with you as well…but he’s an hour late.”

Sato frowned. He could already tell who was going to chaperone them.

Ino and Chouji, who had already labored on a mission earlier, filed off to the side of the room beside Shikamaru.

“Why will we be travelling there, Tsunade-sama?” Hinata asked.

“Natsuhi is the leader of the Star Village and she has been in contact with Jiraiya and Naruto. They
hope that students who are suffering from the effects of Star training can be helped here.” Tsunade began, “Natsuhi will give you the particulars once—”

Kakashi entered sheepishly and greeted everyone in the room, “Well, it looks like I am the last one as usual…”

“Kakashi, this is kind of important!” Sato barked at him, “You should have been the first one here!”

“It looks like everyone just got settled so I’m sure I can catch up,” Kakashi smiled beneath his mask, “Please continue, Hokage-sama.”

“As I was saying,” Tsunade gestured to the woman in the room and Kakashi nodded to her, “Natsuhi will explain the star’s effects to Sakura in great detail before you leave. Sumaru and Hokuto will accompany you all to the Star Village and then back to Leaf. Natsuhi will be staying here to give me further details and act as collateral.”

“Collateral?” Sato was confused.

“There is no established peace between our villages, so an exchange of great value must be made in order to avoid a double-cross.” Natsuhi explained, “I am the Hoshikage. Without me my village will be crippled. You can be assured that so long as I am here Sumaru and Hokuto will cooperate with you fully.”

“That’s harsh, but that’s the way it is.” Shikamaru agreed.

“If everything goes well I am sure we can all look forward to an alliance between our villages.” Tsunade added optimistically, “And I know all of you are wondering how I intend to transport a dozen or so ill children. Allow me to make it clear that Hatake Sato was chosen specifically to make it an easy task.”

Sato made a small **huh** sound and then smiled, “Oh I see! Alright, Tsunade-sama, I’ll do my best.”

Hokuto and Sumaru looked at Sato quizzically, wondering how a trainee was supposed to make the long journey an easy task.

“You aren’t the only shinobi who can fly you know,” Tsunade told them smugly, “Sato is an adept summoner of owls which can help you bring the children here safely.”

Natsuhi chuckled at their faces as they grasped the fact their ability was not exclusive to the Star village.

“Prepare for a long journey.” Tsunade advised the team, “Kakashi will oversee major decisions and act in accordance with what Sakura finds. Sato, you are entirely responsible for the safe passage of Natsuhi’s villagers, so please take your duty seriously. Hinata, you should be on the lookout for any threats while you travel and help keep the children in good condition.”

“Do you expect us back at a certain time?” Kakashi asked.

“No, however if you are in any way delayed I expect you to correspond with me.” Tsunade told him, “After Natsuhi and Sakura have their discussion you may leave with Sumaru and Hokuto. I wish you all a safe journey and good luck!”

Shikamaru and his teammates exited first and were followed by Kakashi, Sato and Hinata. Sakura lingered while Natsuhi had a few last words with the Hokage.
“Thank you so much for agreeing to this, Tsunade-sama.” Natsuhi said, “While you and I wait here for their return I would like to tell you more about my time with Naruto and Jiraiya-sama.”

Tsunade smirked, “Oh I’m sure it was very eventful…”

Sakura had to hustle through the market to pick up the groceries her mother had asked for. After speaking to Natsuhi she had a more thorough understanding of what she was dealing with.

‘Students in the Hidden Star Village were having a difficult time with side effects from training near the “star” which they have been able to control but not cure.’ Sakura was considering it as she picked up milk, ‘I am going to go ahead and assume it is reversible, or at least manageable, considering that some shinobi have developed a resistance to it, like Sumaru. I need to find out what is deteriorating in their bodies when they contact star-chakra…and if most of the students have consistent problems. Maybe brief contact is less severe than prolonged contact?’

She snatched up a package of pork chops that were on sale and she hurried to pay for her foodstuffs.

She recalled Natsuhi saying something peculiar to her:

“Sakura, how much do you know about the origins of chakra?”

“Excuse me?” The girl was confused, “I guess…it is passed down from our parents; our ancestors?”

“Quite right. There was a time when human beings had no control over chakra.” Natsuhi told her, “My grandfather used to tell me stories about the old “world tree”. It was thought to be a concentration of chakra so immense that tailed-beasts paled in comparison. It was said that the fruit of the world-tree is a manifestation of the planet’s natural energy. He claimed that fragments of world-chakra came into existence that way. The legends he told me didn’t make much sense until I began training in the presence of the star…”

“Are you telling me the star is a fragment of that?” Sakura frowned, “As in, world-energy? I am not sure if I am getting this.”

“That’s alright, I struggle to understand it myself,” Natsuhi admitted, “My husband once suspected our star could have been a part of the world-tree long ago, before it disappeared. Humans are able to extract immense amounts of chakra from it; however it can have a steep toll on the body. He died from his complications before we could discover more about it.”

Sakura held her chin between her thumb and forefinger as she thought, “And…you said it fell from the sky and landed in your country?”

“Yes, long ago…”

“Honestly, it sounds a bit far-fetched. You seem to imply that our shinobi ancestors harnessed this chakra and passed it down to their descendants…and some of them must have died trying.” The pink haired girl was stewing over the information, “So why would most present-day ninja not suffer from harsh affects? Does this suggest we became acclimated to chakra?”

“I think that is exactly what it suggests.” Natsuhi got to the point, “That is why I am convinced the children who trained near the star can be helped. Sumaru, Hokuto and myself are proof that shinobi can survive such training.”

Sakura smiled, “I hope I can prove you right. If this turns out to be true…Tsunade-sama is going to have to update some of her medical theories…”
After the conversation Sakura had bought food and then jogged home. She had barely been inside her house for more than a minute before her mother, Mebuki, began nagging.

“Sakura why are you late? I wanted to get started on those pork cutlets!”

“Here.” She dumped the bag on the counter beside her mother, “I’m sorry, I was talking to the Hoshikage.”

Her mother did a double-take, “You were…there’s a Hoshikage?”

Sakura nodded, “Yes, she’s great.”

Mebuki’s face shifted from surprise to acceptance and then back to irritation, “And you didn’t invite her for dinner?”

“Are you serious?” Sakura shouted, stomping her way to her room, “She’s a village leader! She’s going to be dining with Tsunade-shishou as far as I know!”

She entered her room and then poked her head back out, “And just so you know I won’t be joining you for dinner! I have a mission to go to the Star Village with Kakashi-sensei!”

“Oh no you’re not! I haven’t seen you for the better part of two days! Your master is running you ragged!” Mebuki hollered back, “Leave tomorrow morning for your mission!”

“No way! Look, we can spend quality time when I get back!” Sakura was replying with a raised voice as she threw together a travel-bag, “I need to help people who are sick!”

“You do that every day!”

“Ugh!” The Hokage’s apprentice was frustrated with her mother’s stubborn attitude, “You know what? You aren’t telling me what to do anymore! I’m going!”

A silence followed. The silence was broken by the sound of a toilet flushing and Sakura’s father, Kizashi, exited the washroom innocently.

He folded his newspaper and chuckled, “My! It’s getting loud in this house! I suppose Sakura’s home?”

There was no reply.

He shuffled in his slippers over to the kitchen and saw his wife trimming the fat from the pork chops. Fury was radiating off of the woman and he kept his distance, asking quietly, “Um, dear, did our daughter come home?”

Mebuki ground her teeth, “Of course she did! And like always she is preparing to run right back out the door again! I’ll be an old crone by the time she stops to share a meal with us!”

“Now, now, darling, she’s a busy kunoichi just like we always prayed she would be,” Kizashi was smiling, “You know she’ll be back soon.”

“She’ll be back soon, sure, but she doesn’t care about anything I have to say!” She over-peppered the chops as she continued angrily, “Sakura thinks: I’ll stay out all of the time now! The Hokage is my master and I can take missions and train so I never have to see my parents!”

Mebuki turned to face her husband, “And that boyfriend of hers! What is she thinking?”
“She said his name was Gaara.” Kizashi informed her, “He may be in Suna now but I hear he is quite doting!”

Mebuki huffed, “He’s a strange boy! That silent, intense type that’s just…he’s not what I pictured for her.”

“We should meet him! I always wanted to visit Hidden Sand.” Her husband was quite supportive of the relationship, “I’ll tell him some jokes! A pun on sand would go against the grain, wouldn’t it?”

“No puns right now, please…” His wife sighed, turning back to the pan on the stove, “I’ll feel better when I finish dinner. Will you please go talk some sense into our daughter?”

“I’ll get right to it!” Kizashi smiled at Mebuki in an effort to diffuse her anger. He shuffled down the hallway to his daughter’s bedroom and stopped in the doorway.

“Good grief your mother is edgy!” He told Sakura, “It’s only because she misses you, I hope you realize that. You’ve undertaken so many responsibilities in a short amount of time…we’re both reeling from the change.”

“Dad…” Sakura sighed, heaving her backpack onto her neatly-made bed, “I understand. She flips out because she cares; you’re always reminding me…I just wish she would let me go without a fuss for once.”

“Well, parents should always take the time to tell their children they love them.” Kizashi reasoned, “If one day, heaven forbid, you didn’t come home from a mission…I would never want to regret not having the chance to tell you how proud and happy I am to be your father.”

Sakura bit her lip, “Dad…stop! It’s just…it’s just a routine mission. You don’t need to worry.”

He walked into her room and pulled her head to his chest, hugging her, “I can’t help it, Sakura. When you ran off with your teammate a while back your mother and I panicked. I know you are busting your ass to prove to the Hokage that you can make good decisions and be reliable…but your mom and I still miss you.”

The pink haired girl squeezed her father around the middle and then stepped back. Leave it to her father to explain all of the emotions that her shrieking mother could not articulate properly. Though Sakura loved both of her parents she would not hesitate to admit she was a Daddy’s-girl.

She smiled, “Thank you, Dad. I know I disappointed you…but I’m working hard because I do think of you and Mom, and I don’t want you to ever worry about me making that kind of a mistake again.”

“To be honest, I personally trust that you won’t behave that way.” Kizashi told her, scratching his pink-bearded chin, “You see…that boyfriend of yours is probably keeping you on your toes. You wouldn’t want to do anything to upset him again, because I remember how he looked when he brought you home…” He chuckled, “A bit wild-eyed.”

“I know…and he’s already a jounin…” Sakura hung her head, “I feel kind of lame when I think about how far behind I am.”

“Oh please! You are also talented, Sakura, and Tsunade-sama would not have begun training you if you were a waste of time.” Her father reminded her, “Stop feeling sorry for yourself! Look at me! I’m still a genin! In time you will have the same skill and strength as our Hokage.” He grinned, “Take pride in how hard you work. Just because you don’t reap rewards immediately doesn’t mean it isn’t worth it.”
Sakura pulled her pack on, “You always know what to say to make me feel better, Dad.”

“It’s my specialty,” Kizashi folded his arms, “Well, my second specialty! My real ability is doing puns, but your mom asked me not to make any today.”

“Yeah, she probably needed a break.”

They looked at each other and laughed. Kizashi kissed his daughter on top of her head, “Be safe and do your best! I look forward to having some koala-tea time after you return from your mission!”

“No puns!” Sakura barked and then assured him, “But I promise, Dad, we will!”

After saying goodbye to her mother and dodging Mebuki’s angry thrashing, Sakura made it back out of the door.

A short time later Sakura joined her team at the village gate. Natsuhi was saying farewell to Sumaru and Hokuto, who still seemed to have their concerns about leaving her alone in a foreign village.

“Please don’t worry. The Leaf Village is very honorable.” Natsuhi assured them, “I like to think of this arrangement as a short vacation…”

Sumaru scoffed at her answer but Hokuto chuckled with her master. After a bit of encouragement from Kakashi, Natsuhi turned back and joined Tsunade. Tsunade gave the team a confident wave before walking away with Natsuhi, truly looking forward to making a new friend.

Kakashi looked from Sumaru and Hokuto to Sakura and then sighed, “Well, the Land of Bears is quite far away. By foot it could take us about five days, give or take. So… it may be most appropriate to let Sato take over from here.”

Sato was thrilled with the announcement, “Thanks Kakashi! Hm… I guess two should be enough.”

After biting his thumb and drawing blood, Sato summoned his two favorite owls: Gyorai and Kutaiku. The birds had grown to be very large; each about the size of a full-size garage in height. They stood calmly beside Sato and ignored Sumaru and Hokuto’s amazed expressions.

“Before we do anything else I should share some etiquette with you guys.” Sato directed the comment at Sakura and Kakashi, “Sunshine has flown a few times before, so she has the hang of it.”

“Etiquette?” Sakura asked.

“Well the first rule is: don’t pull out any feathers. That will get them riled up.” He walked up to Kutaiku and gestured to a thick, braided rope glimpsing out from beneath feathery down on the bird’s chest, “They both have these for you to hold on to, or get leverage if you need to stand or fight. Try to stay as low and compact as possible and remember it can get pretty loud at high speeds, so we may need to shout…”

“We don’t have to worry much about falling.” Hinata added.

Sakura gave her an uncertain smile, “I guess you speak from experience?”

“Hey, these guys are good! Even if you get knocked off I guarantee they’ll catch you.” Sato grinned, “I mean, look, I’m still alive. I’ve made like thirty intentional jumps already!”

“That is a sterling testimonial.” Kakashi agreed and then he turned to Sumaru, “We’ll be following you back to your village. Is there anything you need to share with us?”
“Yes, actually,” Sumaru’s eyes went skyward, “There is a Jetstream about 10 kilometers above us that runs from East to West. It can cut our travel time to the village in half. However, on our return to Leaf we must take a traditional route which will be significantly longer, especially with the children.”

“They should all be well enough to fly back,” Hokuto surmised, “If we pace ourselves and take breaks the children shouldn’t be too exhausted by the journey.”

After the announcement both Sumaru and Hokuto made hand seals and formed swallow-like wings of radiant chakra.

Sakura narrowed her eyes in thought, ‘So that’s it…Star chakra…it really is unlike what most shinobi use.’ The pair of Star ninja took off and she followed Kakashi to where Gyorai was waiting for them, ‘It’s visible, tangible and it behaves differently with the environment. I guess I should talk about this with Kakashi-sensei once we get to the Star Village.’

She climbed up first and Kakashi hopped up after her. They positioned themselves side-by-side, if a little awkwardly. Sato appeared to be a complete natural when he mounted Kutaiku with a smile and made himself comfortable.

‘Has Kakashi-sensei ever done this before?’

Sakura turned to her teacher curiously. As if he read her mind, he gave her a look that read: I have no idea what I’m doing. She returned the sentiment with a small frown. Sakura secured her arms under the braided rope and then pressed herself flat against the owl. Then the ground was gone.

‘No! No! Why are we doing this?’ Was her initial thought, or rather, mental scream; as they ascended. Each wing beat seemed to drive them upwards, crushing them flat with pressure and wind, angling in the breeze in a way that was wholly unnatural for a human being.

In Sakura’s opinion, rising up was the worst part of flying. While her stomach did somersaults and jigs she remained dutifully silent, holding on for dear life as the bird banked and flapped, combating gravity. A short time after taking off they leveled out and settled into a glide that was a most pleasant change.

She had a millisecond-long glimpse of the distant, shrinking ground below them, and she quailed, grateful that Gyorai was flying smoothly at last. 'Okay this is better...I can get used to this. I don't really mind heights either, it's just... 'She looked over to Kakashi who remained expressionless, 'He didn't make a peep!’

Kakashi turned his head and chuckled, "Well that was awful..."

Sakura nodded and thought to herself, 'Ha! I knew you were shitting your pants too!'

Ahead of them, Sumaru banked to get close to Kutaiku. He had a verbal exchange with Sato that they could not hear over the rushing wind. The Star ninja then pulled up and rose over them to rejoin Hokuto. Sato and Hinata, as far as Sakura could tell, were comfortable passengers on Kutaiku’s back; sitting up and laughing while they spoke. ‘It's obvious they're both used to this. I'm just glad they aren't watching Kakashi-sensei and I freak out back here.’

"It's something else, isn't it? How easy Sato makes this look?" Kakashi mused, "My nephew has more skill than he lets on. He's quite modest about his abilities, when I think about it."

'He's right. He's been training with Sato a lot since I began spending extra time with Tsunade-shishou.' Sakura considered it, 'Kiba said that Kakashi-sensei had once thought about disbanding our team after Sasuke left and I became Tsunade's apprentice. When Tama joined us I think he
decided to keep us together and continue teaching us. I'm glad he did.'

While she was much busier bouncing back and forth between two mentors, Sakura felt she had no right to complain. She was gaining valuable knowledge for the battlefield and for saving lives. Occasionally, she did feel guilty that she did not have more time to spend bonding with her teammates. Tama was always happy to have girl-time with her, and Sakura was especially proud of Kiba, who was consistently displaying maturity and wisdom. 'Compared to how we've grown together...I can only imagine how Sasuke has changed.' She was grateful that Sasuke had not been brought back to Leaf yet, 'I am just not emotionally or mentally prepared for it.'

She relaxed as time dragged by, watching as the forested countryside rolled by far, far below. After an hour or so, Sumaru swooped down to speak to Kakashi; his voice was not that difficult to hear while nearby.

"We're going higher now, so hold on tight when we enter the airflow! It should be fine once we are inside of it." Sumaru advised.

Kakashi acknowledged him and they proceeded rising again, which was not as unbearable as it had been at first. Sakura did find it alarming how much space was between her body and the ground, though. The typical, fluffy clouds she had been watching were now below the flock as they sailed through clear sky. An odd pattern of clouds above them, dotted in a row, was the first indicator of the Jetstream. Hokuto and Sumaru moved first, and it fooled Sakura's eye when the pair made contact with the current of air and then seemed to reappear a considerable distance ahead, 'It's like it's pushing them! Is this even a safe idea?'

She could see Sato and Hinata pressed flat on Kutaiku's back, preparing for their entrance. Hinata's hair, now past her shoulders, flapped wildly in the wind. 'Hm. She looks good. I think I'll keep my hair short for the rest of my life, but Hinata can pull off long or short.' Sakura ceased her distracted thoughts and held tight as the increased wind signaled the Jetstream's proximity.

Gyorai and Kutaiku banked into the stream and the sound of rushing air was deafening. Once inside, Sakura could only vaguely detect their increase in speed, particularly because she had no landmarks to use as a reference. She was getting used to the softness of the owl's feathers as she pressed flat, fearful of being knocked from Gyorai's back. What felt like a little more than 20 minutes to Sakura passed and Sumaru exited the Jetstream. Everyone followed suit, and it was then after leaving the fast-moving air current that Sakura understood just how far they had traveled.

The landscape of the Fire Country was long gone; mountains and canyons were abundant, with a scattering of tall, dark pine forests. 'Oh man! We've got to be close!' Based on Natsuhi's description of the Land of Bears, Sakura could tell that they were nearing the Star Village.

They settled into a comfortable glide again, and Sakura relaxed, shutting her eyes. Two hours passed and thick woodland came into view, sprawling far and wide beneath them. Puffed cumulus clouds drifted by as they began descending, following the Star ninja as they navigated the wilderness.

Hokuto did a playful roll in the air and Sakura was snapped out of her travelling-stupor. The Hidden Star Village was finally visible, and the shadows of giant birds slipped over the ledges of the canyons below as they approached it. After Sakura peeked to get a closer look at the buildings nestled within the forest, Kakashi perked up as well. They soared over the village and circled around, landing carefully in an open yard. Sakura breathed a deep sigh of relief once they were no longer airborne.

She slipped down from Gyorai's back and stretched her arms, 'Being bunched up there was getting old!'
Her companions met the ground as well, stretching the stiffness from their limbs. Kutaiku turned his large, feathery face to Sato and said, "We'll be ready to help whenever you need us, Sato."

"Got it, and thanks for bringing us here."

"Not at all." Both owls disappeared in a large puff of smoke.

While the group was settling, Kakashi came to stand beside his nephew, "Well done. That was rather painless, though I can't say that I enjoy flying…"

"I know it's not your thing." The boy was smiling playfully.

"Will you have enough chakra when you need to summon more birds in the future?"

"I can manage ten or less before I am pushing it." Sato told him, "Or I can just give it my all to summon Kutaishi, but the boss warned me not to summon her. She is not friendly at all…"

Kakashi gave him a stern look, "Kurenai told me about that. I agree that maybe you should avoid her."

Hinata was smiling as she glanced around at their surroundings. She clasped her hands in front of her; a habit that Sakura knew her friend often did while thinking. Sakura came to stand beside Hinata and took in the sights with her, "How did your ride go, Hinata?"

"It was quite nice!" She had genuinely enjoyed it, "But I could see that you and Kakashi-sensei took some time to adjust. It can be quite nerve wracking at first."

Sakura was slightly embarrassed, "You...were watching us?"

"Yes, with my Byakugan." Hinata admitted, "I wanted to make sure you were alright. Sato-kun wanted to as well."

"We looked so stupid at first..." Sakura lamented, "It was stressful! Even Kakashi-sensei was freaked out. Please excuse any weird faces we made."

Hinata chuckled lightly, "Of course! I only laughed once."

Sakura gave the girl a playful nudge.

Three Star jounin approached the group and Sumaru greeted them, beginning with an introduction, "We're back! Here is the team from Hidden Leaf that came with us. This is Hatake Kakashi, Hatake Sato, Haruno Sakura and Hyuga Hinata." He turned to his Leaf companions, "Allow me to introduce the veteran jounin of my village: this is Bai Lu, Nomi and Miketsuko." Hokuto waved to Miketsuko and mouthed silently, Hi Dad! Her father restrained a grin.

Bai Lu, a man with intense eyes and a grayness that foretold how he was pushing 50 years of age, smiled at Kakashi, "Welcome! Ah, I see that Copy Ninja Kakashi was tasked with helping us. This truly is a distinguished visit."

"Actually, I'm the grunt this time. These three will be doing most of the work," Kakashi replied cheerily, "Sato is in charge of transportation, Hinata is here for security, and Sakura, my student, will be conducting medical exams."

Miketsuko eyed the smaller Hatake, "Oh? Is this your son?"

Sato blanched.
"Nephew, actually." Kakashi corrected.

"The resemblance is rather uncanny," Bai Lu agreed, "And these kunoichi look promising indeed! I want to thank you all for coming. I am sure you must be tired from your journey; please rest a while before continuing."

Everyone with the exception of Sakura was nodding in appreciation. The pink haired girl spoke up, "I'm actually feeling fine. I would like to see the children right away, if I could."

"Are you sure?" Kakashi asked.

"I am." Sakura affirmed, looking to Sumaru and Hokuto, "If it's alright with you guys, I would like to begin my initial examinations now."

"Sure," Hokuto was lively as well, "I can bring you to the infirmary and show you around."

The shinobi filed off after that; Sakura followed Hokuto to the administration building which housed the hospital wing. Sato and Hinata joined Sumaru when he offered them a short tour of the village, and Kakashi was quickly swept up by the curious trio of jounin who wanted to know a bit more about Kakashi's career and life in the Fire Country.

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Sakura walked in between rows of hospital beds, staying a few paces ahead of Hokuto. Some of the beds were empty and Hokuto explained that a few of the children were well enough to go outside and enjoy the fresh air. Sakura was glad to hear it. A pair of children sat on the same bed, playing a board game with pebbles. Many chatted with each other, looking surprisingly healthy, while others lay asleep with labored breathing. Sakura took in the sights and assessed.

'There's a lot of variety when it comes to those affected...I wonder...' Sakura turned to Hokuto and asked, "Hokuto, can you tell me if any of the children have recovered on their own?"

"Yes, four of them, to be exact; a few weeks ago." The girl acknowledged, "They've resumed missions and they seem to be quite healthy, although they do get regular checkups."

"Four recovered." Sakura repeated it to herself, and she looked about the room, counting, "There are nineteen kids here. Twenty-three originally affected, besides you and Sumaru, which makes twenty-five." She paused, "Um...do you and Sumaru have any injuries related to the Star?"

"Not really, we just get exhausted sometimes." Hokuto told her, "But some of the physical effects on other children...lesions and scars...they're very serious. I am not sure why some are so terribly affected."

"And Natsuhi?"

"She has some scars, but she ended her training long ago."

"Okay..." Sakura walked with her chin cupped in her hand, thinking.

Hokuto faced the children and raised her voice, "Listen everyone! This is Sakura, a medic-nin from Konohagakure! She's here to study how we've all been affected by the Star, so please cooperate with her while she conducts some brief examinations for the next few days. If anyone feels uncomfortable I will be right here supervising."

They all chirped in acknowledgment.
Hokuto introduced Sakura to the first child, a trainee who was about 11 years old, hoping to get a strangely-colored patch of skin checked. The boy conversed pleasantly and seemed to be in good spirits. Sakura asked routine questions about symptoms: nausea, eyesight, hearing, body pain, bleeding, swelling, etc. She asked politely for him to remove his shirt to get a look at the scarring on his back.

While checking him over, Sakura let her thoughts flow. 'If I am going to test Natsuhi's theory I am going to need a look at that Star after this...because this looks like a chakra-burn to me. I've never seen one before and they're kind of rare, Tsunade-shishou said. I need to compare Sumaru and Hokuto's health, as well as the four recovered kids, to everyone else here to get a scale of the damage.'

In her element, Sakura went from child to child, taking her time with each meticulous observation.

While Sumaru accompanied Sato and Hinata around his village for a walk he told them of his experience with Naruto.

"I'll admit I had difficulty accepting outsiders before I met him. It seemed like every shinobi from an outside village who ever came here started some kind of trouble or made demands," Sumaru sighed, "All Naruto demanded was that I learn to trust others. He had me convinced after I was reunited with my mother...and it did help that he kindly defeated our corrupt village leader at the time."

"Naruto likes taking out the trash for people!" Sato laughed.

"Yes, he does take it upon himself to do that sometimes." Hinata agreed, "He has helped many people in the Leaf Village as well."

Sato nodded, "It's true! He's helped me, his teammates, Sunshine, Neji, people in the Land of Waves..." He became a bit quieter when he added, "Every person he's spent time talking to should count themselves lucky. If Naruto cares about something he will move mountains."

Sumaru found the statement accurate. 'My village was so much better off after he and Gama-sennin arrived to help us. It's been a gift that keeps on giving, really. Now that we have changed here in Hoshigakure we are more willing to help others.'

He showed the Leaf shinobi notable eateries, residential areas, shops, two training dojos, a sky-gazing platform with its own telescope, the local forge and arsenal, hot springs, lodges and then finally stopped in front of the administrative building. Sato asked where he suspected the jounin may have taken Kakashi, and Sumaru pointed him in the right direction, "They might be at the tea house, knowing them."

Sato thanked him before leaving, "Thanks! I'll meet up with you later, Sunshine."

She nodded. Hinata walked with Sumaru past a group of small children coloring with chalk on pavement.

"This is the most isolated village I have ever seen." Hinata told him, "It is so small and you only need a few businesses and services to take care of all the villagers."

"We are quite self-sufficient." Sumaru said it with a hint of pride.

"Is Konoha the first outside village you have been to?"

"Yes," He confessed, "It was so huge...we stayed together so we wouldn't get lost."
"Will you visit more villages?"

"Probably after my mother formalizes an alliance with the Leaf village. We want to have some credibility before we take contracts for outside missions; to discourage unwanted attention." Sumaru explained, "I'm not in a hurry though. Life here has really improved and I want to enjoy it for a while."

"I see."

"Akahoshi was defeated and thrown out, my mother was asked to be Hoshikage...I'm in love with someone." He reflected on the thought, "It's almost ideal."

"Almost ideal?"

"Well...Hokuto is my girlfriend."

"I suspected that." Hinata confirmed with a smile, "But that's a good thing! You are very sweet together."

"Thank you. It's just...it has created some challenges on my team." He shrugged it off, "But never mind that, it's been worth all of the trouble. So tell me, are you a good friend of Naruto's?"

She became quiet, trying to contain some of the excitement and joy that bubbled up in response to the question. She clasped her hands, allowing herself to smile with some composure, "Oh yes."

"I had a feeling you were, when you and Sato were talking about him."

"He and I have been friends since we were small children. I loved him for so long but I never had the courage to tell him," Hinata told him and Sumaru looked at her sadly, "But now he is my boyfriend."

Sumaru laughed in relief.

"He makes me so happy." She continued with a spring in her step, "It isn't easy to be apart from him while he travels with Gama-sennin. After being by his side for so long...this is the first time I have truly missed him."

After inspecting a few of the more seriously ill children, Sakura was introduced to Mizura, Hokuto's other teammate. Sakura's first impression of him was of a friendly young man who was still upbeat despite the disfiguring scars on his chest. She concluded the exam and asked Hokuto for a quiet place where she could take notes. Hokuto and Mizura shared a strange, tension-filled stare before saying goodbye. Hokuto quickly showed the Leaf kunoichi to a study down the hallway.

Sakura took a seat at a table and began pouring her thoughts on paper before she could forget any of her findings. Hokuto stood beside the table, looking doleful. A few minutes passed before Sakura looked up. She noticed the other girl's distress, "Hey...are you alright?"

With a deep sigh Hokuto took a seat across from Sakura and rested her chin on her folded arms, her eyes watering.

"Did I do something?"

"No, of course not, Sakura."

The pink haired girl wanted to be helpful, "Look, we haven't known each other for long but you can tell me about whatever is bothering you, Hokuto. I don't mind!"
"Thank you." She took a breath and calmed herself, "It's Mizura. He's been at Sumaru's throat ever since I began dating him."

"Oh! You're Sumaru's special someone!" Sakura grinned, lifting her pinky to symbolize the attachment.

"Yes, and naturally I should be happy...but Mizura has distanced himself from us. He always pretends to be content around me, and initially he was fine with the change...but it wasn't long before he became angry at Sumaru." Hokuto explained, "It's my fault. I dated Mizura for a short time but there was nothing special between us. I wanted to be with Sumaru instead and I finally was brave enough to do something about it."

"Oh." Sakura's eyebrows were raised.

"Sumaru understands how Mizura feels betrayed: they're good friends. They were good friends." She continued with a quaking voice, "I feel so awful for doing this. I didn't want anyone to get hurt. I just wish I could have fallen in love with the right person the first time..."

Sakura watched Hokuto from across the table, considering what she had said.

"I won't get into much detail but...I know exactly what you mean." Sakura replied, "It would have been great if my current boyfriend was the first person I loved...it would have caused a lot less damage."

Hokuto nodded, wiping her eyes.

"If there's anything I can do to help, just let me know." Sakura offered, "But now maybe you can help me."

"What can I do?"

"I need to pick your brain; get your opinion on a few things."

"Of course."

"Can you tell me what you think it is that sets you apart from the children who were harmed?" Sakura asked, "Why do you and Sumaru resist the Star's effects? Could there be a safeguard in part of your routine, a genetic predisposition, your diet..."

"Natsuhi-sama did advise us to train a certain way, although she has forbade other students from training with the Star as a safety measure." Hokuto thought about it, "I suppose the only thing that really protects us is deep meditation. Many children who were hurt, in my opinion, struggled with that skill, or just could not achieve a spiritual peace."

"Why is that?"

"They were afraid. I know it sounds ridiculous, but they were more focused on their fear of being hurt by the star than they were on achieving harmony with all things. It was self-sabotage." Hokuto explained, "Natsuhi-sama said that is what caused the most damage...as if the children's bodies and the Star's energy were rejecting each other."

"I'll have to look into that more, but I have to say that the inner-peace hypothesis is close to the mark." Sakura agreed, "I have heard that meditation and spiritual balance help develop and protect the body's chakra system...but it's not my area of expertise."
By that point she decided that later she would ask Hinata about what she thought of the theory. The Hyuga did have a thorough knowledge of the chakra network and such things. Sakura hoped she could take advantage of such a resource.

"Hm. I want to pick three of the ill children, three of the recovered children and then compare you, Sumaru and Natsuhi to everyone else. I'll also start some experimental healing and treatment after I take a look at the Star." Sakura hatched her next course of action, "That's tomorrow's agenda. Oh, Hokuto, do you have any literature on the Star I am allowed to read?"

"Yes, Natsuhi-sama gave permission for that. I'll take you to her library."

Sakura tapped her notes on the table to form a neat stack and then followed Hokuto to the next fountain of knowledge.

That evening Sumaru had gathered Kakashi, Sato and Hinata together to show them where they would be staying. The Hoshikage's living quarters was attached to the administrative building, and several guest rooms were prepared off of the corridor that ran adjacent to the infirmary.

Food was brought to them while they waited in a dining room.

Sumaru excused himself before they began their meal, "I was assigned to do a perimeter check tonight and tomorrow, so please forgive me for leaving. I promise I will stop by to check on you when I return."

Kakashi's eye crinkled humorously, "Don't worry, Sumaru. I'll protect this bunch while you're gone."

The boy chuckled on his way out, getting used to the sense of humor that Konoha was known for. It was infecting him and helping him grow a funny bone he had lived most of his life without.

The food was decadent and Hinata reminded her teammate to save some of the spread for Sakura. A surreal moment occurred when, from the corner of her eye, the Hyuga girl noticed Kakashi pulling his mask down shyly to eat. She mulled it over while she helped herself to some stew, 'Of course I have always known what Kakashi-sensei's face looks like since I have seen it with my Byakugan, but I am surprised that he is comfortable enough to eat in front of someone like me,' Then again, Kakashi was probably aware that concealing his identity from her was just plain stupid, 'And Sato-kun has shared many meals with him. What a vulnerable, rare moment!'

The novelty ended after the first minute.

"So how do you think the jounin of this village compare, Kakashi?" Sato inquired, dotting his plate with hot sauce, "They looked pretty cool to me."

"They are well established and deserving of the rank, even if they are bit xenophobic," Kakashi assessed, "Miketsuko is Hokuto's father and he seemed to be the most relaxed. Nomi took some convincing to make sure I wasn't here to assassinate anyone, and Bai Lu..." Kakashi chuckled, "He reminds me a lot of my sensei."

Sato raised his eyebrows, "He does? That's some major respect for a guy you just met!"

"Yes and I am not exaggerating. They've come a long way here in this village," Kakashi went on, "Nearly everyone here feels indebted to Jiraiya-sama and Naruto. It goes against the very nature of the Star Village to reach out and ask for help. Leaf may be the only village they will ever trust, so it's important that we do our best here. This is a delicate relationship."
There was a break in conversation as they ate contentedly. After a time Sato asked, "I wasn't told much, but do you know why Star training is so controversial?"

"Well..." Kakashi could go off of what his Star jounin-companions had told him, "I have not seen a Star ninja in battle yet, but from what I've seen so far...they possess the most incredible chakra shape manipulation I have ever witnessed. It must be a result from training near that stone."

Hinata nodded in agreement. She was still astounded by their ability to physically manifest chakra.

"Even my teacher, the Fourth Hokage, would not be able to match their shape manipulation...and he was very skilled." Kakashi concluded, "The stone they call 'The star' is an unstable source of chakra, so I doubt that anyone who mastered Star training did so unscathed."

"Where did the stone come from?" Sato wondered.

Kakashi shrugged. He was more or less clueless.

"Sakura-chan should know more than any of us." Hinata reminded them. They paused again to eat before Kakashi added, "Sumaru...as you two might be able to tell...he is the strongest shinobi in this village."

Sato sputtered his tea, "What? Are you serious? His mom is the Hoshikage, you know!"

"I know, and Natsuhi-sama certainly is strong, but she was the clear choice as a leader." His uncle replied, "Sumaru is a bit young yet for such responsibility."

"I want to put that theory of yours to the test!" Sato was grinning, "I'll challenge Sumaru tomorrow and get him to spar with me!"

"I advise you not to create tension, but," Kakashi relented, "It would be good to show him what Leaf's reputation is based on."

The door slid open and Sakura entered, trudging tiredly across the tatami mats. Her team greeted her with enthusiasm and she made a small sound of salutations. She plopped down beside Sato at the table and reached weakly for a portion of food.

Kakashi smiled. His mask was back in place since he had finished eating. "Sakura, it's good to have you back. What are your findings so far?" He asked.

Ambition and scientific exhilaration ignited in her eyes and she perked up, "Oh, it's a big deal. There are tons of variables to consider...but if I were to describe it briefly," She looked her teacher in the eye, "That Star is a volatile and ancient source of chakra...and I mean OLD."

"Did you see it?" Sato asked.

"Yeah. Hokuto took me to where it's hidden and I examined it quickly before I left." Sakura added, "The chakra that comes from the Star permanently absorbs into and increases the chakra capacity of people like Sumaru."

Hinata finished eating just so she could hear the wild tale her friend was unfolding.

"The people who can endure training do so because of deep meditation. Achieving peace helps shield from the star's harmful effects. Some documents I read also confirmed what I noticed while checking the children; some shinobi who went far with star training or completed it had their
appearances changed as a result. As for the records of the history of the star...I am kind of confused. I need to ask Tsunade-sama some questions."

"What has you confused?" Kakashi asked, "Maybe I can be of some help."

"It's probably going to blow your mind too, Kakashi-sensei."

"Try me."

Sakura sighed before she began, "Natsuhi was telling me an old story about the star falling from the sky in ancient times...times before people used chakra or ninjutsu. She said that she believes it is a piece of the World Tree that existed."

"What is that?" Sato was lost.

"Some people think it was the original source of chakra; all of the chakra in the world." She shook her head, "But it's just a legend! What I read started out factual...but then it sounded more like mythology."

"So the World Tree was the first source of chakra?" Hinata was putting it together, "Then humans must have found a way to tap into it."

"Bingo." Sakura nodded, "But the tree doesn't exist anymore, well, not in its original form anyway. I was reading that the first person to tap into it was a princess who wanted to stop wars that were ravaging the land. She succeeded, but the husk of the tree turned into..." Sakura hesitated, "It said it became a demon and that it attempted to take its chakra back."

Kakashi stared at her dumbly. Her friends remained silent in anticipation.

"The big-ass tome I went through in that library, which had very little to do with these sick kids...it has to do with ALL of us." Sakura confessed, "It's the big answer to the riddle of our origin. That demon failed to restore itself. Its chakra is inside of us, passed down from our ancestors. And what isn't stored as chakra inside of us exists as the-"

"The Tailed Beasts." Kakashi finally caught up.

She nodded, "Yes. Natsuhi was telling me about this. The princess' son, Hagoromo, became the first sage when he sealed that demon into his body. He broke it into nine parts before he died, into lesser demons." Sakura poured herself some tea, "But what I'm getting at is that the World Tree had fragments that broke off and scattered before the princess reached it, and this star just happens to be one of them. It predates Biju-chakra. It predates human chakra. It's why so many people are harmed by it, because it is in its rawest form."

"Oh my god, slow down." Sato held his head, "Princess? Sage? Tailed Beasts? Is this like the food-chain of chakra, basically?"

"Yeah, you can definitely call it that." Sakura said, unabashed. She sipped her tea.

Hinata was silent. Something like alarm and realization was swelling in her chest. 'I thought this seemed familiar...I didn't understand why I thought I recognized physical, radiant chakra, but now...' She wondered about how her own chakra's composition changed when she used the Misago Byakugan, 'I've seen this somewhere else as well...'

"So...you didn't completely blow my mind." Kakashi announced, "But I have to admit that is pretty close to the craziest thing I have ever heard."
Sakura was busy piling food into her mouth. She was sick of explaining. She was starving.

"You told me about that once, Kakashi, about Tailed Beasts." Sato pointed out, "You said our village has one jinchuriki."

"That's correct and revealing the identity of that person is forbidden." Kakashi reminded him.

"You told Tama and I that it's a person we know and like."

Hinata's hands fisted nervously in her lap.

Kakashi sighed, "Give it a rest. I'm not going to break the Third's Law just for this occasion."

Sakura had spent a few minutes enjoying her food. She began to participate in conversation again.

"If jinchuriki and Tailed Beasts definitely exist, then I have a feeling that this story is true. There wouldn't be any other explanation for how ninjutsu and chakra came to be." Sakura decided, "For now I am accepting this as the truth."

Kakashi folded his arms while he thought about it, "I think I'll accept it as the truth too. No one has questioned where Tailed Beasts came from and ever gotten an answer until now."

"It just goes to show what a tremendous responsibility and burden it is to be a jinchuriki." Sakura reflected on the idea, "That is power that was only filtered by the sage Hagoromo...so it's really volatile and potent. It'll take a toll on the human body not unlike what the kids here have experienced. You have to be really brave to serve your village like that."

"So you aren't afraid of jinchuriki, Sakura? Even if they can potentially release a Tailed Beast in the village?" Kakashi wondered.

She looked thoughtful, "Well, no. I have a better idea of where they come from now. It's a shame that it has to be a militarized operation when we could probably learn so much from a jinchuriki."

Kakashi stared at her for a moment and then he began laughing.

Sato and Hinata looked at him with bewildered expressions.

Sakura scowled, "What? Was that not cowardly enough of an answer?"

He shook his head, chuckling, "No! No...you're just making me proud."

She blushed, continuing to frown, and then gulped her tea.

"Sakura-chan is right. There is a lot we can learn." Hinata agreed, "I think that many people hold onto their fear of when the village was attacked long ago. Was it the jinchuriki's fault?"

"No. It hardly ever is. Jinchuriki in Leaf have an incredibly good track record." Kakashi told her, "While I can't disclose classified information, I will say this...it was an accident. That jinchuriki died unnecessarily that night."

The youngsters gasped, disturbed by the news.

"Many people in our village will feel resentful towards jinchuriki and the Nine-Tailed Fox because of the losses we suffered that night. They have probably never considered the loss a jinchuriki experiences, or the sacrifices they must make." Kakashi's tone became serious, "They fight and defend their home just as we do. They laugh and cry...but they suffer so much more."
Hinata was fighting back tears.

"Unfortunately they are misunderstood, but I am glad you three have a fresh perspective on the matter." Kakashi ended it on an upbeat note.

"Well..." Sakura finished chewing a piece of tempura, "I stand by what I said. My concern is if these kids can be healed after being exposed to raw, prehistoric chakra. I am confident they can, but I need to test some treatment methods and do comparisons before we go anywhere. I will need Tsunade-sama's help when we return to Leaf."

"How much time do you think you'll need?" Her teacher asked.

"I'll examine a few more children in the morning and then run the tests. With any luck they should be fit for travel in a day or two."

"Good! I've got time to challenge Sumaru." Sato was pleased.

Satisfied with the dinner and the chakra-origin theory, the group split up and retired to separate rooms. Sato and his uncle went to their room and next door Hinata and Sakura settled down.

Sakura was rummaging around in her travel bag when Hinata told her, "I want to help you with those tests, Sakura-chan."

Sakura smiled, "Thanks! I was going to ask you to come with me tomorrow anyway. You know more about the chakra circulatory system than I do, and I was hoping you could check for damage."

"Of course I will."

They changed into night clothes, brushed their teeth and chatted while they wound down and shut the light off. Hinata brushed her hair before setting up a futon beside Sakura's bedroll.

"I think Sumaru and Hokuto are cute together." Hinata had been thinking about the couple.

"Yeah they are, but it's not all hearts and roses." Sakura said while getting cozy on her futon, "She told me that her relationship with Sumaru hurt their teammate Mizura, her previous boyfriend. I know what she's going through."

Hinata hesitated, "I think I know what you referring to, and please excuse me if it is impolite to ask, but...were you ever truly invested in Sasuke that way?"

"No, I can't say it was official. But we started getting close...he was spouting nonsense about getting married and being together." Sakura trailed off, "Honestly...it made me nervous. I was starting to feel out of control when he got like that. He demanded a lot more than I was prepared to give."

Hinata nodded in understanding.

"Getting close to Sasuke really caused a lot more damage in the long run, especially now that I am happy with Gaara." Sakura slapped herself in the face with her blanket, "I'm an idiot. I always liked Gaara and valued our friendship. When I faltered and began to doubt he would ever care about me the same way...I looked elsewhere. He saved my life and talked sense into me. He did love me, Hinata! How could I not have seen it?"

Her friend chuckled happily, "Sometimes it is hard to tell!"

"Now that we have a loving relationship I hardly ever get to see him," The pink haired girl lamented,
"I suppose that's a fitting outcome."

Hinata rolled onto her stomach and propped her chin on her hands, "Don't worry, Sakura-chan. He'll come home to you. I know that is what his heart really wants."

"He won't." Sakura replied, restraining tears, "I know he won't."

The dark haired girl was troubled by the assertion, "Why do you say that?"

Sakura remained silent, holding in her grief. It had been a burden to keep Gaara's inevitable promotion to herself. She wrestled with it most days; proud that he would become a village leader at a young age, and distraught that he would be apart from her indefinitely. It was hard to speak about it. It was as if confirming it out loud would be the final nail in the coffin when it came to being on her own in Leaf.

Hinata looked at her with compassionate eyes, "Sakura, what happened? What's wrong?"

The Hokage's apprentice wiped her eyes, trying to get a grip, "I'm alright. Listen," She met her friend's gaze, "You can't repeat what I'm about to tell you."

"I promise I won't."

"Gaara has been selected to become the Fifth Kazekage." Sakura at last got it off her chest, "That's what I've been having a hard time with, Hinata."

Hinata was understandably shocked by the announcement.

"I can't help but wonder if he will still want to be close to me when he has the responsibilities of a village leader. Will I be worth his time?"

"Of course you will! He loves you!" Hinata insisted, "Naruto will be Hokage one day and I have to believe that he won't push me aside when it happens!"

Sakura was still horribly dour. She did not respond well to Hinata's faithful optimism.

"If he comes back." Sakura replied dryly, "Even if he makes it that far enough to become Hokage, Tsunade-sama told me that he has become one of the Akatsuki's targets. She didn't tell me why or what they are doing, but that organization is bad news from what she told me."

Hinata's heart sunk. The uneasy thoughts came back like a rushing wave, 'Will he come back?' His safety was not guaranteed and neither was his love for her. He could come back changed. He could disappear. What would be the point of love if distance and time wedged itself between two people?

"No." Sakura spoke up again, "I'm sorry, Hinata. I was wrong to say that. My Dad is always saying that when you love someone, anything that comes between you is usually an illusion. The one you love rubs off on you and you carry pieces of that person with you..." She looked at her friend, "Naruto has stayed with you; it's obvious just looking at you. You're courageous and you look out for others...and you're not as shy as I remember you were!"

Hinata exhaled, letting the tension go. That made more sense.

She and Naruto had changed each other. It seemed to her that a large part of the love she felt for him had to do with how they had grown and changed alongside each other.

"Besides, Naruto will return for you no matter the danger. That's just how he is." Sakura added, "I'm
"Sorry if I made you worry."

"It's alright. You had a lot on your mind."

"Yes, but it's quite insecure of me to think Gaara and I are doomed just because he has an important role in Sand." Sakura reflected, "I need to stop being melodramatic and just be happy for him."

"Don't beat yourself up. It won't be easy, but try to think of what it'll be like..." Hinata smiled, "Think of what a date with the Kazekage will be like!"

Sakura tried to hide her grin, "Yeah! That probably will make up for all the worries I have now!"

They laughed together before Hinata encouraged rest, "Let's get some sleep."

As silence settled in the room Sakura was still not ready to let her mind rest. She was mentally berating herself for attacking Hinata's relationship, which resembled her own at the time. Even if she had apologized before it still didn't feel like it was enough. 'And she just shrugged it off. I did try to do some damage control, but when I think about it... The pink haired girl allowed her mind to wander to the future, 'If Gaara and I weren't together anymore the world would not stop turning. I have a lot going for me and great friends...there's so much I should be thankful for.'

After a short time Sakura rolled over to look at her friend, "Hey."

Hinata took a peek at the girl who addressed her.

"If I lost what I cared about...if either of us did...it's good to know that I still have you as my friend." Sakura announced sincerely, "When I was little you were the only person who didn't tease me, Hinata. You have always been kind. You were always a good friend. If I lost everything, I'd be okay knowing that I still had you to turn to."

"Thank you," Hinata squeaked, "The same is true of you, Sakura-chan. You accepted me the way I was when we first met. Even my own family could not do that, and I hope you know that I have always appreciated it."

"I sure do. Naruto, Haku and Gaara accepted you too, when we all met." Sakura pointed out, "We needed each other. When life sucked and treated us unfairly it was great to know we could be ourselves when we were together."

Hinata agreed, "Even if I didn't realize it then I was very lucky."

"Me too. So the next time I get blue and miserable just tune me out. The real me knows how good I have it." Sakura told her friend, settling back down to sleep, "I don't want to complain anymore."

"I will, Sakura-chan." Hinata yawned, "Ah...goodnight."

"Goodnight, best bud."

In the morning the two girls were energized and optimistic. They capitalized on their good moods by beginning the examinations early. Two of the children Sakura had wanted to check were still sleeping, so they had to be gently awakened. Sakura got her routine health checks out of the way before getting into serious observations.

She asked Hinata to look for damage within the chakra circulatory system. The three children lined up patiently on a clinic bed and gawked when the pretty dark-haired girl used her Misago Byakugan.
Sakura assured them that they could relax.

Hinata had noted that many of her new abilities gave her deeper insight into the systems of other people. She recalled that while in the Land of Waves she had tried to use a technique that had ended up knocking her unconscious. She concluded that her target, which had been unclear at the time, was too far away. Hinata had hastily chosen Naruto as her point of contact, but the exertion had been too great. 'He was far away in another country but I did reach him briefly...' She did not want to risk injury by trying to seek him again.

After carefully attempting to "overlay," as she had come to call it, again weeks later in the company of her little sister, Hinata finally realized what the outcome of the new jutsu was. 'It overlaps my consciousness and chakra with another person. When I did it with Hanabi it was not uncomfortable or dangerous...but she did say she felt violated. The other person is absolutely aware of my presence but cannot reject it.' It was a strange ability, she conceded. She was working on discovering new uses for it.

Currently, it would be an incredibly effective way to examine the children’s bodies for injury or damage. She checked the children one at a time, briefly overlaying with them, and ignored the shrieks of alarm and confusion that came with the odd sensation.

Sakura fought back a chuckle while she reassured the children they were not being harmed. 'Oh man this is priceless...these poor kids weren't expecting this early in the morning! I don't know how Hinata does it, but if she can get me answers I am going to make her my official medical-sidekick!'

"Sakura," Hinata had finished her observations after a minute or so, "Some cells have become abnormal. A few key points in the chakra system have been weakened," Hinata pointed out the areas, "This damage seems reversible because I have seen Jyukken cause similar injuries. I think they can be healed completely with enough time, but some of the physical changes to their bodies may remain."

Sakura double-checked the spots Hinata had indicated to her, took notes and then thanked her friend for her assistance. When Hokuto arrived and asked if she was needed, Hinata asked if she could inspect her as well for comparison. Sakura excused herself to get a breath of fresh air outside.

'I trust Hinata's judgment. She definitely has seen her share of these kinds of injuries. But I still have more questions...' Sakura thought to herself as she stopped on a deserted patio, 'Maybe I can get some of them answered now.'

Sakura bit her thumb and drew blood. She focused her chakra, drawing on a good portion of it, and made hand seals for a summoning. She pressed her hand flat on the cobblestone patio and smiled to herself when a summoning matrix appeared. A tiny version of Katsuyu arrived with a puff of smoke.

"Hello Sakura!"

Sakura had kept her summoning ability to herself primarily because Tsunade had asked her to, and secondly because she could only muster enough chakra for a pitiful summoning of Tsunade's slug companion. Her new technique made her feel a mix of pride and embarrassment all at once. She had also been bestowed with her master's Yin Seal, which would need several years of charging before Sakura could do anything significant with it. The chakra seal was invisible on her forehead while it was not in use, and it anonymously absorbed chakra bit by bit as she went about her day.

Sakura likened herself to a very young and very wimpy version of Tsunade, for now.

"Hi Katsuyu-sama! I need to ask you about a few things, if you have the time."
"I would be happy to answer." The slug got comfortable in the palm of the girl's hand.

Sakura filled her in, as best she could, about the star-chakra situation. She then proceeded with her questions.

"I have a good idea of how people can protect themselves from the star's chakra, but can you tell me if you know anything about ancient, wild sources of chakra?" Sakura asked, "Are some people born with a better defense against it? Or is everyone equally vulnerable without meditation?"

"Hm..." The slug queen deliberated on it, "In my opinion, this star is indeed a part of the original source of all chakra. It can be dangerous to anyone, but I must say it is not the first incident of its kind. Among shinobi-affiliated creatures like me we have a term for natural chakra that is taken in and utilized by ninja: Senjutsu."

"Senjutsu."

"Yes, chakra found in nature has not been refined by the human body." Katsuyu explained, "When a shinobi is experienced with Senjutsu, they are able to absorb natural chakra and blend it with their own, refining it and making it usable. Deep meditation does indeed make it possible, and this kind of training can maim or petrify a person who is not accustomed to natural chakra. It is difficult, to say the least. Shinobi who enter an empowered state in this way often call it Sage Mode. Jiraiya-sama is able to, for example."

"Huh." Sakura was enthralled by the information, "Will Sumaru and those who complete Dragon Star Training be able to do that?"

"I don't know. The only instances I have seen shinobi learn about and enter Sage Mode is when they have been trained by the Toad Elders of Mount Myoboku or the Snake Elders of Ryuchi Cave." Katsuyu admitted, "This could be a new method learned without the guidance of elders and Senjutsu experts."

"Well in that case I will track their progress and get back to you on that." Sakura smiled, "How does that sound?"

"That would be fantastic!" Katsuyu agreed, "I hope it continues to go well! Please don't hesitate if there is anything else you want to ask me, Sakura."

"Thanks, Katsuyu."

The slug reverse-summoned the small replica of herself back to her home in the forest. Sakura returned to the infirmary and found Hokuto and Hinata kibitzing with one another. Hinata had nothing to report other than Hokuto had no visible damage at all. Hokuto described how she had manageable fatigue on bad training days, and she was certain that Sumaru would say the same. Sakura thanked them for their help.

Before she could express her desire to take a break for lunch, Sakura watched Kakashi enter with Sato tucked under his arm. Sato had been beaten black and blue, "Kakashi, I swear I'm fine, put me down!" And was bad-mouthing his uncle the whole way.

Kakashi gently set him down and then turned to his student, "Sakura, please have a look at him."

"I said I was okay!" Sato barked.

Kakashi shook his head, "You're not. Sumaru didn't hold back. You're lucky he wasn't fighting you seriously."
Hokuto frowned, "Sumaru did that to you?"

The young Hatake tried to make light of it, "I challenged him to spar with me and...it got a little intense. But after what I did to him he'll need some band-aids for sure!"

"You got the worst of it," Kakashi insisted, "He walked away without limping, at least."

Sakura sighed and pulled the complaining boy further into the clinic, seating him on an empty bed. 'Back to business as usual...'

The day went on peacefully. Sato was restored to his un-bruised state and refrained from challenging any other Star ninja. Sakura examined Sumaru for injuries as her final step but found nothing worth noting. He was in the peak of health, as far as she could tell, 'He's tough alright. And that green hair is kind of pretty...'

She took one final crack at the literature in Natsuhi's library before concluding her examinations, 'Tsunade and I can heal these kids, without a doubt. It will take some time, considering how many of them are coming to Leaf...but we are bound for success. And I can say I know a lot more after studying here than I did when I arrived. I bet it's going to help in the future!' Chakra origin, jinchuriki, Senjutsu: it was all a new part of her academic and medical vocabulary. She would make the most of it.

That afternoon both Sumaru and Hokuto, after getting the go-ahead from Sakura, began preparing travel supplies for the children. Kakashi decided they should leave in the morning in order to give every family adequate time to part with the youngsters.

Sakura was worn out from her running around and knowledge-building. That night while having a conversation with Hinata she fell asleep in the middle of a sentence. At the crack of dawn the next day the team was assembled, and Hokuto and Sumaru were herding sleepy children into a courtyard in front of the administrative building.

Sumaru talked over the flight plan with Kakashi and Sato. He had taken into consideration Sakura’s warning, 'If any of these kids get too worn out we may have to cut some flights short. I doubt anyone here will be able to handle a non-stop trip from Star to Leaf without the Jetstream. Let’s take it easy.'

“We won’t be able to use an air current to speed up our journey, so I suggest we take the same route my mother used to get to the Fire Country.” Sumaru informed them, “Hokuto and I managed it in a day and a half, but I think these children will need more respite than we did. It could take a little over two days if everything is in our favor: wind, storm systems, pit-stops and all of that…”

“That is a very conservative estimate.” Kakashi told him, and then looked to Sato, “What do you think, Sato-kun?”

He scratched his chin in thought, “Sumaru is probably right. The owls I picked should go pretty fast, but we won’t know an ETA until we set a pace.”

His uncle nodded to him and Sato then moved to the center of the courtyard. He needed a considerable amount of chakra for the summoning, but Sato, like most members of his family, had been blessed with plentiful reserves. He summoned six enormous birds that all varied in appearance and coloration. They made sure to look formidable and cool in front of the children since they had been notified beforehand what their task was. Many of the trainees gasped at the sight.

“Okay,” Sato gestured to the owls to make arrangements, “I count...nineteen kids...so let’s do five
on Mokumo’s back,” He pointed to a bulky horned-owl, “And five each on Washika and Kugoro,” A speckled eagle-owl and gray hawk-owl respectively, “Then Chitose will take the last four.” He pointed to a pretty snow owl who nodded her head.

Sato then took a look at his team, “That leaves Kutaiku to take Hinata and Sakura, and Gyorai will take Kakashi and I.” His veteran and most trusted owl summons met his gaze confidently.

With the flight arrangements decided, the shinobi chaperones began securing their supplies and food to the braided rope harnesses. Sumaru and Hokuto helped divide up the children into the appropriate groups and introduced them to the towering birds, “Now don’t be shy, they’re friendly.”

After one last goodbye to parents and family the children were bundled onto each owl. Mizura struggled to get a foothold while climbing onto Kugoro’s back. Sumaru reached over to assist him but the boy swatted his hand away bitterly. Sumaru recoiled, visibly upset, and watched in silence as the sickly boy pulled himself up stubbornly. Another sick trainee scolded Mizura after seeing the bad behavior, “Sumaru is your friend! Be nice to him!”

Mizura said nothing.

Sato strolled around to see how everyone was doing and made sure to give the children the same instructions he had given his teammates. After making certain all were aboard and prepared he leapt and took the spot beside Kakashi, motioning for Sumaru to take the lead.

In beautiful synchronisation, Hokuto and Sumaru manifested star-chakra wings and took off.

Kakashi was more prepared for the take off this second time around. He braced himself as they ascended and was relieved when they leveled off much sooner than they had on the previous flight. He glanced over to Sato who appeared to be completely relaxed.

"It scares me a little, when I think about it," Kakashi began quietly, "You used to be so small. Your mother could lift you up with one arm when you were a kid. Now that I see how you're catching up to my height...it's a bit overwhelming."

Sato laughed, "Kakashi, who knew you were sentimental?"

"Well I am, I just don't talk about it that much." Kakashi looked ahead, "Who wants to hear all of that?"

"I don't mind it."

His uncle chuckled, "It's as if the older I get the more nostalgic I become. When I was young I didn't have much time to reminisce...because my life hadn't begun yet."

"Huh. That is a good point." Sato agreed.

"It's going to happen to you too, you can count on it." Kakashi warned him, "I guess this all started happening after Rin left the village. Then my sensei passed away...time just forges onward and I wonder if I've participated enough. That's when I got the bright idea to be a jounin sensei."

Sato patted his back, "It was a good decision. Like Mom was always saying, we have to stay connected to people; that's what a life of meaning is all about." He added, "And when I get as tall as you I'll start wearing a mask too so I can fake people out."

They laughed together and Sumaru swooped past them, giving them a small smile as he went by.

The Star shinobi was checking on the children in-flight. The owls banked together as they
circumvented the worn face of a mountain. When they leveled out once again their conversation continued.

"You've grown and so have your friends. Sakura, Hinata, Kiba and your age group...I would call you all competent shinobi now. Some of you are even worthy of a jounin-title." Kakashi wagered, "Kiba threw me for a loop when he took on Sasuke and those Cloud ninja a short time ago. I probably couldn't have done it any better myself."

"Yeah I heard about that! It was a big deal..." Sato trailed off, thinking of how he and Kiba were not on good terms, "So...name some names!" He prodded, "Who would you like to see make jounin?"

"Hm." Kakashi thought about it, "You're going to take this personally. It's better if I don't comment on it."

"I won't! I won't whine or disagree or anything," The boy grinned, "I'll just hear you out."

"Well, my guess is in about a year or so you'll see Shikamaru getting promoted, but he probably will dislike taking the jounin trials." Kakashi assumed, "He may do it or he may be just as comfortable not doing it, either way, Tsunade has come to depend on him."

Sato nodded, "That's kind of an obvious pick."

"You and Shino are on your way, but you need to push yourselves harder." His uncle told him, "Maybe in the next few years you'll make it. I think Kiba may be just slightly ahead of you."

Sato pursed his lips, holding in his desire to grouse, 'He's just speaking highly of Kiba because of his success on that mission and because Kiba's his student! I could salvage a mission and save lives if I had to! If there was an opportunity!'

"You didn't like that one, did you?" Kakashi's eye crinkled in delight, "That's what I think. Now...as for those of you who could make it sooner than that..."

Sato was surprised, "Sooner?"

"Yes, as in, if push comes to shove; as in, if they receive enough recommendations that the Hokage must address them," Kakashi clarified, "Besides Shikamaru...Neji will be ready soon. I've been speaking to Gai and I've been told he is a true contender. But in my opinion, our kunoichi are the ones who are advancing the most rapidly."

By then Sato was not on the same page anymore.

"Your teammate, Hinata, she can do it whenever she wants. Tsunade has her eye on that girl." Kakashi told him, "She keeps it to herself, but Hinata could run circles around us if she wanted to. She is thoughtful in battle and with a little effort and training...I wouldn't be shocked if she was chosen first."

Sato gawked, "Sunshine? Are you serious?"

"Her advanced Kekkei Genkai alone can probably do us all in."

"Yeah but she's so...she's just so nice." Sato pointed out, "I don't even know if that's what she wants."

"That is true. She may not be interested in serving as a jounin, but time will tell. As for Sakura, well, Hokage-sama is pouring all of her knowledge into her because it's a wise investment." Kakashi
concluded, "She is a safe bet as well, although she'll need more time. I'm confident she'll make it and I will recommend her myself if I must."

"Oh man...some of that I expected and some I didn't." Sato admitted, "So I can quote you on that?"

"I'd rather you keep this to yourself. I don't want any people who I didn't mention to feel inadequate because, honestly, I haven't seen the performance of every shinobi in your graduating class. Others could be well-equipped too."

His nephew nodded, "Sure."

"It is a pleasure to see you all mature and improve," Kakashi told him, "But I feel like I didn't have much to do with it. I haven't been a good teacher and I..." He hesitated, "I know many things that have gone wrong were my responsibilities."

"Stop it already! You need to stop being so remorseful and lighten up." Sato told him, "You're a more involved sensei now. Being frustrated with what you did wrong won't change things. Sasuke's defection probably had very little to do with you anyway."

"I still wonder if I could've stopped him."

Sato gave him a stern look, "Quit wondering that...because everyone has wondered that. There's no point in it anymore."

A herd of deer could be seen on a hilltop, and as they soared over them the animals scattered in fright.

"We're fine and we owe you a lot. You stepped up training me and your team and it paid off," Sato reminded him, "Tama is gifted and setting a new standard for taijutsu specialists. Sakura is just as smart as Shikamaru but more motivated...and she's the Hokage's apprentice," His comment elicited a chuckle from his uncle, "And Kiba? He can lead missions with subordinates now. Even I'm doing well! Kurenai-sensei said she was confident I could outdo her in ninjutsu, taijutsu and genjutsu already...but I'm not sure if she was joking."

"I don't think she would. I agree that you have become a very capable shinobi." Kakashi assured him.

"Then go ahead and take a little credit for it." The boy smiled, "You taught me more than I probably deserved to learn, and Anyo whipped my sword skills into shape."

"He's your Grass ninja friend, right?"

"Yeah," Sato verified, "He's been showing me that taking things a bit more seriously helps."

"And I am living proof of why you don't want to overdo taking things seriously." Kakashi observed.

"You've gotten better."

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Sumaru and Hokuto kept the group gliding at lower altitudes, most likely because they feared for the children's safety. So far, none of the Star trainees had complained at all. Many were enjoying the flight and encouraging Hokuto to do tricks and rolls. She obliged them occasionally.

They navigated valleys and mountain peaks for a few hours before the first pit-stop. Several children relieved themselves before they continued on for a few more hours and then stopped in a glade as the
sun was setting. The chaperones dug two large fire-pits and Sato showed the children how to start a campfire. Sakura and Hinata went from child to child for brief follow-ups while Kakashi summoned two of his hounds to go hunting for game.

Once they had settled down for the night around the two roaring fires Sumaru kept the children's attention with old legends. Towering trees surrounded the clearing, and the six owls Sato had summoned made themselves comfortable in the tall branches. They left to go hunting in shifts, letting a few of their peers remain to watch over their human charges. They too began to enjoy Sumaru’s stories as they unfolded.

Kakashi returned after a time with small animals to roast over a spit. Many of the children had already tucked into the provisional meals they had packed with them, but sniffed curiously as the older shinobi made dinner.

Hokuto had tapped Mizura on the shoulder and quietly asked, "May I talk to you for a second, Mizura?"

He looked surprised, "Of course."

They stood and put some space between them and the campout. Hokuto folded her arms and took a deep breath.

"I want you to end your bad-blood with Sumaru." She said boldly, "Everyone can see what you've been doing. It's time to stop."

He frowned, "Isn't it up to me whether I want to be his friend or not?"

"It is, but he has shown you nothing but kindness...he's been beating himself up because he understands how you feel!" Hokuto retorted, "If you ought to be angry at anyone it should be me, and yet you haven't said one harsh word to me yet."

"You know I couldn't do that." Mizura told her, "I still care about you."

"Then why can't you treat Sumaru with that same compassion?" She asked, "You care about him too! You've been such good friends for years!"

He remained silent, letting his gaze settle on the ground. When it got down to it, he did feel bad about how he was treating his friend, but Mizura was not yet ready to get over it all.

"Stop this nonsense. You and I both know that you didn't care for me that much." The girl's voice was sharp, "What really bothers you is that Sumaru did, and he was willing to damage his friendship with you in order to get close to me."

Mizura looked at her sadly. He could not deny her accusations.

She shook her head, "I'm fine. I just wanted to tell you that."

"I understand and...I'm sorry." He told her, "I truly am sorry, Hokuto."

"Save your apology for Sumaru." The kunoichi told him. She then turned on her heel and returned to the campfire.

After entertaining the children for a while Sumaru encouraged them to sleep. He took a seat next to the hungry Leaf shinobi who were speaking in-between mouthfuls of meat. Kakashi’s group had
finished devouring the rabbits he had roasted and they all relaxed with full bellies. Sumaru picked at a few scraps still on the spit when they had invited him to help himself.

Sato had gotten Hinata involved in the conversation and prodded as to what was going on in the ever-soft-spoken girl's life. With Sakura's nod of interest the shy girl sighed and answered her teammate's questions.

"I feel as though things have much improved." She began, "I feel like I belong now."

"Even though they made Neji the heir to your clan?" Sato asked, "That doesn't bother you?"

Her smile was small when she spoke, "Honestly...I prefer to not have that responsibility. I know I could do it if I had to and I am still second-in-line..." She chuckled, "But Neji-niisan handles the pressure better than I do."

"Pft!" Sato laughed at the thought. Sakura did as well.

Kakashi got in on it and asked, "So how are things with your father, in the wake of this change?"

"Quite good. He seems much happier and Father is proud of both Neji-niisan and I." Hinata reported, "He was relieved that it worked out, I think. He had felt worried for so long that our clan would lack strong leadership in the future."

"Yes, he doesn't have to be concerned about that anymore." Kakashi agreed.

"Even Hanabi spends more time with me." Hinata mused, "I think now that my sister respects me she thought it was worth improving her relationship with me."

"It's a shame that she didn't want to associate with you before that." Sakura pointed out, "She's a bit stuck-up, if you ask me."

"That's just how she is." Hinata was resigned to the facts, "I don't mind."

"And what about your evolved Byakugan?" Sakura asked, "Is that a hot-ticket issue in your clan?"

"My Father does have to frequently curb the requests of our elders. They are very curious about what abilities the Misago Byakugan will yield, but I am still learning about it myself." Hinata admitted, "Father said the elders believe that the Hyuga clan will experience evolution in their blood limit the way that the Uchiha clan has."

"It is said that the doujutsu of the Uchiha and Hyuga are descended of ancient doujutsu." Kakashi told them, "There are doujutsu that occur even outside of clans like yours; with people who have heritage that goes back to that ancestral line."

"The line of the Otsutsuki." Sakura added.

Her friends turned to look at her, puzzled.

"It was in that book!" Sakura clarified, "It said that the Sage of the Six Paths and his family possessed that gift. His descendants passed along many of his traits. I mean, I guess that's the truth if it corresponds to everything else."

"So it is." Kakashi guessed.

"That does make sense." Hinata agreed, "I will take my time developing this power. Most of it has come naturally so far."
Kakashi was pleased to hear it. He had earlier wondered if the Hyuga clan had been obsessing over its princess' new gift, but apparently her father was shielding her from most of the scrutiny. Hiashi was without a doubt a stern man, Kakashi knew, but he was a father and widower with two daughters. He had prevented Hinata from becoming a plaything to Hyuga elders.

The deep dark of the wilderness settled upon them as the night wore on. Kakashi asked his subordinates to sleep and volunteered to take the first watch. Sumaru and Sato volunteered to take the second and third watches, respectively.

Hokuto and Sumaru settled near some slumbering children near the campfire and spoke to each other quietly. Sato settled on the far side of the camp, and Hinata and Sakura made themselves comfortable near another bundle of children.

"Oh man..." Sakura stretched on her bedroll tiredly, "When we get home you and I need some girl-time. This has been a tough trip. Ino and Tama will know just how to help us unwind..."

"Yes! May we invite Tenten-neechn too?" Hinata squeaked.

Sakura smiled at her, "Sure. So Tenten has become like a big sister to you, has she?"

"When I was at my lowest towards the end of the Chunin Exam...she was the one who stood up for me. She has ever since!" Hinata told her, "I am so grateful. She really did help Neji-niisan and I."

"Yeah I want to hang out with her too. She's low-maintenance and cool."

Hinata made a soft hum of gratitude. There was a pause as they got comfortable under their blankets.

"Those two..." Sakura's voice was contemplative, "What's up with them?"

Hinata frowned as she thought about it. Her personal opinion on the matter would likely be more honest than what Neji or Tenten would ever fess up to. "I think they love each other." Hinata speculated, "But neither is the type to admit it."

Sakura laughed quietly, amused, "You're right! That has got to be a pain...bottling all of that tension..."

"Maybe I should help?" Hinata pondered.

"Well...I don't know. Maybe you shouldn't. I mean, if they do care about each other, aren't they likely to recognize that at some point?" Sakura reminded her, "If Gaara, of all people, can do it then certainly they can."

Hinata pursed her lips and nodded sagely, "Yes, absolutely!"

She had faith in them.

"It might be a while before it happens, though..." Sakura had to concede.

The girls stared at the captivating river of stars above as their conversation went on and on, and eventually Hinata wanted Sakura to share more about her life and experiences.

"It's kind of hectic going back and forth between Kakashi-sensei and Tsunade-shishou for training...but I think I'm better off. It is tiring but it's worth it." Sakura explained, "And it certainly is a whole lot easier than getting along with my parents. I've been trying to earn their trust back since I ran off, but it seems like my mom is always finding something about me she can be critical of."
"I've met your parents once. Your mother was quite nice!" Hinata recalled.

Sakura felt her teeth grind together when she thought of her mother.

"She's really a control freak." Sakura told her friend, "What is your mom like?"

"Oh! She was very easygoing and kind." Hinata was happy to remember the days when her mother was alive. "I would call her a champion of justice and fairness, especially for the Branch Family of my clan. She had many friends...and she was a skilled gardener and artist. Father was never the same after she passed away."

"I'm sorry." Sakura said softly, "You know, Hinata, she sounds kind of like you."

Sakura empathized with her friend. She thought that as crazy as her own parents were she could not imagine losing one of them.

'Many of our friends are parent-less, now that I think about it.' Sakura could not help but notice the trend, 'Naruto, Gaara, Haku, Sato, Neji, Lee, Tenten...I know that they have lived without parents for a long time. They rely on their friends like they would on family, that's why they cherish the strong bonds they have.'

Sakura could not deny that even though both of her parents were alive and well, she too depended on her friends. She let herself drift to sleep contentedly.

Shortly after sunrise Sumaru and Hokuto rallied the children and handed out meals. After the youngsters and their guards were fed they greeted the owls that descended from their perches nearby. Sato had a word with Mokumo and Kugoro, who had suggested placing seven children with each of them since their size would permit it. The owls agreed and the groups were divided up; the two groups of seven and then the remaining five with Washika. This left the snow owl, Chitose, without any passengers.

Chitose stretched her neck and bent close to Kakashi, blinking at him when she spoke, "You are Sato's uncle and the leader of this mission. Please allow me to return you to Leaf, Hatake-san, it is the least I can do."

He chuckled, "Ah, well, I don't see why not."

Kakashi leapt up and properly introduced himself to the friendly owl. Sato had mounted Gyorai with a cheerful, "How are you doing, pal?" and Hinata and Sakura returned to Kutaiku, who was also happy to see them. Once Sumaru and Hokuto headed the takeoff the Leaf chaperones followed.

The children admired the pink-tinted clouds that rolled by as they began the last leg of the journey. Within a few hours they had passed into Earth Country territories and by noon a strong wind blew from the northwest, propelling them faster towards their destination. Sumaru filled in his Leaf shinobi companions that they could capitalize on the favorable wind and possibly arrive earlier than anticipated. As they maintained their course Kakashi was alone with his thoughts.

'Sato, Sakura and Hinata are functioning on-level with Kiba and Shikamaru, from what I can see.' He was pleased that they were doing so well, 'I expect that they can all make Chunin easily by the next exam. My...it feels good to see training pay off...now I understand why Minato-sensei was gushing all of the time when we improved.'

While Kakashi reflected on how his students and their peers were young adults gaining valuable experience, Hokuto and Sumaru flitted from group to group, inquiring if any pit-stops were needed.
No one had any complaints and so they pressed on, leaving the Earth Country. By the early afternoon they had cut into the outer edge of the Land of Rain, and it was appropriately overcast and chilly.

Sato, atop Gyorai, came up beside Kakashi and Chitose. He was grinning from ear to ear and shouted to his uncle, "Let's race!"

"No."

"You can't say no!"

"I just did."

"You didn't even try to lose yet," Sato retorted, "Come on Kakashi, let's have some fun!"

His uncle sighed, "I quite enjoy taking it easy and not experiencing a nasty fall from a few thousand feet. This is fun."

Sato's facial expression translated to: What a chicken! He rose and stood on his feet; his silver hair was swept back by the wind. Sato then tilted back, as one would to fall on a luxurious feather-bed, and tumbled down into the sky below. Kakashi could hear his laughter. Gyorai made a hoot of annoyance before diving down after him. 'He makes it look easy, but still, I'm not letting a kid goad me into an asinine game.'

Gyorai appeared a short time later with Sato kneeling safely on his back. He looked quite smug, "Come on Kakashi, you couldn't even fall and break your neck if you wanted too. These guys are really good."

The jounin did not reply and hoped that ignoring Sato would discourage him. 'Well I already know that didn't work for all of these years...he refuses to be ignored.'

"Hatake-san, I can defeat Gyorai. He is fast but I am much faster. You ought to accept this challenge." Chitose recommended, "Make a bet and watch Sato-kun lose. We are certain to win!"

"Hm," He thought about it, "Are you sure? I only have a winning-streak against Gai, but I don't want to push my luck..."

"I am sure."

He warmed up to the idea, "If I'm certain to win...then I shouldn't say no."

Chitose and Gyorai leveled off with each other about a dozen meters above the rest of the groups in flight.

"Ah, so you'll do it?" Sato crowed, "Good! You were starting to look like a big pansy!"

"I'll race you, Sato," Kakashi confirmed, "I'll also bet you an expensive lunch that I'll win. I plan to savor every bite."

"You're on!"

Sakura had looked up and noticed the antics of the Hatake family, 'Sheesh! Those two can get pretty hot-blooded sometimes! As long as they leave the rest of us out of this I don't care.'

"We are in a canyon that will come around in a loop." Gyorai pointed out, "Why not declare the first one to close the circuit the winner?"
"Go!" Sato had pressed himself flat against Gyorai and Kakashi did the same with Chitose, holding fast to the braid-harness. The man felt his stomach lurch as the white owl took a dive, out-speeding Gyorai as she had promised, and built up tremendous momentum. Kakashi’s eyes watered as the wind buffered him. Sato followed close behind. The remaining chaperones maintained a regular pace, staying out of the Hatakes’ nonsense.

The craggy Rain territory unfolded before them and the owls took hard turns, banking swiftly at each curve. Chitose flapped so powerfully at times Kakashi felt as if he would be thrown from her back. At the speed they were moving, and so much closer to the ground at that, he wouldn’t be surprised if Chitose failed to retrieve him if he fell.

Halfway through the race the clouds overhead released a light drizzle. They ducked under stone archways and banked with reckless speed and abandon. Gyorai made great effort to overtake his competitor, but Chitose was trying very hard to impress her passenger. Chitose pulled ahead with a burst of speed and pulled up over a stone ledge.

A man was standing there.

Kakashi’s trained eyes instantly fell on the stranger, taking in details. He looked back as he and the white owl soared over a cloaked man, and it became very clear to Kakashi that the person alone on the outcrop was indeed watching him. Sato raced past him as well, heedless, cheering when he overtook his uncle.

“Slow down.” Kakashi warned the owl summon, “Something’s wrong.”

“Is it that fellow down there?” She asked softly.

“Yeah…”

Kakashi took another look as Chitose came around, staying high above the strange man. The ginger hair was odd to begin with, but the numerous facial piercings made the stranger downright outlandish. The final detail sunk Kakashi’s spirit entirely, ‘That cloak…that is what a member of the Akatsuki wears.’

The man stared back at Kakashi, trying to make sense of the Leaf stranger as well.

The tension escalated in a matter of seconds. Kakashi took what he already knew of the Akatsuki, based on the fight with Itachi and Kisame, and averaged it with the S-Class classification of those involved with organization, ‘And there are nineteen helpless children coming straight this way...while I have three genin subordinates and two young Star ninja.’

Kakashi knew his own strength better than anyone, so he hoped he could contend with the unidentified Akatsuki member if it came to it. Fear and determination flooded him. He called to Sato who had also come around, realizing something was amiss.

"Get back to the others immediately."

"Kakashi, what's going on?" Sato was picking up on his uncle's distress.

"We just found a member of the Akatsuki." Kakashi told him, "Fall back and get everyone to safety. I'm counting on you, Sato. I'll buy you some time."

"What! But what about you-?” Sato met Kakashi's gaze and then relented, "...okay."
He and Gyorai soared back in the direction of the group, obeying Kakashi's order. The man below held his ground, keeping careful watch over Kakashi. The Leaf jounin felt his blood turn to ice as a second member of Akatsuki appeared, manifesting from thousands of floating slips of paper. It was a woman with blue hair in the same trademark cloak, and she took off like a shot after Sato. It was the first sign of hostility and Kakashi reacted the only way he knew how.

He and Chitose gave chase, intending to stop Sato's pursuer, but the ginger-haired man below raised his hand towards them.

A sudden force was exerted on Chitose, as if gravity denied all capability of lift, pulled down on the owl and her passenger vertically. The scenery rushed by and Kakashi briefly thought of his fear of falling, finding it paled in comparison to the utter helplessness of being pulled from the air. Chitose screeched, terrified, but then had a moment of lucidity. The ground was approaching fast.

"Down Cushion jutsu!" She managed a last-ditch-effort technique, wrapping Kakashi in a ball of feathers.

They struck the ground together with ferocious speed and Chitose's shrill cry was cut short. She had been killed instantly by the blow, but Kakashi was more fortunate. The feather-defense loosened after a moment, providing an exit, and Kakashi replaced himself with a shadow clone, sneaking off while a cloud of dust still obscured him. The clone waited as a decoy with Chitose's body.

Kakashi took cover behind a boulder, his heart pounding frantically in his chest. He could not make heads or tails of what had happened, 'He took us down! No hand signs, no weapons, nothing...and Chitose didn't stand a chance.'

The ability was bizarre and Kakashi hoped it was not more complex than it looked: a pull.

He felt far more afraid than he had when Itachi and Kisame had appeared in the village. 'I had Asuma and Kurenai with me then...and Gai arrived in time too. I don't want to risk any of the genin trying to help me for this fight...I have to do it alone.' But he had virtually no information to go on. The opponent was unknown, 'That headband is from Hidden Rain so water jutsu are a possibility...'

Yet he could not make any conclusions. There was no recognition at all, not from the Bingo Book or warnings on nukenin, 'I just have to assume he ranks up with Itachi and other members of the Akatsuki. I can't take a chance and retreat or I risk the rest of the group getting attacked.'

That was the other problem, 'That woman is going to follow Sato back to the others and I don't know if they can deal with her...' He had to hope Sato would be clever enough to escape, or that he and the kunoichi could keep the Akatsuki woman's attention away from the Star trainees.

Kakashi dared peek out from behind the rock, spying the Rain ninja a dozen meters away. He was approaching the shadow clone.

"I watched as your group carelessly wandered into these territories." The man spoke with a detached voice, "Star and Leaf are not welcome here."

"I gathered that," The clone's reply was snappy, "In that case we'll be on our way."

"You won't." The man replied, "Konoha so boldly declared the Akatsuki a public enemy and threat. This encounter is mutually hostile. To let you leave and report this is out of the question."

"I can keep a secret." The clone joked.

"You are the Copy Ninja: Kakashi. A shinobi of your reputation could never conceal this." The man in the cloak raised his hand again, "You and your Star companions are liabilities to the organization.
It must be dealt with."

The Rain shinobi exerted the force again and it tossed the shadow clone like a ragdoll. It came again, pulling down, and slammed the clone into the ground, destroying it.

Once the ruse was exposed Kakashi charged, a kunai ready, hoping to take advantage of his opponent's lowered guard. The Rain ninja scuffled with him. His movements were sure and swift; evidence of years of experience. He blocked Kakashi's slashes without much thought before hopping backwards. The Rain shinobi unleashed another repulsive force that blasted Kakashi back.

The Leaf jounin was flung across the plateau and skidded and rolled in the gravel before he hit a rock pile. He composed himself, shaking off dizziness, and stood. He had an idea of what his enemy's ability was, *He can push and pull objects without hand-signs. It seems like he has to time it right...'*

Kakashi quailed for a moment when the Akatsuki man charged. The jounin steeled his nerves and moved to counter, praying that the rest of his team was faring better than he.

Sato was aware that he was being followed as he returned to the congregation. He glanced back a few times, trying to stay far ahead of the blue haired kunoichi chasing him along the lip of the canyon.

The other chaperones came into view and Gyorai swooped to come beside Kutaiku and his passengers. Sato's grim expression immediately unnerved both Hinata and Sakura.

"Where's Kakashi-sensei?" Sakura asked.

"He stayed behind. The Akatsuki are here." Sato informed them, "We need to turn this group around now."

Hinata used her Byakugan to survey the area, first spotting the kunoichi approaching them, and then the man Kakashi was battling about a mile away. She relayed the positions of the Rain ninja to Sato and Sakura. Sumaru banked towards them and asked what the trouble was.

"There is a dangerous organization called the Akatsuki that we've been warned about and two members are here. They are high-ranking and dangerous shinobi." Sakura filled the Star ninja in, "We need to get the children away from here. You and Hokuto should guide them back to the Fire Country and we'll distract them for you."

"Hokuto can do it. I'll help you fight." Sumaru objected.

Sakura, assuming an impromptu leadership position, shook her head, "No, Sumaru. If either one of these shinobi get past us to the children Hokuto will need back-up. Please stay with her."

He held his tongue. Sakura was absolutely right. Sumaru banked on transparent wings and told them to be careful. They watched him reach his girlfriend and pass along the news. The owls promptly changed course and were led away by the Star ninja.

The Akatsuki kunoichi had arrived. With a whirl of her cloak, a storm of paper projectiles shot up towards Sato. Gyorai reacted quickly, "Air Metal Feathers!" The composition of his feathers became metallic and he blocked the incoming volley with his wing.

Sato made a breathless request, "Can you girls cover me so I can get back to Kakashi?"
"Yes! Go Sato-kun!" Hinata leapt from Kutaiku's back to the top of a stone archway. She bolted straight towards the blue haired woman and prepared a classic Hyuga-greeting. Gyorai wheeled about and doubled back, taking Sato to his uncle.

Sakura watched smugly as Hinata tested the woman's defenses with lionhearted Jyukken slaps. The Rain kunoichi evaded until she was struck, and then the woman dispersed into slips of paper to avoid further harm.

Hinata's Byakugan was keen to how the woman's body had arranged itself. Whether paper or flesh, the Hyuga girl was still able to spot weaknesses. Hinata's stance shifted accordingly and she pummeled the slips at key points with a 64 Palm strike. It seemed to nullify the imperviousness of the woman's paper ability and the kunoichi reformed, bloodied and bruised. She looked truly surprised by the young girl's apt use of taijutsu.

'Damn, Hinata! As a melee fighter you're the best choice to test an enemy's defense. She looks freaked out!' Sakura was elated to see that Hinata was an unexpected match for the Akatsuki woman, 'In my case, my first priority is keeping everyone healthy; that is the role of a medic. But if she gets close enough...I'll punch that bitch right into her next birthday!' She would love an opportunity to unleash her super strength, but Tsunade had instilled in her a thorough understanding of what was expected of her on the battlefield: Above all else you must stay uninjured, Sakura. You need to avoid attacks and keep your distance. If you are disabled then you will be unavailable to teammates. Don't forget that you have a supporting role on a team, but when you are on your own...that is when you take a person's head off.'

For a few minutes Hinata made a mockery of the so-called threat. When the kunoichi was sick and tired of the thrashing she took, she made a break for it, creating paper clones as a distraction. Hinata spun and danced, using less-traditional Jyukken, and shredded the paper replications. She had been developing a style of her own she had named “Gentle Step.” It was a hybrid of Gentle Fist combined with her natural talents: her dancing and her budding control over her Water chakra affinity.

While chasing the retreating kunoichi Hinata could see the Star ninja had put considerable distance between themselves and danger.

Her Byakugan revealed a wide ring of paper bombs below the topsoil. Hinata made a leap to avoid them, but a newly-formed paper clone caught her in the back with a desperate kick. Hinata tumbled to the ground and into the trap. The blue haired woman stopped to watch as the bombs flared to life around the Leaf kunoichi.

Sakura sucked breath when the explosions went off around her friend, "Hinata!"

Hinata had blocked with a spherical wall of chakra and Sakura was relieved. Sakura watched the balance of aggression, patience and thoughtfulness in Hinata's actions. It bolstered Sakura's confidence, helping her shed fear and doubt completely, 'Even if we're in over our heads...if we end up getting killed...all we can afford to think about now is winning!'

The pink haired girl asked Kutaiku to descend and circle around the Akatsuki member, "If we can stop her from escaping it could give Hinata a chance to finish her off! We should try it!"

"Just because this woman is ill-suited against a taijutsu specialist does not mean you should underestimate her." Kutaiku warned her, "You are taking a risk if you get involved."

"You're right, but don't go underestimating ME." Sakura retorted, "Get me down there!"
The drizzle turned into a downpour as owl and passenger joined the harassment of the Rain kunoichi.

Kakashi had clashed with Rain ninja long enough to predict the timing of the gravity pulls and pushes.

*I'm out of shape*...’ He thought at one point. The man Kakashi was fighting was clearly older than him but had not tired at all. His movements and attacks were as sharp and precise as when they had begun, and Kakashi wished he still had the spring in his step he had enjoyed ten years earlier in the Black Ops.

Things took a perilous turn when the Akatsuki shinobi went on the offensive, swiping at the Leaf ninja with a sharp carbon rod. Kakashi resorted to using his Sharingan, hard-pressed to avoid the tireless man's assault. The rainfall had made the ground slick as they dashed about, meeting and parting violently.

From the corner of his eye Kakashi watched Gyorai soar overhead. Sato leapt down in silence, falcon-like, and went straight for the Rain ninja, *Unfailingly reckless-*! Kakashi's heart nearly stopped when the man reached and caught Sato by the throat. It had looked as easy as catching a ball in the schoolyard. Sato wretched, struggled, and then ignited.

The fire clone Sato had sent down had been paper mache'd with explosive tags

The explosion was savage and Kakashi had not been nearby, but he *still* had to tuck and roll to avoid the debris and flames. While the black cloud of smoke was dissipating Sato came to stand beside his uncle.

"I was setting traps so I thought I should send you guys a present in the meantime." The young Hatake explained.

"You had me worried for a second there."

"Nah, I never engage a fight myself." He was smiling, "I'm the indirect type."

Kakashi thanked heaven above for that. His Sharingan quickly located the Rain ninja who was unscathed by the bombing.

"He shielded himself with that repulsion power." Kakashi acknowledged, "If you're going to help me you need to be cautious, Sato. He exerts a force he can push and pull with, and there's a five second delay between each use."

"So let's coordinate. When he counters one of us with that power then the other will move in..." The boy understood right away.

"Yes. Watch yourself, Sato. He's one of the strongest shinobi I have ever faced."

Sato grimaced. He kept his thoughts private, but Sato could tell that if Kakashi was already struggling that he, a much younger and less experienced ninja, could not afford a single mistake if he wanted to escape with his life.

His scattered fire clones had finished setting traps and then rushed towards the Rain shinobi. From above, Gyorai added pressure with a flurry of iron-tipped feathers. Rather than use a repelling force again to protect himself, the Akatsuki nin dodged, incredibly agile, and hacked apart the disruptive clones.
Kakashi used a variety of "copied" ninjutsu to get the enemy's attention, favoring Earth jutsu to manipulate the Rain ninja around the plateau. After becoming annoyed by Kakashi’s pestering the shinobi rushed at him, furious, and a volley of blows were exchanged.

The moment arrived when the Akatsuki affiliate used his repelling force again, pushing Kakashi dozens of meters and then over the side of the plateau. Gyorai caught him with a well-timed swoop and Kakashi sprang from the owl’s back, rejoining the fight on the rainy canyon-top.

Sato had caught the shinobi one second after the force-push had concluded. The silver haired boy plunged his kodachi down, drawing on everything the swordsman Anyo had taught him, and was effectively blocked. Sato cursed, flipping and weaving, moving faster than he had ever been able to before, and tried to make use of the few precious seconds remaining. His genjutsu had fooled the man for a moment, making him block a blow from an illusionary-Sato. The genin attacked again, slicing a small mark on the side of the man’s head when he dodged. He leapt away from the Rain ninja, cutting a trigger-wire that was snug under a rock.

An enormous bear-trap snapped shut around the enemy.

It was a fraction of a second too late; the shinobi blasted it open with repulsive force. Hunks of broken metal clanged across the plateau and Kakashi had feinted with a shadow clone, drawing the Rain’s ninja’s attention from Sato. The real Leaf jounin had successfully come up from behind. ‘I’m still in the delay period!’ And Kakashi had aimed a Raikiri jab at the enemy as he turned.

The man had anticipated an attack from behind, and Kakashi’s jab grazed the Rain shinobi in the arm, avoiding the fatal blow that was intended. He completed the turn, bisecting the shadow clone coming to the rescue, and then stabbed Kakashi in the shoulder. The jounin grunted in pain, stuck on the rod that had impaled him.

“I have not exerted myself yet.” The Akatsuki representative said in a lofty voice, “Have you?”

Sato’s flying kick hit the man squarely on the left cheek, knocking him sideways, and Kakashi leapt away at the first opportunity.

After letting a smoke bomb provide them with some retreating cover, both Hatakes took refuge behind a boulder. Kakashi removed the rod and put pressure on the stab wound. Blood dripped down into the rain puddle beside him; a harsh reminder of his mortality. Sato reached over and tied a very sloppy but tight swath of bandages around the man’s shoulder.

They said nothing to each other for a few moments. The reality of the situation was now dawning on them. It was, far and away, a truly hopeless battle for them.

“This is a foe we will not defeat today. Not even with a dozen Leaf shinobi, I don’t know if we ever could…” Kakashi said quietly, “If he truly has not made any effort in this fight yet…then we are outmatched. I’m sorry to have to tell you this, Sato, I know it isn’t very inspiring…”

“It’s alright. I promise I won’t give up.” Sato told him, “As long as the girls make it out of here and the Star kids arrive safely…I won’t get upset. It’s our responsibility to keep this guy away from them, Kakashi.”

“Huh.” His uncle looked up at the sky from beneath soggy bangs, “It seems you’re the one inspiring me.”

The Akatsuki woman had been going between paper bombs and projectiles to keep distance between her and the Leaf kunoichi. Hinata was frequently employing her sphere-defense, Divine Protection,
and counter attacked when she could. She shot small bolts of water, expertly controlled by her water affinity, and then terrorized the enemy with tajjutsu if she strayed too close.

The increasing pressure the blue haired kunoichi created with her distractions and tricks had virtually ceased Hinata's offensive. Sakura's covering fire with projectiles and Kutaiku's razor-feathers would miss when the woman broke herself down into paper. Hinata had begun to consider using the Misago Byakugan to press their advantage again, 'It would only help me for a short amount of time before I get exhausted...and I don't want to be worn down before I can help Sato-kun and Kakashi-sensei.' Sakura had her back, but even so she had to keep her involvement limited for the sake of the team.

"We've got to try something else," Sakura demanded the owl's cooperation, "Any ideas? This woman just wants to keep us away from her partner, but she's getting too comfy now!"

"I've been told you are quite skilled, especially with chakra control." Kutaiku replied, "If we combine ninjutsu it could make a devastating technique. We can try that."

"Okay, so how do we do it?"

"I will focus my chakra and you will focus yours. We should resonate about the same amount of energy for our techniques, and if we time it correctly, we can use a jutsu together." Kutaiku explained, "This is common for summoned animals and shinobi, however Sato has not attempted something like this with me...so you will be the first person."

"Great." Sakura sighed.

She decided to let her Hell yeah! attitude take over to boost confidence, and she prepared herself for the strongest fire jutsu she had been taught, 'If Kutaiku would just hold still I would probably be able to get a feel for this...' But Kutaiku continued circling above the Rain kunoichi and Hinata, doing his part of focusing while Sakura could only hope she was doing something right.

Beginner's luck was favoring her, and she felt a twinge of intuition tell her that Kutaiku was ready. She unleashed her chakra and technique, letting it bond with the bird's, "Katon: Dragon Fire jutsu!"

"Futon: Gale Breath!"

They maintained their jutsu, watching as it swirled and grew into a horrific, continuous flamethrower that razed everything below it. Rainfall was seared into its vapor state as the jet of flame shot towards the blue haired woman, who was plainly terrified to see the column of fire coming her way. Hinata had retreated appropriately to observe Sakura, who chased the Akatsuki kunoichi around the rocky plateau.

Hinata could see the paper projectiles the woman tried to counter with caught fire quickly, 'I see! That paper was oiled so it could be used in the rain! That isn't much good around fire though...'

Paper clone decoys were left behind, but Sakura incinerated them before they could get anything productive done. The flames formed a barrier, scorching the plateau, and corralled the woman towards the edge of a cliff. Hinata stayed on the opposite side of the wall of fire, waiting for any sign of desperation from their opponent. The woman surely had not anticipated two young kunoichi to toy with her, but she was not as helpless as she seemed.

Paper wings formed and carried the woman to safety. She began to move back in the direction of Kakashi's battle. Sakura abruptly stopped her fire jutsu and called to her friend, "Come on Hinata! We can't let her get over there!"
Hinata made a running start and then leapt onto Kutaiku's back. The owl dove ahead through the canyon in pursuit of the blue haired woman.

A blast had hit both Sato and Kakashi simultaneously as they abandoned cover. They were thrown back a considerable distance before hitting the broad side of a rock formation. Their mouths gaped; trying to get air after the wind had been knocked out of them. Knowing that inaction spelled death they sprang after recovering, moving in opposite directions. Kakashi, knowing that Sato was more vulnerable, created a diversion.

He summoned all of his hounds who immediately went after the Rain ninja. The dogs scrambled, snapping, charging with weapons, and the man evaded them gracefully; kicking aside any hound that got too close. Sato maintained a safe distance and was pleased when his uncle's shadow clone appeared near the Rain nin's feet, using the Headhunter Jutsu in an attempt to pull the enemy underground.

The man used another repulsive blast and Kakashi's timing was perfect. As the dogs and shadow clone were knocked away, the Leaf jounin raced ahead with a crackling Chidori, confident and true in his course.

"This again." The man droned.

He caught Kakashi's arm, faster than a blink, and punched the jounin in the stomach without a trace of mercy. Their eyes met for a moment, and Kakashi pondered how he could have been countered so handily, 'Even with my Sharingan...he's moving faster and reacting to attacks that no one else should be able to...it's as if... 'He looked at the man's eyes, confused, 'Those are some strange eyes...is it a doujutsu? Is that what we're dealing with?'

A gravity blast knocked him away and Kakashi slammed into the same debris pile his dogs were whimpering in.

Sato's Chidori impaled the Rain ninja a heartbeat afterward.

The boy's expression revealed a mix of satisfaction and remorse, knowing it was a fatal blow to the chest.

"Sorry, but this fight is over." He told the cloaked man.

Sato was beginning to notice and alarming lack of blood and warmth.

"Yes. It is over." The man replied, unaffected by the assassination technique, and then stabbed Sato in retaliation. The rod sunk into his right side, excruciating, hitting vital points that Sato was aware of. He let out a sharp breath and withdrew his hand, not understanding why the Rain ninja was invulnerable to everything effort they could muster.

Resignation washed over Sato, 'I lost. I won't get away now.'

"Run Kakashi!" The boy screamed over his shoulder, "He's not going down! Get away from here!"

The Rain ninja observed the young man struggling on the end of the rod, "Children are the first to be sacrificed to further the goals of adults. Maybe now you understand this?"

"Go to hell!" Sato hissed.

The man unleashed a force with his free hand, pushing the boy down to the slick ground, and then
crushed him.

Kakashi heard screaming as he laid eyes on Sato and then realized after a moment that it was his own voice, shouting at the top of his lungs as the last of his blood kin was killed by the Akatsuki. Kakashi pushed himself up to his knees, watching powerlessly, and his Sharingan could track rain drops that fell in dreamlike, slow-motion and landed on his nephew's heedless face. His cares were left in the material world and his pain was over, at least, Kakashi hoped so.

His heart wrenched, devastated that the boy who he had come to cherish had his life unfairly snuffed out. Semi had begged him to do everything in his power to see that Sato had a long and prosperous life, and Kakashi felt it was the ultimate insult to his sister to let the child die first even after he had sworn it would never happen. Kakashi let the self-hatred and guilt swirling in his mind take over.

His vision inexplicably sharpened. Something was odd.

The Rain ninja rounded on Kakashi, completely unashamed of murdering such a young person. Kakashi swallowed hard, knowing that he had very little fight left in him, ‘But if I can stall a little bit longer…then the others can escape...’ That hope was dashed when he noticed the blue haired woman coming around the bend with Sakura and Hinata close behind.

Hinata's eyes took in the morbid scene below. Sato, she could see, was dead at the Akatsuki man's feet. Kakashi was across the plateau and badly wounded, struggling to stand. She felt terror and despair flood her veins and the feeling was reinforced by Sakura's panicked sob beside her.

'Sato-kun...' She let the tears roll freely down her cheeks, 'Were we too late? No. We must help Kakashi-sensei!'

The blue haired woman landed on a ledge above the plateau, appearing to withdraw from battle. Hinata could tell that the enemy kunoichi knew her partner could handle all of them without her assistance.

She took a long moment to steel her nerves. Crying would not help presently, but she hoped her new ability could make a difference, or at least afford Kakashi the opportunity to retreat. Hinata exhaled, calming down, and let energy flood her while calling upon the Misago Byakugan. She weighed her options, 'I could attack...however I have no idea how fast or experienced that man is.' While she knew she was a match for the unknown kunoichi, the man was another matter, 'It would be best for me to learn more while I can! Then I can stage a diversion...'

Sakura's voice faded into the background, her vision shifted, and Hinata was no longer air-born on Kutaiku's back. She was suddenly on the ground standing over Sato, overlapped with the Rain ninja's consciousness. He made a soft sound of surprise, quickly aware of her presence, but he held still. They were rapidly sizing each other up.

Something was off about the body she had entered, she thought to herself, 'It feels cool and still...this isn't like being with the children or Hanabi. I feel chakra coursing through, but,' Hinata had a moment of terrible discovery, 'This isn't the chakra of this body! This body isn't alive!' She felt like shrieking in fear, not comprehending how a dead body was animated to fight at first, 'Someone is controlling this body with chakra? Outside? How?'

She shared vision with her temporary host and was immediately aware of the powerful eyes she was seeing out of. She could not explain the strange sensations and details she was observing, but she wanted to find something that might help her protect her friends. Hinata mapped out points on the body pierced with carbon rods that were acting like antennae, pulling in the controller's chakra, 'If I
Hinata concentrated and then flushed her own chakra into the Rain ninja's body. It was not unlike how she would use a rotation, forcing chakra from all of her tenketsu, but her energy flowed from her body, disconnected briefly, and then out of chakra points in the body of the man. The chakra receptors in the enemy flared and were then disabled, nullifying outside control. The vision she shared with the man disappeared, and the consciousness she had sensed that was occupying the corpse abruptly vanished. Hinata withdrew, returning to her body, and the Rain ninja collapsed to the wet gravel.

Hinata woke and Sakura was still talking to her, "Are you alright? I thought I was losing you for a second, Hinata!"

"I stopped him!" Hinata shouted, "Hurry! We need to get to them now before he returns!"

"What are you talking about-?" Sakura caught a bit of what her friend was trying to get across. It appeared that the ginger haired man below was down-for-the-count. She just accepted that Hinata had done something to neutralize the immediate danger, even if she had been next to the girl the whole time.

Kutaiku descended and so did the blue haired kunoichi. The woman rushed to the Rain ninja's body, pulling it into a sitting position.

"What's wrong, Nagato? You lost contact." She said quietly.

The owl landed and Sakura waved to Kakashi to get his attention, "Kakashi-sensei! Hey! Hinata says we don't have a lot of time!"

The Leaf jounin staggered to his feet, unsure of how the Rain ninja had become incapacitated. He listened to Sakura urging him to get a move on. Kakashi asked his hounds to retreat before he made a clumsy dash to the crater ahead. He slid down, soaked from the rain, and carefully lifted Sato's body. He backed away, fearful, keeping his eyes glued to the woman who was examining her fallen partner. When he determined that he would not be attacked Kakashi leapt away, making it to Kutaiku, who took off an instant later.

"Sato! Is he alright?" The owl asked worriedly, ascending through a rain cloud, "Sato!"

Kakashi gave a heartbroken look to his student, "Sakura, can you do anything for him?"

He had laid the boy flat and they kneeled on either side of him. Sakura, just by glancing at Sato, knew that his injuries were severe. She checked for a pulse quickly and when she found no sign of life she tried chest compressions. She paused, looking again, "His bones are broken but the organ damage...it's too much. I won't get him back." His body was mangled beyond repair, she feared. It would take Tsunade and a miracle combined to save him, in Sakura's opinion.

Her eyes met Hinata's, "Please try something, Hinata! What you did before...you told me you saved yourself on the Retrieval Mission. Can you do it again?"

The Hyuga girl pursed her lips. She did not want to tell her teammates that she had no control over what had happened to her that day. She could, however, try to recreate it. Although her stamina was wearing thin from her earlier use of the Misago Byakugan she called on it again, scanning over Sato, and then overlaid with him. She encountered the same cold quiet that she had with the previous body
she had been in contact with. Sakura watched with baited breath as Hinata became still and silent, absent from her own body, she guessed.

She had no idea if it would do any good but Hinata made her best attempt to flush the last chakra she could possibly part with through the boy's body. It resonated like a high-pitched hum and then began to circulate normally through Sato's chakra coils. It felt warm. She felt stirring. She also felt exhaustion. 'I hope this lasts. I don't have enough strength to do it again...' Hinata returned to herself again, letting out a breath, and then her shoulders slumped tiredly.

Sakura was busy taking advantage of the faint heartbeat she had picked up. She scrambled, healing the most serious injuries first, if possible, 'This is a disaster. Most of these injuries are fatal so even if we did revive him for now he could die in a few minutes!' She glanced to Hinata again, expectant, "Would you be able to help me heal him?"

Hinata stretched her hands in front of her weakly, setting them on Sato's abdomen, and a faint green glow followed. For a short while she assisted and then stopped, shutting her eyes. "I am spent. I'm sorry." Hinata told her quietly.

Sakura nodded to her in understanding, 'She fought so hard and her power does consume a lot of chakra...she's done enough.'

Sakura moved up and down, sensing for injuries, and mended broken ribs before moving on to any internal damage. She also detected a stab wound, a lower vertebrae fracture and then found head trauma, a badly broken leg, both arms broken and a broken collar bone.

Kutaiku flew steadily out of the canyon and Gyorai dove towards them after spotting them from above in cloud cover. The owls chattered with great concern, asking if Sato had made it. "Cool it, you two! We need to get back to Konoha as soon as possible!" Sakura warned them, "There's still a chance, but I can't heal all of this on my own."

She healed what she could, but Sakura knew she was rapidly draining herself of chakra. Sato made a start unexpectedly and the three conscious shinobi gasped, shocked and relieved. He then began screaming himself hoarse, still in agony from the injuries that remained. Sakura ordered Kakashi to hold the boy still after he had begun thrashing. He pinned Sato and Sakura was able to resume her work, prioritizing the most dangerous wounds. By the time she was satisfied with her healing endeavors Sato had screamed himself unconscious. They left the rain behind and clear skies greeted them as they came closer and closer to the Fire Country.

'I have to leave his leg and collar bone for later...I started his arms but I don't have enough chakra to finish them.' Sakura thought to herself, 'It doesn't matter. I think I got most of the severe injuries. Now let's just hope he holds on for a while...'

Sakura sighed and then turned to Kakashi. He was staring mutely ahead and she watched as a tear escaped his right eye. She patted her teacher's shoulder reassuringly, "It's going to be alright. I think he can tough it out now." She noticed his shoulder had a makeshift bandage around it. She spared a bit more chakra to heal it.

"It was just like back then..." Kakashi muttered, remembering Obito's cruel end. Sakura did not know what he was referring to, but she could plainly see that the man was traumatized.

Hinata tensed. She used her Byakugan and then sucked wind in fright. Sakura looked to her, eyes wide, "What is it?"
"They are following us." Hinata reported. She could see about two miles from their position both Rain ninja had recovered and were giving chase.

Sakura didn't want to put any more pressure on her battered teacher, but with the whole team so weak it would spell the end if they were caught. "Kakashi-sensei, can you stop them?"

"I would likely die trying." He admitted, "If it comes to it, you'll have to go on without me."

Sakura cursed quietly, looking back over her shoulder. She could not see them yet but Hinata certainly could, and Sakura knew that once the enemy was close enough for her to see it would probably be too late. She asked Kutaiku to fly higher or if he and Gyorai could set traps.

"That man pulled Chitose down and killed her easily." Kakashi interjected, "They shouldn't put themselves in harm's way again."

The sinking feeling in her stomach returned, and Sakura frowned in frustration, upset that the mission demanded at least one person sacrifice himself or herself to the Rain ninja. 'I've done all that I can do and so has Hinata...I don't want Kakashi to throw himself at them only to slow them down...we have to find a way.'

Gyorai made a soft sound of greeting when Sumaru banked towards them, descending from cloud cover. He was very concerned about the state of his Leaf comrades.

"I came back to check on you! What happened?" He asked.

"We are outmatched by the shinobi following us." Kakashi warned him, "The most we can hope for is to escape, but even that doesn't seem to be possible right now, Sumaru."

"Hokuto and the children made it. They should be arriving in the Leaf Village any moment now." Sumaru told them, "You all go ahead and I will stop them. I doubt they'll have enough strength left to deal with me!"

Kakashi wanted to object to his bold defiance but Hinata spoke up, "We should listen to him. Sumaru should at least be able to distract them."

Kakashi paused, considering it. 'I suspected that Sumaru was the strongest in his village, but I don't know if he'll be able to handle two members of the Akatsuki on his own.' In what was likely his most selfish thought yet, since Sumaru had willingly offered to stay behind, Kakashi felt it was fair to continue and save the lives of his subordinates. They had fought and struggled beyond limits they knew they had, managed to preserve Sato, and halted the Rain shinobi if only for a short while. They had earned their right to flee to safety.

"Thank you." Kakashi said to the green haired boy, "We'll meet you at the village."

Sumaru nodded and then pulled up. The owls soared on into the clear skies and Sakura and Kakashi looked back, watching as Sumaru's translucent wings lengthened, steadying him as he faced the incoming threat.

The Star ninja held still and focused his chakra. His retreating friends were shocked to see his chakra become visible and radiant, in what Kakashi would describe as a manifestation similar to a jinchuriki's biju-chakra cloak. Kutaiku screeched in alarm as atmospheric pressure dropped; frightened by the environmental changes occurring in response to Sumaru's jutsu.

Particles in the air began to condense and Sumaru's chakra wings had changed shape: slender and violet, and a long, bird-of-paradise-like tail sprouted as a third appendage. He hovered in the air,
fearless and glowing, and concentrated on gathering chakra. Kakashi's group had covered considerable distance and the Rain shinobi had come within range of trading blows with Sumaru. Sumaru was able to act first, concluding hand seals, and had completed his complex shape manipulation.

Kakashi, from a great distance, swore he was seeing Sumaru mix more than two elements, 'How is he...I know that Particle-Style techniques exist in the Rock Village...but what is that?'

The sky rained down energy beams when Sumaru attacked with a cry, and the landscape within the vicinity of the approaching Akatsuki was ripped apart. The Rain shinobi blocked swiftly with his force-shield, but after a few fleeting moments it caved. He and the kunoichi retreated from the grassy field, backtracking, but were still pummeled by incoming particle beams.

Kakashi could only see relentless blasts of light and chakra striking down like Heaven's vengeance, and his mouth hung open, stupefied by the display of power.

The second shield failed after the time delay ended, and the Rain ninja found it futile to counterattack. Sumaru's long-range strike continued uninterrupted and simultaneously the bird-tail vectored down, crashing into the earth and swiping the two enemy shinobi. They were hurled back, tumbling in the rubble, but caught themselves and escaped injury. They gave up. The pair turned around and fled back to their territory.

Hinata exhaled while observing with her Byakugan, 'They don't want to waste their energy on us anymore. Also, I think that chakra signal controlling the body reached its limit, so it would have been pointless to continue.'

Sakura relaxed, still frowning, but she looked ahead at the rolling green forests that came into view. She and Kakashi held Sato steady between them, both silent and contemplating what they had gone through.

Sumaru had ended his brutal attack and about-faced, following after his friends with jet-like speed.

Their arrival in Leaf was noisy. Sakura had asked Kutaiku to go straight for the hospital, and below they were not surprised to see a congregation out in front of the building waiting for them. The other owls were waiting with children circled around them, and Natsuhi and Hokuto stood nearby. Gyorai and Kutaiku landed carefully and Kakashi quickly slid down with Sato's limp body in his arms. Sakura and Hinata followed, unable to disguise the weariness on their faces.

Tsunade rushed over to Kakashi's team, roughly aware of what hardship they had experienced, "Who got it worst?"

"Sato." Kakashi's voice was still sorrowful. The group of hospital medic-nin beside Tsunade immediately took the silver haired boy from his uncle's arms and replaced him on a stretcher. They hustled into the hospital a moment later.

Tsunade turned to Sakura expectantly, "Please come with me, Sakura. I need you to walk me through what you were and weren't able to do for him."

"Yes, Shishou."

The Hokage then made eye contact with Kakashi, "Kakashi, I expect you and Hinata to be ready for a debriefing once Sakura and I finish his treatment. I need you to tell me everything."

The man nodded wearily. Sakura and her master rushed into the hospital, not wanting to waste any
Natsuhi approached Kakashi; her expression was sympathetic, "I'm sorry about all of the trouble you had to go through, Hatake-san. I never imagined something like this could happen."

He shook his head, "No. I should apologize to you...to everyone. I was responsible. The Akatsuki nearly jeopardized this entire mission and I should have taken greater precautions."

"You can't prepare for everything." Natsuhi reminded him. She looked up with a smile, seeing Sumaru's silhouette against the sun, and she wrapped her arms around him in a warm hug when he landed.

Hokuto was next, and she was scooped up and squeezed by her boyfriend who was still high on adrenalin. She kissed his cheek and whispered for him to calm down. He did, a little bit.

Sumaru looked at Kakashi, "Did everyone make it safely?"

"Yes. Thank you for what you did back there." Kakashi told him, "You're the reason we're alive."

The boy smiled, "It's the least I can do for my friends."

Kakashi was cheered up a bit by the Star group's reunion and their kindness. He came to stand beside Hinata who looked absolutely dreadful.

"Let me take you home so you can rest, Hinata." The jounin said gently.

She complied with a weak nod and walked beside him. Traces of horror, curiosity and relief flicked across her face as they traveled down the main road. Kakashi knew she was trapped in her own thoughts; a coping mechanism he could not afford to try while the Hokage expected him to suck it up and manage things.

Hinata walked slowly, aching with every step. After several minutes of silence she decided to speak, "Kakashi-sensei."

"Hm?"

"Something was wrong with that man." She said grimly, "When I saw inside of him...that body was dead. It was being controlled by someone."

Wide-eyed, Kakashi stared at her. He digested the information, 'So that's what she did! She was able to stop that shinobi from the inside...It's no wonder why our attacks didn't work, then...that body did not respond to pain or injury...not even killing it would have achieved anything.' Kakashi jammed his hands in his pockets, stewing it over, 'Maybe the only way would have been to destroy the body entirely so there was nothing left to control. Although I can't imagine how I would have done it...'

"That explains why we couldn't do much." Kakashi agreed, "Your ability has given us a clue about this enemy and that is incredibly valuable, you know."

They trudged through the front entrance of the Hyuga estate together. Hiashi was having a word with Hideyasu in a side yard. The two men immediately noticed Kakashi's tall, lanky form beside the small Hyuga kunoichi. Hinata's accompaniment had to mean something significant, so they met them halfway across the courtyard in front of the house.

Neji passed through the entrance after Kakashi and Hinata entered. He had wrapped up training with his team for the day, but his curiosity was piqued when he saw his family gathered around Kakashi.
He crossed over to them and listened as the jounin spoke.

"On our way back from the Star Village we had a run-in with two Akatsuki members," Kakashi explained, "It was the most one-sided battle I have ever experienced in my life."

Hideyasu was visibly shocked, "Why would they so brazenly attack, Kakashi? If it was just a chance meeting..."

The silver haired man sighed, "Well...several things prompted it, I think. We were called 'liabilities' to their organization and they vocalized their dislike of an alliance between Leaf and Star." Kakashi looked to Neji who was trying to pick up on what had happened, "There was no way to identify who they were. I didn't recognize them from any advisory I've checked...and their techniques were unlike anything I've seen. Our kunoichi overwhelmed the woman who was fighting, but that man...

A small sound escaped Hinata, as if she was reliving the terror of confronting the Rain ninja.

"He mortally wounded Sato...and there was nothing I could do to stop him." Kakashi said quietly, "I would have been killed if Hinata hadn't stepped in."

Hiashi was bug-eyed after hearing those words, "Hinata?"

Neji and Hideyasu, beside the Head of Hyuga clan, fixed their eyes on the quaking girl. Neji moved to stand beside her, finally realizing that she was due to collapse from exhaustion.

"Hinata was able to disable an opponent I had no chance of defeating." Kakashi confirmed it.

Hiashi closed his eyes, feeling pride and fear at the thought of his daughter risking her life. He addressed her, "I am sure you must be worn down, Hinata. I am glad that you returned home safely...but please, never approach the Akatsuki carelessly."

"Never." She agreed softly.

"I'll return with the Hokage for a debriefing, once she finishes healing my nephew." Kakashi informed them, "Until then get some rest, Hinata-sama, you've earned it."

"I will see you then, Kakashi-sensei."

Kakashi found his way out, still managing to keep his cool.

Hideyasu smiled and laid a hand on Hinata's shoulder, "As always, you're a gem on every team, Hinata-sama. Saving Kakashi's life means that he is in your debt."

She shook her head, "No, it isn't like that...I did what I had to do so we could all survive. It only worked for a few minutes, really. Kakashi-sensei doesn't owe me anything."

The friendly Hyuga man laughed, "So modest! I'll be sure to remind him for you!" He strode away with a big grin, always happy to get on a youngster's nerves.

Hiashi ushered Hinata and Neji into the house, leading the way to Hinata's room. Apparently, Hideyasu had let the word slip to Hanabi on his way to find his children, and the girl raced around the bend in the main hall. She pushed her way past her father and cousin and stormed into the bedroom. Hinata had collapsed face-first onto her bed, totally depleted.

Hanabi grimaced at her with her hands on her hips, "You fought the Akatsuki? What were you thinking!"
"You are out of line, Hanabi." Her father grumbled, "Show a little respect, please, it was not her choice to confront them..."

"Hideyasu said-!"

"Neji, make her sit down." Hiashi strode in and sat in the desk chair near Hinata's bed.

With an exasperated look Neji grabbed a fistful of the back of Hanabi's shirt and lifted her up, relocating her to an area rug on the floor. Her legs folded beneath her and she took a seat, still a bit riled-up. Neji continued to stand, hoping to learn more about the mission Hinata had returned from.

"If you can manage it, Hinata, I would like to know what happened." Her father asked, "I know that you and Kakashi will need to submit a report to the Hokage, but you can be informal with me."

Hinata rolled over and slowly sat up. She tucked her hands in her lap and looked at her family, not shy about showing how tired she was. She began the tale from their initial departure, flying to the Star Village, inspecting the children and then the flight home, which took a chaotic turn. She described how she and Sakura had been a decent match for the Akatsuki kunoichi, but found that the same could not be said of her partner.

"That man had red hair and facial piercings..." She paused, "Actually, there were piercings all over his body. They were pulling an outside chakra in. It was so strange."

"You were unable to identify either person?" Her father checked.

"No, we couldn't." She admitted, "When we followed the woman back to where Kakashi-sensei was fighting...that man had killed Sato-kun."

Neji and Hanabi were startled by the news.

Neji gave her a seriously concerned look, "I heard Kakashi say that he had survived..."

"Sakura-chan and I were able to revive him, but it took all of our strength." She told him, "I don't think I should try using the Misago Byakugan for a while...well...I don't know if I would be able to."

She tried to describe how she had used her ability to temporarily break the connection between the controller and the body. They had escaped and set to work healing their teammates, but after being pursued by the Rain shinobi only Sumaru was able to fend them off, "And he did it with a jutsu that..."

She paused in thought, "I don't know. His star chakra rained from the sky and destroyed everything. After that they chose not to follow us."

"Star ninja have very exotic talents." Hiashi acknowledged.

Her family members were aghast over the story. Hiashi wondered how Kakashi dealt with his nephew's sacrifice.

"Kakashi-sensei gave up hope after that." Hinata admitted, "I was worried he wouldn't be able to escape, he was so upset..."

Hiashi and Neji sympathized, understanding how dreadful a feeling it would be to lose a teammate or loved one. It was a well-known fact that Sato was the only family that Kakashi had left.

Hinata's voice shook, "I was s-scared that Sato-kun was beyond saving...if I didn't have just enough
chakra left to use that jutsu, we wouldn't have been able to do a thing."

"Rest now. You don't need to be troubled by it any longer," Hiashi told her, "I appreciate that you shared that with me, Hinata. I'll also be sure to prevent our elders from pestering you with questions, since news of your ability is sure to reach their ears at some point..."

He stood and excused himself. Neji and Hanabi remained, still baffled. Neji could hardly believe what a close call it had been. While he had only been vaguely informed of the organization's existence, the Akatsuki were a real and significant threat to Leaf and other villages that defied them.

'And even Kakashi could not contend with the member he encountered...all they could ask for was to leave that place with their lives.' He thought darkly.

"Will you both stay with me for a little while?" Hinata asked.

Neji nodded, "Of course, Hinata-sama. I'll get you something to drink." He rose and went to fetch the nearest available tea, even if it was right in front of one of his fellow Main Branch peers.

Hanabi, with the same brooding countenance she had come in with, watched her older sister's face.

"You are kind like Mother but strong like Father." Hanabi pointed out, "I want to learn to be more kind so I will be missed if anything ever happens to me."

"Don't you say such things!" Hinata admonished the girl, stepping away from the bed, and she hugged Hanabi fiercely, "You are already deserving of that love! I love you! Don't talk so foolishly, Hanabi."

The younger girl hesitated and then wrapped her arms around Hinata, grateful for the embrace.

Over an hour later Kakashi poked his head into a room that Sato had been relocated to. Tsunade stood beside the young Hatake’s bed, pointing out measurements on an IV drip to Sakura. They spoke medical jargon to each other for a minute before they noticed Kakashi’s arrival.

Tsunade waved him in, clearly in a pleasant mood, “Come in, Kakashi.”

He entered, settling his eyes on his nephew. The boy was still unconscious and wrapped head to toe in bandages. Both of his arms were in slings and his leg was elevated in a cast. Kakashi winced a little at the sight.

“Because of Sakura’s bravery and level-headedness, Sato will make a full recovery.” Tsunade announced, “I couldn’t have healed his injuries any better than she did out in the field. I did some touch-ups…but he’ll need to rest for several weeks before he can live independently. He may need to be physically reevaluated so I can determine if he can continue missions.”

“I am grateful to the both of you.” Kakashi told them with sincerity.

Tsunade smiled, pleased, “It’s my duty. Your team thoroughly protected those children and each other. Natsuhi and I will never forget it.”

“Is there anything else I can do, Tsunade-shishou?” Sakura asked.

“Yes,” Her master replied, “Go home. I will conduct evaluations of the children on my own later. For now I will be bringing Natsuhi and Kakashi with me to the Hyuga compound. I need Hinata’s account of what happened.”
Sakura nodded in understanding and took her leave, but not before giving Kakashi an encouraging smile. The pink haired girl exited the recovery room and ventured down the long corridor. She was still filthy and drenched in sweat, ‘Bathtub here I come…’ When she caught Sumaru and Hokuto’s attention she gave them a wave, not willing to stop and chat. They were supervising the children who had been placed in their own wing of the hospital.

Outside she was tempted to bolt straight home but she stopped herself. ‘I can’t do that. I need to tell Tama…’ She felt her throat clench nervously, ‘I don’t want her to have a heart attack…but not telling her and letting her find out on her own is worse. Of course, Sato is alive and that’s what counts…maybe I can play this down a little?’ Sakura knew how her friend would feel upon learning her fiancée had been brutalized earlier that day.

Familiar with Tama’s schedule, Sakura went for the bakery first, and found the older girl stocking shelves. Her teammate smiled when she walked in, “Sakura! You’re back!”

Sakura nodded, “Yeah! I know it took us a while, right?”

Tama brushed confectioner’s sugar from her hands, “Well that couldn’t be helped. How did it go? Did Kakashi-sensei and Sato enjoy themselves?”

“They did.” Sakura refrained from adding, Up until they were throttled by the Akatsuki, they were having a delightful, light-hearted race!

“I bet you and Hinata-chan did too!” Tama smiled, blissfully unaware, “Did you stop by to tell me about it? I’ll take my break now in that case…”

“Actually…I was going to ask you to stop by the hospital.” Sakura chose her words carefully, “Sato got banged up on the way home so…I thought it would be good for you to check on him.”

“Oh! What happened?”

Sakura bit her lip, ‘Shit.’

Thankfully, Tama wasn’t desperate for an answer, and she untied her apron.

“Sure, I’ll go see him now!” Tama decided, “I hope he isn’t terribly hurt. Which room is he in?”

“I left him in 105, on the first floor to the left.” Sakura informed her, trying to play it off, “I’m going home to rest now. I’ll catch up with you in the morning, if that’s alright. Do you want to meet at the teahouse?”

“That’s fine with me.” Tama agreed, and she shouted into a storeroom, “Ami! Watch the store for me! I’m taking my break now!”

A distant, Got it! answered. Tama followed Sakura out the door and then thanked her for the heads-up. Sakura walked down the street, stiff-kneed and guilty, ‘Oh man…I didn’t prepare her for what she’s going to see. I’m an asshole. Asshole. NO. It was better not to break it to her then…right? Ugh!’ She jogged home, mentally berating herself the whole way.

She let herself in the house and was relieved to find no one was home. Sakura removed her boots, threw her travel bag into her room and then made a beeline for the bathroom. She drew a hot bath, scrubbing herself first, and then relaxed for the first time in days. ‘Tama I’m sorry…I know how I would feel if anything ever happened to Gaara.’ Although she did acknowledge how her boyfriend was unlikely to come to harm, ‘I guess I’m just a chicken, when it gets down to it…I didn’t want to see you sad. Some friend I am…’
When she was refreshed and dressed again in pajamas, Sakura shuffled in her slippers down the hall, intending to make tea. She never made it to the kitchen. Instead she flopped down on the sofa and groaned tiredly, ‘I just can’t move anymore!’ She stayed there, immobile and useless. Her father had returned with a shopping bag and a newspaper. He took one look at Sakura and then frowned, “Hey…”

“Hi Dad.” She croaked.

The look on her face said it all. Kizashi immediately could tell she had been through the wringer.

“Sakura,” He put his items down on a table, “Are you lucky to be alive after completing that mission?”

She nodded groggily.

Kizashi walked behind the couch and reached, patting Sakura on the top of her head, “I’m glad you’re home then, Sakura.”

“Thanks Dad…uh…can we please not tell Mom?”

“Let’s not.”
One fine day, at about noon, Jiraiya was perusing a tobacco stand. He decided to treat himself with some of the extra money he had earned from the circulation of his two most recent novels. He listened with half a mind as the shopkeeper gave him suggestions. He browsed as red maple leaves drifted down from the trees that lined the street. It was a humble town in the mountains with handsome architecture that complemented the maples: a portrait in garnet.

Across the street a raucous of shouts could be heard coming from the town's renowned dojo.

"Is that your kid in there?" The shopkeeper asked the Toad Sage, "My boss came back ten minutes ago and he told me the dojo looks like a free-for-all."

"Why yes, that's my student." Jiraiya said it with a small, impish grin.

"You don't say?"

"Mm-hm," He nodded, "He was curious about this town's fighting style so I let him check it out. He's going to be fifteen in a few months..."

"Oh..." The shopkeeper looked bemused, "Those are grown men in there who have practiced Judo their entire lives."

Jiraiya smiled, "And your boss described it as a free-for-all?"

"Yeah," The shopkeeper said quietly, "Damn. Fifteen. I couldn't do a thing when I was that age."

"He's something else, alright." Jiraiya said before pointing to what he wanted, "I'll take five ounces of this and the one next to it."

"Good choice, sir."

After buying tobacco Jiraiya shopped around for a short while longer. He was thoroughly enjoying being an anonymous shopper in a faraway place. He wrapped up his relaxing stroll and entered the dojo, poking his head into the main room. Several men were flat on their backs on the floor mats and another was on his knees. It clearly wasn't sitting well that the young blonde man who had stopped by and challenged them had gone undefeated.

"Naruto."

Naruto looked over his shoulder while he was helping his wheezing opponent stand up, "Ero-sensei!"

"Have you concluded your challenge?"

"I think so." Naruto pulled the man up and clapped his back, "You almost had me! Hehe!"

The disheveled man shook his head, frowning, and pointed to the door, "Please go now."

Naruto felt slightly offended but did not want to cause any further discomfort, "Right...sorry."
"The Toad Sage's apprentice will not apologize for any of his victories!" Jiraiya announced it for all to hear. "The next time we pass through here will you accept his challenge more cautiously?"

All present nodded and Jiraiya could not help but grin with pure elation, 'Judo-shmudo. Naruto's taijutsu is nothing to shake a stick at and he keeps improving every day!'

They exited and the door shut swiftly behind them. Miserable moans could be heard afterwards.

"They shouldn't be that upset! At one point I let them come at me seven against one." Naruto was puzzled by their reactions, "Wasn't that fair?"

"In my opinion, that whole dojo attacking you at once was still not fair." Jiraiya told him, "Don't feel bad for them, Naruto. Even if they didn't see it coming, it is the responsibility of a dojo to defend their reputation but expect to lose once in a while..."

"I still feel bad. They were nice guys."

"Stop."

Naruto sighed heavily. They walked side by side down the road before coming to a sushi bar. They settled happily on the stools and ordered the chef's special. They conversed with each other in-between popping hand rolls into their mouths.

"So are you liking it out here?" Jiraiya asked his protégée.

"Yeah it's pretty. It's not like home but it'll do."

"Yes this is a quiet spot. This was the place I first ran into Obito, years ago."

"No kidding?"

"He was shopping for baby supplies, if memory serves."

Naruto tapped his chopsticks against his lip, "Oh yeah! That must've been when Yuma was born."

"Yup." Jiraiya confirmed it, "They've got everything here from smokes to diapers."

"I want to get something for Hinata-chan."

"The jewelry's kind of pricey here, kid. She might appreciate a souvenir though."

"No. I already told you I wanted to get her something she could wear this time. It will totally be worth it."

"Then by all means go pick something out before we leave this afternoon." Jiraiya encouraged him, "You have some serious training ahead of you, starting today."

"I'm fine with that." Naruto assured him. Everyone in the dojo had been more or less pushover, so he was looking forward to some intensity for a change.

They finished lunch and Jiraiya let Naruto run ahead to the jewelry shop on the corner. He followed the boy in and could not help but notice the two shop-girls twitter excitedly at the sight of Naruto. He was, after all, growing into a handsome man. The icing on the cake was the smile that was present on Naruto's face 95 percent of the time. It was really melting hearts now.

Jiraiya watched from over his student's shoulder as he searched for something suitable. After a
minute of peeking through glass cases Naruto decided he would ask for help. He explained to the saleswomen that he wanted to find a nice memento for his girlfriend and they quickly became crestfallen. Instead of giving up they gave guidance and asked questions. A sale was a sale, and if they couldn't get the boy then they could at least get the money.

"What does she look like? Skin, hair...you need to look for colors that complement her." A girl advised.

Naruto felt butterflies in his stomach when the image of Hinata came to mind, "Well she's...super pretty. She has dark hair and pale skin."

"Silver." A girl nodded.

"What about her eyes?" Asked the other sales rep.

"They're like..." He emphasized with his hands, "Big and beautiful! And white!"

"All white?" The girls were puzzled.

"Like the moon."

The girls made small sounds of admiration and then scrambled, looking through cases that formed a u-shape in the shop. Moon-colored eyes? These specifications called for very distinct metals and gems.

Jiraiya chuckled while he watched and Naruto became quiet, still searching for something that Hinata would appreciate. After a few minutes and rejecting a few pieces the girls brought over for inspection, Naruto pointed to a necklace on display, "Can I look at this?"

A salesgirl came around and lifted up the silver chain. The pendant on the end was a circle shaped like a crescent moon. Perched on the moon-silver was the silhouette of a songbird. A tiny diamond was fitted on the moon. Naruto nodded with confidence, "I like it."

"Let me see." Jiraiya stood beside Naruto and took a look, "Well now...that is a very literal interpretation of your princess! Although the Hyuga clan identifies with the sun...this does seem perfect for her, doesn't it?"

"Perfect."

The saleswoman perked up, "Oh so you're interested in this one?"

"Yeah I think it's right up her alley! How much is it?"

She checked the price tag, "This is 235 Ryo."

Jiraiya raised his eyebrows, "Wow. That's a steal."

'I'll take that, please." Naruto was smiling, very thrilled with his choice. If Hinata liked it he would be even more satisfied, 'I guess she'll have to tell me when she writes back!'

The saleswoman wrapped it carefully and put it in a box before taking him at the register. After thanking the shopkeepers Naruto found his way out with Jiraiya and he had a lot of bounce in his step.

"That was a good find, Naruto." Jiraiya commended him, "You're a good boyfriend."
"I really want to be. It feels great." He had a squinted-eye grin on his face.

They continued on in high spirits. The maple trees in town stretched out into a majestic forest, and Jiraiya and his pupil followed the country road east. The further away from civilization they progressed the more privacy they would have for training, Jiraiya thought. A concert of birdsong and crickets accompanied their walk. When they reached the far side of the mountain Jiraiya stepped off of the road into a quiet patch of forest.

"Let's leave our stuff here." Jiraiya suggested, dumping his travel bag beside a Hawthorne tree in bloom, "Then we'll go a bit further in and you can show me how your sealing technique is shaping up."

"Alright." Naruto set his bag down and continued to follow.

He knew that Jiraiya was very concerned about him getting the Hiraishin right. Of course, that was much easier said than done. Naruto had only used it successfully on two occasions and he was still working out the kinks. His master had demanded that he invest more time in the seal formula he had been studying; both transcribing it and marking things with it. It had become a chore, in Naruto's opinion, because even though he had a thorough understanding of what he had read, performing it was very tricky.

Naruto had also realized his initial experience with the Flying Thunder God technique in the Star Village was a fluke. The seal formula on the three-pronged kunai that had responded to him was not supposed to react to his chakra. It was inscribed for another person. His tampering had somehow modified the formula, and it automatically rewrote itself to accommodate Naruto. 'That is just...so weird. I have no idea why it would!' He and the Fourth Hokage, as far as he knew, had nothing in common besides Jiraiya's mentorship. A seal so personal and unique should not have budged for him, and yet it had.

It was all for his benefit, as it turned out. He had memorized and begun practicing with the new seal formula in the hopes of perfecting the Hiraishin. Learning the jutsu had gone well, but he was struggling with "marking" things with his formula.

Weeks earlier, Jiraiya had pulled him aside to give him a crash course in seal-marking, which was totally unlike any method of seal manipulation he had tried before.

He and his teacher faced each other, holding their palms out and facing up. Naruto frowned while he concentrated, disliking how easily Jiraiya could manifest symbols on his fingertips. The sage tried to give him practical advice.

"I know it's strange and hard for you to do...but try to imagine you're gathering chakra in your hand, maybe like before you form a complete Rasengan. When you feel it spread evenly on your hand that is when you apply the formula: straight from your brain to the chakra branching out in your fingers." Jiraiya told him, "It isn't easy, I know. Hand seals are all that most ninja will ever need to know, so this advanced technique can be a pain in the ass when you first learn it."

"I'll keep trying." Naruto said, staring expectantly at his hand.

Today it was not going much better. On his first attempt Naruto was able to pull the written formula together in his palm and Jiraiya smiled in surprise. The smile faded after a moment when he pointed out a flaw.

"Sorry, Naruto, but that just doesn't look right." The Toad Sage gave his assessment.
"I screwed it up, I could feel it." Naruto agreed, "Hm. I wonder..."

He pressed his hand against a tree trunk curiously, wondering if the formula would stick. It did not.

"Totally useless." Jiraiya chuckled, "But it won't be like that when it's formed correctly."

"Yeah, yeah..."

He let the seal fade away in his hand before he gave it another shot. The symbols he had in mind lined up neatly in his palm and Naruto let out an uneasy breath before turning to Jiraiya for confirmation. Jiraiya looked at it and then shrugged, "It looks okay to me..."

Naruto took a few steps to another tree and pressed his hand against it. His heart pounded in excitement when he felt the tingle of chakra leave his hand and was successfully imprinted on the tree. He glanced at his handiwork, grinning at the Hiraishin formula on the tree, and then ran across the clearing.

Jiraiya didn't understand the boy's behavior, "Hey, did you get it? Where are you going?"

"One more! I think I can do it again!" Naruto announced happily. He marked another tree successfully. He was hollering, ecstatic, and then marked two more trees before he felt he had practiced enough.

Jiraiya folded his arms and laughed, watching Naruto crow joyously as he teleported from marked tree to marked tree. *This kid is a riot...*

Naruto came down off of the high of his accomplishment and he fell back in the grass, spreading out. Jiraiya walked over and took a seat beside him. They had to fight off reoccurring giggles for several minutes.

"You are a rather talented kid, Naruto. I don't know if people have told you that." Jiraiya commended him.

"Usually they don't." Naruto was taking deep breaths, still smiling from ear to ear.

"It helps that you put all that effort in. It will take you very far." Jiraiya added, "Well...I guess sometime I'll introduce you to other sealing techniques. If you can get the Hiraishin down then you can learn those too."

"You think so?"

"Sure. You're an Uzumaki after all."

Naruto gave his mentor a confused look, "What does that have to do with it?"

"Everything. The Uzumaki clan was famous for their sealing techniques. They were masters." Jiraiya informed him, "It is in your blood to learn all of this, that's why I am sure you can do it."

Naruto's eyes were wide, "That clan...are they still around?"

"Unfortunately, no. After the destruction of the Hidden Eddy Village you could say the people of that clan scattered to the winds. They settled in many different lands. Some of them ended up in Leaf, who was a longtime ally of the Eddy Village."

"I never knew that." Naruto said quietly, "I guess my parents..." He trailed off, too saddened by the thought of what might have become of them.
"Don't be upset, Naruto. Today is your day! You just made strides to master a technique that was known only by the Second and Fourth Hokages." Jiraiya reminded him, "Do you have any idea of how proud I am?"

The boy's mood improved after hearing the kind words.

"Thank you. I'm trying not to let you down." Naruto replied, "And I don't want Gaara to get comfortable when he's Kazekage either. I know I can bust him up."

Jiraiya scratched his chin, "I can't estimate how much Gaara has improved since I haven't seen him, but I guess you could give him a run for his money. Let's not forget Haku, though. I'm sure he knows plenty of ways to assassinate the both of you now."

"That's probably true."

They relaxed for a while and Naruto let the formula come together on his hand again. He looked at it, wondering what ways he could apply his new jutsu, 'I probably won't be using this technique the way previous users did. Ero-sensei said it might be in the notes I was reading, but I didn't see anything about how they personally used it.'

After a time Jiraiya hoisted his pupil up and informed him it was time to spar. He was encouraged to use the Hiraishin as well, "I'll use only tajjutsu for today. I want you to focus on tajjutsu and teleporting too. No ninjutsu."

"Do we really need handicaps?"

Jiraiya swiped at his head. They tussled, sometimes playfully, but no punches were pulled and Naruto conceded that Jiraiya was definitely stronger than he looked. It helped that the Toad Sage was on the slow side, and at times it was downright unfair when Naruto teleported away from and incoming attack, forcing Jiraiya to spin around to look for him. Once Jiraiya had noted all of Naruto's current seal anchors, however, Naruto had to mark other locations to teleport, or occasionally use the three-pronged kunai. He tossed the knife around cleverly to zip away from danger.

After teleporting thoughtfully Naruto was able to drop down from above, and caught Jiraiya with a kick he had not expected. The Sage tumbled and rolled and did not bother standing. He stayed on the ground and sighed, "That's enough for now. Ow. It feels like I slipped a disk..."

Naruto hopped over to him, concerned, "Did you hurt your back?"

"You hurt my back."

"You didn't want me to hesitate!"

"I know! I know..." Jiraiya acknowledged while making a boo-boo face, "But it's hard to keep up with young people these days. You're too damn quick."

Naruto helped him hobble to his feet and apologized again when his master made sounds of pain. They agreed no more rough housing was allowed until Jiraiya improved. He stooped over to his bag like an old man and then stretched. There was a cracking sound and Jiraiya sighed in relief, "Oh so that wasn't a disk! That's a bit better..."

Naruto shook his head. Jiraiya retrieved his pipe and new tobacco from his travel bag and then took a seat, "Ah! We'll camp here for tonight. This is a cozy little forest."

"Yeah," Naruto agreed, leaning back against a tree, "Do you want me to go get some water and
firewood?"

"Not now, you can find some later." Jiraiya told him. He lit the pipe and inhaled. He exhaled while reaching into the bag once more, "Let's have some downtime...

He pulled out a deck of cards and Naruto scooched closer so he could play.

"Make this interesting please, Naruto."

Naruto was puzzled only for a moment before he got the hint, 'He wants more players.'

He created two shadow clones that made themselves comfortable in the circle. Jiraiya dealt the cards with the pipe clenched in his teeth as he spoke, "No ganging up on me! You did that last time. Besides, it's funnier when you and your kage bunshin are pitted against one another."

They played two rounds of Daifugo. Naruto, or rather, the real Naruto, won the first round handily but later experienced dissent with his clones. They turned on him in the second round just as Jiraiya had hoped, and so Jiraiya was the victor of the second round. Naruto wanted a tie breaker but Jiraiya refused.

"No way! You threw my back out so that's the tie breaker."

"That's stupid."

"Too bad! Go get some water and wood and then we'll start dinner."

Naruto gruffed and when he stood to leave he ushered his bickering clones to come with him to help. The trio of blondes disappeared into the woods while Jiraiya took stock of what food they had packed, 'Hm. Naruto will definitely eat those instant noodles of his, so the leftover fish and rolls are for me...'

Before he could get too comfortable he heard a shrill cry, and Jiraiya looked up into the evening sky. A messenger hawk was descending, 'Well I'll be! A message from Hidden Leaf!'

The bird landed on a low tree branch, steadied itself, and then swooped down to join Jiraiya on the grass. The sage removed the scroll fixed the bird's leg and opened it, 'This is from Tsunade...'

Jiraiya,

I hope you and Naruto are both well. I have been, especially after they finished adding my face to Hokage Monument. If you ask me it is much improved with a woman's visage. I know you would agree.

Jiraiya was entertained by her jab at his perverted ways, 'Oh I agree, Tsunade!'

Unfortunately I don't have much in the way of good news to report, but I will start with the good news. Natsuhi and I have been getting along, and it seems to me that once we pen down an agreement the council would oblige an alliance between Leaf and Star. I may need to persuade them a bit, but I am sure it can be done. The ill trainees arrived here six days ago, and Sakura and I have made great progress healing their star training injuries.

Jiraiya was thrilled to hear that it was working out. The idea of Natsuhi and Tsunade getting along warped in his mind and became an erotic fantasy that he was sure would be the crux of his next novel, 'I have been inspired.'
Now for the bad news. Just to make you aware, I sent Kakashi with Hatake Sato, Hyuga Hinata and Haruno Sakura as his subordinates. They all performed very well. I was pleased. On their flight back to Leaf with the ill children, however, they had the great misfortune of straying into the path of the Akatsuki.

Jiraiya felt his breath hitch and he sputtered on his pipe. He knew that he needed to read more, but he was instantly terrified that perhaps Kakashi and the genin with him had met a violent end; not to mention the Star trainees with them.

Naruto returned with a pot of water for boiling and his clones set down the firewood before he dissolved them. He noticed Jiraiya's horrified expression, "Hey, Ero-sennin, are you alright?"

He let out a breath and shook his head, "I'm reading a message from Tsunade and it's...a bit much. Let me finish and I'll give you the details. Just start a fire for now, Naruto."

Naruto proceeded with building a fire but he felt unsettled, 'He looked upset! What did Baa-chan need to tell him?'

Jiraiya continued reading Tsunade's update.

Kakashi and Hinata debriefed with me and described who they encountered. The pair of Akatsuki members they met with was an unknown man and woman. Kakashi said that they are not listed among recognizable nukenin, as if to suggest they have maintained their village affiliation with Rain. I suppose this is because Hidden Rain has no jinchuriki to abduct, and so they have nothing to object to. I was told that Kakashi and Sato discovered the man first. He was described as terribly powerful and outclassed all shinobi present on that mission. The woman was unable to put pressure on either Sakura or Hinata while they kept her away from the trainees, and I daresay they had the valor of jounin while confronting her.

Kakashi and Sato discovered that even a fatal blow could not stop the opponent. This unknown man reportedly killed Sato and nearly had the chance to do the same to Kakashi. Luckily, Hinata was able to disable the man with her new ability, which she and her clan now refer to as the Misago Byakugan. This afforded the team the opportunity to escape. Hinata and Sakura's combined efforts were able to revive Sato, however nearly a week later I am still having difficulties healing his injuries, which were numerous to say the least. I expect him to recover but it will take a long time. Sumaru, who I understand you have been introduced to, was able to discourage the Akatsuki from pursuing by using his Star ninjutsu. Curiously, Sakura claims that he was using some type of Senjutsu, which she concluded is a result of Dragon Star training.

Jiraiya's mouth was hanging open in shock.

I know that must be hard for you to believe, Jiraiya! But Katsuyu has told me that it was the conclusion she and Sakura drew after their investigation. We can discuss this matter more in the future, if you like. My greatest concern for the moment are these two unidentified shinobi. They are obviously hostile towards Leaf, yet as you have informed me before you left, the Akatsuki is not actively hunting for jinchuriki at this time. My hope it that they will not go out of their way to confront shinobi of our village again. Kakashi described this man's primary jutsu as a gravity-like force that could push and pull at will, at a few-second interval. Hinata gave her account of the man as well, which she described as a dead body being controlled remotely by another person's chakra. Yes, this does sound ludicrous, however it is the only explanation we have on why her decision to block this person's chakra flow had any effect, while injury did not.

If I get any more information on this pair I will notify you immediately. Any intelligence we can gather on the Akatsuki is crucial. Please be very cautious, because it appears to me that even if you
Jiraiya extinguished his pipe and then ladled some of the boiling water in the pot into a teacup. He
snuck a look at Naruto's face while he was reading and then retrieved the leftovers from his travel
bag. Suddenly Naruto made a panicked start.

"Sato's gone?" He gasped, his voice trembling.

"Keep reading, don't get upset yet."

Naruto continued. Jiraiya watched and heard his student whisper Hinata's name quietly when he read
about her. When he finished the scroll Naruto put it down and rubbed his forehead, feeling a
headache coming on.

"I am not sure if I am done processing all of that myself." Jiraiya told him, "It was an unnecessary
but unavoidable fight."

"Hinata fought them off." Naruto looked absolutely perplexed.

"She did. She is quite powerful. I'd wager that even Kakashi couldn't have survived if she hadn't
been there."
Naruto smiled a bit, stupefied, proud and also very frightened. It was odd, he thought, that she had not yet been told of his identity as a jinchuriki, and there she was standing up to the Akatsuki anyway! 'Oh my God. I picked the best girlfriend, just...hands down the best. She's gotten so strong too! She hasn't mentioned any of that in her letters!'

"So everyone is going to be okay?" Naruto asked.

"I expect so. The trainees and Sato are being well cared for by Tsunade." Jiraiya pointed out, "Although I am certain Kakashi is a bit shaken up since that mission."

"Yeah..."

"And I'm also sure the Hyuga clan is gloating like crazy after learning about Hinata's heroism."

"But hey it's a good thing!" Naruto insisted.

Jiraiya passed Naruto the instant noodles so he could prepare them and then made another cup of tea. The sun was setting and Jiraiya wondered if he ought to write a response to Tsunade, 'But I want to keep it brief...it isn't as if much has happened over here.'

They ate quietly for a while before Jiraiya broke the silence, "Naruto..."

"Mm?" He replied, slurping noodles.

"Our timing could not have been better. Now that you're wrapping up your Hiraishin training we are going to move on to our next project." Jiraiya announced, "You are going to work on mastering your Kyuubi Chakra."

Naruto paled, a bit unnerved by the idea. Naturally he understood it was a critical part of his training, but his relationship with the Fox was neutral on the best of days. Coming to an understanding with the biju would be a real challenge.

"We'll start tomorrow. We need to find a secluded area where no other people could possibly be around." Jiraiya determined, "If you do ever run into the Akatsuki, my wish is that you can mow them down with the same power they are trying to steal from you. Just out of curiosity, how many tails of the Fox's chakra have you been able to call upon?"

"Up to three, but I've never tried more than that." Naruto replied, finishing his meal, "I feel like the higher I go...the more I forget about myself...or I get confused and I don't know where I am or what I'm doing."

"With practice we'll be able to get you acclimated to more chakra." His mentor assured him, "And just in case you get out of control like that, I have one of these." He pulled a seal-tag from his jacket and showed Naruto, "This seal is very reactive and only for emergencies, such as shutting off your Kyuubi chakra. You don't need to worry. If it gets to be too much for either of us I'll just slap this on you and it's a guaranteed kill switch."

"Well that's good." Naruto agreed.

"That's tomorrow's endeavor." Jiraiya decided, and then fetched a brush and scroll from his bag, "Now I need to write Tsunade some sweet nothings."

In the early morning hours, still by the cover of darkness, clouds rolled in and a rainstorm followed. Jiraiya woke up cursing and Naruto groaned in frustration. He was curled in a ball beneath the
Hawthorne tree, and as droplets pelted down he uncoiled and snatched up his bag. He and Jiraiya covered their heads; half awake, and walked blindly until they came to a functional shelter.

They settled again beneath a mossy ledge carved out of the side of a hill. The two laid down and fell asleep again, not very concerned that they had been wetted down. It had happened a few times in the past during their travels.

When the sun rose it was still raining. Jiraiya woke first and sat up, watching the rainfall with a catatonic stare. A length of time passed while he wandered through his thoughts, appreciating the sweet smells of the forest.

'Where does the time go? I would wake up to rain like this back when I was training Yahiko and his group...then it was Minato...and now Naruto is here keeping me very entertained in my old age.' Jiraiya mused, 'How many students do I have train and lose before the prophecy is fulfilled? It feels like I'll never get this right.'

He glanced over to where Naruto was snoozing, 'But when I see him...I keep thinking this is it. I mean, I practically named this child! Willed him into being!'

Jiraiya was aware he had shirked a lot of responsibilities after Minato's death, but avoiding Naruto had proven to be an impossible task. The small boy had marched right up to him that day in the small trading town he had used for peeping. He had a posse with him, too.

He remembered seeing Naruto and Gaara's disgruntled, chubby faces when they had been young children, 'And Haku was standing between them smiling like a saint...' They were the youngest and most rambunctious group of kids he had ever taken under his wing.

With a small sound Naruto stirred and stretched like a cat. Jiraiya greeted him and handed the sleepy boy a roll from his bag.

"Thanks...ahh...Ero-sensei." He yawned gratefully.

"Eat up! Once this rain clears we'll be on our way." Jiraiya clapped Naruto on his shoulder, "How'd you sleep kid? We had a pretty rude awakening, huh?"

"It's happened before." Naruto munched on the roll, "I slept like a rock..."

"Me too...but this weather is making me ache." Jiraiya complained, "My back feels twice as bad."

"Sheesh! Take some aspirin or something! You sure don't bounce back like I do."

"I appreciate your sympathy. Fine." Jiraiya frowned, "That makes me wonder...have you ever taken aspirin?"

"No. Well, I don't think so." Naruto pondered it, "I don't really get sick or hurt."

"I'd kill for a third of your vitality..."

Naruto grinned cheekily at his master and finished his breakfast. They composed themselves for the morning and drank rainwater that collected in their teacups. An hour later the storm was reduced to a light drizzle and they chose to set out. They conversed pleasantly while hiking a deserted trail up the mountainside.

"Shoot. We should have bought parasols in that last town..." Jiraiya cursed his blunder.
"We'll pick some up at the next one! Maybe I should get a nice one for Hinata..."

"I'm sure she already has one."

"I'll get her a better one."

"Suit yourself! It's not like you're made of money, though you have been quite frugal on this trip."
Jiraiya conceded.

"Haku-kun taught me how to budget. And man does it come in handy when you have a girlfriend!"

"You've got that girl on the brain, kid. It's been Hinata-this and Hinata-that for two weeks now..."
Naruto puffed up, irritated, "So?"

"So I think you need the talk."

"What?"

"Well how do I put this? You're old enough now to..." The teacher paused, hoping he would not say something to offend his student, "You know what? We can have this discussion after you look at this." He retrieved a small, paperback novel from his pocket.

Naruto cringed at the sight of the book but Jiraiya tossed it to him and insisted, "Just look at it. I know you're not into this stuff, but you are growing up and there is something to be said about educating yourself."

He hesitated briefly before cracking it open. Naruto read in silence while they walked. He nearly walked straight into a tree and Jiraiya had to grab him by the arm and course-correct him, 'Kakashi can give him some pointers on how to walk and read at the same time...'

Some time passed and they stopped close to the top of the mountain that overlooked hills and woods in the distance. Naruto took a seat on a fallen log and continued his reading. Jiraiya was glad the boy would now consider the content, even if he didn't necessarily condone it. The Sage lit up his pipe and relaxed.

About halfway through the novel Naruto stopped and closed it.

"I don't want to do it this way." He said.

"What way?"

Words failed Naruto and he blushed, holding the book out for his teacher. Jiraiya took it and shook his head.

"Spit it out, kid. You can tell me."

"I just..."

"If you don't say it I will say it for you."

Naruto scowled, "Please don't-"

"You are going to have sex." Jiraiya looked him dead in the eye when he said it, "It doesn't have to be up to my literary standards, of course, but you should have an idea of what to do when the time comes."
"I already had an idea of what it was!"

"Yes, but you don't know the technical aspects of it." Jiraiya told him, "So that's why we will talk about it."

"Do you really have to teach me this stuff?"

His teacher nodded, "I sure do. I've had this talk with almost all of the boys I've trained, except for you and your teammates. We haven't gotten around to it yet." He blew out a line of smoke, "Relax! I talked about sex all the time with Minato, or as you know him, the Fourth Hokage!"

That shot down any of Naruto's remaining insecurities.

"I am telling the truth, I swear. He needed to know so I explained." Jiraiya expounded, "Not to feed the storm of gossip, but he had a lot of sex. You don't need to flip over that because it was with the same woman and he very happily married her." Jiraiya pointed his pipe at Naruto, "But he WAS fifteen once and he had questions!"

Naruto sighed and let the tension ease out of his shoulders. He would be lying if he said he did not think about being intimate with the girl he loved. It was something he had not yet brought up with his best friends either, although Naruto was certain they had opinions on the matter as well, 'I don't think they've done anything yet...but maybe Gaara and Haku will talk to me about it.'

A silence punctuated the conversation and Naruto spoke up, "His name was Minato. That's right."

"Namikaze Minato." Jiraiya repeated fondly, "You and I are going to talk about him a lot in the near future. It's not something I am comfortable telling you now because we have to focus on your training. When we have downtime we will talk about him and his life. It's very important that you know about him."

Naruto raised his eyebrows, "Okay then."

Jiraiya sat down and inhaled on his pipe. He watched Naruto's face for a moment before he asked, "How is your bond with the Kyuubi?"

The boy's expression revealed a bit of concern but mostly optimism, "It can't be bad..."

Jiraiya snorted, "Sure it can. I just want to estimate how easily you'll be overtaken if you start to draw on the Fox's chakra."

Naruto shrugged, "It hasn't been as difficult as when I first started. He isn't very friendly...but we do talk."

"You do?"

"Sometimes. When I meditate there are times he will answer my questions if I don't know something."

Naruto explained, "But mostly he insults my intelligence and hypes himself up!"

"Oh boy..." Jiraiya exhaled and put out his pipe, "He's proud."

"Super proud."

"He thinks he's better than you."
"That's how it seems."

"That fox is not going to willingly lend its chakra, in that case."

"Well..." Naruto folded his arms, "I guess it depends on what's going on. When we stopped in Ramadi Village he helped me find my way to a shrine...other times he tells me to piss off."

Jiraiya restrained a smile, finding it humorous.

"One other thing..." Naruto added, "I think...he likes Hinata."

The Toad Sage stared at his pupil, alarmed.

"I know! I don't get it either." Naruto admitted, "I mean, he hates everyone as far as I can tell, but she hasn't made his shit-list. He can be inappropriate about it, but I think if she was going to stand face to face with the fox..." He lowered his voice, "He'd never hurt her."

"I would not bet on it. Don't be fooled by any exceptions to his hatred, Naruto." Jiraiya warned, "You really don't know how he would react, and it's safe to say he can't stand YOU. It won't do to let your guard down."

"You know I won't." Naruto stood up, "So are we going to do this or not?"

Jiraiya fiddled with his bag and Naruto was abashed when his master took out a sake bottle.

"This isn't for you." Jiraiya assured him. He tipped a mouthful back, swallowed and then hissed. He put it away and then got to his feet.

"Liquid courage!" The sage touted, "Alright. Let's go over there by those rocks and get started!"

As they walked the forest gave way to slopes that were dotted with boulders. The face of the mountain was obviously worn down by erosion and lacked trees, but Jiraiya felt it was more than enough space for them to experiment.

"Today I am going to throw everything I have at you," Jiraiya informed Naruto, "I won't be nice about it. I'm not apologizing for black eyes and such..."

Naruto snickered, "You better watch it. I don't want to hurt your back again."

"I'll manage. Don't get cocky just yet."

Jiraiya leapt to the top of a boulder and folded his arms, trying to look formidable. Naruto took a position directly across from him, still quite relaxed. No matter how it turned out, Naruto thought, they both liked each other too much to injure the other seriously. That was his take on it, anyway.

His master was doing arm circles to loosen up when he spoke again, "So how strong do you think I am, Naruto?"

"Uh..." The boy was puzzled, "I guess...at least as strong as Baa-chan...or the Third..."

"What a conservative estimate!" Jiraiya laughed, and then became frighteningly serious, "You're going to get to know me a bit better..."

He did not give any further warning. Jiraiya summoned an enormous, red, horned-toad that Naruto had not yet been introduced to. It immediately swung down a barbed, double-prong club and Naruto
evaded, surprised by the swift destruction of the landscape.

Jiraiya perched on top of the toad's head, "Hey Gamaken! Let me introduce you to my student, Naruto."

"This is the one you were talking about?" The toad's voice was deep, "Shall we test him?"

"That's the idea."

They rushed for Naruto again and he bounded away, bit his thumb and prepared hand-signs without thinking. He felt that if Jiraiya could summon toads that he shouldn't be restricted from doing so.

"Nope!" Jiraiya leapt down and took a swing at him, interrupting his efforts, "Use only your own strength! No assistants for you today: toads or clones!"

"Come on!" Naruto rounded about and kicked him, aggravated. Jiraiya blocked and then avoided the toad's club that came down again. Naruto was sent tumbling down the slope, thoroughly annoyed.

"This is a test to bring out your Kyuubi chakra! Don't forget!" Jiraiya reminded him, bearing down on Naruto with a well-timed Rasengan. Naruto had the good sense to hurl his three-pronged kunai past his mentor, and reappeared behind him. He happily threw his best punch at Jiraiya and was met with a wall of spiked hair.

'He's really on his A-game today...' Naruto noted how Jiraiya left no gaps in his defense, 'I'm still feeling spiteful, though!'

Rather than calling on the first tail of the Fox's chakra Naruto retreated to safety, evading Gamaken again, and then unclipped his leg weights. Jiraiya was positively livid, "Hey! I didn't give you permission to-!"

Naruto bulleted towards his teacher with a newly formed Rasengan, feinted to the right, and then caught Jiraiya. The sage was able to block with his hair technique and countered again, pricking Naruto with sharp spines. He and his student cursed at each other, both battered, and then separated. The Rasengan had gouged out a crater in the slope and Jiraiya stumbled away from it.

"Why should I have to slow myself down?" Naruto complained, "I was done with those weights anyway!"

"I didn't tell you that you were done with them!" Jiraiya groused.

Gamaken had stopped and watched the juvenile exchange as the two argued.

"You've handicapped me enough!"

"I've handicapped you appropriately!"

"This IS my natural speed!" Naruto insisted.

"Shove it! Use that goddamn Kyuubi chakra already!"

They hurled their respective Rasengan at each other again. The two made their best attempts to evade but were hurled over the rocks, experiencing bruised egos and bodies. Jiraiya ordered Gamaken to attack once more, certain that it was a fair match. Naruto darted about, finally utilizing the Fox's chakra, and Jiraiya was slightly less angry after seeing a biju chakra-cloak manifest, 'It's about time!' He was by no means going to make it easy for Naruto. Jiraiya summoned again, calling Gamabunta
to the battlefield along with two toads that, by comparison, were tiny beside the Chief Toad. They were also elderly.

"Jiraiya-boy!" The old male toad was bearded and chipper, "I haven't seen you in an age!"

"What can we help you with, youngin?" The female of the pair asked.

"It's good to see you, Fukasaku, Shima..."

Jiraiya watched smugly as Gamabunta and Gamaken attempted to dog-pile his student, and then lashed out with their weapons. Naruto had about two tails available. He was a blonde blur of movement on the mountainside, and the toads opposing him knew better than to let his unusually high-powered Rasengan get too close. They leapt clumsily, too large to move nimbly in the craggy environment.

"Naruto is quite the handful! As I am now I wouldn't be able to deal with him, even if he isn't using his best jutsu." Jiraiya explained, "I do feel your help is warranted. Will you gather some natural chakra for me?"

"Ah." The toads understood. Fukasaku and Shima hopped onto Jiraiya's back and then settled individually on his shoulders. They attached themselves to his body and held still, preparing to harvest natural energy.

One of Naruto's kicks, Tsunade-like in strength, connected squarely with Gamabunta's head. The boss toad fell back and knocked Gamaken over with a cry. The toads rolled down the mountainside and had to detangle themselves.

"Sorry, Chief Toad!" Naruto apologized, but his voice carried a growl with it.

By the time the boy had turned back to Jiraiya the man's appearance was very different. His hair was wilder, facial markings more pronounced, and his eyes and nose were distinctly toad-like, 'Uh...what did he just do? Did he...just spontaneously grow a beard?' In fact he had.

The wild hair that had fended off Naruto earlier fired a continuous storm of needles at the boy. He dodged, fleet-footed, and approached Jiraiya at the mountaintop, pulling more fiercely on the Fox's chakra. Naruto could hear a distant but apathetic complaint from the Kyuubi while he did it.

Naruto and Jiraiya met ferociously, and there was no denying that Jiraiya was much stronger and more agile than before. The boy could have sworn he had dodged a punch, he had seen it with his own eyes, but he was struck anyway and hurled into the side of a large boulder. 'How did he hit me!?" Naruto was unnerved by the feat.

"How do you like Sage Mode, kiddo?" Jiraiya was pleased his student had to shake off the attack and regroup, "You might need to use more Kyuubi chakra, right?"

"I can take you!"

They rushed at each other again and scuffled. Although Naruto took great care in avoiding Jiraiya's augmented taijutsu he was still hit with great frequency. He could not put his finger on the exact reason, but Naruto had a hunch that Jiraiya's chakra was increasing the range of his attacks. When a mighty kick was aimed his way Naruto spun, letting a crimson tail of chakra lash out, batting his master like a fly swatter. Naruto sprang again while Jiraiya was down, but one of the toads perched on his mentor's shoulder countered with a wind jutsu, forcing him back.

Naruto back-flipped away like a ruby-colored gymnast and then condensed another, more potent
Rasengan. Jiraiya was in his sights and he was high on the biju's incredible energy.

Jiraiya had timed his counter well, pouring his chakra into the same technique, and generated the largest Rasengan that was physically possible. It dwarfed Naruto's demon-fueled attack, and when Jiraiya came down with the ultra-big ball of energy Naruto counted himself fortunate that his chakra cloak shaved off some of the damage. The mountainside was gone after that.

At the bottom of the slope Naruto shook his head, trying to come back to his senses. He looked up, witnessing the resulting landslide of rocks and debris that came loose without any land left to support them. He let his chakra tails whip forward and tear the rocks apart. The chakra-limbs hoisted him up the sheer rock face and he leapt with a small roar, trying to strike harder and faster.

A giant sword thunked down beside him and Naruto barrel-rolled to the side, agilely navigating away from Gamabunta who was still peeved he had been head-checked earlier. Gamaken was pursuing him as well. Naruto was chased onto the last strip of sustainable land on the mountaintop and he had been lined up for one of Jiraiya's most punishing techniques.

Shima provided a fire jutsu and Fukasaku initiated a wind jutsu as Jiraiya exhaled a wave of toad oil. The deluge of oil ignited and was fanned to an unbearable intensity by the wind technique. Gamaken and Gamabunta leapt high into the sky to avoid the danger. Jiraiya had generated a localized, flaming sea before he retreated, hoping Naruto had not come to harm. The burning oil cascaded down the sheer drop, scalding trees and plant life on its way down.

“Jiraiya-boy, look there!” Fukasaku warned his shinobi companion.

Jiraiya could see several boulders had been overturned and piled on top of each other to serve as a platform above the rushing oil. A transparent chakra limb had arranged the means of escape, and it joined Naruto’s body again after the task was done. Naruto was standing on top of the rock pile, no longer aware of his surroundings.

Jiraiya watched apprehensively as a fourth tail attempted to form but reabsorbed into Naruto’s body. The chakra cloak hummed red around his student. ‘Well that is progress! This is the first time he’s ever pushed it this far…but maybe this is far enough. I don’t know what an extra tail might do to him.’

The boy was holding still and had taken the rough silhouette of the demon fox, complete with tails, claws and pointed ears. His surging chakra was suctioned close to his body. Naruto looked from side to side, as if trying to recognize where he was.

“How are you feeling, kid?” Jiraiya called over to him, glad that the oil wave had run its course, “You’re doing great!”

Naruto’s head snapped in the direction of Jiraiya’s voice. He pounced.

Shima screamed first. It was as if the boy had soared across the distance between them. He had brought his arms down in a pile-driving motion and Jiraiya managed to dodge it. The force of the blow leveled the bottom of the slope and more debris careened down.

Jiraiya believed he had been withdrawing quick enough, but a corrosive tail of chakra swiped at him, burning an ugly line across Jiraiya’s chest. The sage was hollering in pain, coming to the realization that Naruto had lost his awareness.

“Time for the failsafe!” Jiraiya announced through gritted teeth, “Both of you get back!”

Fukasaku and Shima complied, leaping away from Jiraiya. When the larger toads made a start to
assist their elders warned them to maintain their distance. The small toads positioned themselves helpfully while Jiraiya ran for his life, and when the sage failed at getting any closer to Naruto the pair took advantage of the distraction.

“Senpo: Frog Call!” Fukasaku and Shima cried in unison, striking Naruto’s back with the sound wave. It paralyzed the boy for only a few precious seconds, but it was enough time for Jiraiya to dive in.

“It’s going to be okay, kid!” Jiraiya promised, and patted the tag on his student’s forehead just as two sets of claws gored his mid-section.

The tag immediately suppressed all chakra in Naruto’s body. The chakra surrounding him seemed to evaporate and his beastly features rapidly faded. The blonde shinobi fell to his knees, drained from the tag.

Jiraiya plucked the suppression seal from Naruto’s head before coughing violently. He tasted blood in his mouth and then hazarded a peek at his stomach and chest. Jiraiya equated it to ground-beef, ‘Bad. I should have…acted sooner.’ His vision was swimming.

Fukasaku and Shima approached, shouting in alarm. Jiraiya heard their voices mix together before a high-pitched ringing overtook him. It went dark and silent a moment later. He fell backwards.

“Jiraiya!” Shima squawked, “Stay awake!”

She and Fukasaku settled beside him, ignoring the spattering of blood surrounding them. They were trying to assess his injury and what action to take next.

Naruto snapped out of his swooning and groggily looked over to his master, “Ero-sensei…”

His knees were too weak to support his weight. Naruto crawled a short distance before reaching Fukasaku. He felt something warm on his hand and slowly looked down. His hands and singed jacket were coated with Jiraiya’s blood.

Naruto inhaled sharply, horrified, and then settled his wide eyes on his teacher, “Ero-sensei!”

Gamabunta was asking Shima what could be done.

“Pa and I need to patch him up! Both of you go home now.” Shima turned to her toad-husband after the giant toads had disappeared in smoke, “We’ll bring these two with us.”

He nodded to her and then gave his attention to Naruto, who was hyperventilating.

“Naruto-boy…” The toad put a webbed hand on him, “We can help-”

“Did I do this?” Naruto’s voice was a screech, “Did I do it? I don’t remember it! Please help him-!”

“Shush!” The female toad commanded, “Grab him, Pa!”

Fukasaku got a grip on the quivering boy and fed chakra to his contractual seal. Smoke surrounded them and they were successfully reverse-summoned to the home of the toads.

In the confusion and chaos of their relocation, Naruto did not notice the fantastic vegetation and statues of Mt. Myoboku appear. His eyes were squeezed shut while he cried and wailed; his hands were clenched in fists. Fukasaku was able to drag Naruto by his sleeve into his house. Shima was already inside and tending to Jiraiya. She had another small toad assist her with a medical technique.
Fukasaku was trying to get some coherent responses out of Naruto, “Naruto-boy…you don’t remember what happened?”

“No.” He had taken a seat on the tatami mats in the main room of the house, “Did I do it?”

Fukasaku crossed over to a chest of drawers and retrieved a handkerchief, “You didn’t mean to, Naruto.”

He handed the cloth to the weeping boy and Naruto blotted his salt-stained, boogery face with it. He was in absolute disbelief that he had wounded Jiraiya so badly. What was worse than that, he noted, was that it was not his decision. The Fox had subdued his awareness of battle, making him blind and savage.

Naruto retreated into his mind to confront the Fox, feeling rage prick at him beneath his grief.

‘Fox!’

The Kyuubi was cackling wildly behind its bars, thrilled.

‘How could you? We've been on good terms for a while now! I almost killed Ero-sennin!’

Oh? You expect that you can gain control over me? You are a fool. You have always been a fool. You gave me the chance and I ripped your toady-teacher like tissue paper.

‘But we...’

You think we have reached an understanding? Ohohoho! No. I was just in the mood for conversation. You are fodder just like the rest of them. Test me again and soon YOU will be MY captive.

‘I'll never let that happen!’

Oh Naruto, what naive compassion you possess! You haven't been betrayed enough! You have not hated enough to realize the positive doctrine you vomit up is baseless! I will be your teacher now.

Naruto fled the Fox's banter and collapsed to the mats on the floor, weeping again. He had been a true idiot to think it was safe to test his limits with the Nine-Tails. He never should have agreed to Jiraiya's training. The helplessness and shame he felt was so overwhelming that he wished for death for a short time. ‘What are Gaara and Haku going to think? Or Baa-chan...’

Fukasaku stayed by his side, patting his back, "Don't listen to him, Naruto! Don't believe the Kyuubi's lies!"

Merely by touching Naruto, Fukasaku was still able to feel the faint presence of the Kyuubi, tormenting his jinchuriki to the best of his ability. The fox was trying to force away all forms of help or hope. ‘That is how the Nine-Tails can truly gain control over Naruto...by weakening his spirit...’

"Now, now...Shima is with him. My wife is too stubborn to let anything happen to Jiraiya-boy..." The toad elder was trying to reassure Naruto, if it was even possible at that point, "The two of you will be fine."

He continued rubbing soothing circles on Naruto's back for a minute more until the boy calmed somewhat. He cried silently after that, crumpled on the floor in ruined clothing. ‘This won't do...this
Fukasaku hurried into the kitchen of the house and called out the window to a passing trainee, "Kosuke! Come here!"

A small red toad in goggles looked over to the toad elder, "Fukasaku-sama!" The young toad bounded up to the side of the house obediently.

"Kosuke, I need you to do me a favor. Ma and I have brought Jiraiya-boy and his apprentice here for rest. Check with Gamaken or Gamabunta if you need to verify their previous location, but please bring their belongings here." Fukasaku instructed, "They must have left them somewhere in the forest outside of the Maple Village."

"Of course, sir! Right away!" The young toad rushed off to check with the boss toad before starting his search.

Fukasaku left the window and sighed. What else could he do? 'Ma should be able to heal Jiraiya-boy...but we need to make sure that the child doesn't panic or give into the Fox's will. It will be very difficult for him to bear it on his own right now.'

He went to a pot on a burner and spooned some warm vegetable broth into a bowl. The sympathetic toad brought the food to Naruto, who was still an inconsolable heap on the floor. Fukasaku bent down towards the boy's face and spoke quietly, "Please sip some of this, Naruto. It will settle your stomach."

Naruto did not answer.

Fukasaku rolled the boy over and prepared a spoonful for him. He was concerned about the hollow, far-off look on Naruto's face, 'He is still despairing... ' He lifted the boy's head and tried to coax him to eat. The broth dribbled from Naruto's uncooperative lips.

With a disappointed sigh Fukasaku set him down and took a seat. Maybe all that he could do for now was stay with the young man until he snapped out of it, 'It is what Jiraiya would want me to do.' He sat for a while before fetching a basin of water and a washcloth, and he scrubbed the blood from Naruto's hands and arms. Fukasaku was certain that Naruto would not want any reminder of the violence that had occurred. The young man lay compliantly on the floor and when the toad elder finished he took a seat again, unruffled.

A long period of silence was only broken by cheerful frog-songs outside. Abruptly, Naruto spoke, "Thank you..."

Startled, Fukasaku looked down at Naruto who seemed to have dried up and become lucid again. He patted the boy's head, "Don't mention it."

"What's your name?"

"I am Fukasaku of Mount Myoboku. My wife Shima and I are known as the Two Great Sages of the Toad Valley." The toad introduced himself, "We trained Jiraiya-boy in the art of Senjutsu."

"Thanks..." Naruto's voice shook, "Thanks for helping us."

Fukasaku chuckled, "No disciple of the toads is abandoned, no matter what."

Naruto slowly pulled himself into a sitting position. His muscles were aching and the air was thick, "So this is the Toad Mountain?"
"It is." Fukasaku held up the bowl again, "Would you like to try to eat this now?"

"Maybe not yet..." Naruto frowned, "Why does my body feel so heavy? This place..."

"Mount Myoboku is saturated with natural energy. It will take a while for your body to adapt." Fukasaku explained, "Relax for now. I imagine you will be able to accept natural energy soon, so you'll get used to being here."

"Okay."

Shima emerged from the bedroom she left Jiraiya in. She was clearly exhausted when she sat down on a cushion, sighing heavily.

"That's Shima?" Naruto asked Fukasaku quietly.

"The one and only!"

The boy crossed over to her and prostrated on the floor to show his gratitude, "Thank you for helping Ero-sennin, Shima!"

The toad was surprised by the gesture but smiled, "Not at all, and please, call me Ma."

"Thank you, Ma!"

She was tickled by Naruto's respectful disposition. Jiraiya had told her once that he had bound Naruto to the Toad Contract when he was six years old, 'That was a truly reckless thing to do...but Naruto seems to be very capable...and also very appreciative of toads!'

"How is Jiraiya-boy?" Fukasaku asked.

"He will need undisturbed rest so he can continue to recover. I expect it will take quite a while." Shima got them up to speed, "I was able to stabilize him...but Kyuubi chakra is very destructive and worsens wounds. He will bear some terrible scars."

Naruto looked positively crestfallen by the report, but was relieved to hear that his master was not in jeopardy of losing his life.

Shima hopped over to Naruto and laid a critical eye on him, "Were you injured?"

"Uh...I'm not sure..."

"Take your jacket off, boy."

Naruto removed his jacket, which was really just strips of the garment it used to be. Even his undershirt was slightly charred. Shima looked him over and pointed out burns that had begun to heal.

"Our Boiling Oil technique did get to you, it seems." She said while healing scaly patches on his arms, "How remarkable! You resisted it and began healing on your own."

"It was good that we were present for that fight." Fukasaku determined, "An accident could have killed either one of you, and Jiraiya knew he was taking a great risk. Without supervision things may have ended up much worse."

"It was my fault." Naruto said in a soft voice.

"It was Jiraiya's fault." Shima corrected him, "He was the one who suggested it, wasn't he?"
"When can I see him?" Naruto asked.

"Not for a while. He must rest." Shima advised, "So should you, Naruto. Please come with me."

The female toad escorted him to another bedroom adjacent to the main room. She slid the paper screen aside and Naruto trudged through, not fussing at all when she directed him to a futon on the floor. He slumped down onto it in silence and quickly found sleep.

His dreams were vivid. Many memories from his childhood bounced around in his head, especially of the time Naruto and his friends had first encountered Jiraiya. He had been an extremely reluctant caregiver. Naruto remembered constantly dogging the sage with criticism and how they initially did not get along.

In spite of how they had butted heads, they had genuinely liked each other. Jiraiya was willing to test them and teach them. He had not feared them at all and was impressed with their abilities. Naruto, Haku and Gaara had wiggled their way into his heart and had earned his affection. Jiraiya had brought them to Leaf and provided them with a secure home and safety. He had even taught them their first jutsu, 'It was the transformation technique...'

They had been slightly discouraged when he had left Konoha and also frustrated when he was assigned as their sensei after graduation.

He remembered the bickering and the laughter. He remembered Haku always sucking up to Jiraiya to stay in his good graces, 'And how Gaara did everything he could to piss Ero-sensei off...' Painting fences, mundane drudgery, eating out, discouraging peeping and a few serious missions...'He passed down the Rasengan to me...'

Naruto remembered the panic he felt during the Invasion when Gaara's seal had been weakened. Naruto, of course, had taken it upon himself to halt Gaara's destructive outburst, but Jiraiya had patched up Gaara's seal quickly after attempting to rescue the Third. Finding Tsunade had also been a highlight for Naruto, as well as his introduction to the treachery of both Orochimaru and the Akatsuki, 'But Ero-sensei fought them off too.'

Every black eye Jiraiya had gotten as a result of peeping, every angry tirade and proud monologue of accomplishment he had given...it floated around in Naruto's head, amplifying the terrible fear he had of losing his mentor. He had been a parent and lifeline. He taught more than just shinobi-skills, he taught life-lessons large and small. He provided support and wisdom. Jiraiya guided his students and groomed them with confidence and dedication, bringing out the best in them.

Naruto knew that he had always relied on Jiraiya, but admitting it was terrifying. In the same way losing Haku or Gaara would destroy his world, Jiraiya was just as much family as they were. 'I have to protect him too.'

Naruto woke the following morning and sat bolt-upright. Sunlight was pouring in through the window.

He examined his chest, arms and legs and was pleased that the burns he had sustained were gone. He glanced over to a low table with a lamp that had a gi and pants set out for him. Naruto stripped off his ruined outfit and redressed, feeling far more relaxed since Fukasaku and Shima had taken charge.

He still completely lacked an appetite, he noticed.

He exited the bedroom and snuck to the room where Jiraiya was being kept. He found Shima there at
work changing Jiraiya's bandages. The white haired man was still unconscious. He had hoped to sneak a visit with Jiraiya, but Naruto chose to announce his presence to the toad elder instead.

"Good morning, Ma."

Shima looked over her shoulder, "Good morning, Naruto."

"Do you want me to help you with those?"

"No, thank you. I would prefer if you didn't see this until he has healed a bit better." Shima replied, "I want to keep you as calm as possible today. I'm sure you understand. I am nearly done anyway."

"Alright then."

"Pa should still be out on the porch. Go find him for now and I will be out soon."

Naruto nodded and then shut the door. He stepped outside on the veranda and did indeed find Fukasaku.

The toad elder greeted Naruto happily, "You're awake, Naruto!" He pointed to a bowl he had set down on the ledge, "Eat that up now and then we'll talk."

Naruto sighed but sat down and complied, tilting the bowl back and downing the clear broth.

"My...Jiraiya's old clothes do seem to suit you." Fukasaku mused.

Naruto spat out the last of the liquid, shocked, "These are Ero-sensei's clothes?"

"Yes, from when he was your age. We kept some of them for other human students who may potentially visit." He explained, "You can wear them until we are able to bring you something else."

"I guess there isn't any good shopping around here?" Naruto pointed out.

"No. No shopping at all." Fukasaku chuckled, "We are in an uncharted location within the Fire Country, and it is a month's journey by foot on a secret road to reach Konohagakure."

Naruto slammed the bowl down on the wood of the porch, tremendously excited, "We're that close to Leaf?"

"Only if you stay on the road, otherwise you would get horribly lost. It's rather tricky." The toad added, "Close is a relative term, but yes, you are much closer now than you were while you trained near the Maple Village in the north."

Naruto was about to burst at the seams with joy. Home was near! His friends and loved ones were within his reach should they need him, 'I am not happy about Ero-sensei being hurt...but this is great! We just covered about a year's distance in one night! Summoning is the best...'

"How about a walk?" Fukasaku suggested, "I'll give you a small tour of this sacred land. It should help perk you up!"

Naruto agreed. They left the house and took a stroll around the small settlement where Fukasaku's house was located. Toads greeted them amicably as they went past and Naruto took in the charming, wild sights. Flowers and toadstools livened up the brush and streams and waterfalls were abundant. 'This place is beautiful...' Naruto stopped in front of a toad statue that was posed in a cross-legged state of meditation. He admired its serenity.
"That statue was once a person." Fukasaku notified Naruto.

"Like...a human?"

"Yes, a shinobi who attempted to master Senjutsu long ago." Fukasaku went on, "Many toads and ninja who tried to do so became statues in the process."

"Senjutsu. Is that what Ero-sensei was using?"

"Oh yes. He is a master, just as Ma and I are masters."

"So...what is Senjutsu?" Naruto rested his hand on the statue, "And why would someone learning about it turn into a statue?"

"All very good questions!" Fukasaku was pleased, "I suppose Jiraiya would like me to tell you all of this since he is unable to right now. It may even be his wish that you begin Sage training in the not-too-distant future."

Naruto was quiet for a moment, mulling it over.

"This training...wouldn't have anything to do with Kyuubi chakra in me, right? I wouldn't need it?"

He asked.

"No, it is entirely separate from that. Senjutsu is the art of absorbing and harnessing the natural energy all around you." Fukasaku clarified, "Shinobi understand that physical and mental energy is stored within our bodies, and that is the foundation of Ninjutsu. With that in mind, outside of our bodies, nature is host to an abundance of chakra as well."

"It probably isn't easy to do."

"Correct. It is some of the most difficult training one could ever undertake. One must meditate, often with the assistance of toad-oil from our sacred fountain, which allows the user to feel more acutely the natural energy in the environment." The elder divulged as they walked, "If one training in this manner does not hold perfectly still in order to harmonize with nature...they run the risk of permanently turning into a toad statue." Fukasaku pointed with his cane to other statues, "We revere those who have tried and failed here. They did not let fear deter them."

"My kind of guys!"

They laughed together and rounded a bend towards another settlement. It was much larger and appeared to house the medium to giant-sized residents of the valley. After passing several patches of vegetables and herbs Fukasaku stopped by a well filled to the brim with clear water. He tapped its ledge with his cane, smiling, "You'll like this."

"What is it?"

"This is the Enshinsui. It is the portal that connects Mount Myoboku directly to the Hidden Leaf Village." Fukasaku told him, "Only toads my size can use it. It is quite helpful, I must say."

Naruto was smiling too, catching on, "Yeah, I can see how that would come in handy."

"Bear in mind it will not transport a human."

"Well I could kind of tell just by looking at the size of it..."

They continued their stroll towards a wide pond where Naruto and his escort walked across huge
lily-pads. On the way an unsuspecting dragonfly was struck by Fukasaku's tongue, pulled in and downed. Naruto gagged at the sight, "Do you make a habit of doing that, Gramps?"

"No...usually Shima prepares them first. That was a snack." Fukasaku announced, "You'll get to enjoy Ma's cooking soon!"

"I'll pass..."

"You won't have a choice while you're here." The toad elder reminded him, "Never fear, you'll grow accustomed to it. Jiraiya-boy did while he stayed in my home."

"Oh man...Ero-sensei had to eat bugs, huh?"

"They helped him put on muscle, with all that protein he ate."

Naruto was thoughtful while he poked his own arm, "You know what...I think I like the sound of that."

Fukasaku was thrilled, 'Naruto is incredibly open-minded! Jiraiya needed far more persuading before he chose to eat, back then!'

They stood on the precipice of a waterfall that overlooked a shrine. A large, pale toad was seated in the shade dozing at the top of the steps.

"It is not time for you to be introduced to the Great Toad Elder yet." Fukasaku told his companion, "But I think Jiraiya will ask to introduce you sometime soon. That is his lounge down there."

Naruto covered his eyes and squinted, looking into the distance, "I think I see him...is he a big deal?"

"He is our leader and the oldest Sage of this sanctuary." The toad replied.

"I see." Naruto folded his arms and followed Fukasaku as he proceeded to lead the way back to his house.

"How does your body feel today, Naruto?"

"Better! It felt like there was such a weight on me when I got here."

Fukasaku was pleased, "You're getting used to the natural energy here. That's a start."

They had completed their tour and outside of Fukasaku's house a small, red toad hefted two travel bags onto the veranda. Naruto raised his eyebrows in surprise, 'Oh crap! We left our stuff behind! These toads think of everything...'

"Thank you, Kosuke!" Fukasaku clapped his webbed hand on the trainee's back, "Allow me to introduce you to Uzumaki Naruto, Jiraiya-boy's student."

"It is nice to meet you!" Kosuke saluted the blonde boy.

"It's good to meet you too! I really appreciate what you did for us." Naruto told the toad, "Can I repay you, somehow?"

"Well..." Kosuke had a wishful look on his face, "Please summon me in the future to assist on missions! I am more skilled than I was last year..."

"Now, now, child, don't be so hasty." Fukasaku chided, "When the time is right Naruto will call
The old toad carried on into the house but Naruto grinned at the small trainee and said quietly, "I promise I will."

Kosuke was delighted. Naruto followed the toad elder inside, carrying the bags with him. He set the gear down in his bedroom before taking a seat near Fukasaku at a low table. Shima had left a plate of peppered and baked crickets for them. While Fukasaku helped himself, Shima came to stand beside Naruto and wrapped a measuring tape around his trunk. He laughed, caught off guard, "What's up, Ma?"

"I'm taking your measurements! If I can find some new clothes for you while I am out I will return with them." Shima moved the tape around, memorizing the sizes, "Stand up for a moment." Naruto stood and she took his waist size quickly.

She bustled across the room, picking up a basket, and then turned to her husband, "Look after Jiraiya and Naruto, Pa! I'll be back shortly."

He nodded with a mouthful of crickets. Once Shima had gone Naruto laid back on the mats, exhaling. He was feeling much more relaxed now that his toad hosts had taken the reins.

"Try one, Naruto."

Naruto looked up, eyeing the plate of baked insects on the table. 'I might as well have one now...since I'll be eating them for a while.' He sat up, shut his eyes and popped a cricket into his mouth. It was crunchy but well-seasoned and he was able to eat it with little difficulty.

Naruto smiled, "Not bad."

"I know! It's a textural problem most people have, when it comes to eating a bug-diet." Fukasaku divulged, "Jiraiya got over it when he was a boy. What else could he do but learn to eat our staples while he was stranded here?"

"Stranded?"

"Oh yes, Jiraiya arrived here completely by accident." The toad replied, "Has he ever told you about how he met the toads he formed a contract with?"

"Well...no..."

"Then allow me to elucidate the circumstances of his arrival!" Fukasaku had a flash of humor in his eyes, "You may very well know that Jiraiya-boy was Sarutobi Hiruzen's student, known more prominently as the Third Hokage."

"Yeah! He was a cool guy."

"Yes indeed...and he pushed his students very hard to train and hone their abilities. Hiruzen was instructing his students on the use of a summoning contract one afternoon, which would prepare Jiraiya, Tsunade and Orochimaru to summon their contracted animals in the future." Fukasaku went on, "Jiraiya-boy admitted to me that he was quite over-excited after learning the hand seals used for the technique, but he had not established any sort of contract first...and using summoning seals without a contract can be very dangerous, considering there is no guarantee of where you will be transported afterwards."

"He used those seals?"
"Of course he did! What a bright and patient boy he was..." The toad's inflection had an edge of sarcasm, "And right before Hiruzen's eyes he disappeared, scaring the daylights of him! His teacher had no way to locate him or track him...he would have to wait for Jiraiya to return to Leaf by foot...if he had actually survived."

Naruto cringed.

"Yes, you can imagine the grief Jiraiya's haste inflicted. His sensei was beside himself, and made sure to forbid his other students to attempt the jutsu. In the meantime, however, Jiraiya had the great fortune of arriving at Mount Myoboku..."

"I guess it was just meant to be..." Naruto mused.

Fukasaku's expression was serious, "Not only was it meant to be...it was foretold."

"Huh?" Naruto was perplexed.

"The Great Toad Elder had predicted that a disciple of the toads would arrive from the Leaf village. When we discovered Jiraiya wandering around...we quickly knew he was the child we were destined to train." Fukasaku explained, "We forged a friendship and a contract with him, and also introduced him to Sage training. He made it back to Leaf safely, some weeks later, and his sensei was relieved...and thereafter he endeavored to become a Sage."

Naruto was grinning, glad that some of Jiraiya's blind luck had afforded him the opportunity to begin the same training.

"The rest is history!" Fukasaku concluded, "There is more to tell, especially with respect to you, Naruto...but those are things that Jiraiya will explain to you."

Naruto picked up another cricket and snacked on it. He had not expected Jiraiya to have any kind of graceful introduction to the toads he had befriended, but at least there was some dignity in being expected by the Great Toad Elder. Jiraiya, it was apparent, had made the most of his serendipitous summoning error.

'And if it hadn't been for Ma and Pa...' Naruto thought, 'We'd be sunk.'

A low moan came from Jiraiya's room and both Naruto and Fukasaku started in surprise. They exchanged a glance before leaving the table. Naruto slid the door open and they peered in at Jiraiya, who was still flat on his back, but he was verbalizing his discomfort.

"Ahh...why...?"

"Jiraiya-boy!" The toad elder laughed, "Are you really awake or just having vocal dreams again?"

"What...do you think...?" His voice was rough.

"He's awake." Fukasaku deduced.

"Don't come in here...unless you bring me food. Steak. Beer. I want it all." Jiraiya demanded.

Naruto cracked up, unable to contain his mirth. Fukasaku was chuckling as well.

"We only have baked crickets right now, Ero-sensei." Naruto informed him, "Sorry."

"To hell...with the bugs..."
"They're pretty good!" Naruto encouraged.

"They've...converted you." Jiraiya growled.

"We have soup and insects, like always." Fukasaku told the man, "I know how to whip up some delicious curry, if you prefer! But truly, that is all there is. The beer, however..." He thought about it, "I'll pay Gamabunta a visit. He has quite a catalog of alcohol at home..."

Jiraiya made a whimpering sound that was a mix of happiness and pain.

Fukasaku asked Naruto to watch over his master while he was gone. Naruto entered the room and sat beside Jiraiya, quickly losing the brief joy of seeing the man awake. Jiraiya looked terrible: perspiring, rigid with pain, and wrapped up tight in bandages. Shima had declared that the Toad Sage would recover but of course, Naruto thought, it would be a long journey.

Naruto felt a lump form in his throat as the emotions and memories of his childhood washed over him again. Tears welled in his eyes and he sat with his hands clenched in his lap, not unlike what Hinata would do when she was upset.

"Naruto..." Jiraiya turned his head slightly to get a look at the boy, "Are you okay?"

Naruto's mouth was in a crybaby pout after hearing the words. He finally allowed himself to cry, but he nodded, confirming he was well.

Jiraiya's smile chided him a bit, "Come on now...don't be like that..."

"Of course I'm okay! Look at me!" Naruto pulled at the white and red gi he was wearing, "Heck, I'm even dressed like you now! What I want to know is if you're okay..."

"Sure!" Jiraiya tried to be a bit more optimistic, "Everything hurts right now but...I think I'll be just fine."

"I'm so sorry..."

"Hey! Don't you dare!" The man gruffed, "I don't want to hear any apologies from you, kid."

"I'm the one who hurt you, Ero-sensei, so it's my fault."

With great effort and pain to accompany it, Jiraiya struggled to sit up, wheezing while he did it. Naruto flailed his hands, trying to dissuade him, but Jiraiya reached out and wrapped his arm around Naruto's shoulders. He squeezed him in a warm, loving hug.

"No. You are not at fault. I knew what I was asking you to do and it was dangerous. I'm the idiot who needs to apologize for putting you through all of that." Jiraiya told him quietly, "I'm sorry for pushing you."

Naruto sniffled.

"You've got a heart of gold, Naruto. You wouldn't hurt a soul unless you absolutely had to." Jiraiya reminded him, "My request to train you that way...it was a knee-jerk reaction to everything Tsunade told me. We should have built up gradually before trying something so reckless."

Naruto shook his head, "How could it have gone better? That fox is always going to be like that..."

"You don't know that for sure, even now." His master answered, "I'm to blame. I feel like I behaved no better than Orochimaru...testing your limits like that."
"It's nothing like that!" Naruto protested, aghast, "You actually give a shit about me!"

"Yes, and I am glad you know it." Jiraiya agreed, "You, Haku and Gaara...you guys are the third team I have trained in my lifetime..." He paused and smiled, "And you are by far my favorite team."

Naruto stared with wide eyes, taken aback by the comment. Jiraiya made himself comfortable again and grumbled, adjusting his blanket. A moment passed and Naruto frowned in thought.

"Can you tell me about the other teams you trained, Ero-sensei?" He asked.

"Well sure, if you're interested." Jiraiya yawned. His yawn stretched his diaphragm and he yelped in pain. He returned to a supine position and held still until he felt better. Naruto sat cross-legged, curious about other students that Jiraiya had mentored.

"Hm...the first students I ever trained I found near the Hidden Rain Village, way back during the height of the war." Jiraiya recalled, "They were orphans...probably around eleven or twelve years old. They were very close friends and had formed their own sort of family, kind of like what you did with Haku and Gaara. They needed people to depend on."

Naruto nodded, listening intently.

"I took pity on them. I wanted to show them how to survive in a war-torn land...and since they already had the disposition of growing into shinobi someday, I taught them what I could. We had about a year and a half together before the Third ordered me to relocate."

"What were they like?"

"Let's see...Yahiko was a go-getter like you! Ha! He wasn't exceptionally talented, but boy was he outspoken...he was a natural leader." Jiraiya told Naruto, "He looked after Konan, a pretty kunoichi, and Nagato, a shy boy who had a lot of latent ability. I admired how hard they worked and how they genuinely cared about each other." The man stopped talking, as if abruptly overcome with sadness.

"What happened to them?" Naruto asked, "Can I meet them?"

"I don't know." Jiraiya admitted, "Once I left Rain I had no way of finding them...our hideout had been destroyed. For a while I was afraid they had been killed. I just don't know anymore...and I feel like I really screwed up."

Naruto folded his arms, empathizing.

"But the second time around I felt like I had pulled myself together. My sensei had been pressuring me to mentor a team in Leaf, and he had assembled a group he thought I would be compatible with." Jiraiya gave him a sharp look, a bit startled by Naruto's informal way of acknowledging the Fourth, but he was aware of how much respect Naruto felt for the late Yondaime. He'd let him get away with it.

"Yeah...and don't get me wrong, they were a great bunch of kids! Lively...kind of average...but Minato began to show excellence after a year or so of training." Jiraiya explained, "My other two...they were rather complacent. They settled down by their early twenties and were not so concerned with their shinobi careers...but Minato was close with them even as he pulled ahead."

"What was he like?"
Jiraiya sighed, thinking to himself, *I don't want to say too much right now. There's a time and a place for everything...*

"Minato was quick on his feet and not very physically powerful...well...you throw a *much* harder punch than he ever did." Jiraiya went on, "He was bookish and intelligent. He *loved* to pester me about things he studied. He was the one who bugged me to learn more about seals and summoning, so I hoped adding him to my summoning contract would quench his thirst a bit...but I think it just added fuel to the fire."

Naruto was grinning, glad that Jiraiya was justifying his admiration of the Fourth.

"He was friendly and respectful to most everyone...but I think he would take his duties way too seriously, sometimes. He could get tunnel-vision on bad days and it could make him blind to details he ought not to overlook..." The man shrugged slightly, "But that did not dampen his success. He was incredibly skilled and always endeavored to improve himself. His girlfriend was also a talented shinobi, and the two of them liked to share sealing jutsu and practice."

Naruto raised his eyebrows, "Is that the same girl you were talking about before?"

"The same one. They were committed for a long time, kind of like you and your princess."

"She must have been cool."

"Minato thought so. He had to convince her to go out without him because her initial opinion of him was a spineless, quiet boy: her words."

"She did *not* say that."

"Sure she did! She was a scrappy hot-head. He only ever cheered her on from the sidelines until he worked up the courage to tell her how he felt."

"I'm pretty lucky Hinata never gave me a hard time..."

"You can say that again. You have it much easier, in some ways." Jiraiya conceded, "But yes, my second time as a teacher went well. I was so proud to see Minato grow into a hero."

"We must have been lame in comparison." Naruto supposed.

"Hell no! Your team blows the others out of the water!" Jiraiya disagreed, "You just found me at my lowest: my students were gone, I was miserable and trying to get inspired to write...the last thing I wanted was a bunch of six-year-olds with obvious shinobi heritage to need my help."

"But we did need you."

"I knew I couldn't leave you there; the Third would have killed me." Jiraiya confessed, "Try to see it from my perspective...I was impressed and pissed off at the same time. I didn't want to go through it all over again...but a kid with a rare Kekkei Genkai and two jinchuriki! Who could walk away from that? Who could deny your future?"

"Some people might have tried to."

"Well I didn't want to be *that* asshole." Jiraiya affirmed, "I knew that once you were set up in Leaf you'd be fine...and I ran away again thinking I could escape...that I had done enough..."

"Nope."
"No. I was ordered back again, and for good reason. You three needed some serious fine-tuning...but even a few months into your genin careers, I knew even a jounin would have to be nuts to mess with your team."

Naruto chuckled while he thought about it, 'Yeah...Ero-sensei knew us since we were small. It was different from his other teams...he probably felt more responsible, even if that wasn't what he wanted.'

"So...what did you really think of us when you compared us to your other students?" Naruto wondered, "You said we were your favorite."

"The most diverse!" Jiraiya summed it up, "You three are my most diverse team. It's great. You guys really made me step out of my comfort zone...and made me feel hope after a long period of feeling hopeless."

Naruto smiled, "For real?"

"It's true. You were younger, more helpless kids. I didn't have the luxury of getting a group of preteens who had some knowledge or Academy training...you three were homeless pups." Jiraiya told him, "Your group had incredible potential even from that young age. I could see you were a mess, sure, but that's what made me like you. My other teams were enjoyable and spunky, but your group takes the cake."

The blonde boy was laughing, "Wait...are you saying...we made you love us?"

"So what if I am?" Jiraiya was a little defensive, "You made me feel that way like no other team could...that's the honest truth."

Naruto put his hands on his knees, grinning, "We're pretty fond of you too! I'll admit it, Haku always showed it, and even though Gaara didn't, I know that's how he feels. We're very grateful."

"I know, kid."

There were a few moments of thoughtful silence before Naruto spoke again, "That's why...I don't want to risk it anymore...hurting you or anyone else."

Jiraiya was confused, "What does that mean?"

"I'm never going to use Kyuubi chakra again." Naruto announced.

Even if it was uncomfortable Jiraiya attempted to sit up again. He was alarmed by his student's thought process, "Naruto, that's a rash decision."

"Well it's MY decision to make." Naruto asserted, and he stood up, "There are too many people who I don't want to lose."

"It's not impossible, Naruto, don't be intimidated! You can't just push aside everything Minato worked for-!"

"Never again."

Jiraiya told him to wait but the boy exited the room and quickly shut the door. He had no idea that their heartfelt exchange was Naruto's way of resolving his fear of harming others, 'Even if he believes he can avoid it...he can't forever.'
Two Days Later

Tsunade had concluded the last rounds of examinations with Katsuyu, checking each Star trainee for any remaining complications. Her effort combined with Sakura's had repaired most cellular damage and chronic illnesses the children suffered. The Hokage was trumpeting her success all through the village, and not a single soul was unaware of her accomplishment. Even the Academy students would interrupt Chunin instructor's lessons to inquire about their leader's endeavors.

Natsuhi, to show her unending gratitude, had wined and dined the Hokage several times. On the last night of the Star shinobi's stay the Hoshikage had a bit too much to drink, and consequently had to be returned to her room by her obviously embarrassed son. Tsunade had called her a pushover but fell asleep shortly afterwards. Shizune had begged fellow jounin to assist her in extricating Tsunade from the restaurant and bringing her home.

In the morning Tsunade whispered her thanks to Shizune while taking a seat at the desk in her office. She had a bag of ice tied to her head to relieve the epic headache. Natsuhi was in slightly better condition when she arrived. The final order of business was putting forth their expectations for an alliance.

Once again, Shizune acted as a liaison for the two hung-over women, walking back and forth between Tsunade's desk chair and Natsuhi's arm chair...where they were reclined and groaning. She made sure to orate what had been written down since, apparently, the village leaders were having trouble reading small text today.

"There's one more request I wanted to make, Natsuhi..." Tsunade added, fidgeting with the bag of ice, "I hope that you'll consider deterring the Akatsuki, whenever possible."

"You know that I will, Tsunade-sama."

"I just want you to be aware of why that organization is an issue; aside from the fact they attacked Kakashi's team." The Hokage continued, "Jiraiya and I understand that the Akatsuki are hunting for jinchuriki and extracting the biju within them, most likely in a bid for power over the Five Villages, or any village, for that matter."

"I...see."

"Naturally, Hoshigakure has little reason to be concerned with this yet, since your village has no jinchuriki at risk. I would understand if you refused to get involved, however the threat of the Akatsuki is sure to become an international danger in the future." Tsunade added, "It doesn't help that Kakashi confirmed their hostility towards any village that Leaf is allied with."

"Then I suppose we are involved already, in that case." Natsuhi decided, "Your village only has one jinchuriki."

"That's correct."

"It's Naruto, isn't it?"

Tsunade and Shizune balked, unable to believe her lucky guess.

Natsuhi smiled, "It's alright. He's amazingly strong for a shinobi his age. I just assumed that since Jiraiya-sama was looking after him...and how much he cared for his village...that maybe he was the jinchuriki."

"So long as you don't repeat that information then no harm can come of it." Tsunade agreed, "My,
my...you are astute, Natsuhi."

The auburn haired woman thanked her, smiling. Tsunade was not going to openly admit it, but she was getting a small girl-crush on Natsuhi. She didn't think that after hitting fifty years of age she would be able to make more friends, but Tsunade was pleasantly surprised it was possible. It was even more convenient that Natsuhi had no prejudice at all against jinchuriki, although Sakura had tried to explain to her it was because Star Village had a wealth of knowledge about the origins of ninja. When Sakura was spouting all of that nonsense...I really didn't follow it that well. It would provide an answer about where chakra and Ninjutsu come from...but until I really need to know something I am not going to ask.' Sakura had enough room in that brain of hers to log away such antiquated information.

"Please make note, Shizune; that I, Soramori Natsuhi, Fourth Hoshikage of the Star Village, do promise to unconditionally lend aid and protection to the Hokage and the Hidden Leaf Village." Natsuhi announced, "And may I please have a glass of water?"

Shizune stopped herself from nearly writing down the request. She sighed, setting the writing pad on Tsunade's desk and then turned to leave the office to get the water.

The Hokage added before she was out the door, "I need one too, Shizune..."

At about noon the women had finished establishing their alliance requirements. They had also gone through a lot of tea and water. Tsunade had promised to honor Natsuhi's wishes and protect the Star Village as well, because the Star had its hunters and they too posed a threat. Shizune dropped off the document to Homura Mitokado and Koharu's office, Tsunade's current advisors (Hiruzen's advisors before her), and she had a feeling they might hesitate to extend friendship to such a remote village. No matter. Tsunade would be more than happy to combat any criticism the council offered.

Outside the front entrance of the administration building, Tsunade and Natsuhi met with Sakura, Sumaru and Hokuto. The trio had been supervising the recuperated Star trainees, all of whom were horsing around and itching to begin the journey home. Even though Sato had been released a week early from the hospital he was still in no condition to take missions. He was permitted to return home so long as he refrained from heavy lifting and strenuous activity. He most certainly would not be flying anyone anywhere.

"That's fine," He told the Hokage, "Kakashi can do that kind of stuff for me!"

And so he had returned home yesterday and immediately invited his teammates over, Kurenai included, for a "thank-goodness-I'm-alive" party. Tama had baked a pie for the occasion.

With Sato indisposed, Tsunade had arranged a well-fortified squadron of jounin to guide the Star troop back to their village. 'Heaven forbid the Akatsuki are tracking our movements now, however unlikely, I just don't want to take the chance sending them without protection...' She had scrambled more patrols in response to the incident, yet no team had spotted hide nor hair of the offending nukenin organization. It really did seem as though it had been a freak encounter.

A short time later, Shizune, Gekko Hayate, Maito Gai and Inuzuka Tsume had reported to the courtyard to be introduced to Natsuhi and her shinobi. Once the large platoon set out and their goodbyes had been said, Tsunade had permitted Sakura to take the rest of the day off as a reward for her diligent work.

Sakura made a bee-line for the Hyuga estate to visit Hinata and ask how the party went.
The pink haired girl was surprised to find Hinata and Tenten on the porch of the house, carefree and chatting. Tenten waved hello to Sakura as she approached, "Hey Sakura, congratulations on your success! I heard you were pretty badass on that mission, saving everyone's life!"

It really bolstered Sakura's confidence to take such a compliment. Coming from Tenten, the kunoichi who had torn her to shreds in the previous Chunin Exam, it meant a lot.

"Thanks! I couldn't have done it without Hinata, though." Sakura replied, coming to stand beside her friends, "How are you ladies?"

"Very well!" Hinata chirped.

"Same here," Tenten agreed, "Hinata told me that another Chunin Exam is coming up! The only people I've told are Neji and Lee. They're looking forward to it, but I had to remind Lee not to tell Gai-sensei. I'm pretty sure he can restrain himself."

The girls happily conversed in the afternoon sunlight, updating each other on current events. Hinata was glad that the Star ninja were on their way home at last. She told Tenten and Sakura about the delightful get-together her team had attended the day before, celebrating Sato's homecoming. Kurenai had been truly relieved that her student had lived through the ordeal, and Hinata reported that Shino had reacted to the scare as well. He and Sato appeared to be much closer. "Shino-kun was at the hospital frequently checking on Sato-kun, last week." Hinata observed, "He even brought him coffee..."

"Wow. That's Sato's favorite thing, isn't it?" Sakura was amazed, "Kiba said that when boys do stuff like that for each other...it's because they are best-best friends."

Tenten snickered.

Hinata nodded, tapping her chin in thought, "I think it's true. Sato-kun can tell Shino-kun anything..."

"It's just funny that something that is perfectly acceptable behavior between girls has to be such a big deal for boys." Tenten pointed out, "Then again, Lee is into gift-giving too."

They all nodded together, coming to the same conclusion. Boys took friendship to a whole new level of significance.

They were interrupted by Neji when he came around the corner of the veranda. He locked his gaze onto his teammate before greeting her companions. Tenten bade her friends farewell before leaving to train with Neji, and Sakura had to fight back a grin as the two ambled off together, looking very comfortable indeed. Sakura sat down beside her friend, chuckling quietly.

Hanabi came out of a sliding door, visibly bored, and then took a seat on Hinata's opposite side. She was cramming the last of a sweet-bun into her mouth. Hinata patted her sister's back in a friendly greeting and the girl grunted in salutations. Sakura said hello even though she was not acknowledged in return.

"So...have they made any progress?" Sakura wondered aloud.

"Neji-niisan and Tenten-neesan?" Hinata verified.

"Yeah! I mean look at how they're walking...it's like he's thinking about grabbing her."

Hanabi nearly choked on her snack after listening to the statement.
Hinata considered it, "They have not done anything yet as far as I can tell...but I know they will."

"This is ridiculous! They need to date. " Sakura added, frustrated, "Why won't one of them just make a move?"

"They continue to hold back. Maybe they respect each other too much?"

"That's crap."

Hanabi leapt up, outraged, "What are the two of you talking about? Neji-niisan and his teammate? Together?" She huffed at the notion, "I should challenge her to a fight to defend the heir of the Hyuga clan!"

Sakura was laughing, finding the pipsqueak's reaction comical, "I really advise against challenging Tenten. And you know that Neji can defend himself, right?"

"On principal alone I should act."

"There is no cause for alarm." Hinata said calmly, "Please relax, Hanabi." She pulled her sister down again to sit. Hanabi complied in silence and then enjoyed another brief back-rub. Hinata had won.

In Sakura's opinion, Hinata's newly discovered ability to persuade her sister was a result of the stronger sense of trust they had. Hanabi was identifying her sister in a more motherly way, while still respecting her for her strength and wisdom. The girl was still a handful, but her relationship with her family was steadily improving.

"Do you feel like going out today, Hinata-chan?" Sakura asked, "Maybe Tama or Ino will do something with us..."

Before Hinata could give an answer a small, red toad appeared at the far end of the yard. It looked around curiously for a moment before hopping onward, approaching the group of girls.

Hanabi sighed dramatically, "Another one..." She stood up, spun around, and went back into the house to find more snacks.

The toad gave a short salute to both kunoichi, "Good afternoon! My name is Kosuke, coming with a message from Mount Myoboku via the Enshinsui. I need to find someone named Lady Hyuga Hinata."

"That's me." Hinata was smiling widely, "You must be new."

"Yes, this is the first time Naruto has sent me anywhere!" The toad was beaming, "It is nice to meet you, Hinata-sama! Please accept this!" He took a package and a scroll from his messenger bag and handed it to her. Sakura watched the exchange, highly amused.

The toad sat in the grass, intending to be patient with the recipient. Hinata found the small box intriguing and opened it first. Her stomach did a loop; a fantastic loop. Naruto had sent a gift and her brain had a hard time processing it. A beautiful, silver pendant gleamed up at her and Hinata's hands began to shake. It was thoughtful, it was sweet, and it was something she would have picked for herself: full points.

"What's that?" Sakura got a glimpse of the box and gasped, "Whoa! Jewelry! He is definitely on the right track..."

Hinata lifted up the chain, star-struck, and Sakura clapped her hands in excitement.
"Well give it here! Let me put it on you!" Sakura insisted.

Dazed, she passed it to her friend who deftly fitted it on her slim neck and hooked the clasp. Sakura took a look at the necklace and nodded in satisfaction.

"Naruto-kun..." Hinata felt like crying a little, feeling overwhelmed by the gesture. Even though he was far away and she had not seen him in a year, only he could boast to know her heart so well. She opened the scroll to read his message, taking a deep breath to calm down.

_I miss you so much. I wish I could explain it all right now, but all I can say is that I have been through some things that have really scared me lately. It's better now, but a day or two ago I was so ashamed and upset that I wasn't me anymore. It's very hard to be out here without you, Hinata. I definitely took being around you and the others for granted. When I come home that is going to change. I always want to be around you. I want to be right beside you._

Hinata looked up from the heartfelt words, blushing furiously. She needed a small break so that her heart was in no danger of exploding.

Sakura raised her eyebrows upon witnessing Hinata's reaction, "You're scarlet! What did he say?"

"I'll tell you shortly..." Hinata replied, struggling on with the note while her heart pattered frantically.

_I depend on you so much more than you know; more than I knew. You have always listened and understood me better than Haku and Gaara and I just never gave it much thought. Thank you. I need you more than ever to listen now. I'm not that good at sharing my feelings, but today I can't help but do it. It's been rough out here. It sucks being away from home and being away from you. I have gotten stronger, but if I could have done it my way I would have stayed in Leaf. Not a moment goes by that I don't want to run back to you. Even now I am tempted to do it. When I close my eyes I can see your face. I need to kiss you again._

Hinata began to gasp while she read. Her fragile disposition was colliding with this strange and new feeling of emotional and physical excitement. She was as red as a tomato. She feared she might faint.

Sakura was positively riled while watching her friend. She grabbed Hinata's shoulders and gave her a light shake, "What did he say Hinataaaa?"

Somehow she was able to compose herself again, and Hinata gently brushed her friend's hands off, "Please let me finish, I am nearly done..."

_You are the reason I came back to the village when I was a kid. You always made home feel like home. You're the best and no one can compare to you, Hinata. I hope you don't think I am totally pathetic for saying all of this, but I feel way better now that I got that off my chest. Please write back! The toads can get between us super-quick now! But I'll explain that another time. Be prepared to go on a date with me when I get back! I hope you like that necklace too, because I'd like you to wear it when we go out together! I promise I will talk to you again soon._

_Love,_

_Naruto_

Hinata was quivering once she had finished reading. It was all still sinking in. It was a magnificent feeling. Fed-up with waiting for Hinata to recover from her love-struck funk, Sakura snatched the scroll from her and ignored her peep of protest.

"Sakura-chan, no!" Hinata squealed, "Please don't!"
What? Is it dirty?

"N-No! Just heartfelt..."

"Take it easy." Sakura told her, opening the scroll to take a look, "I won't tell anyone if he's making marriage proposals already. We'll just keep it to ourselves."

Hinata gulped and then allowed Sakura to proceed. It wasn't really bad or suggestive, 'But Naruto was pouring all of his emotions out! Should I really let someone else see that?' Not to mention there was mounting desire that Naruto had also expressed, 'I am so happy he said that! I want the same things he does, but...’ She fiddled with the necklace and glanced at Sakura beside her who was reading, 'I hope Sakura doesn't tease me about it.'

Sakura quickly got through it and looked up with a grin when she had finished.

"Puberty." Sakura announced, "He's at a volatile stage. Brace yourself!"

Hinata had known she was going to get teased, but it did curb her embarrassment somewhat when Sakura wrapped an arm around her and laughed. Hinata pulled her sweatshirt's hood up over her head and pulled the drawstrings taut.

In an unassuming town in the southernmost reaches of the Fire Country, a tavern opened up to start a day of business. The first two customers to arrive were very odd, the waitress thought.

A tall, brutish-looking man and a tiny, cherubic boy walked in together, famished.

The waitress put on a welcoming smile and asked them to take a seat at the nearest booth. She took their orders, trying to ignore the swords fastened to the man's back.

"Excuse me, but do you have any curry here?" The boy asked politely, "I didn't see it on the menu."

His legs were so short they hung off the edge of his seat, far above the floor.

"I apologize, that would have to be made-to-order...and I don't think the chef has any ingredients to make curry today." The waitress was hoping the disappointment wouldn't tick off the shinobi, "Please tell me if there is anything else I can get you."

"Hm." The boy inspected the menu again, "This takoyaki looks good."

"Yeah, I'd recommend that. We make it fresh! How about it?"

"I'd like that, please!" The boy remained cheerful, "And some tea as well."

"Sure! And you sir?" She turned to the shinobi.

His arms were folded in disinterest, "Beef soba noodles."

"Of course! I'll be right out with your meals." She just about ran away into the kitchen, sweating. She could tell the difference between friendly, local shinobi and strangers who were often no-good rogues.

"Can we get dessert too, Raiga?" The boy asked.

"If you want to."

"I feel like I could eat a tableful of food..."
“It’s because you’re growing, Ranmaru.” Raiga informed him, “You definitely eat more than you used to…”

Ranmaru was grinning, very proud of how he was improving. After having consumed the Curry of Life he had been cured of rickets, which had left him sickly for most of his youth. To prevent a relapse of the disease he ate a wider range of food and played outdoors more often. He had bounced back better than Raiga could have ever imagined.

Raiga had showed signs of improvement as well after eating the famous curry; at least, his mood had improved drastically. He wasn’t obsessed with burying people alive anymore, and Ranmaru found that kicking that habit gave them a lot more free time.

They had been travelling south with the intent of reaching Ranmaru’s birthplace, where Raiga had found him. After that they wanted to explore the area a bit more before returning to the mainland.

A consequence of eating Sancho’s life-changing curry, however, had given Ranmaru a taste for the stuff. He was fond of anything and everything spicy, and whenever he could he would eat curry at every eatery they stopped in. Nothing compared to his favorite, but he was often happy with what he found.

Another result was that Ranmaru now possessed the strength to begin shinobi training. Tutoring Ranmaru was a more constructive outlet for Raiga’s energy, and he was a rather decent teacher. Raiga was thrilled with the incredible chakra control Ranmaru had, and the boy had easily picked up supplementary jutsu and proven he was clever with his substitution and trickery. Ranmaru was slowly but surely building muscle and increasing his speed. He was quick over short distances, but Raiga disliked that he still was not strong enough to flee further than a mile before getting winded.

Aside from his mysterious Kekkei Genkai, which Ranmaru spent some afternoons figuring out; he also had a natural talent for healing. Raiga was unable to help him develop either of those skills, but he encouraged him to do it on his own when they had time. Very soon he planned to begin teaching Ranmaru his Lightning Style techniques and make him a formal apprentice. One day, if Raiga trained the boy properly, he would inherit the Thunder and Lightning Fangs.

For now he was open-minded and attuned to Ranmaru’s needs. He knew it wasn’t doing Ranmaru any good to take things too fast, so he kept all lessons at a pace that did not leave the child gasping for breath.

So far their journey was very enjoyable. So was the food.

A few more customers came in and were seated. Shortly after that the waitress returned with their meals. Ranmaru tucked in hungrily to the doughy octopus balls. He and Raiga ate in ravenous silence, quickly moving towards a second helping. They were able to overhear the patrons at the table beside them, who had some choice words about the Hokage.

“That woman shouldn’t be so outspoken! Sure she healed some sick kids, but she has a mountain of gambling debt she hasn’t paid back! She’s crazy. People are going to track her down.”

“And what are they gonna do? Threaten her? She is the Hokage.”

“It’s absurd! A woman like that becoming a village leader…”

“Hey don’t forget,” His friend said, wagging his chopsticks, “She IS a legendary ninja. She might be crazy, but you’d have to be even crazier to cross her. She has her vices but I don’t think it’s absurd. Tsunade is a descendant of the Senju.”
“Yeah, I guess you’re right.” The man relented, “It’s just since she had a winning streak at my gambling house all of my luck is gone. I never win anymore.”

“Then maybe you ought to quit gambling, dumbass.”

Ranmaru bounced excitedly in his seat, “That’s right! We’re close to the Hidden Leaf Village aren’t we?”

“Closer than I want to be…”

“Can I become a Leaf ninja someday, Raiga?”

Raiga’s look of shock halted Ranmaru’s question. He slurped down a mouthful of noodles before answering, “You don’t need to be affiliated with a village to be a successful shinobi.”

“But I want to have a home and comrades who depend on me.”

“No, that’s stupid.” Raiga shot it down, “I had comrades once but it didn’t last long. People are selfish idiots.”

“Those Leaf ninja who helped me are my friends.” Ranmaru countered, “That is why I think I would like belonging to that village. They helped you too, Raiga.”

“You helped me, not them.” Raiga disagreed, “Don’t go getting obsessed with serving a village. In the end it just burns you. If you want an honest opinion, Ranmaru, they would only care about your abilities, not you.”

“Oh.” The boy’s chin dropped, “Is that what it was like in the Mist Village?”

“It’s still like that in Mist. I don’t see why Leaf would be any better.”

They continued to eat and Raiga ordered a plate of grilled fish he could share with Ranmaru. Ranmaru had some time to think about the rejection of his idea. Perhaps now was a better time for travel. Eventually, Ranmaru thought, he could find a way to persuade Raiga to go along with his wishes. He had a lot more training ahead of him before he could call himself a competent ninja anyway. Leaf might appreciate a capable shinobi more than a pint-sized trainee who just learned how to walk again.

Once they had stuffed themselves and indulged in pineapple sorbet, the tavern’s specialty treat, they proceeded to waddle down the road.

“Maybe on our way back we can visit Konohagakure?” Ranmaru wondered.

“Enough already. I don’t want you to get attached to that place.” Raiga scolded him, “No one would accept us there.”

“I think they might.”

“At least you, they would. I’m a criminal and they would rather jail me than task me with a mission.”

“I suppose that’s true…” Ranmaru agreed dolefully.

“One day after my funeral you will inherit my swords.” Raiga told him, “And you will make a much better swordsman than me.”

The boy was excited by the prospect, “You think so? I just hope I get taller…”
“It doesn’t matter if you do or don’t. Ameyuri Ringo was short and she was a master of these blades.”

That was music to Ranmaru’s ears.

The day had finally arrived for Gaara to swear in and pledge himself to Sand as the new Kazekage. He had some slight anxiety about it, but he had more or less resolved his hesitations. Although none of his friends from Leaf would be in attendance (since it had been a secret matter, mostly) it felt good to know that his siblings and student would clap for him front and center.

Kankuro was more nervous than he was.

“That’s the outfit Temari put out for you, right?”

“It is.” Gaara assured him, adjusting his sleeves. It was long-sleeved and black, as always. Temari said that he looked like a real man in it, but she had expressed her dislike of the white ceremonial robe he was told to wear over it. It just chipped away at the “cool factor”.

“Okay and you brushed your teeth…”

Gaara gave his brother an annoyed look, “Yes.”

“You bathed too?”

Gaara shook his head in disapproval, tired of the flighty behavior, “Kankuro…you need to calm down.”

“Well fine! But you put deodorant on too?”

“Shut up.”

“It’s going to matter when you get up there, you’ll see! Everyone is going to be watching you and then you’ll just start…” Kankuro gestured at Gaara’s face, “Perspiring. All over.”

Gaara turned and exited the main door of the mansion. Too bad Temari had not stayed behind for his pep talk; her nerves of steel would have come in handy. Instead she had gone ahead to save seats at the ceremony and pick up Matsuri so she would not be mobbed by younger, admiring trainees.

Kankuro walked beside Gaara down the road and managed to keep it together. Gaara was trying to purge his brain of any thoughts that may distract him during the ceremony, but he could not stop thinking about Naruto and Haku.

‘They should be here. I want them to be.’ He also knew they would have come if they had the ability, and also that the timing was quite bad, ‘While I was in Leaf I never thought about something like this happening. Naruto has always wanted to be Hokage, but I just wanted…’

He could see a crowd gathering in the plaza ahead.

‘I just wanted to be someone respectable. I wanted to become a jounin and then I didn’t care what else I did. I wanted to serve and be trusted by others.’ He wanted to be liked, even if he made it difficult for people to do sometimes, ‘Being a Leaf shinobi would have been most satisfying. Sand is my home, but…I want different things now. I want things now that I won’t be allowed to have while I am here.’

His thoughts were racing as they took a back entrance into a small building that was attached to an
observation deck. The platform would overlook all of the villagers gathered below. Kankuro motioned for him to go up the stairs first.

‘Naruto and Haku are probably as strong as I am.’ Gaara thought, ‘I don’t really know if I am as strong as any other village’s Kage. It turns out that this position has very little to do with that.’ He had finally come to understand that it had a bit more to do with political matters and what was best for the village.

What it had boiled down to, Temari had once told him, was that Hidden Sand desperately needed a dependable leader. If a shinobi was wise, experienced and had some degree of strength he or she had to be considered. Though young, Gaara had been an obvious choice.

Once on the platform, Gaara could see a small group of councilors standing in the hot sun. He felt a little bit of anxiety that manifested as heartburn. He stifled a painful burp.

He and Kankuro crossed over to the robed elderly folk in charge of the proceedings. They were greeted formally and then Kankuro stepped aside to stand by Baki near the railing.

Soi Masateru, the oldest prune-of-a-councilor present, addressed Gaara.

“Gaara of the Sand…we are all so very pleased that you have accepted the title of Kazekage. However, before we continue, this is the most appropriate time for any objections to be made.” The man cleared his throat, “Is there anyone here who would speak out against this nominee?”

A silence washed over all gathered. Some hushed sounds of agitation came from the crowd when a man approached the platform and ascended the stairs. Masateru had not noticed the individual (his eyesight was shot) and so another village elder by the name of Chiyo slapped his arm, directing his attention to the stairwell.

“There’s your objector.” The kunoichi grumbled, “Did you plan at all for someone to challenge this young man?”

“No, actually.” He was contrite.

Chiyo groused, “This is going to mess everything up, you damned fool. I warned you to prepare for anything!”

“Please, Chiyo-sama…this so rarely happens.”

“I’ll never have time for a nap today…I’ll be behind schedule…”

Their whispered exchange was embarrassing Kankuro, who stood beside an equally mortified Baki.

Gaara stood patiently, not very surprised that at least one person was not happy with him as the selection. The man who arrived on the platform was, as expected, a veteran jounin. He looked to be somewhere in his forties; fit, handsome, and aging well. His eyes were narrowed angrily.

Another councilor spoke, announcing the shinobi, “This is Shigenori. He is a cousin of the Heroine of Hidden Sand, Pakura. He and his son are the last wielders of the Shakuton blood limit.”

“Oh, yes, but I thought I already spoke to you some months ago, Shigenori.” Masateru was surprised, “I was under the impression you were not interested in becoming the Kazekage.”

“Initially I wasn’t…” Shigenori admitted, “But to see you bring a child up here…a jinchuriki who is supposed to be a weapon for our village! This is utter foolishness! How could you even think that
“This boy is going to aid our village in any way?”

“He is stronger than all of us.” Chiyo spoke up, “He is wise for someone his age…and he also has better self-control than many can boast.”

“He was a Leaf shinobi.” Shigenori asserted, “He doesn’t care about Sand! He’s probably just waiting for his chance to kill us all!”

“I have a name, you know.” Gaara pointed out innocuously. So far he had not taken offense to any of the impersonal talk or idiotic accusations. He was tuning it out.

Masateru disagreed, “Gaara was kept in Hidden Leaf by the Third Hokage. Some claim it was for his safety and some claim it was for military gain…but no matter what the reason, he was well trained by the Toad Sage and prospered. He obviously still has love for Sunagakure; otherwise he never would have left Konoha, the place he called home. He is a very worthy choice, in the council’s opinion.”

“He also doesn’t whine or complain like the rest of you.” Chiyo added.

“This jinchuriki-!”

“Gaara.” Gaara reminded him.

“Gaara is not trustworthy!” Shigenori insisted, “His own father tried to get rid of him! He even turned on Leaf and attacked during the Chunin Exam!”

“Orochimaru orchestrated the entire invasion of Leaf.” Chiyo deadpanned, “Gaara was a victim.”

Shigenori looked incredulously at the elders of the council, “You can’t actually be serious about this?”

“Why did you wait until the last minute to be outraged so? It was common knowledge for weeks.” Chiyo countered, “We may be old, and I may like to joke around, but this village needs leadership and we will not make phony decisions.”

“If that is so…then I challenge this nominee!” Shigenori declared, “Should I defeat him, I will accept the position of Kazekage.”

The elders looked ticked off but could not deny the right of an eligible shinobi. Kankuro was steaming mad as he watched the ignorant posturing, but was simultaneously delighted to see Gaara did not give much of a shit about what this jounin had to say. ‘He’s obviously an idiot.’

“Very well then,” Masateru looked to Gaara, “Will you accept this challenge or forfeit?”

“I accept it.”

The old man grumbled but then continued, “Let me outline the rules of a title-duel. This particular battle may be observed by villagers as it has never been, in the tradition of Suna, a private matter. You will face each other at the Buddha statue. Spectators may not be approached or harmed in any way, which would result in disqualification and punishment,” He cleared his throat, “You may forfeit at any time. You may kill your opponent without penalty. You may use any technique, forbidden or otherwise, provided that it complies with the spectator-stipulation.”

Gaara was surprised that he was given permission to kill his opponent. He had never needed permission for it before, but these days he was growing more and more accustomed to having
restraint. Why be excessive if he was going to win anyway?

“If you are unconscious for ten or more seconds you will forfeit the duel. If you are unable to continue fighting because of physical impairment you will forfeit the duel. You may show mercy to the opponent and still be judged the winner.” Masateru concluded, “The council’s determinations are final and the council will declare the winner based on fair judgment. Do you have any questions?”

Neither opponent was unclear on the rules. It was common-sense stuff.

“Well then, please proceed to the statue.” The old man told them. He then asked another elder to make the announcement that a challenge had been made and that spectators were permitted.

Shigenori stormed off after the exchange and Gaara gravitated back towards Baki and Kankuro. Just in case, it might be good to have some parting words before a potentially fatal battle.

“What an asshole…making a scene like that…” Kankuro growled, “How the hell could he be surprised? The council is not going to pick a candidate and then say just kidding!”

“Not everyone in this village is open-minded enough to accept it.” Gaara replied, fully aware of what the problem was.

“A word of caution to you, before you face Shigenori…” Baki said in a low voice, “He is very powerful. He is not famous like Pakura was…but there is a reason he is respected in Suna. He has mastered his fusion-type blood limit.”

“Haku has a Kekkei Genkai like that.” Gaara was catching on, “What is the Shakuton?”

“It combines Wind and Fire elements for some very nasty jutsu. I’ve seen people boil in their skin and die by getting too close to him.” Baki warned, “He will freely control fire orbs, most likely, and be able to attack you, near or far. His specialties are Taijutsu and Ninjutsu. I suggest you bide your time and stay on the defensive until he reveals a weakness…and you’ll probably need to kill him to stop him.”

Gaara was silent. He was unsure if he wanted to kill anyone today. He had overheard that this man had a son, and he did not want to incite the boy’s hatred by killing his father over a title.

“He will not show you mercy. He does not view you as a trustworthy person.” Baki added, “Be careful, Gaara.”

“Do what you have to do.” Kankuro told his brother solemnly, “This is your day, not his. Don’t feel sorry for him.”

The crowd below was beginning to get rowdy after the announcement. A good portion of villagers were moving on to the Buddha-statue battleground. Baki and Kankuro followed the slow-moving elders to the next site and Gaara took off on his own

‘Kankuro said that I should not feel sorry for this man…’ He thought, ‘But I do. His ignorance may cost him his life today. It may cost me mine. I don’t want to be the Kazekage that his son will hate for the rest of his days.’

Gaara was mentally forcing himself to push this moral dilemma aside. After all, Shigenori was asking for it. He had to keep a level head if he was going to prevail. ‘I will fight defensively as Baki advised. That’s the only smart way to handle an opponent I know almost nothing about.’

He did start to get butterflies in his stomach when he spotted Temari and Matsuri joining Kankuro on
Gaara held his head high when he came to a stop in front of the giant, sunken effigy of the Buddha. Shigenori was already there waiting, looking as hostile as ever. Gaara half-expected Masateru to make another announcement to spectators when he raised his hand, but the elder only said, “Begin.”

Thank goodness his sand shield was prompt, because Shigenori charged without hesitation. Gaara was subconsciously adding a thicker layer of sand to his body’s sand-armor. His shield was stopping some impressive close-combat assaults that, by Gaara’s estimate, were a bit shy of Maito Gai’s strength. He was just not quick enough to get past Gaara’s defense.

The moment a fire-orb manifested beside Shigenori, Gaara retreated. He could feel the air around him heating up to a sickening temperature. Another orb appeared, circling around Shigenori as he pursued Gaara past the statue. Gaara hoped that he could avoid that body-boiling issue that Baki had mentioned.

He countered effectively with bolts of sand, trying not to engage offensively. When an orb of fire shot out and connected with his sand, even with his impeccable protection, Gaara felt his skin pucker. They danced around each other for a few decisive minutes, sizing each other up. Gaara fortified a large sand dome that was thick enough, by his estimations, to stop those pesky will-o-the-wisps.

Shigenori had forgone taijutsu entirely, realizing that Gaara was not going to get hit. He had been too meticulous with his defense. Instead, Shigenori elected to use one of his most powerful jutsu. The orbs he had created came together and he then released the concentrated ball of elemental chakra over Gaara’s dome, “Incinerating Flare jutsu!”

It took about half a second for Gaara to realize his sand was changing state. During the explosion his sand was superheated into glass, making it essentially useless. Gaara fled and replaced himself with a shadow clone while still obscured by smoke and steam. The shadow clone ran in the opposite direction and distracted Shigenori, going on the offensive with sand. Shigenori took the bait and began harassing the clone with intense Fire techniques.

Tucked away behind the back of the Buddha, Gaara took a moment to think about his predicament. He could hear Shigenori roaring as he attempted to incinerate the doppelganger.

‘There is no way I will come out of this unscathed unless I stop him from using his Ninjutsu…’ Gaara conceded, ‘It didn’t take much to melt my shield…and we cannot get too close to each other or we risk being killed immediately.’ They were two bona-fide death-traps. It was just a matter of who could strike first.

His problem solving skills kicked in and he began to hatch a plan, ‘Flames burn in the presence of oxygen. If there is none around, that technique of his won’t work.’ It was going to take some serious effort to smother Shigenori, but Gaara guessed the element of surprise would help. He created two more shadow clones to help him coordinate.

Shigenori was still preoccupied with ransacking the area in an effort to toast the shadow clone. When the shadow clone dissolved at Gaara’s command, a classy screw-you gesture, Shigenori rounded on the real Gaara with a flaming howl. He and his shadow clones synced their sand techniques and folded a tsunami of sand over the man and his flame orbs.

It appeared to have worked and Kankuro wooped happily from his perch. A hole was punched through the sand with a fiery torpedo and Shigenori rocketed out. He took a swing at Gaara and after the boy dodged him Shigenori superheated the sand protecting him. It only destroyed a shadow
clone, but Gaara was dreading when Shigenori would guess correctly and discover him among his replications.

Gaara could hear his brother’s distant voice, *Aw shit!*

Shigenori had been hatching a plan as well. He had heated much of the sand in the area to form glass, knowing Gaara could not manipulate it. He was doing his best to deprive his opponent of resources, which was not far from Gaara’s own strategy. Another incineration-ball came too close for comfort. Gaara was able to evade and was not shy about drawing on Shukaku’s chakra. It bolstered his energy-reserves, making him faster and lighter on his feet.

After the blast, Gaara snuck some blood and hand seals to form a summoning matrix on the ground. He then tried to feign stress so Shigenori would pursue him. He stumbled around as if injured and, once again, the man took the bait. Shigenori rushed for him confidently and ran over the top of Dosojin’s hidden head. He was completely blind-sided when the gargantuan scorpion shimmied up from beneath the desert surface. With a hefty pincer, the summon creature flipped Shigenori like a pancake.

Shigenori hit the ground, gasping in shock, and Gaara’s sand swarmed at the opportunity. Shukaku’s additional chakra allowed Gaara to condense a tight and super-dense sand dome around his opponent. Shigenori had not acted quickly enough burn through it. With his air-supply depleted he was unable to use any Shakuton Ninjutsu to free himself. Silence filled the next few seconds.

Gaara let the sand make full contact with Shigenori in an attempt to choke him out. He could hear the biju demanding that he crush his competitor, but Gaara was surprised that this time the demon’s influence was not as oppressive as it used to be. He resisted it successfully.

“Was he bothering you, Gaara?” The scorpion boss asked.

“Not really. We’re in the middle of a contest.”

“Oh. Have you won yet?” Dosojin was curious.

“I think I have.” Gaara was starting to feel smug.

He released his grip on Shigenori and his sand withdrew. The man was unconscious. One of the elders shouted down from their observation spot, “Is he down?”

Gaara nodded. Chiyo descended, rolling up her sleeves, “Now it’s time for my official duty: corpse check.”

She kneeled down and checked for a pulse. She found one. The old woman stood and then dusted her hands, “This fellow is probably not going to be up in ten seconds. Well, I’ll start a count now.” Chiyo closed her eyes and began to count.

Gaara had not been keeping track himself, but he was quite sure that more than thirty seconds had passed. Chiyo had still not called the duel. He came to stand beside her, concerned, ‘*Did she just…* die?’

There was no other explanation. She was so still and silent that it looked as if the octogenarian had bit the big one on her feet. Curious, he poked her shoulder.

Gaara jumped in surprise when she awoke instantly, batting her lips together, “Oh I am parched…”

“Chiyo-sama…”
“Yes?”

“Shigenori…”

“Oh.” She glanced down at the unconscious man and then looked back to Gaara, “You’ve won.”

He sighed, a little embarrassed and also relieved. Chiyo asked him to wait a moment so she could go report it to the other council members, “And I promise I won’t fall asleep again.” She laughed hysterically as she returned to the observation ledge.

“You’ve won the contest.” Dosojin pointed out, “Congratulations.”

Gaara chuckled after listening to the sincere and naïve words, “Thank you. This means that I am the Kazekage now.”

“Oh! That is something that doesn’t happen every day.” The scorpion told him, “I am glad I could drop by for this occasion.”

“So am I.”

Dosojin bid him farewell before departing in a mammoth cloud of smoke. A raucous of excited shouting erupted amongst the council members and then it spread like wildfire to the villagers. Gaara quailed, hearing the deafening cheers that were all for him. He could see his siblings and student hollering, much like he had expected them to.

And though Shigenori did not deserve any semblance of sportsmanship, Gaara lifted the man and leaned him on his shoulder. His son might appreciate him being returned in one piece.

After the duel no other challengers came forward. In fact, everyone seemed to approve as Gaara donned his stupid, white ceremonial-robe in the village square and was sworn in by the council. He didn’t think the hat fit properly and Chiyo muttered to him that they would get it resized within the week, “You don’t need to wear it much, thank goodness.”

He gave a short speech about how he wished to put the village first, honor comrades and risk his life for his responsibilities. Although Gaara felt he had bumbled over his words (he was most nervous about public speaking) he was met with incredible fanfare.

When the main event had ended Gaara did not get the chance to speak to his apprentice. Matsuri had been swept up by a wave of screaming, enthusiastic Academy students who needed to know what Gaara’s tutelage was like. He hoped she would forgive him later for being the cause of her harassment.

Temari and Kankuro had whisked Gaara away to a restaurant, in the darkest most private corner the establishment could provide. They ate in relative peace, but the owner had insisted that the new Kazekage and his family eat for free.

“That was awesome.” Temari decided, picking bones out of her filet of mackerel.

“Yeah.” Kankuro agreed, still a bit dazed by it all.

Gaara was inhaling his food. His frayed nerves had given him a bit of an appetite.

“I was starting to think you were growing up too fast, but maybe you have just been adapting for this role, Gaara.” Temari speculated, “You truly deserve it. I don’t think I’ve ever been prouder. You did
“Thank you.” He said, losing a few grains of rice when he spoke.

They munched contentedly, managing to keep a low profile. While Gaara was topping off three platefuls of the daily special with a cup of tea the euphoria began to fade. He’d had a rather tame yet gratifying victory. He sorely wished his best friends could have witnessed it.

He also acknowledged that his position in Sand meant that he would never again join them as a team in Leaf. Of course they would forgive him and even be happy for him, but it still did not feel completely right. Gaara intended to do everything within his power to be in frequent contact with Naruto and Haku. He got the feeling he was going to need their support more than ever.

The next stop was the administrative building where Baki guided Gaara to a dusty office. Baki pointed to a tall stack of documents on the desk, “That’s about a day’s worth of paperwork mixed in with forms and liability releases you need to sign. I know you’ll enjoy it.”

“What a glamorous job…” Gaara muttered.

“But before you look at any of that, here,” Baki handed him a scroll, “This arrived a little while ago.”

Gaara peeked open the beginning of the scroll and saw it was addressed to him and sent by Tsunade. “This is from the Hokage.”

“She’s a peer of yours, now.” Baki said it with great amusement, “Read that first and if you need anything feel free to send for me.”

“I will. Thank you.”

Once Baki exited the office Gaara continued to stand as he read the message.

*Congratulations, Gaara, on becoming a village leader.*

*I have never doubted that any of Jiraiya’s students would become top-notch ninja. I am proud but I cannot take any credit for your success. That was entirely your endeavor. Sakura is happy for you as well and will soon gain her own bit of fame here, so please treat her well. There is one last thing you ought to keep in mind: I have reason to believe that Uchiha Sasuke may take time out of his busy schedule to assassinate you. The gist of it is that he recently learned of your relationship with his former teammate and did not take kindly to the news.*

*Be on your guard. As you know, I would prefer if he returned to Leaf alive, but should you encounter him and have absolutely no other option, I will not condemn you for killing him in an act of self-preservation. Again, you have my sincerest congratulations. You’ll be hearing again from me soon.*

*Tsunade, Fifth Hokage*

Just when he thought things were going to smooth over.

Gaara closed the scroll and then pulled off the ceremonial-robe. He crossed over to the desk and mopped the dust up with the garment before tossing it on the floor. Some spare scrolls and ink were in the top drawer and he retrieved them before sitting down.

He had some letter writing to do.
Obito's Dream

Chapter Soundtrack: “Opus” by Ryuichi Sakamoto

Tobi was unusually downcast today, Orochimaru thought. When he had pointed out that his clownish spy was not his normal, hyperactive self, Tobi had attributed it to a cold that he was recovering from. He had run out of energy, but had just enough left to relay some very sensitive information to Orochimaru.

They had met in a room in Orochimaru’s underground hideout, standing in the flickering shadows cast by torchlight. Orochimaru had dismissed Sasuke and Koinyu, both of whom had become curious about intelligence that Tobi provided with each visit. Orochimaru often did not mind allowing the two to stay connected to the outside world in this manner, but today was different. He knew that this report was going to be rife with details he did not want his subordinates to hear.

“How many were present?” The snake sennin asked.

“Everyone.” Tobi told him, “All of the Akatsuki gathered.”

“Including you.” Orochimaru snarked at the thought, “And what was it that they needed to discuss at such a meeting?”

Tobi paused. He took a seat at a long committee table and sighed.

Orochimaru continued to stand, waiting for an answer.

“A team from Leaf clashed with Leader.” Tobi divulged, “It was kind of an accident.”

“An accident?”

“Well, from what was said, I guess the Leaf team was returning from the Land of Bears…so they wanted to take a shortcut through Rain territories.” Tobi tapped his finger in a line on the table, indicating a linear route, “Like that! Pein-sama said that he and his partner were on the trail of an important jinchuriki, but lost track of it on an island. When they were returning to HQ afterwards, they noticed intruders…so they waited. Pein waited to see who was getting so close…and it was those stupid Leaf ninja!”

“Just passing through…careless. As careless as they have always been.” Orochimaru muttered.

“Yeah! And they put up a fight but still got punished.” Tobi added, “Pein-sama said that Leaf and Star working together will be a problem…so there is now a side-project to snuff them out.”

“Hoshi ninja have to be complete fools to cross the Akatsuki. They’ll be wiped out faster than they can blink.”

“That’s what everyone is saying…”

“Tell me who the unfortunate Leaf shinobi were that encountered Pein.” Orochimaru pressed on.

“Uh.” Tobi paused again, swallowing.

“Well?”

“Hatake…Kakashi.”
Orochimaru looked mildly surprised, “Is he alive?”

Tobi hesitated, “I…I think so.”

“And his subordinates?”

“One of the genin with him did not make it.” Tobi reported, “There were two kunoichi who gave Konan problems. Pein said one of them, the little Hyuga, was troublesome. He wants her gone too.”

“A little Hyuga…” Orochimaru considered it, referring back to his knowledge of Leaf’s clans, “That must be the princess. There are rumors that her eyes have grown quite powerful.” He licked his lips, “I may find the time to make her into a new pet-project… but if she continues to sidetrack Pein, then that will take a lot of attention off of me. Very serendipitous.”

“You don’t want them to lavish you with attention, Orochimaru-sama?” Tobi asked stupidly.

“No, you twit. I can get so much more done when I am not under scrutiny.” Orochimaru replied, “This is quite an opportunity for me, in fact. With Leaf and the Akatsuki distracted with one another, it will remove two great thorns from my side.”

“Oh yeah! It’s a spectacle to behold! We should watch it and kick back with some popcorn…”

Orochimaru frowned at him. That bumbling-fool energy was coming back.

“Is there anything else of consequence I ought to know? What is the Akatsuki’s next move?”

“When the Akatsuki is still monitoring the movements of uncaptured jinchuriki, we still can’t do a thing with them yet. In another year or so the organization will continue with extractions.” Tobi added, “We were all told that if Leaf or Star crosses us again we should terminate them immediately. I guess we’re not picking the fights, but we were ordered to finish them! Only Leader can pick fights.”

“Because part of being a leader is one’s ability to wisely choose battles.” Orochimaru agreed, “It’s one of my specialties.”

When Tobi proceeded to drivel on about who he wanted to make friends with most in the organization, Orochimaru coldly dismissed him. He had heard what he wanted to hear. The snake sennin had a full plate of his own to contend with, and subtracting Konoha and the Akatsuki from it for a time would be beneficial. Koinyu’s attempt to beguile Haku with an entrapment seal had failed. Sasuke had cavorted with a former teammate and engaged Cloud ninja too recklessly. There were a few diatribes that needed to happen.

And so Tobi was dismissed on the condition that he return in two months with an update. The masked man bounced out of the room, beyond Orochimaru’s sight, and then his brief surge of energy left him. He proceeded down a long corridor with slumped shoulders.

It was hard for Obito to accept what his old teammate was going through. It was even worse that he had to learn of it from the enemy’s perspective, the Akatsuki leader known as Pein.

He had been shocked when he was ordered to attend a meeting a few days earlier. Zetsu had informed him that, as a spy, Tobi was every bit as responsible of monitoring the organization’s enemies as a full member was. And so, for the first time, he stood amongst some of the most feared and high-ranking criminals in the shinobi world, gathered at the headquarters.
Jiraiya had warned him that he would find Itachi in the Akatsuki’s ranks, but it still turned Obito’s stomach to finally see the young man there in the flesh. He remembered Itachi as a young, talented and warm-hearted boy. At the meeting, it seemed to Obito that Itachi had become a total stranger. His silence and critical gaze were unnerving.

He had been introduced to Kisame and Zetsu before, as well as Deidara and Sasori. Obito had not, however, had the great displeasure of being introduced to Hidan and Kakuzu, another pair of merciless outlaws. They had given him the up and down with great distaste before Hidan had told him to go fuck himself.

It was more or less what Obito had expected.

Pein and Konan had terrified him. It was the first time he had ever seen them. They were veterans among the group, as well as the Akatsuki’s founders. They dwelled in the Hidden Rain Village and rarely ventured out of their headquarters. Typically, if the leader had anything at all to report, they usually communicated by way of a hologram-jutsu. Today he had appeared in person to impress upon other members how he absolutely would not allow any village to raise a finger against them.

When he explained how he had taken it upon himself to trample a team from Leaf to set an example, group members were impressed and pleased. The Leaf team had been called “stupid, worthless, weak and vulnerable” and some other unfair words by the most vocal Akatsuki members. Just when Obito thought his blood pressure could not go any higher, Pein reported the unthinkable.

“The Copy Ninja had a younger Hatake with him.” The leader had said, “I killed that boy and he surrendered.”

Obito wanted to scream. His mind raced upon hearing those words and he was driven to distraction. Somehow he had not made a scene it front of anyone, and before the meeting was adjourned, the leader told Itachi to stay behind so he could ask him about the Byakugan. Obito could barely contain his outrage as he left the Rain HQ without parting words to other members.

‘At some point Kakashi must have had a child.’ Obito thought, ‘And that’s something special. Kakashi always struggled to be close to others…so I know that must have meant a lot to him. They were on a mission together and then they…’

His hands clenched and his chest ached. Just like that, Pein had punished Leaf by punishing Kakashi. There was no stopping it, Obito was sure, and he could only imagine how devastated his friend was. He did, on a very real level, empathize with his teammate. Obito would beg for any torture, any conceivable kind of hurt other than losing his own son.

By the time he had passed through the Land of Rain, Obito had to remove his mask for air. He was short of breath and his face was stained with tears. A secluded patch of forest with a dilapidated shrine appeared to be a safe place to stop. Obito rested on the crumbling stone steps of the abandoned holy place and allowed himself to cry.

‘I really am no different than when I was a kid.’ He thought, wondering what kind of grown man wept like this, ‘But I can’t…I can’t believe this happened. If anything ever happened to Rin or Yuma I’d be so lost. I’d become something horrible. Now Kakashi has to go through it...’

He was grateful that his family was safe. There was nothing in the world he would ask for beyond that. Yet Kakashi’s suffering was more than he could stand, and it did trouble Obito to think of what difference he could have made if he had decided to return to Leaf. The chance had come and gone, long ago, back when Rin had suggested it at their reunion. He had been too afraid to say yes. As time passed he became more receptive to the idea while his wife became less receptive.
He and Rin had squabbled about it numerous times. Rin argued that their family was much better off being separate from village matters. Obito cited that Yuma’s Kekkei Genkai was reason enough to return and associate him with the Uchiha clan. When they grew tired of screaming at each other, Obito always let it fall to the wayside. Their absence had not hurt anyone, Rin said.

But they both knew that Kakashi languished. He had not been a popular talking-point, and certainly not the reason they should go back. After all, Obito thought to himself, Kakashi would probably wring his neck if they met again. He had survived, grown, married Rin and started a family…without contacting Kakashi. The man had every reason to get upset with him if he found all that out.

‘But I could’ve helped him. Rin and I could have helped him…’ His overly emotional brain insisted, ‘We weren’t there for him all this time. Our place is in Konoha but we have been too cowardly to show our faces there.’

He wished to return to Leaf, hoping against hope that he would be able to escape the Akatsuki alive. If he could clear every hurdle in the way, he and his family would be happily welcomed back to the village. A normal life in Leaf might be worth the risk, in his opinion, but his better half would likely not feel the same way.

Obito continued on, mask-less, returning home while remembering how his life with Rin began.

A few months after Obito had received his new eye, Rin and Sesshu had settled comfortably in the mountaintop town of Shincha with him. As repayment for staying in Obito’s house, Rin had been helping with home repairs. It had been a while since it had seen the care it deserved.

Obito had not known much about plumbing or refacing surfaces before undertaking the project. Rin had told him that the pipe that had exploded (while doing bathroom repairs) wasn’t the end of the world. They shut the water off and took an entire day to rework pipes and materials…and mop the floor. A few times they needed to consult with professionals in town about how to replace parts, woodwork and general repair.

In time they had become experts in patchwork-fixes. The outside of the house was looking magazine-worthy, but inside there were areas held together by tape and gum, painted over, of course. It was progress.

Rin’s gardening had turned the property into a paradise. Her only complaint was the invasion of deer that had the guts to nibble on her shrubs at night. She had given her ninken the official duty of pest-control once she had purchased and transplanted more expensive perennial flowers.

Their talents were put to use in town as well. They were able to help a few families with home repairs and maintenance, and Rin loved sharing her gardening expertise. Char was more than happy to task her with the care of his expansive, private garden since; apparently, she knew what she was doing. He was just too old to care for it anyhow.

Rin had also learned, while chatting with Obito during upkeep, about the organization he worked for. She was alarmed to hear about what the Akatsuki’s motives were, but she was glad he was not very involved in their affairs. He ran errands, sent messages, spied, and generally tied loose ends. They would not trust him with anything serious for the money they paid him. They knew him as Tobi; the stupid, one-eyed henchman.

As a result, Obito had gone to work in Char’s convenience store part-time to generate more income. It wasn’t much, but he was able to get by and spend his time how he saw fit.
Rin was able to make money on the side by doing house-calls and traveling around to care for patients. It was a good way to afford the building materials on their checklist.

It was a simple existence and far away from shinobi concerns, in Rin’s opinion.

She was also very pleased that Obito was enjoying two-eyed sight. The eye’s donor, Urabe, had passed away weeks after the procedure. He had been at peace and went painlessly in his sleep, but Rin was sure she would never forget the young man’s generosity and kindness.

Obito had become less shy about making eye contact with her since the transplant. He trained his new eye up successfully. He held her gaze confidently and no longer turned his head so that she would only see the unscarred half of his face. He was completely at ease with his appearance, at last.

They had established a respectful, arm’s length distance around each other. They got along very well, and occasionally touched innocently, but Obito was well-behaved and courteous around Rin at all times. This annoyed her somewhat when she considered it, remembering how close they had come to each other on the day they reunited. While part of her wished for a bit more physical affection, she never brought it up to Obito, supposing it would work out eventually.

It was a typical day on their mountaintop while they worked on tilling Char’s garden for a new season. For a while they worked in silence; sweating, sleeves rolled up, hair tied back. Rin had noticed that Obito had his mask secured to his hip, as if anticipating an occasion to conceal his identity. She found it odd since they had discussed their plans already: gardening all day and then making a big dinner to enjoy. She addressed it.

“Will you need your mask today, Obito?”

“Hm? Oh, well, maybe…”

“What do you mean, maybe?”

“I’m not sure when this person will arrive exactly, so I just think I should be ready.” Obito told her, “Zetsu-san told me a potential new recruit will be passing through here. I was told to lead him to a checkpoint.”

“A new recruit for the Akatsuki?” Rin frowned, “Don’t you feel a little bad about assisting a group like that?”

“I do.” He admitted, “But I’ve got to hope that my participating with them now might help me mess with them in the future.”

“I guess you’re right…”

They went back to work, bashing the soil open with hoes and rakes. The sun shone directly over their heads in the field and cicadas sang in the forest nearby. Sesshu trotted back and forth between them with a basket in his teeth. Sometimes they would pause and sip from the water bottle or blot themselves with a dry towel that the dog delivered. It was a system that functioned superbly.

Obito was thinking about stopping for lunch (they had packed sandwiches) when a disturbance shook the mountain. An explosion rang out from back in the direction of town. Rin and Obito nearly jumped out of their skins when it happened suddenly, and Sesshu bristled in fright.

Rin whipped her head around, eyes wide, “That wasn’t us, right?”
“No! Well...could we have done that?” He didn’t think so. Obito brushed his hands on his pants.

Sesshu set the basket down in the field before following the pair towards civilization. Obito pulled his mask on while they ran. They closed in on the tall plume of smoke.

Some screaming and shouting caught their attention when they reached the village. Rin and Obito rounded a bend to find a home and some property that had been leveled. The flames were still raging and townsfolk were tossing buckets of water onto the smoldering foundation. Obito acted quickly, warning people to step back, and then used an Earth Jutsu to smother the fire. He asked if anyone had been inside, and he was promptly informed that no one was caught in the blast. He heaved a sigh of weary relief.

“What happened?” Rin asked one of Char’s neighbors, “That shook me all the way over in the garden!”

“T-That kid over there…” The neighbor whispered, “He b-blew up Junichi’s house…”

“Are you serious?” Rin furrowed her brow and looked.

A crowd of people kept their distance from a blonde teen. It looked as if he and Junichi had finished a verbal altercation. Junichi was now sporting a black eye and had been thrown to the ground. The man was cowering in the dirt, terrified to look up at the young shinobi who had earlier told him to “get out of the way”.

It didn’t add up, Rin thought. It was only an unassuming young man: his long, blonde hair tied up and he was wearing simple clothes. She did not mistake the Rock Village headband on his forehead and quickly raised her guard. Rin doubted she would ever lose her hostility for the ninja of Iwagakure, and this was further proof of that.

She and Obito walked forward to confront the young Iwa nin.

He was grinning down at Junichi; his arms folded proudly, “Wasn’t that gorgeous? Pure art...fleeting and untouchable in a single moment…”

“That was...my home...and livelihood.” Junichi mumbled, sadness beginning to overtake his fear.

The young ninja glowered at him, “Hm? Well maybe if you hadn’t lipped off at me before I would not have chosen that place as my next art piece. Now you know better, don’t you?”

The man was cringing.

“Before I make you my next outstanding subject...you should tell me where my informant is.” The Iwa nin warned, “I was told to come to this pisshole. I don’t want people to tell me to meet with them and then bail on me!”

Obito stepped forward with a small wave, “You’re looking for me!”

The younger shinobi’s face dropped, “You...?”

“Yes! My name is Tobi. If you’ll step this way I can deliver you quickly to the next checkpoint, Mister...”

“Deidara.” The blonde had a satisfied look on his face, “It’s about time.”

Rin swiftly grabbed Obito’s arm and whispered into his ear, “What are you doing? He just
destroyed a square block!”

“This is the new recruit.”

“You’ve got to be kidding me!” Her hiss was cautiously quiet.

“I’ll be fine. I’ve been around worse types.”

“Obito…”

“I promise, Rin… I’ll be back later.” The man murmured, “Please help everyone here while I’m gone.”

She nodded and they separated. Deidara folded his arms behind his head, all smiles, and strolled behind Obito as he led the way down the road. The villagers grimaced as Deidara’s farewell echoed, “Later losers! Hmph!”

A bead of sweat rolled down Rin’s neck. He had done this before, Obito had told her all about it, but she could not help but worry. She approached the last smoldering coals of Junichi’s house when the man finally decided to stand up. He came to a stop beside her and choked out a sob. She smiled at him.

“Good thing I’ve been brushing up on restoring houses! Don’t worry, Junichi. We’ll get this fixed up!”

“Thanks, Rin.” He rubbed his eyes with his sleeve, “I just hate to think my temper could have gotten me or someone else here blown up! He just tossed a little ball of clay at my house and then…”

“He did?” Rin muttered, “What kind of jutsu was that?” They were both stumped.

Char was patting Sesshu’s head when he turned to them and spoke, “That was Deidara of the Explosion Corps in Iwagakure. He is a prodigy with the Explosion Release and quite famous for his young age.” Char waggled his cane, “And he came here of all places to cause problems! Very unusual.”

“He won’t be back.” Rin assured him.

Another villager spoke up, “My uncle told me the other day that Deidara recently defected from his village, though not before trying to blow it up, naturally!” She squealed, “It’s not fair! Why do shinobi like that take it out on people like us? Why can’t they all be good like you and Tobi, Rin-san?”

“I don’t know.” Rin said quietly, “That’s why he and I are here with you. We know what you’ve been through, so we can definitely help each other.”

Her friends smiled at her. They proceeded to halt the last of the flames and then salvage any possessions that were in the rubble. Practically nothing remained, but townsfolk assured Junichi that he would be living under his own roof again in no time. For the time being, Rin abandoned her work in the big garden. She could see to it again in a day or so, or whenever Obito returned.

She passed the rest of the day with villagers, clearing debris and hauling spare timber and building supplies to the plot. In a day or so, the carpenter said, it would be safe to build. He was sketching out a plan in the meantime. His coworkers were checking the foundation for stability. She and Junichi sat on a bench across the street, thanking townsfolk who came by to donate items.
Junichi had received all kinds of food, clothing, cutlery, blankets, bottles of wine, and other household necessities. The pile expanded and even Rin added to it, giving him a package of seeds.

“It really is amazing how everyone comes together here.” Junichi marveled, “It wasn’t always like this. We have struggled through very difficult times in this village, living in the shadow of Hidden Rock during the thick of the war…”

“It’s had a toll on everyone.”

“Yes, I’ve heard that even you had to fight in the war.” The man recalled, “When Tobi arrived here some time ago he really had an impact. He can be silly but he looks after everyone. We’ve come to rely on him so much. He inspired a lot of giving and compassion in this village when it had nearly run dry.”

Rin smiled, “I know exactly what you mean.”

Junichi gave her a knowing look, “So…if I may pry…what is your connection to Tobi-kun?”

She was startled, “My…my connection?”

“When you came here to help Char-san you didn’t have to stay. You’ve been looking for reasons to stay, haven’t you, Rin? To be with Tobi!”

“We came to be good friends! And I like it here!”

“Ah well that’s obvious! And we enjoy having you here too, but,” The man shook his head, chuckling, “People here have noticed how close you two are...like you were never strangers to each other. Tobi speaks about you constantly. There isn’t a person here who doesn’t know how great you are, Rin!”

“He’s a talker…” Rin sighed.

“Some have even said that Tobi is clearly infatuated with you.” Junichi continued, “He may be a very good man to choose, don’t you think? I mean, I’ve never seen his face, but a while ago Urabe-kun said he did and that he wasn’t half bad…”

“Please, Junichi, cut it out.”

“Don’t you agree?” The man wondered, “Well, in the event that you don’t, please don’t lead Tobi-kun on. Don’t break his heart or take away his cheerful spirit. He’s the treasure of this village.”

“I would never-!” Rin stood up, huffing, “Look you! I’ve promised to protect Tobi. I would never do anything to hurt him!”

“So you do care about him!”

“I do!” Rin hollered, “Fine! You can tell whoever you want! But let me work this out…I don’t need gossiping townspeople to set us up! I’ll come out and say it when I’m ready to say it.”

Junichi looked very smug.

“Ugh! Sesshu!” Rin called to her dog and then turned back to Junichi, “Please...don’t tell him. I want this to be between him and me.”

“I won’t, Rin-san.”
“Thanks. And remember Char said you can stay with him until the rebuilding is finished.”

“Sheesh! How could I forget that? I need somewhere to sleep!”

They laughed before parting and Rin went straight home. The dark of evening had arrived. She was tired and she had only eaten a bit of what had been passed around by contributors during the day. She supposed Obito would not have an opportunity to eat until he returned from the recruitment. Her throat tightened with worry. She could only imagine what it was like to regularly interact with S-Ranked criminals. Obito had a knack for it, somehow.

“Let’s make dinner.” Rin said sidelong to Sesshu, “A big one! And then whatever Obito can’t finish we’ll donate to Junichi.”

“Or to me.” The dog said hopefully.

Obito had passed the day escorting Deidara out of the Land of Stone. The teen’s travel experience was surprisingly limited, but Obito delivered him to the checkpoint with believable aptitude. He only had to endure about a dozen insults from the young nukenin. No violence ensued either.

Once three cloaked figures emerged from the shadows in the dense forest they had stopped in, Obito squawked a goodbye (still in character) and fled. He had been instructed not to linger around official members of the organization. Even now, he only knew a handful of their identities, and he had heard that Orochimaru had quit not too long ago, ‘Which explains why they were looking for a replacement.’

He supposed the three members who were handling the recruitment would force Deidara to join somehow. The youngster had no idea that there would really be nothing in it for him in terms of compensation. It was an organization that thrived on peer-pressure and ego. Members were not paid for most objectives, as far as Obito knew. If Deidara turned the offer down someone was going to make him reconsider. It was a nasty trick, but Obito felt it was fitting for an equally nasty person.

His return journey was rather quick and he refused to stop after the sun set. Obito traveled under the cover of stars, and after hours of trekking dawn was near. He had been thinking about how Junichi had lost his home. He had also been thinking about Rin.

‘She totally has it all under control. I wouldn’t be shocked if she rallied everyone to build a new house in one day!’ Obito thought to himself, admiring the people of Shincha, ‘Even if she didn’t… they feel safe with her. Rin is a shinobi they’re willing to trust.’

He felt a swell of pride when he thought of how effortlessly Rin had adapted. She had been a great doctor and friend to many. He had never felt happier in his life to be in her company.

Obito had slowed down, exhausted, and trudged up the mountainside towards home. In the darkness, larks called out an early morning song. A bolt of fear went through him when he thought of Rin’s likelihood of being a permanent resident.

‘She might leave Shincha someday. She might look for new places to see and things to do.’ He accepted that fact, if a bit bitterly, ‘Rin can always come back here whenever she wants to. I’m sure she knows that. I would wait…’

He caught himself having the same thought that had plagued him for weeks. He wanted to wait. He wanted to see if Rin had taken any interest in him. More than anything, Obito wanted to have his romantic sentiments returned.
He had not been proactive about expressing it, but he had at least given subtle cues to Rin of what his intentions were. Simply put, he said “we” and “our” a lot...maybe way too much. He bragged about her to everyone and picked flowers for reasons other than keeping up the “Tobi act”.

After all the work she had put in on his property, Obito was convinced that the house was just as much Rin’s home as it was his own. He wanted her to feel that way too. He hoped that he was being silly worrying about her possible departure, and that maybe she had no desire to leave their town at all. He wanted to be the reason that she stayed.

Until he could find a thoughtful way to articulate this overwhelming feeling, Obito planned to maintain the decorous contact between them. He’d die for the chance to kiss her, but until he knew that was acceptable he would never dare try it. If she was going to live in the same space as him, he reasoned, he should never give her a reason to feel uncomfortable.

When Obito arrived on his doorstep it was still pitch dark outside. A lamp was still lit somewhere in the house, but he doubted that Rin was still awake. He pulled his mask off and sighed. He passed Sesshu who was curled up on a rug sleeping. The dog opened a sleepy eye and acknowledged Obito with a weak tail-wag.

“Hi Sesshu,” Obito whispered, “Go back to sleep, boy.”

The dog drifted off again. Obito passed through the living room and then stopped, seeing a dim light had been left on in the kitchen to his left. He stared through the doorway at the decadent spread of food and treats that were left on the table; covered and waiting for him. Obito muffled a happy shriek. His stomach felt like it had been turning in on itself. He had been starving all day and night, and of course, Rin knew that.

He picked up a bowl and helped himself. Obito was grateful no one was awake to witness the inelegance of his eating. He ate more vegetables, rice and dumplings than he felt would reasonably fit in his stomach. Obito crammed down some steamed fish and grilled beef before declaring himself full. He sipped water instead of sake, knowing he didn’t want to wake up with a headache and a stomach ache.

‘Thank God for Rin.’ Obito thought to himself. She was a lifesaver, through and through. He crept down the hallway silently and peeked into her room, as the door had been left ajar. Her face was carefree and beautiful while she slept.

When Rin had first arrived, Obito had used the space for weary travelers or neighbors...and for keeping a vast collection of literature. They had since converted it to her bedroom and cleaned it up nicely, fashioning a shelf for the mountain of books that had been homeless for so long. She adored Obito’s Sumi-e paintings and had hung all of them in her room.

The dawn’s first ray of sunshine was passing through her window. Rin rested undisturbed in her bed with her hand pressed underneath her cheek.

He would thank her when she woke up. Even though he had been too tired to check, Obito was sure Junichi’s property was on the mend as well. He went back down the hall to his bedroom, pulled his shirt off and then collapsed on his bed. Then he slept.

The birds were singing too damn loud. Obito rolled over, hugging a pillow, and kept his eyes squeezed shut as sunlight bombarded his room. He desperately needed sleep, but his eastward-facing room was best suited for early risers. The man groaned tiredly.
“Oh, so you’re awake?”

Obito’s eyes snapped open.

Rin laughed, “You don’t look like you want to be awake.”

“Uh, hi, Rin,” He said while clearing his throat, “Good morning.”

“Good morning, Obito!” She looked very happy and had perched on the edge of the bed, “Did you get to eat when you came home?”

“I did,” The man said, unable to help his smile, “Thank you so much for that. I thought I would have to settle for canned peaches…but you made a feast.”

“I wanted to.” Rin was pleased, “I thought we could finish off what we wanted and then give the rest to Junichi.”

“That’s a good idea.” Obito agreed. He noticed that she was staring. He blushed.

Rin reached out and touched his artificial arm, curious. Obito allowed it, but realized he was half-dressed and feeling vulnerable. He continued hugging the pillow.

“This is…I have never seen anything like this.” Rin said softly, lifting his arm up carefully and turning the wrist, “It works so well! Can you feel with it?”

“No. I mean, pressure sensitivity is kind of there…but it’s not like feeling with skin.” Obito explained.

“Do they refit you every year for when you grow?”

“Sasori did. I haven’t grown in over two years so I guess this size works for me.”

“I can’t believe a nukenin like that would be willing to help…”

“He considers it practice for his puppets.” Obito told her, “I believe he thought about turning me into one, once, but then felt it would be too embarrassing to use me.”

“Thank goodness.” Rin moved her hand up the limb to the shoulder, where it met flesh, “So…how do you move it?”

“Chakra.”

“That was my guess.”

“I barely even think about it. It’s gotten easier.”

Rin nodded, “Hm. And your leg is the same?”

“It is.”

“Can I see it?”

“No.” He was blushing again, “It’s fitted all the way up to my hip.”

“And…you don’t want me to look?” She was confused.

“Well no…”
“You don’t need to be so shy. I’m a medic-nin.” Rin told him matter-of-factly, “I want to know how your limbs work so I can help if they ever get damaged or you get hurt.”

Obito totally understood her clinical perspective on the matter, but he refused to let her go anywhere near the lower portion of his body at the moment. He was sporting some major morning wood, simply from waking up, and Rin had only made it worse. He was not going to risk further embarrassment by telling her that.

“Fine, some other time.” Rin relented, patting his shoulder, “I can practice with your arm to see how it works. We’ll get to it eventually.”

He nodded in agreement. Rin exited his room and called over her shoulder for him to prepare to finish tilling the garden soon. She then proceeded to clean up around the house in the meantime.

Obito took a moment to consider if he could get away with one of the male-habits he had enjoyed before Rin showed up. It would only take a few minutes! He had no privacy anymore and he figured Rin would not appreciate accidentally catching him in the act. With a grunt of annoyance Obito rolled out of bed, found a new shirt to put on, and thought of every unsexy thing he could.

Later in the day they had finished turning the soil and forming rows in the dry dirt. Rin explained that they would be planting vegetables for summer, and demonstrated how to add fertilizer to each furrow they had dug. He held his breath while they did it. The smell was pretty rank.

After putting down fertilizer Rin went crazy. She waved around seed containers excitedly, “Look what I got! Beans, squash, eggplant, peppers, cucumber, peas…”

“Which ones do you want me to do?”

“Planting the bigger seeds is easier so you can take these.” Rin handed him two packages of what seemed to be beans, “You can work on the top-right corner and I’ll start on the left.”

Obito was a slow planter, he figured. Rin had finished off two rows of seedlings before he had gotten ten of his own down. She bounded forward and back in the garden and had done most of it herself, but she did not reprimand Obito for his inexperience. She told him that he would learn in time.

On their way back to the house Rin expressed how she hoped a gentle, spring rain would arrive and set things in motion. It was the only trigger the seeds needed.

“What do you want to do now?” Obito asked her.

She thought about it while they walked, “I…don’t want to do anything.”

“You want to take it easy today?”

“Yeah.”

“Me too.”

And so they agreed they would be lazy for the rest of the day. They ate the food that Rin had prepared and stayed in the house, perusing the many volumes in Obito’s collection. Sesshu had complained that they were wasting a perfectly afternoon and that people might want their assistance at Junichi’s house.

“Come on, Sesshu, we can help every other day this week!” Rin countered, “We just need a little
break.”

“You can help them if you want.” Obito reminded the dog.

Sesshu told them to enjoy their unproductive time and left the house to go into town. Someone would put the dog to work and then maybe consent to a game of fetch afterwards.

Rin and Obito sat on the floor of her bedroom with a few old volumes between them. She had moved two of her potted flowers beneath the window to catch afternoon sunlight. They enjoyed the peace of reading and did not speak for a while. Occasionally they would read aloud excerpts or quotes of significance to each other. Rin came across an unusual novel in the pile.

“What’s with this book?” Rin asked, holding up a dusty hardcover, “I can’t read these characters…”

“Let me see it for a second.” Obito held his hand out and took it, “This was written in Hanyu, Rin.”

“You have a book from Han?” Rin was impressed, “How did you get it?”

“Immigrants bring them over here. A lot of these pass through the Earth Country and into other shinobi countries.”

“Can you read it?”

“No, but I should bring it into town. Maybe someone there still reads Hanyu.”

Rin leaned back against the edge of the bed and stretched, “That would be interesting…to see what stories are like from the Kingdom of Han. I’d like to see that country someday!”

Obito’s stomach dropped, “You want to travel that far away? You don’t even speak the language…”

“Someone around here can teach me or I’ll pick it up! It’d be amazing to see it.” She wore a distant, happy look, “They say a lot of shinobi ancestors came from Han and settled here long ago.”

“I guess it would be extraordinary,” Obito agreed hesitantly, “But does that mean you would go by yourself?”

She stretched again and yawned, “I don’t know. I could.”

“What if I asked you not to?”

Rin was surprised, “You don’t want me to travel?”

“Um, well…I think you should. It’s just…” Obito pulled himself together, “I wondered if you would come back here after your trip; to live here.”

Quickly she understood what he was anxious about. Rin rested her arms on her knees, smiling, “Obito. Relax. Don’t you think I want to be here?”

“But if you go someday…”

She shook her head, “You don’t need to worry about that. This is where I want to be. If I did choose to travel it certainly wouldn’t be now, anyway. I’m still settling down.”

Obito felt the apprehension he had been wrestling with transform into joy.
“You want to keep living here, Rin?” He asked.

“I do. I want to stay in this house with you, if that’s alright.” She became a bit shy as she admitted it, “I promise I’ll contribute and I won’t take advantage…”

“Hey, I know you won’t,” Obito waved his hand reassuringly, “But I just need to establish that if you plan on being here indefinitely…there are conditions that have to be met.”

“Oh, you mean like rent?”

“No, and I’d pay you for that anyway.”

Rin shook her head, “I won’t accept your money, Obito!” She frowned, “But then…what do you mean?”

Obito locked his gaze with her’s, contemplative, and his mouth was pursed in a thin line. She could tell he had something in mind, and he was thinking hard on it, but Obito had puzzled her as far as conditions went. Rin sat and waited for a reply, which she knew would arrive momentarily. She watched as he moved some of the books on the floor aside and shimmied closer.

He had a serene look on his face. She liked how his eyes were mismatched and bright. Just as she was entertaining the thought that whisked into her mind, ‘He’s a rather handsome man…’ Rin felt an electric jolt of nerves go through her when Obito leaned down. Her heart rate took off when she anticipated a kiss. He was close enough for it. She hoped she did not look a gaping idiot.

Obito stopped just to look at her again. He was reading signals. Rin allowed herself to become impatient after three seconds and gave him an expectant look that queried, Well then?

He kissed her softly. The electric sensation in her chest skyrocketed, supercharged, enough to power several cities, and then leveled off pleasantly. Rin held that kiss for as long as she could, making sure he knew that she enjoyed it.

They parted and looked at each other with expressions of accord.

“That is a condition. You need to be okay with that happening.” Obito informed her.

Rin was radiating excitement. She did not give Obito a verbal answer. She ran her hand up his arm, intentionally meeting skin, brushed over his shoulder, and then settled it behind his neck before pulling him down again. She initiated another kiss and let her hands roam. Obito had been so polite and respectful of boundaries since she had arrived, and she appreciated it, but this was Rin’s opportunity to tell him that she wanted what he had been withholding.

He got the hint and wrapped his arms around her back, pulling her in. Rin pressed up against his chest and she swore she could feel his heart rattling his ribcage. They paused for air, pecking each other sweetly while they oxygenated.

“Obito, if that’s a condition for me to stay here, then I think I know what your other conditions are.” Rin announced with a discerning expression, “And I want you to know that I’m okay with those too.”

He pressed his forehead to her’s and chuckled. She captured his lips again, more boldly, and
relished the feeling of his gentle, inquisitive touches. Rin had lost track of all thought and time. She had completed a series of kisses that satiated them both, at least for the time. Rin curled against the curve of Obito’s neck, nestled comfortably under his chin. She could feel him smiling.

Rin pressed her hands on the spot just above his heart and she could feel the warmth conducting through his shirt. She closed her eyes so she could feel the steady beating.

“I love you, Obito.” She told him in a small voice.

Rin felt his whole body go rigid, shocked by the words. There was tension in every stitch of him and she could feel the rhythm beneath her hands speed up. She stayed where she was, thinking that maybe Obito was not expecting such an admission. Rin had no problem qualifying it, if he was afraid that she did not mean it.

“I am a flawed person.” Rin said, knowing she had developed a cynical, darker side that he had witnessed while helping Char, “I may not even be the best choice for you, but I am more proud of who I am now than I was when we left you on that mission. I wish we hadn’t.” Rin confessed, “Obito, spending time with you since I arrived here…it gave me peace again. You’ve made me feel so happy that I…I don’t know how I could ever feel this way without you. I will try to be someone worthy of your heart.”

“No.” He said in a thick voice, still holding her tight, “Don’t say that. Don’t try to improve. Please don’t change anything about who you are. I have always loved you, Rin.”

She knew that was true. That was absolutely true. When they had been Chunin, long ago, young and foolish, she had sensed it then. Rin had only understood the depth of Obito’s feelings after he had been fatally pinned beneath a boulder. She had rounded an emotional corner on that mission. Rin had held his hand for as long as she could after she had removed his left eye. She could indistinctly remember what he had told her while he laid there: Look after Kakashi for me. Tell Sensei I’m sorry. Please think about me when you get away from here, Rin…

Kakashi had to yank her away screaming before they were ambushed a second time.

These memories mingled with new thoughts in Rin’s head as she and Obito reclined on the floor, unabashed, kissing passionately. Now she was thinking about how he had changed. Obito had grown into a tremendous shinobi and nobly guarded innocent people. His many positive attributes had only multiplied as he had grown up. She admired how he was steadfast and kind, in spite of his suffering.

Rin also could not deny that she found him attractive. He was an intellectual equal who appreciated her and what she did. He had a healthy sense of humor. Obito’s face was, in her opinion, very good-looking and his scars were negligible. She had only seen his upper half just this morning, but Rin was fascinated by his mature build and wide shoulders. She had a feeling the rest of him would be just as tempting.

And, by some stroke of fortune, his feelings for her remained intact after all the time that had passed.

So they agreed that the conditions set for cohabitation were entirely fair.

After a few weeks Junichi was settled comfortably in his new home. He invited friends and neighbors over frequently, thanking them for their efforts. When Rin and Obito had stopped by to see how the rebuilding had gone, Junichi gave Rin a questioning look: Did you tell him?
Rin grinned at him. In response, Junichi fetched a bottle from a cabinet and poured them some wine.

“Thank you.” Obito said, accepting the drink. “What’s the occasion?”

“You and your girlfriend are.”

Obito sat in his seat in, self-conscious and proud all at once, “How did you find that out, Junichi?”

“Easy! I just looked at her face! I’d check yours too if I could, Tobi.” Junichi playfully tapped Obito’s mask, “There’s no use in hiding the fact that you two are in love!”

Rin gave a big, sidelong smile to Obito.

And as the months passed the whole town caught on. Summer arrived and the young couple was busy harvesting and selling vegetables. Obito became more and more comfortable with townspeople’s questions. They were well-liked and respected, so he never received hurtful comments. He was, however, urged to marry Rin. “Make her an honest woman!” Char had said.

Obito would have liked to explain to people that he had dreamed of marrying her back when he had still been in the Academy. Since he could not disclose that bit of history, he would quietly admit to people that he was building up to it.

They had lived together for nearly six months. It was going well, in his opinion. He and Rin had about the same level of cleanliness, organization and rotation of chores. Their home was very functional as a result. They could both cook, which gave their schedules flexibility, particularly when Obito took off to deal with nukenin. They trained and exchanged jutsu, as always, and Obito believed that Rin was indeed everything his heart had promised him she would be. Not perfect, of course, but perfect for him.

There was also a learning curve for Obito in the time they had grown closer. They stole kisses whenever they had the chance. Their touches had remained chaste for a long while, up until the day Rin had grabbed a handful of her boyfriend’s butt. He had been shocked by it, and she only gave him a mischievous, entitled look afterwards. Obito took it as a sign that Rin was interested in moving things along. He just did not know how to be cool about it.

Most days he was fine with kissing and touching, but when Rin would direct his hands to where she wanted them, he would get nervous. In fact, on most occasions he denied the contact altogether. Obito did want to touch her, but he had trained himself for so long not to act on such desires. She had, after all, lived with him before they had dated. He had exercised a lot of restraint that had become second-nature. It put him in a tricky situation that often left Rin offended or frustrated.

On one such day, after a panicked leap away from his girlfriend, Rin confronted his anxiety.

“Why won’t you touch me?” The woman demanded.

“I…I want to…”

“You’re full of it!” Rin shouted, pointing to the unbuttoned portion of her shirt, “You just stopped! I asked you to! I want you to! Are my breasts too small or something?”

“No!”

“Then what’s wrong with me?”

“Rin! Nothing is wrong with you!” Obito countered, raising his voice, “I’m still trying to get used to
this..."

"So it’s not me?"

"No.” He shook his head, calming down, “Of course not...”

Rin stood from the sofa and folded her arms, standing directly across from Obito. A bit of her clan-breeding came out and there was a fiery look in her eyes. She’d had it. She wanted an explanation.

“I’m sorry. I just...when you arrived here I wouldn’t let myself...do things like that…” Obito admitted, “I’m still figuring out that it’s acceptable.”

She seemed to understand. Her disgruntled expression faded a bit but she closed up her shirt, sighing.

“I hear what you’re saying. I’m glad that you’re that kind of person.” She smiled at him, “You’re a good guy, Obito.”

Relief trickled back and Obito’s shoulders relaxed. He had feared Rin would have an explosion, regardless of whether she understood his hesitation or not. He reached for her, intending to proceed with cuddling, but Rin brushed past him.

“Sorry.” She told him, “I’m not...feeling it right now.”

And his day spiraled out of control from there. Rin had left and gone into town to visit two patients. She then had intentions of tending the garden. She would be out all day. Everything that had needed Obito’s attention, on the other hand, had been taken care of already...with the exception of Rin.

He and Sesshu had gone for a walk alongside the stream that wound up to the mountain’s peak. The greenery was vibrant. A tall forest surrounded the clear creek, and it stretched down the mountainside and stopped at the clearing near Char’s garden. The dog was attempting to comfort Obito, swearing up and down that Rin loved him, but the man was troubled.

“I messed up. I should have done it.” Obito lamented, “It’s not like it wouldn’t be enjoyable either! It’d be great! I don’t get it. Why do I have to be such a mood-killer?”

“Who could possibly fault you for being that way?” Sesshu reminded him, “You’re better off not overstepping bounds than going too fast. If you had rushed Rin into anything months ago...I would have ripped your face off.”

“Spoken like a true ninken.”

“Thank you.” Sesshu wagged his tail.

“Now it feels like...I can’t stay calm. I get too wound up.” Obito observed what was getting in the way, “I don’t mean to get spooked around her. I suppose I’ll get used to it.”

“You will.”

They stopped beside the water’s edge and sat down. Obito rubbed the dog down from ears to flank. They lounged for a while in the sunshine, wondering just how long it would take for Obito to ‘get used to it’.

He was able to kiss her. He had no issue with that. Holding and touching was fine too, Obito thought. When it came to more serious interactions, such as humoring Rin’s daring touches,
removal of clothing or compromising positions…he struggled. She still had that innocence about
her; even while doing all of that. Obito knew that he wanted to do everything that she was asking
for, but his nerves had gotten in the way. Whether it was fear, inexperience or performance anxiety,
or perhaps a mix of those things, he could not say for sure.

Obito did know that Rin was the first woman he had ever been in a relationship with. After all of his
time in Shincha he had never let anyone get close to him. That had something to do with it as well,
he guessed. It still dumbfounded him that the girl he had been smitten with for so long was now
dating him.

A hypothetical situation passed through his mind. He posed: if Rin takes your shirt off like she tried
to the other day, what will you do this time? Probably not wiggle away from her, like he had
previously. He was being such a child! A man in his mid-twenties ought to be prepared. Never mind
tolerating it, he thought to himself, what was stopping him from enjoying it?

Now she was avoiding him. She had quickly gone into town after the incident. She had said she
wasn’t “feeling it”. The idea filled him with dread.

Obito laid back on the wild grass and clover beside the stream. Sesshu was dozing off, but still had
his ears pricked at attention.

“She’s upset with me.” Obito said aloud.

“Maybe a little.” Sesshu agreed.

“I can do this.”

“You can.”

“What if she doesn’t want to anymore?” His voice cracked.

“You’ll need to confirm that first before you stress yourself out more.” The ninken said, “Don’t
jump to conclusions.”

“You’re right. Good dog.” Obito let out a breath and patted Sesshu’s head.

After napping beside the stream for about an hour the pair went down the mountainside and into
town. Obito hoped that offering to buy Rin lunch would ease some of the tension. He fitted his mask
over his face, like always.

Sesshu caught Rin’s scent and followed the trail to a preschool. They spotted her seated at a picnic
table outside, listening to children’s heartbeats with a stethoscope. She nudged each child along
after determining they were healthy, and they rushed back to the playground. A teacher supervised
the class beside Rin, and joked with her occasionally. Obito was surprised to see Rin in such a good
mood.

He waved hello and the teacher immediately noticed him. The woman opened the latched gate and
let him in, “Tobi! Are you here to play with the kids today?”

“Some other time I will. I wanted to see if Rin is still busy.”

“Ah…” The teacher smiled knowingly, “Yes, your beloved is nearly finished with the examinations.
I’ll let you have her when she finishes up!”

A few of the children came up to Obito, asking if he would join them in a game. They were
disappointed he was only here for the doctor-lady.

Rin was chuckling to herself when Obito and Sesshu came up to her. “They like you.” She observed.

“I’ve stopped by a few times. The kids sure can brighten your day…”

“I know.” Rin agreed, putting her instruments away, “So what’s up?”

“I want to take you out to eat! What do you say?”

Her expression was apologetic, “Oh. That would be great…but I just accepted another house call before I came here. Emi-san isn’t feeling well.”

“That’s fine. I’ll make something for when you come home later.”

Rin was delighted and she thanked him. They parted ways and Sesshu returned to the house with Obito. He continued to fret and the dog had told him to suck it up, “A shred of self-confidence will do you good…”

Obito continued to pass the day while wrestling his doubts. He prepared a meal with many of the vegetables they had picked from Char’s garden. He wondered if Rin would tend to it today even after helping an extra patient. ‘If she does she’ll be home even later…’ He then considered picking her up at dusk, ‘I can’t do that. How desperate do I want to look? I’m not going to seem any more attractive running after her like a lovesick dope…’ But he really, really wanted to.

He decided to wait. As thanks for Sesshu’s relationship advice, which was uncommonly helpful for a dog, Obito let him have the last of the beef in the house. Obito told Sesshu there was no need for him to go out hunting for dinner so long as he kept up his moral support. The dog happily ate the treat. He then stretched out on a rug to digest. Sesshu dozed off again and awoke later to see Obito staring at him from the table across the way.

“Uh…”

“Shoot. You moved, Sesshu.”

“Oh. I’m sorry. What are you doing?”

“Painting.” Obito told him. His ink brush lightly moved across pressed paper.

Sesshu elected to hold still, “Were you nearly finished?”

“Almost.”

“How do I look?” The dog sounded amused.

“You look…” Obito let his Sharingan soak in the details for a moment longer, “Like you’re shedding…”

“Well! There’s no need to be rude! I can’t control that you know.”

“Relax, boy. You’re handsome.”

Sesshu was satisfied with the answer. When Obito called him over the dog stood up and shook. He trotted over to the table and took a look at the newest Sumi-e painting in the house. It was a minimal yet accurate ink wash of a burly dog sleeping; chin on paws, ears forever pointing up. The brush strokes had been professionally executed. Obito signed it as an afterthought.
“I think you have done me justice.” Sesshu decided. He went back to sleep after that, curling up on the rug again.

Obito finished a glass of wine he had been sipping on. He had calmed down considerably after he had begun painting earlier. He did, however, have to stop himself from walking out the door to find Rin. It was dark outside and she had still not returned.

He knew some personal space was a healthy thing. Rin probably did not even care any longer about what had happened that morning.

‘Just be patient.’ He told himself. Obito drew a bath and settled himself in the water, which he always preferred hot. The man leaned his head back and shut his eyes. His mind was blank for a long while he sat, feeling his skin beginning to prune.

‘It can’t be helped.’ Obito thought, ‘I was scared that maybe there was something I would do…that would bother Rin…or make her not like me anymore.’

But he had been afraid of that his whole life. When he had sacrificed his life for Rin and Kakashi all those years ago, he realized what a foolish fear it was. He had grown enough to know there were worse things in the world than having his heart broken…such as watching the people around him suffer. It was better to take on pain himself than to subject others to it, he had decided.

‘Minato-sensei would say that’s very mature of me.’ He thought happily, ‘I try to be like him.’

He was still worried that he had jeopardized his relationship enough to ruin it, but Obito was never the type to give up. He would do everything he could to prove he was a good man before Rin walked out of his life again.

Obito opened his eyes when he heard the creak of the front door, footsteps, and then quiet words being exchanged with Sesshu. He stood from the bath and toweled off. With alert ears he slipped into his bedroom and dressed silently.

Obito let out a deep breath when he heard Rin calling his name.

The man walked through the dim house and then poked his head into the kitchen. She looked over to him, surprised, popping a piece of eggplant into her mouth.

“Oh! Thank you for making this!” She sounded cheerful, “Will you eat with me?”

“Sure.”

They helped themselves to the food he had prepared earlier. Obito could hear a cricket singing its heart out, and he suspected it had entered through the open window above the sink. His Sharingan quickly noticed it beside a folded towel on the counter. He returned his attention to Rin. She was sitting across from him at the table with a warm expression on her face.

“You had a busy day today,” Obito pointed out, “The bath is still warm. You should get in as soon as you finish eating.”

“I will.” She nodded happily, “It was a good day. Not too busy at all.”

“How are your patients?”

“They’re fine. The children were all fine.” Rin paused, “Well…Emi-san’s arthritis is getting pretty bad, but I can help her manage it.”
Obito smiled to himself. This was the Rin he knew. She seemed to be back to normal. ‘I hope I am too.’

“Hey! Sesshu said you painted him!” Excitement flashed in her eyes, “Will you let me see it?”

“I left it in your room. I made it for you.” Obito told her, “Sesshu liked it.”

“Thank you!” Rin leaned in and kissed his mouth; he tasted carrot and ginger on her lips. She stood and put her dish in the sink, “I’ll go wash up while the water’s still warm! Thank you, Obito!”

Heat and joy flooded him, right down to his toes. So far, it seemed as though all was well. His day-long worrying was beginning to look like a big waste of energy. Obito cleaned up the table and scrubbed their dishes. ‘Thank goodness…Rin is still in a good mood. She didn’t mention this morning either!’ He coaxed the cricket onto the page of a recipe notebook and set it free; shutting the window after it had hopped away. Obito switched the lights off and returned to his bedroom.

He stood in the doorway, listening to the gentle sound of splashes coming from the bathroom a few steps away. He couldn’t help but imagine Rin bathing, ‘And she’s in the same water I was in earlier…’ Obito shook his head, dispelling the thoughts. No need to be creepy, he reminded himself, but he felt like he was on the right track now in terms of progress. He would see her naked someday and he would not freak out when it happened.

In the dark he walked until his knees touched the edge of the bed and then flopped onto it. Obito rolled and once his head found a pillow he made himself comfortable. He sighed deeply; finally able to release the day’s tension. He shut his eyes and began drifting.

A soft sound retrieved him from his unconscious state.

“Hey.”

Obito peeked his eye open and looked to the doorway.

Rin’s silhouette was visible in the dark. She had put pajamas on.

“May I talk to you?”

Obito yawned, “Ah…of course, Rin.”

She stepped inside and sat on the free side of the bed, folding her legs beneath her. She looked more fretful than she had earlier. Obito reached and took her hand in his own.

“What’s wrong?” He asked. He shifted and stretched in order to wake up properly.

“I…” She stopped herself, gulping, “I’ve pushed you. I made you feel uncomfortable…and then I…acted like such a…”

He squeezed her hand, “Stop. It’s fine.”

“When I didn’t get my way I was quick to accuse you.” Rin said quietly, “That’s no way to treat someone I love.”

“You can’t expect to get everything right on your first try. I never have. Besides, I haven’t been that uncomfortable.” Obito raised his eyebrows, smiling, “I want what you want, Rin. I’m just a big bundle of nerves.”

Rin nodded slowly. She fusses at the blanket and then pulled it back, slipping beneath it without a
word. Obito had lifted his arm and given her space to settle herself. She pressed against him and rested her head on his chest. His t-shirt smelled good, like him. She felt completely better when his arms encircled her.

“I’m sorry.” Rin said softly, “I was moving fast, wasn’t I? It was all worked out in my head, but I didn’t try to confirm with you if you were ready.”

“Hm. What’s all worked out?” He wondered.

“What I want.” She replied, “I’ve had lots of time to think about it. When I was younger…I was just a medic-nin. I imagined that I one day I would meet someone and fall in love. I knew that I wanted to be with a person who would be happy to marry me and have children…”

His head felt heavy and he felt a burning sensation in his throat. She was saying some very interesting things.

“You’re the person I was waiting for.” Rin told him, “I want all of that with you, Obito. I just need to…take it slow…and be fair to you.”

Obito closed his eyes and tried to stay calm. Life had become a very beautiful thing, in spite of years of struggle and enduring solitude. He had come to a place where people accepted him and wanted him as a friend. Rin had found him. ‘Prayers do pay off.’ He thought.

He kissed the top of her head, “Rin…you don’t need to be sorry about that. You’ve been completely fair.”

“Well…how can that be the case when you refuse to touch me?”

“I’m not refusing…”

“I want to make love.”

“I know.” Obito blushed furiously, “Just keep in mind I have no experience.”

“Me neither.”

“And I thought…” His artificial hand parted her hair and trailed down her neck, “That if we are going to do something like that…it would be best to be married first.”

Rin paused. It was not something she had considered an absolute must.

“Maybe I’m old fashioned…but I kept thinking that since your family isn’t out here to protect you, or object to anything you do…I’m the one who needs to safeguard your honor.”

She laughed lightly, “I’ve hardly ever listened to them.”

“That’s true, but I’m the one who’s going to protect you.” Obito asserted, “At least, that’s my opinion, anyway. I will go along with whatever you want, Rin. We are still kind of young…”

“You want to...” Rin muttered, turning to stare at his face, “When can we do it? You want to get married?”

“Really bad.”

“I can call you my husband.” She grinned, “Oh! That does sound nice, doesn’t it?”
He squeezed her, “I think so!”

“It does seem to be the proper way, huh?” She sat up and tapped her chin. “We don’t have to tell anyone! We can just go ahead!”

“Well we should have a few witnesses…”

“Let’s invite some friends from town!” Rin took his hands excitedly. “I’ll go ask in the morning! Maybe someone can lend us formal clothes for the day…”

“Uh…”

“You think the shrine can take us on short notice?”

“Probably not. I know that priest and I think they typically need some warning so they can prepare for a wedding.” Obito reminded her. “You’re getting a little ahead of yourself again, Rin.”

“Sorry.” She sunk down again, balancing her chin on his chest, “I’m just excited.”

He ran his hands through her hair, rumbling with low laughter, “It’s okay. I’m excited too.”

“Then you won’t hold back anymore.” Rin added, shimmying, and she straddled his waist, “Then you can’t say it’s better to wait…not if I belong to you. Not when you’re mine.”

Obito tried to speak in-between her demanding kisses, “Easy…does…it…"

It had not been easy falling asleep the night before, but after a time Obito and Rin managed it. Rin had explosive energy the following morning. She had left bed and ignored him when he asked her to come back and bask in the peacefulness of the morning.

“You can keep sleeping if you want.” Rin told him, “I don’t mind! I just have to run around today. I can’t stop myself.”

He told her to wait a few minutes so he could get dressed. He ought to go into town with her to confirm their engagement, or some people might call Rin’s bluff and accidentally incense her.

They prepared and set out with Sesshu in tow. The ninken was surprised they had come to the decision so quickly.

“This is a decent solution…defining yourselves as a mated pair.” The dog commented, “You don’t need to justify this to me either. You’ve lived together for long enough. It’s better this way for when you welcome your pups.”

“We haven’t gotten to that yet, Sesshu.” Rin informed her hound. But her face confessed: Oh but I’ll get us there!

At the edge of town Rin gave her boyfriend an inquiring look, “No mask?”

He smiled as they walked, “No. Today is not a good day to wear it. Not when I’m trying to be sincere.”

She gently stroked his scarred cheek, “That…makes me really happy.”

They stopped by Char’s house first. They had to knock for about ten minutes and ask Sesshu to bark at open windows. Finally the old man answered the door, apologizing. “I always keep guests
waiting…I was soaking my feet and I am just so terribly slow.”

“No, Char-san, we’re the ones bothering you.” Obito told him, “How are you?”

“Ah…I can’t complain, Tobi. It’s been a mild summer. My health has never been better.”

Rin felt a small swell of pride knowing that the old man was well. Saving Char had facilitated her reunion with Obito. She regarded Char for a moment as he asked them to come inside. Rin nudged Obito gently and whispered, “He…didn’t look at your face.”

“I don’t think he can see that well…” Obito told her, “Not since I’ve known him…”

After a pleasant chat with the cloudy-eyed village elder they announced their intent to marry.

“You will be very blessed.” Char told them, “I owe my life to you. Many people in this village do. Tobi and Rin, you will both prosper.”

“Thank you Char-san.” Rin was bubbling over with joy.

And when they continued their tour through Shincha, several people were confused by the appearance of Rin’s companion. Char’s neighbor even walked up to her and poked Obito, who he did not recognize, “Who is this guy, huh, Rin? Does your man know about this?”

Obito was embarrassed, “Yoshige…it’s me.”

The man was shocked, “T-Tobi?”

Rin nodded, arm in arm with Obito, “I don’t need to explain a thing to him if he’s right here!”

“Well I’ll be damned…” Yoshige was stymied, “Why wear that mask, Tobi? You’re easy on the eyes.”

“I have reasons. Today I don’t want to.” Obito explained, “I don’t want Rin to be marrying a faceless man.”

And Yoshige rushed away from them, hollering to Junichi and a shopkeeper across the street. Rin and Obito stood, quite rattled, watching as the news spread without permission or interruption all through town. A small mob gathered around them, asking questions and offering congratulations. Sesshu weaved between legs, soaking up some of the attention.

“Tobi! We can see your face!”

“Congratulations!”

“You asked her?”

“Handsome!”

“I knew you’d do it!”

“Will you invite me?”

“Rin-san! When is the baby coming?”

“Do you have everything you need?”
They answered as best they could. Some very generous people offered their services: fittings for formal wear, organizing a party, preparing food, and other kindhearted gestures. Junichi had gone ahead to the Shinto Shrine on the far side of the village, running up the steps, and consulted with the priest. He returned to inform Rin and Obito that there was a timeslot open in two days, “And I confirmed it for you! You should be ready by then, right?”

It was a chaotic two days. They had many people to answer to, especially older, fussy women. Along with most demands came acts of kindness, however. The kimono and hakama they had asked to borrow were gifted to them by the local seamstress. A pavilion had been set up between the shrine and town, at no expense to them, and prepared for a reception. Obito had to remind Rin that many people wished to take this opportunity to repay them for their help.

The day of the wedding, Rin was taking her morning tea on the porch, trying to get a hold of her nerves. Her mother had once told her when she was a young girl that kunoichi never frivolously married. She had said that, by nature, a kunoichi does not want to surrender her independence. They often entertain the idea when they find an equal or, at the very least, a man who will allow her to lead the life she wants. Rin’s mother chose to marry a teammate, who had proven himself a worthy partner.

‘Tsume was set for an arranged marriage because her personality was a bit too…’ Rin frowned, ‘A bit too fearsome for most men. Though, as an eldest daughter in the Inuzuka clan she couldn’t really help that.”

Rin had always known she would marry for love. She was gentler, softer…when it counted, of course. Particularly when she had been a Genin and then a Chunin, she was quite starry-eyed. The hair on her arms stood up when she recalled Kakashi, who she had been positively besotted with. She remembered her mother’s words, how kunoichi did well to find their equal.

‘Kakashi…was never my equal. He was always so far ahead of me.’ Rin thought to herself, ‘I would have spent my life chasing him…I would have begged him to settle down with me.’ It frightened her to think of how she had projected desires on a person she truly did not know that well, ‘He was handsome and strong…but not once did he stand beside me.’

Obito had been in step with her since they had first met. She had taken him for granted and cursed her weakness every second after he had been lost. Rin had convinced herself that if she had been more cautious he never would’ve had to sacrifice his life. What occurred to her sometime later, a while after Kakashi had rejected her, was that Obito wanted to die protecting her. It stung so much worse after she had realized that.

‘I will not squander this precious gift.’ Rin thought, ‘My partner found me again. I found him.’

She finished her tea and also acknowledged that the icy part of her shinobi heritage, as well as her crush’s rebuff, had made her resentful of Kakashi. She was feeling some sick satisfaction knowing that she would never reach out to him again. He would never know that she had prevailed and found happiness, most especially not with Obito.

Rin brought the cup inside and left it in the sink. She caught Obito on her way back out, and at the top of the porch steps he wrapped his arms around her and kissed her. They stood for a moment until Sesshu strode past them, reminding them they had appointments to keep.

They set out down the hill, hand in hand, tranquil, for the most part.

“This is happening a bit more quickly than I expected…”
“I agree…but we wanted to do this. Will it matter if it’s today or a year from now?” Obito asked.

“Not it the slightest.”

“Exactly. It’s still a little scary.”

“They’re making it scary!” Rin huffed, referring to the townsfolk, “Everyone had to be involved and complicate things. They really got in our business.”

“Maybe it’s not as a bad as it could be…” Obito mused, “I don’t know about your clan’s customs, but the average wedding in the Uchiha clan is about a three day affair.”

“Whoa.”

“Well, I only saw someone getting married that one time…but it was a big deal. Much bigger than this…”

“Would they have made me wear the emblem and everything?” Rin wondered.

Obito laughed, “That’s a requirement. They would have forced you to completely forsake all the traditions of your former clan. They would dress you head to toe…tell you what to do and when to breathe. It’s really superstitious. There’s a pretty long and annoying purification rite for women too, which they say makes it easier to have children born with the Sharingan. Then a bride is taken to the Naka shrine and given the Uchiha name. Once everyone accepts you…you’re allowed to get married the next day…”

“Whew!” Rin was grinning, “My family would have lost patience.”

“I would have lost patience.” Obito agreed.

Obito dropped Rin off at her dresser’s house before continuing down the road. Yoshige’s family was providing him with hakama and had notified him he would be dressed and ready in about an hour. Rin would need four hours, give or take.

“Those women do crazy things with hair and makeup and then pile on robes! They don’t even let a bride have a choice.” Yoshige complained, “It takes forever! Not to mention its summertime and she’ll be overheated probably before noon. If your wife faints before you exchange vows they say its bad luck!”

“Rin is very strong.” Obito said proudly, “And she can take a little heat.”

His preparations were essentially painless, and though his kimono was a bit confusing, Yoshige and his sister capably dressed him. It was not nearly as complex as Rin’s outfit would be, they told him. They also slipped a hand-fan in his belt, insisting he be prepared for some unbearable temperatures later in the day. His caretakers set a tray of light fair on the table for him and proceeded to scramble to the pavilion to help set up. Yoshige said that when he returned he and Junichi would escort him to the sanctuary and then the shrine. His wait would be a long one.

Obito sat for a while and gawked at the round fan he had been given, an uchiwa, knowing it was the symbol of his clan. Of course his friends didn’t know of his lineage, he reminded himself, but it was a spooky sign. He could only hope it was God’s way of blessing his marriage.

It was starting to feel a bit warm. Obito leaned out an open window for fresh air and whistled for Sesshu. The large dog came bounding and wagged his tail in salutations.
“How does she look, Sesshu?”

“Very beautiful. Rin is a bit irritable because she and the ladies can’t agree on how much is enough.” Sesshu reported, “But you’ll be charmed when you see her.”

“I bet I will.” Obito couldn’t help but smile, “If she’s still feeling grumpy when you get back, please tell her that I love her.”

“That would delight her.” The dog turned about and returned to Rin’s camp.

Knowing there were a few more hours of isolation ahead of him, Obito sat down on a sofa and closed his eyes. He imagined what it would be like if he was among his clansmen getting married. It would be quite a circus, but he still thought it would be fun to watch as Rin was naturalized as a member of the clan. Since it didn’t matter much to either of them anyway, the daydream slipped away from him.

He thought about his Sensei and Kakashi. Their attendance would have been very special, Obito thought. ‘They would be shocked, most likely.’ He thought about how Minato-sensei gushed about getting married to Kushina and how much fun it was being with her. Kakashi had always plugged his ears during such stories.

Obito frowned to himself, ‘You heartless jerk, Kakashi…’

He sighed. He wanted to lean back and sink into the couch but Obito stopped himself, fearing he would crease the kimono his friends had worked so hard on.

‘Back then…Rin probably would have wanted to marry Kakashi.’ He thought to himself, ‘And if by some horrible whim of his, had he consented to it…’ His frown deepened, ‘He would have made her so miserable! Even if he had lightened up after our mission! He still would have been rigid and emotionally stunted! She would try so hard to please him and she’d get nothing back. That pisses me off.’ Obito stood up again and began to pace, ‘After all, she told me that she left Leaf because Kakashi had hurt her feelings. He promised me that he would protect her, but I didn’t mean just physically keep Rin alive!’

For a renowned prodigy, Kakashi sure could be a dumbass.

He stopped at the window again and looked outside. The sunlight was intense and the sky was cloudless.

‘Then when I think about it…Rin and I…we’re kind of lucky.’ Obito thought, ‘We’ll have fun every day just like Minato-sensei and Kushina-san did. Even when times are hard or things get dangerous…I’ll always be happy knowing that Rin loves me.’

He snacked on some of the fruit on the tray. Obito paced and thought some more, and after two hours of boredom he spied Junichi walking past. He called out in a desperate voice to his friend.

“Please take me with you.” Obito asked, “I’m going to lose my mind if I stay in here.”

“Aw, Tobi! Are you getting antsy?” Junichi laughed, “Fine then, come with me! We’ll go to the pavilion.”

It was a sweet relief to not be boxed in by four walls and be alone with his thoughts. Junichi chatted with him all the way up the hill, soothing his nerves, and at the pavilion they were quickly cornered by other townsfolk.
“Hey! What’s Tobi doing here? It’s too early.”

“We told you not to bring him or he’ll start helping us set up!”

“He won’t, relax!” Junichi grumbled, “I’m not going to let the poor man rot at Yoshige-kun’s house. He needs to enjoy this day, not dread it!”

They allowed Obito to hang about but only on the condition that he not help with preparations. He had a surprisingly easy time consenting to the request. The tent was large and set up over picnic tables on a flat plain of grass. Some nearby oaks provided decent shade, but it was still hot enough to make him tug at his collar.

He wandered around and said hello to people while admiring the decorations. Lanterns hung in preparation for the evening. The flowers were native to the mountainside but thoughtfully arranged. Obito could only assume, after looking at a platform set up with instruments, that music would also be provided. He could smell food cooking somewhere. He had a feeling that he and Rin would have a blissful afternoon.

The last hour passed without Obito noticing, but it helped that Junichi had snuck him a shot of liquor. Afterwards he was herded along by men his age, handed a parasol for shade, and then nudged up a long stone stairway to the shrine. Obito kept a slow pace, knowing that Char was struggling with every step a few feet behind him.

At the top, the green forest was parted by a long, dusty courtyard, and at the far side an old but well-kept shrine stood. He noticed the priest and two shrine maidens stepping out with parasols to greet the guests.

“Good heavens it is a hot day, Tobi-kun.” Char rasped, stepping under Obito’s umbrella, “Much too hot a day to get married…”

Obito smiled, “I think this is a perfect day, Char-san.”

“Well then…maybe it’s a fine day for a young person to marry. I still think we should all dress down. You could get married at the riverside; now that would be more practical…”

Some squealing from guests caught his attention and Obito looked over his shoulder. Rin had ascended the stairway and her arrival immediately put butterflies in his stomach.

She was adorned in white kimono, and the elaborate uchikake jacket over the dress was a pale gold with white embroidery. Since her hair was too short for a traditional style it had been tied up and fashioned with white flowers. Her eyes looked huge and beautiful.

Rin tried to smile at him but her face made it clear: I am sweating to death!

Obito chuckled quietly when he came to stand beside her and offered her his arm. He held the parasol over her, but it was not going to help very much.

“You look beautiful, Rin.” He whispered, “Are you going to be alright?”

“Thank you. I can do this…it’s just…” She took a shuddering breath, “Way too warm for me right now.” She finally smiled, “And you look very nice yourself!”

He shifted hands to hold the parasol and then fanned her with the uchiwa he had with him. They still had to wait for the priest and shrine attendants to approach them before they could go inside. They would sweat profusely in the meantime.
Rin looked at the fan quizzically, “Where did you get that?”

“Yoshige gave it to me.”

“Does he know?”

“Of course he doesn’t.”

She giggled, “It makes this feel more official!”

“It’s just a fan…”

“I know, I know.”

The priest arrived and bid them good morning. From behind him two young women and a young man stepped forward. The young man took the parasol from Obito and stood behind him, shielding the couple from the harsh sun. The priest and shrine maidens bowed and Obito and Rin returned the gesture. They slowly followed behind the shrine attendants and their guests fell into line behind them. Sesshu walked beside Rin on her left side and ignored the odd look the priest-in-training gave him.

Before entering, all were expected to have their hands rinsed in cold water in act of symbolic purification. Rin could hear Obito sigh quietly when a maiden spooned some water on his hands. ‘I can’t wait for it to be my turn…’ She thought.

The inside of the temple was spacious and well-lit. Obito and Rin were led up to the center of the room and asked to take a seat on a bench. The trilling, off-tune flute being played at the edge of the room by an older shrine attendant was getting on Rin’s nerves. Guests had seats lined up against both walls. She glanced over to Sesshu who sat beside Char. Her ninken had his ears laid back as if hoping he could block out the piercing noise, ‘Poor Sesshu…’

A lower level priest pounded on a large drum to signal the beginning of the ceremony. The head priest greeted everyone present and said a prayer. All guests were asked to stand and bow, which most did stiffly (as there were many older folks present). The priest then announced the ritual dance the two shrine maidens would perform. Some more tuneless, Gagaku music began and the two girls proceeded to prostrate before an altar full of offerings to the gods. Rin watched with her eyes glazed over, ‘Don’t pass out. It’s so ridiculously hot in here…and noisy…hang on…’

Both shrine maidens completed a series of graceful motions and then made a raucous with bells. They jingled at the altar and then in front of the couple, and Obito nearly winced when an inexperienced maiden came a little too close to his face with the instrument. The priest spoke a few words after the dance and then asked Obito and Rin to stand again. The music quieted a bit.

Yoshige’s sister, Nozomi, was kneeling down beside Rin to catch the extra length of her kimono; heaven forbid she trip with all this sitting and standing during the ceremony.

The older shrine maiden set a box on the stand in front of Obito and Rin. Three nuptial drinking bowls were nested on top of each other, reserved strictly for sake in the san-san-kudo phase of the ceremony. The maiden took the first cup, the smallest, from the top of the container and her companion tipped sake into it from a brass pot. The small bowl was handed to Obito first and all eyes went to him. He raised the drinking bowl to his lips twice before sipping the sake on the third attempt.

This process repeated with Rin, who made the same gestures Obito had. The cup was refilled for two more drinks each, and then the maidens handed them the medium bowl and started over. By the third and largest drinking bowl, and the three required sips from it, Rin and Obito were wishing for
a drink of water to stave off the wine. It didn’t matter if they enjoyed the sake or not, they were told. The importance of the number three, a holy and indivisible number, was the focal point of the sake ceremony. It would ensure happiness.

The maidens cleared away the nuptial bowls and the head priest then presented Obito with a scroll. He was asked to read a marriage oath in his loudest voice.

“Your honorable elders may not be able to hear you well, otherwise…” The priest added quietly.

Although Obito read as clearly as he could, the majority of the old people in attendance did not hear him anyway. They just watched admiringly until he finished.

The priest said another prayer before the altar and the maidens returned with sakaki branches for Obito and Rin to offer the gods. Nozomi assisted Rin with her dress and helped her shuffle ahead to the altar. They set their branches down and bowed twice together. Rin looked at Obito from the corner of her eye as they raised their hands. They clapped twice. They bowed once more. Nozomi herded Rin, who was at her least mobile, back to her seat.

The shrine maidens had poured sake into the bowls in front of each guest, and after a few last words from the head priest; invitees joined Obito and Rin for one last sip. They were declared a united family. The trilling music picked up again and Rin felt her head swimming. She could not tell how much time had passed, but she did know that once the priest and shrine maidens made their way down the center of the room it was their queue to follow.

Nozomi helped Rin stand and shepherded her and Obito out of the temple behind the shrine procession. The young man caught up to them with the parasol. The little parade moved slowly outside and Rin was grateful that Obito was discreetly fanning her as they walked.

He couldn’t fight back a wide smile and said quietly, “I know you don’t feel so great right now…but we did it.”

“Yeah…”

Sesshu trotted out after them and asked how much longer Rin had to bake.

“Just as soon as we leave the sanctuary grounds we can pour some water down her throat.” Nozomi replied, “I promise, Rin, it won’t be long now. And we’ll get this damned uchikake off of you too…”

And thank goodness, when they finally crossed the courtyard, the priest and maidens turned to them at the gate of the sanctuary and bowed. The formalities ended after the shrine attendants returned to the temple and people were allowed to raise their voices again. Many people clapped and loudly gave congratulations. Obito thanked them before watching Nozomi carefully tip a canteen of water into Rin’s mouth.

His wife looked back at him, “Would you like some, Obito?”

He nodded and took a few gulps for himself. They were refreshed a little. Obito helped Nozomi remove the golden robe that was weighing Rin down. The group continued down the hill towards the pavilion.

“They told me I need to get changed over there.” Rin pointed to a small cottage on the side of the field, “Nozomi-san said this kimono is going to kill me before long.”

“That’s fine. I’m glad they brought something more comfortable for you.” Obito squeezed her hand,
“But it’s not going to take a few hours, is it?”

“It better not!”

The women swept Rin up and brought her to the lodge to change. Obito was taken to the reception tent where everyone gathered around, laughing, and teased him playfully.

“It’s over now!”

“She’ll get you, Tobi, you’ll see! Rin’s only pretending to be nice!”

“It’s too hot! You need to get those clothes off of her!”

“Knock it off.” Obito warned them, “You wouldn’t say things like that if Rin was here, would you?”

“No, you know no one means any of it.” Junichi clapped his back, “Come sit over here! You can say hello to everyone while the food is being set out.”

Sesshu sat loyally beside Obito as people swamped him with congratulations. It wasn’t too long before Rin appeared, fully capable of movement, and returned to his side to satisfy some of the guests. Her kimono was a reasonable length now; a vision of summer in reds, gold and orange.

It seemed as though every single person from town had lined up to converse with them. Many people handed over small, colorful envelopes of money. This alarmed Rin because she and Obito had not paid much for the ceremony at all, and most of the preparations had been through the charity of neighbors, ‘We don’t deserve this money! We don’t even need it…’ Char told them it would be rude to refuse a gift, and so Obito and Rin accepted what was given to them with great humility.

Chilled tea was handed out for refreshments. A few older guests played music from the stage that was far more pleasant than what they heard at the shrine.

Obito and Rin floated around for a while, talking to guests all through the pavilion. They helped themselves to a wide array of food, mostly fresh fish and vegetables. The heat was forgivable thanks to the relaxed atmosphere.

“You are simply stunning, Rin.” Char told her, “You and Tobi will be very happy together.”

She thanked the old man and asked if he wanted anything to eat or drink. He declined, and instead sat in the shade petting Sesshu, basking in the pleasantness of the party.

Obito had lowered his guard a little and was visibly affectionate towards Rin, pecking her lips or cheek whenever he could. They shared a brief dance together before they became uncomfortably warm again. Guests highly approved of their loving behavior. With the afternoon came some cloud cover that suggested a drizzle. Yoshige had run back to his house to fetch parasols just in case it rained.

When the man returned he looked very distressed. He exchanged a few words with Char before he and the older gentlemen came up to Obito and Rin.

“Is something wrong?” Obito asked them.

“There was a break-in at Char-san’s shop.” Yoshige reported, “I guess someone must have taken advantage while most of us were here at the party.”

The old man shook his head, “I’ll look into it later…I much prefer spending time here.”
“Did you see anyone there?” Obito checked.

“I think someone was still there, but I didn’t let myself inside. There was a lot of broken glass…”

Rin watched her husband’s nostrils flare after hearing the news. She knew very well how protective he was of his elderly friend. She was not quick enough to grab him before he stormed off back in the direction of town, “Wait!”

Yoshige blanched, “Oh gosh…is he going to try to catch the thief?”

Rin lifted up her skirt and set into a clumsy run, motioning for Yoshige and Sesshu to follow her.

“He’s a shinobi. Not only will he catch the thief, he’ll probably punish the thief too.” Rin surmised.

“He’s the groom! Tobi’s not supposed to be doing stuff like this! I’ll get Junichi and some guys to look around with me.”

“It’s a bit late for that.” She pointed out.

At the bottom of the hill they had lost sight of Obito. Sesshu raced ahead to the shop. A person rushed from the building and the dog pounced, pinning the delinquent to the ground with mighty paws.

It was a boy of about twelve.

“Stop!” The child screeched, “I’m sorry! Tobi let me go! Don’t hurt me, dog!”

Sesshu growled but backed off. Rin arrived and asked her ninken to stay put. She and Yoshige peeked into the window, where glass had been completely smashed in as a point of entry.

Inside the shop shelves were in disarray. Many items had been taken and the register had been ransacked. Rin could see Obito had snatched up another youngster and was hauling him outside as he wailed in terror. Her husband dropped the other young offender outside on the dusty roadside. He was maybe a year older than his companion. He cowered away from Obito.

“What were you two thinking?” Obito snarled, looking to the younger boy, “Tonushi! You know better than this! I talk to your parents all the time!”

“I-I’m s-sorry, Tobi…”

“Who is this kid?” He gestured his thumb to the older boy.

“That’s Chikusa…” Tonushi gulped, inching his way closer to Rin, “He’s a genin from the Hidden Rock Village…”

Rin’s stomach dropped, ‘Oh this is not good…’

Obito immediately hoisted the genin up by his shirt collar, “So you’re a genin, huh?”

“Y-yeah…” Chikusa whimpered.

“How did you meet Tonushi?”

“We play together sometimes in the forest…”

“Is that so?”
“It’s true! We hang out a lot! Tonushi said there was going to be a big party here today…”

“You decided to come here for my wedding? Or because you knew no one would be watching the store?” He gestured to the broken window, “Turn out your pockets again.”

He set the genin on his feet and Chikusa surrendered all of the money and snacks he had taken.

Obito’s look of disgust completely disarmed the young Rock ninja.

“I guess you don’t make much money on the missions you take.” Obito observed, “It’s cowardly to steal.”

“I swear I’ll never do it again!”

“I don’t take the word of any Rock shinobi seriously…”

Rin stepped forward cautiously, whispering, “Obito…he’s just a child. He definitely won’t!”

“In fact, Rock shinobi nearly ruined my entire life. I’ve been fighting and killing them since I was your age.” Obito continued, “It isn’t surprising that you would carry on the way the rest of them do. Robbing an old man…tricking a kid who’s supposed to be your friend…they’re the most despicable sort.”

“I’m not like that!”

“You haven’t proven otherwise!” The man roared, “Do you know what a nukenin like me could do to you? Well do you? I dare you to try to harm anyone in this village again!”

The boy began to weep, “Please…don’t kill me…”

Obito narrowed his eyes, “I won’t bother. Go back to your village and never come back here. If you really don’t want to be a corrupt ninja, put others before you first, for the rest of your life.”

And Chikusa heeded the warning; without a parting word to Tonushi he ran away as fast as his legs could carry him. Obito rounded on the younger boy, still fuming.

“How dare you do such a thing to Char-san? He’s your village elder.”

“Chikusa…he made me…” The boy sniffled.

“I’m sure he did. You owe Char-san an apology…you owe your parents an apology.” Obito softened a little, “You can’t forget that you have a little brother now. Fumitake needs a role model, you know.”

Tonushi nodded sadly. Rin lifted him up and patted his shoulder, “Run along now, Tonushi, straight to your mom and dad…and tell the truth.”

Tonushi walked down the road with his head hung in shame.

Rin stepped up to her husband and held his face gently in her hands. He was still simmering.

“I can see your Sharingan.” She said quietly, “Please try to relax…”

“Sorry.” He sighed, blinking, and his eyes were dark again. Obito hugged her tight.

“You were so angry…I was worried you were going to beat that boy up.”
I thought about it, but if I did then he wouldn’t really learn what I was trying to show him.”

She nodded, smiling, and planted a warm kiss on his lips. Yoshige cleared his throat behind them. He bent down to pick up the stolen goods and money to be returned to the shop.

“Well…that was handled very well, Tobi.” The man complimented, “But you’re not really a nukenin are you?”

Obito scratched the back of his head, “Not exactly…I just haven’t lived in my village for quite some time.”

“Me neither.” Rin added, “Actually, Yoshige…if you could keep this to yourself…you should know that Tobi and I are Leaf shinobi. We’re still loyal to our village and the Hokage.”

“You’re-? What are two Leaf ninja doing out here in the middle of nowhere?” He was surprised.


“Ah-ha!” Yoshige tapped his fist in his palm, solving the puzzle, “I knew it! You were never strangers! You were running off like scamps into the sunset.” He shrugged, “I won’t complain. You’ve made Shincha a much safer place since you arrived.”

They thanked him. Sesshu came to stand beside Yoshige and warned, “Never repeat this information. It could get any one of us killed out here.”

“I’m not stupid, doggy.” Yoshige replied, folding his arms, “Huh. Well that explains the talking dog at last…you’re natives of Konohagakure…”

They walked back up the street towards the pavilion. Junichi had come looking for them.

“I poured Tonushi’s parents a drink.” Junichi said it with a small grin, “I heard what he did.”

“Tobi scared the daylights out of those boys.” Yoshige confirmed.

Rin looked at Junichi, “You know who else you should pour a drink for?”

“A certain married couple I know.”

The rain clouds that had rolled in only broke after the reception had ended. By that time, Rin and Obito had already been delivered to their house with their gifts and leftovers for dinner. Nozomi and Yoshige had dropped off Rin’s formal kimono and uchikake before running home. It was a much stronger storm than they had expected.

“I’m not sure where I’ll put this.” Rin fidgeted with the box that contained her expensive robes, “It’s funny that you get to wear it once…and then you want to loan it out to people!”

“Maybe that’s why everyone else was excited to do it.” Obito wondered.

They put the food away while listening to the sound of wind and rain somersaulting outside. Sesshu quickly fell asleep on his favorite rug. He had overindulged on scraps at the reception.

Rin shuffled down the hallway and set the storage box down on her bed. She dusted her hands and sighed happily. While at first it had seemed to be a lot of hassle, the wedding had been lots of fun. ‘That’s it. We’re married now.’ She thought as her face heated up, ‘Obito was so great all day long while I was melting. He made it seem easy when he looked after me…’
She had gotten the feeling even before they had started dating that he would make a good husband. Today, effortlessly, Obito continued proving her theory true. It made her heart flutter when she remembered the events of the day. He was himself. Happy. Nervous. Angry. Mask-less. Obito had been genuine in front of her and everyone around them.

Rin was quite surprised when he had shown compassion to the Iwa genin. She could write it off as mercy shown on his wedding day, for karma’s sake, maybe. But Obito had despised Iwagakure as much as she did, and letting another crime go unpunished would be a rare decision on their part. All the same, she was glad he had not pummeled the juvenile delinquent.

She glanced out the window to see sheets of water coming down. It was not yet dusk but it was dark outside, and Rin was grateful they’d had good weather for most of the day.

With a small yawn, she tried to reach and undo the obi of her party kimono. The belt was much fancier than anything she had ever worn before and had been tied too securely for her to grasp. Grumbling, Rin went down the hall and turned into Obito’s room. She needed to ask for help or she would end up sleeping in her dress.

There she found her husband who had worked out his own clasps and ties. Obito had gotten his haori jacket and hakama off, and had nearly opened his kimono before he noticed Rin’s presence. He stopped and gave her a surprised look. Rin folded her hands, a bit embarrassed, “Obito…I need some assistance.”

“Oh! No problem.” He smiled and walked over to her, “What has you stuck?”

“This obi is ridiculous.” Rin told him, “Can you please help me get it off?”

“Sure.” Obito stood behind her and took a look at it, “This is pretty sophisticated…” He began tugging to test where it would come undone. When he found a bit of give, Obito slowly unfastened it and handed the slack of the sash to Rin while he worked. She looked down at the floor, but in her peripheral vision she could see Obito’s bare leg.

‘Hm. Haven’t seen that before.’ She noted, stealing a glimpse of his right leg afterwards, ‘And this is the artificial leg he wouldn’t show me back then…’ She found it quite minimal; the design was streamlined and served its purpose.

“There you go, Rin.” Obito told her, having fully removed the belt.

She took it from him shyly, murmuring thanks. Inwardly Rin was appalled by her sudden timidity, ‘What the heck? I saw some skin and I…I’m like a bashful kid…’

“Hey.” He gave her a small smile, “Are you alright?”

“I am.”

“You’re…” He poked her cheek gently, “Blushing a little.”

Rin whacked his hand away from her face, “Sorry, but you’re mistaken. It’s makeup.”

“It’s definitely your face.”

“No. It’s not. I’m going to wash it off now.” She growled.

Rin turned about and rushed to her room. She set the obi down and stripped off her kimono in a hurry. Rin pulled on a pale pink night robe and tried not to panic. Her attempt to order the kimono
properly was just awful. She let it rest beside the formalwear box on her bed.

‘I bet he…expects me to stay in his room from now on.’ She thought nervously, ‘Well I’ve done that before…but…nothing happened. He didn’t do anything.’ Since they had married, however, Rin had a sinking suspicion Obito was not going to be as hesitant as he had been before, ‘I just don’t understand why I’m uneasy now! When I was his girlfriend I was prepared to go all the way! I wasn’t scared…I mean, I’m not scared. It just…feels different now.’

In the bathroom she washed her face contemplatively, knowing there was a very good chance she had blushed straight through the sheer powder she had on. Her eye makeup took a while to budge. Once her face was clean she ran water at the tub. As it filled she quickly scrubbed herself down before settling in the water. For a short while Rin could not relax. It felt like her shoulders were frozen with tension.

She unwound bit by bit as she listened to the rain.

“Rin?” She heard Obito’s voice through the door.

Rin submerged herself up to her neck, “Come in!”

He slid the door open and looked at her with slight concern. Obito was shirtless but had black pajama bottoms on. He stood in the doorway when he spoke, “Are you okay?”

She nodded, “Yeah.”

He smiled, “We don’t have to do anything, Rin.” She was surprised he had figured it out, “Let’s just go to sleep. I’m so tired. I can’t believe how much this day took out of me.”

“You’re not hungry, Obito? We have stuff we can make for dinner.”

“No. Sleep is all I need.”

“No bath?”

He chuckled, “Will you be mad if I don’t wash up?”

“I couldn’t tell if you smelled before. It was kind of a sweaty day.” With one powerful sniff she determined that her husband was not offensive at the moment, “Skip it. Get some rest, mister.”

“Alright then…” He turned and then stopped, “Come to my room when you finish up.”

Rin nodded meekly, “I will.”

Obito shut the door behind him.

Her heart pounded, ‘Whoa. That was kind of sexy.’ She soaked until her muscles no longer ached. ‘He gave me a look right there, over his shoulder…huh. I liked that.’ Rin smiled to herself, ‘My, my he has grown up so much…I remember when he used to use that dropper in his eyes all the time…or when he’d grind his teeth at Kakashi when he was angry…’

She drained the tub and stood, cocooning herself in a towel. ‘I feel better now. I think I psyched myself out earlier…’ Obito had never given her a reason to be nervous around him. ‘He’s very honorable. It’s silly for me to fret about this, really.’

After she dried off, Rin redressed in her night robe. She toweled her hair dry and brushed her teeth, knowing that she was running out of things to do to stall. As she stepped out into the hall she noted
all the lights in the house had been extinguished. Counting about 14 steps along the wall, Rin arrived at Obito’s room, which she now figured was her room too.

Blind in the dark, she marched forward until she found the bed. Rin slipped under the blanket and lay still for a moment, trying to discern if Obito was asleep. His breathing was slow and peaceful. She reached out her hand and touched his back, between his shoulder blades. Muscle beneath smooth skin; she withdrew her hand anxiously, ‘Wow.’

A minute passed before she got over her nerves. He really was sleeping, she deduced. Rin scooted closer, pressing her nose gently to his skin, ‘Nope…he doesn’t smell bad.’ She folded one of her hands beneath her cheek, as she always did before sleep, and shut her eyes. The rain lulled her into dreams.

Cricket songs had replaced the rain. Without opening her eyes, Rin woke and listened to the quieter sounds of the night. She had rolled over at some point and pulverized a pillow beneath her chin. She could also feel Obito behind her, holding her around her midsection. His breath whistled softly on the back of her neck.

Even with her head in a drowsy fog, Rin felt a small surge of elation. This situation was making a lot of sense to her. She had snuggled with Obito plenty since she had moved in, but their current embrace was true perfection. Maybe it was because they were exhausted by the long day they’d had, or maybe it was because they had bound themselves in the most profound way possible, but Rin knew she was home.

His breathing changed. Obito stirred and with a yawn he tightened his arms around Rin. The full length of his body pressed against her. His chest was warm on her back. For a few moments she feigned sleep while he made sleepy sounds, teetering on the edge of consciousness. Rin did not expect him to speak; his voice was rough, “You’re awake.”

“Mm-hmm…”

He pressed his lips on the exposed part of her neck and trailed kisses down to her shoulder. She felt him smile against her skin.

Rin stretched a little to wake up and then flipped her hair off her neck, “Do that again, Obito.”

He paused, decoding her message, and then began to kiss his way back up. His hands moved and found a spot where her robe hung open; they settled on the skin of her stomach.

Rin took all of a moment to think about how to proceed. She didn’t feel so tired anymore and she was quite relaxed. It was a very suitable time, in her opinion, to receive her husband’s attention.

Obito froze when he noticed Rin had unknotted the tie to her robe. He watched as she shrugged off a sleeve, and then feasted his eyes on her uncovered body in the dim light. He nearly had coronary failure when she shifted to lay on her back, naked, and looked up at him self-assuredly.

“Um…Rin…”

“Hmm?” She smiled, looping her arms around his neck.

He took a deep breath, “I told you before that we don’t have to do anything.”

“You only said that…” Rin pulled him down slowly, “Because you thought I was nervous.”
“But you were.” Obito pointed out, his face hovering inches from hers.

“For a little while, I was.” Her eyes were mischievous. “Now I’m not.”

His breathing was unsteady. Obito balanced himself above her and kissed her, hoping to satisfy Rin and distract himself from the fact that she was more ready than he was.

Rin enjoyed the kiss for a minute or so before speaking again, “I bet you wouldn’t second-guess yourself if you just…” She guided his left hand to her breast, “Went ahead and tried…”

The childish, terrified look on his face faded gradually. Obito wore an inquisitive expression afterwards as he sank down and settled. Rin stroked his hair contentedly and allowed him to take the time he needed.

It was round and perky and very, very soft, he determined. He ran his thumb along the curve of her flesh and lightly passed over the nipple. Obito looked up when she inhaled sharply and tilted her head back. He supposed he was going about it the right way. He squeezed gently, rolled his palm over it and grinned when Rin stared up at him, dumbstruck.

“That feels good?”

“So good. Now the other.”

“Oh.” He hesitated, “My other hand might feel weird when I touch you…”

Rin seized his artificial arm and put his hand where she wanted it. “It’s different,” She told him, “But it’s…just what I need.”

Obito leaned down and kissed her while his hands continued, and she encouraged him with quiet sighs. Rin let her hands roam up his arms and over his shoulders, greedy for the heat coming off of his skin. His touches felt good but Rin thought he was being too careful. After a deep kiss that left her tingling everywhere, she wiggled from beneath him, repositioning herself so that his face was even with her chest.

“Use your mouth now…” She demanded in a throaty breath.

He looked bewildered again, but she persuaded him with guiding touches and soft sounds. Once his lips touched her skin Rin writhed with the feeling, and Obito realized he really liked the way she expressed her enjoyment. He sucked and caressed, reveling in her reactions. He tormented her playfully, finally at ease with the idea of sex, and acquainted himself with her superb breasts. Rin locked her hands in his hair as Obito trailed down with his tongue, gliding down her chest to her stomach.

He kissed her navel; held her waist as he kissed down her hip and to her thigh, staying there when she moaned inaudibly. Obito scooted backwards and continued to kiss down the span of her leg. His hands skimmed along her frame, learning her shape. Rin was pure smoothness under his lips, and after he had learned the landscape of her slim legs, he moved up again. His wife had stopped guiding him altogether so that his curiosity could direct him.

Past his shyness, Obito studied her womanhood, getting over the fact that he had never seen one before in his life. He traced a finger over the tiny patch of down there, ‘This hair is so light-colored.’ And then down the supple lip below, ‘Kind of…wet.’ Rin stopped him. He looked up at her face and saw that her cheeks were crimson.

“Is this not okay, Rin?” He asked, referring to the spot he had found.
She shook her head, reluctant to explain at first, “It’s…fine…but I don’t want you to touch there… right now.”

“It doesn’t feel good?”

“It feels very good. I’m just…I’m,” Rin huffed, trying to articulate properly, “I’m ready.”

“You’re ready?”

“For you,” She clarified, “I don’t want to play anymore.”

Obito stared at her. He had another three seconds of inward, spiraling confusion to contend with, ‘Rin wants to make love…and I know I want to, but,’ He looked down again, estimating, ‘How do people do this? How does it fit?’

“Obito…”

He looked up at her beautiful, beseeching face again. He took a deep breath. To hell with his nervousness, he thought. Obito knew enough. For his age, he couldn’t possibly be so ignorant as to not know what to do. The man stood up on his knees. He felt Rin’s eyes on him as he stripped down. There was slight apprehension on what Rin thought of his automail limbs, which contrasted noticeably against his pale skin.

She didn’t seem to notice; she reached for him. He folded under her touch and settled down again, feeling her chest brush against his when they kissed. While their mouths were occupied, Rin slipped her hand down his stomach, arriving at a very urgent erection. She stroked him just to understand what it was like, but Obito made a surprised sound in his throat and he nearly head-butted her. He apologized for the close call. Rin just smiled. She touched him again.

He decided he could withstand the contact, and they kissed for a short while longer before Rin started to mutter, getting impatient. She had positioned him and was whispering, telling him to follow through. Obito did so rather quickly. He slid into her and watched as her eyes widened; her nails sunk into his back, unfairly sharp. He kind of got the idea of why she had been ready. She was drenched, ‘So when I touched her…Rin got excited.’

It was easy to move. He probably should have done it slowly and carefully, but almost immediately Obito realized he could not help the pace he set. Rin had not admonished him for it. She threw her head back, gasping, maybe in pain, but then adjusted after a moment. She had stopped clawing his back, and instead settled her hands on his shoulders. He attached his mouth to whatever was in reach while she thrashed; her mouth, her neck, her breasts, her wrists. He thrust wantonly, overwhelmed by the pleasure of being surrounded by a space so tight and hot.

Obito thought he would be able to continue up until Rin did something that was far too visually stimulating. It must have started to feel good. She didn’t say so, but if her moans and lip-biting weren’t indicator enough, she communicated it to him when she arched her back. It would forever be etched in his memory; the way her breasts seemed to float weightlessly as she bent, making an exquisite crescent with her body. Her eyes were closed; her rosy bow lips were parted. The unstoppable wave of euphoria crashed into him and Obito tipped over the edge.

He came with a harsh but muffled cry. He slid his hands along that arch that aroused him, her skin so impossibly soft, and at the end of her back he palmed and squeezed her bottom while he moaned. Rin was into it. She was kissing him ferociously. After a time the sensation died down and Obito collapsed onto Rin, resting his head between her breasts. None of it had lasted very long, but Obito thought maybe that was the price of having no experience. The duration could not possibly have
mattered as much as the feelings did...and there had been no shortage of them.

They were only able to stay still and breathe for a long while afterwards.

Rin rubbed soothing circles on his scalp. It felt wonderful but it was putting him to sleep. His face was cushioned by her breast and his arms had cinched around Rin without any intention of setting her free.

“Did that feel really good because we’re in love?” He mumbled.

Her voice was scratchy, “In our case...yes...”

He was beginning to feel terribly sleepy, “Did you like it, Rin?”

She nodded, “Yeah. I want to do it again.”

Obito quailed, afraid of disappointing her, “I can’t...right now...”

“I know you can’t. Physically, that would be kind of impossible.” Rin mused, “But there’s always tomorrow...”

He smiled widely. Dream had become reality.

“Hmm...” She draped her arms behind his neck, “I’m so happy. That did feel good...”

“Was it as nice as when I did this?” He ran his tongue over the nearest nipple and she shrieked.

“Uh...” Her voice shook, “Both ways are...really...good for me.”

“I love doing it.” He admitted, “I’m not sure what I was worried about.”

“Me neither.”

He helped her paw at the blanket that had been discarded. They were covered by it once again when they fell asleep.

Marriage agreed with them. The house seemed to reorganize itself over the next few months. Many of Rin’s belongings had found homes in the room she shared with her husband. More flowerpots sat on the windowsills.

Sesshu had learned his lesson early on that Obito and Rin could not make love quietly. In the beginning it seemed to happen every day, and the dog often pulled his favorite rug out the front door and to the porch. He slept outside to avoid their nocturnal activities.

Rin had been a wedded woman for about eight months when she went into town one day to sell the last of the vegetables. Char always got first crack at their radishes. Once she had sold him what he needed, she moved on to Yoshige and Nozomi’s house. Nozomi wanted to buy some produce while her brother was out. They got to chatting after the sale.

“Are you and Tobi planning on children?” Nozomi asked her, “I've been wondering...”

“Well...” Rin furrowed her brow, “We’ve been trying since we got married. Tobi said he didn’t want to wait.”

“Did he?”
“Yeah. The very next day he said we should do our best,” She shrugged, “So much time has passed without results that…I just stopped thinking about it. I started to get crazy thinking that something was wrong with me.”

“Oh Rin…” Nozomi shook her head, “Sometimes it doesn’t happen easily. It can take many attempts.”

“We try every day.”

Her friend raised her eyebrows, “Oh…even on your unsafe days?”

“Especially.”

“Maybe it’s him.” Nozomi tapped her chin and then stood, “One moment…”

While her friend stepped into the parlor of the house Rin sat, stiff-backed and very offended, ‘Did she just accuse my husband of being infertile? I mean, it has me worried, but I don’t need her commentary!’

Nozomi returned with a small hemp bag and handed it to Rin. “These can help if he eats them. Pumpkin seeds are wonderful.” She advised, “I’m sure he can do it, Rin, but sometimes the body needs a little help! Make sure he eats lots of fruit and stays away from too much tea or alcohol…it can set you back.”

Rin was surprised as she accepted the bag of pumpkin seeds, “How did you learn this, Nozomi?”

“Gossiping with Emi-san! She knows every possible way one can manipulate a man, even his body.” Nozomi grinned, “She’s seen a lot in sixty years. Oh! And the most important thing…”

“What?”

“Go to the seaside market today and get oysters. Make him eat them.” Her friend said in all seriousness, “They’re the magic cure for every man. I wouldn’t be surprised if you were expecting the next day…”

Rin gave the woman a skeptical look.

“But if that doesn’t do it…you should get examined too.” Nozomi concluded.

“I will. I’ll stay open minded. Thanks, Nozomi.” Rin found her way out and moved on, keeping the advice in mind. She went from door to door and sold the last of her harvest.

Obito was off doing errand work for the Akatsuki again, so Rin considered what she should do until he returned. ‘He may be gone for another day or two…I guess I should go to the Ine market. I should at least try everything before I throw the towel in.’ That and she was kind of excited for some fresh seafood. It had been a while since she had tasted the ocean.

She stopped at the house and packed a tote. The money she had gotten from her produce sale could afford some delicacies from the fish market. She left a note for Obito in case he returned during her absence. Sesshu trotted beside her as they set out down the mountainside.

It was half a day’s walk to the shore northeast of the Land of Stone. The sunshine and clear sky were divine while hiking down the pine trail, but the cool breeze promised a cold winter to follow autumn. When they arrived in the fishing village called Ine, the market was bustling. Rin lithely picked her way through the crowds, asked someone where she could find oysters, and then found “the man
with big sideburns” as she had been directed. His stand was well-stocked. He was wiping his hands on a towel.

“Hello.” Rin gave a small wave, “You’re Kisei the oyster man?”

“Yup.” He was pretty big and intimidating, “And you’re a tiny woman I’ve never seen before.”

“Um…yeah…”

“You need oysters?” He put his hands on his hips, “How much? It’s a ryo apiece.”

She steeled herself and said, “I need…however many it takes to help a man make a baby.”

His frown looked to be permanent. After a few awkward moments of silence Kisei said, “You’ll want about ten.”

“That’d be great, thanks.”

The following day Obito had still not returned home. It did not bother Rin so much. She had complete faith that he could take care of himself. In the meantime she spent her day just how she liked. She trained with Sesshu for a while in the forest, working on his transformations and timing attacks.

Rin sat on a fallen tree covered in moss when it was break time. Her dog sat beside her, panting to cool down. She patted Sesshu’s head and watched as clouds rolled by.

“I wonder…” Rin looked at her dog’s forehead, parting some of the fur there, “You’re hair grew back over the seal. It’s been so long since you received it.”

“It probably doesn’t even work.”

“My dad wouldn’t have put it on you if it didn’t.”

The dog yawned, “Maybe you’re right, but now is not a good time for us to practice with it.”

“Why not?”

“You’re trying to have a pup! You need to take good care of yourself.” The dog reminded, “And your clan’s forbidden technique will consume so much chakra from the both of us…we’d be fools to think we’d recover properly.”

“But we’ve never tried it!”

“We can try it when we’re in a hopeless battle.” Sesshu suggested, “But not a moment sooner.”

Rin sighed and rested her hands on her knees. Sesshu had a good point. Forbidden jutsu could have devastating consequences. She ought to learn more about it only after she didn’t care what shape her body was in. It wouldn’t be fair to worry only about Obito’s health when she too needed to be fit.

At noon they returned to the house. Sesshu was distracted by an imprudent squirrel perched on the front step, and he tore after it like a maniac when it tried to flee. Rin went inside to begin preparing oysters.

She worked for a while juicing lemons and grating horseradish for a recipe she had read about.
‘We never got to eat like this when I lived with my family…it was red meat everyday…’ Rin felt a bit of nostalgia for her clan, ‘I bet Tsume hates me. I bet Kakashi never batted an eyelash after I left. I keep thinking maybe I should have said goodbye somehow…or at least sent them messages to say I’m alive.’

While shucking the oysters over a bowl, Rin heard shouting outside: “Ew! Sesshu get that out of here!”

She smiled to herself, ‘Obito’s back!’

She continued working, listening to the man and dog talk briefly. Obito came inside and immediately hugged Rin from behind. She chuckled, turning her head to catch his lips.

“Rin…” He squeezed her, “Did you miss me?”

“I did! I’m cooking for you right now!” Rin was chipper, “I hope it went smoothly.”

“It was relatively eventless.” He frowned, “But I caught Sesshu with a squirrel’s head outside. I’ve got no appetite after that.”

“Nasty…”

“So! What’s this?” Obito looked at what was coming together, “Clams in sauce?”

“Oysters, actually.”

“You went all the way to Ine for these?” He was surprised.

“Yeah! And the fish monger selling them was like seven feet tall!”

He cracked up. She lifted a plate with a set of chopsticks balanced on the edge. Obito tried one, chewing thoughtfully, “Its good. Horseradish is a…different choice.”

Rin tried one herself, “Whoa…that’s a bit stronger than what I intended.” She privately thought of how maybe she had ruined a good meal, but when she handed the plate to her husband and he polished it off quickly, Rin stopped worrying about it.

This sneaky strategy of healthy eating unfolded under Obito’s nose for the next few months. He complained when Rin limited, or forbade, alcohol consumption, but lightened up when she explained it was for a good cause. They returned to Ine for fish and oysters frequently, knowing the season would end once winter arrived. Obito had caught on to the fact that eating food from Ine usually led to wild nights of sex.

And though they waited patiently, nothing seemed to change. Rin would have short fits of hysterical rage whenever she menstruated; reviewing all of her medical knowledge, realizing it was what she didn’t know that was holding her back, in all likelihood. ‘I’ve done everything I could think of! We are the healthiest two people in this country, for heaven’s sake!’ Sometimes, on these sad days, Obito would try to start a conversation with her that often took a turn for the worse. He would hear a lot of “Zinc!” and “Forget it!” and “Murphy’s Law!”

Once wintertime set in, Shincha became a snowy mountaintop. Their efforts had slowed considerably, and though Obito still had hope and did his best, Rin’s expectations had taken a nosedive. When she saw children playing in town or at the school she would fold her arms and say, “They’re probably too much work anyway…”
As snow fell on a windless morning, Obito was frying eggs for breakfast. Sesshu was spread out on the floor of the kitchen, hoping that bacon was soon to follow. Rin stepped into the room to wish them good morning. Her eyes widened. She turned on her heel and walked back out. Sesshu exchanged a glance with Obito. The man turned the heat off on the stove and followed Rin back to the bedroom. She was hiding beneath a heavy blanket on the bed, whimpering.

“Good morning, Rin! I thought maybe you’d want to eat before you work on your house calls…”

“No thanks.”

He was crestfallen, “Did you…want something else?”

“Jam and crackers.”

“I’m sorry. I should have asked you first.”

She was shaking her head under the blanket, “No! It’s fine! You make what we always eat…but today it smells so bad.”

“It smells bad?”

“Do you know if those eggs were spoiled?” She poked her head out from under the quilt, “They’re rank! I feel like I’m going to-”

“I got them a day ago, Rin.” He frowned, “Come on. I’ll make you something else.”

When she refused to enter the kitchen again, Obito made her the damn jam and crackers and brought it to her in bed. He was annoyed that she was being so suddenly finicky. It was unusual. He and Sesshu enjoyed their eggs and watched as Rin ran out of the house shortly after that, probably to avoid the odor.

Rin spent the entire morning going from door to door, and each family sat her in front of a fire to warm up before she did examinations. Her third patient of the day, Tonushi, had come down with a stomach flu. She advised his parents how best to treat him and how to avoid catching it themselves. Tonushi’s father, Hirano Seike, had put Tonushi to bed and was feeding Fumitake, their toddler, who was beginning to like solid foods. He made choo-choo sounds as he popped tiny bits of mushroom in the baby’s mouth.

Atsumi, Mister Seike’s town-beauty wife, chatted with Rin by the fireplace as she knitted a scarf.

“Thank you for always looking after my boy, Rin.” The woman sighed, “I’ll never forget what trouble he caused on your wedding day.”

“Not at all! Tonushi hasn’t done anything like that since.” Rin pointed out.

Atsumi’s expression was stern, “Oh no…not after how we disciplined him…he’ll never do it again.”

Rin felt a twinge of sympathy for the child. He had probably been beaten back to his senses, but Tonushi had parents who loved him and wanted him to grow up with accountability. She wished to be a parent like that herself someday.

“How have you been, Rin?”

“Quite well, thank you.” Rin paused, “Well…I got a little sick this morning.”

“Oh? Is it the same flu as Tonushi’s?”
“No, I mean… I became nauseous after I smelled Tobi’s cooking.” She explained, “He claims it was fine but I still say those eggs were spoiled.”

Atsumi looked at Rin over the rim of her glasses, “Is that all?”

“I think so. I’m not really sick.”

“You probably aren’t. Have you noticed any other aversions lately?”

“No, I’m fine. I know what you’re thinking.” Rin replied, “But Tobi and I haven’t had any luck. No baby yet.”

“Char-san said you bought two pickles from the shop for a snack last week.”

“What has that got to do with anything? Really?”

“Pregnant women love pickles.”

“That’s a myth.”

“I say it’s a fact.” Atsumi smiled, “I’ve got two kids now and I know I was eating them like crazy!”

“That definitely makes you an authority figure, Atsumi-chan.”

Atsumi put her needlework down and held her chin as she thought, “Well it seems to me you just can’t believe it might be happening, since all you expect is failure.”

Rin sighed, sagging in the armchair she was settled in.

“Rin, listen. You must have noticed something. You probably think it’s nothing, but you’re allowed to get your hopes up a little.”

“I’d prefer not to.”

“Haven’t you seen any physical changes at all?”

“Atsumi…I haven’t. I’m sore from my period. That’s it.”

“I doubt it.”

“Sheesh! Why can’t you just accept what I’m saying?”

“At least examine your breasts.” Atsumi insisted, “It’s tell-tale! If you’ve changed colors you know you can’t deny it.”

“What the heck are you talking about?”

“Nipples turn brown and they get big and sore. Let’s check!”

Rin’s face was the epitome of disbelief, “You can’t mean-”

“I’ll see for myself, that way you can’t keep denying it.”

“Please no…”

Atsumi led her to the washroom, wordlessly removed her husband from the sink, and then shut the door once Rin was inside. Seike’s confusion was audible for a minute.
“Lift up your shirt.” Atsumi demanded, “Enough of your denial!”

Rin grumbled, supposing she had known the woman long enough, and once her sweater and undershirt were rolled up Atsumi took a look.

“Told you.” Atsumi smirked.

Rin glanced at the mirror, “Hm. They’re about the same.”

“You’ve got the look.”

“No.”

“I’m certain of it!”

“This is stupid…”

Atsumi compared her own to Rin’s, “See? Pink. Brown.”

“Come on! Everyone’s different.”

Seike was knocking on the door asking if they were alright. They neatened themselves and exited the room, arguing, ignoring Mister Hirano’s concern. Rin abhorred how the motherly know-it-all insisted she could know so much about another’s body. Even though she had not charged today for examining Tonushi, Rin was deeply considering it now. Atsumi resumed with the pleasantries and then Rin felt bad about asking for money. She didn’t try. She bid them good day, pulled on her coat and ran out into the snowfall.

‘That woman can be such a pain…’

She walked down the street to Char’s convenience store. She said hello to Char who sat peacefully behind the counter with a small jigsaw puzzle to keep him busy, waiting for customers to visit. Livid, she bought a pickle and a pregnancy test.

When Rin returned home she found Obito outside, breathing fire to create a walkway in the knee-high snow. Sesshu was around as well, hopping through the white fluff like a puppy. Her husband waved to her and ceased his jutsu.

“Hi! Are you feeling better?” Obito asked her.

She hugged him in greeting before proceeding to the house, “I’m fine. I’m sorry if I offended you earlier, Obito.”

“Don’t worry about it,” He looked at her shopping bag, “What did you get?”

“A pickle.” She said dismissively, striding inside.

Rin stomped her feet and shook snow from her shoulders at the entryway carpet. She pulled off her boots and made a beeline for the restroom. When Obito and Sesshu came in from the snow they too politely tidied themselves, brushing snow from their person and dog respectively.

Obito put on a pot of water for tea and wondered why Rin had been in such a hurry. She had left her pickle on the counter. ‘That’s weird... usually she wolfs them down right away.’ She must have forgotten it. He watched the snowfall at the window for a time, imagining how deep it would get and how he ought to keep up with melting it.
He poured the boiling water over tealeaves and sat down, wondering what Rin was up to. He waited patiently until she reappeared; looking dazed, and then she stopped to stand in front of him.

Obito smiled uncertainly at her, “What happened?”

“Well…” She sighed, “I let Atsumi see my boobs today.”

He stared at her, aghast.

“It’s okay. I saw hers too.”

Obito put his tea down, digesting the information.

“There’s a good reason, I swear.” Rin qualified, “It’s because I’m pregnant.”

His stupefaction gradually evolved into excited, soundless shock. She watched as his face revealed every minute emotion that was blossoming in his mind. ‘Oh Obito…’ She loved him. She loved his honesty. It was impossible for him to hide what he was thinking. There was no doubt that all that hope he had been clinging to for nearly a year was instantly justified now. She caught traces of what looked like pride in his expression, translating to: Oh yes I did…

There was an organic and easy silence between them. Rin picked up her pickle from the table, folded back the wrapper and bit into it.

Obito was in an absolute tizzy after finding out. He told just about everyone he knew and then got all of Shincha jazzed up. Rin did not exactly appreciate the pomp and attention, but it was fun that her husband became even more hell-bent on satisfying her every whim…and he was already good at it.

The only foods around the house were the ones that met her smell and taste approval. She was bundled everywhere she went, waited on day and night and generally treated like royalty. She was conscious of her mean behavior. Rin was so ashamed when she snapped at him or reacted indifferently to things he was happy about, but when all she could think of was her soreness and expanding midsection, there was no way Obito was catching a break.

Her first trimester was horrific. Towards the end, Obito was experiencing a variant of Stockholm’s syndrome: becoming a captive of Rin’s but still loving her in spite of the mistreatment. There were some days Rin was too cranky to even acknowledge his existence, and a few times he went to the shed at the back of the house to weep because of the neglect. Other days Rin scrutinized him like the harshest inspector, becoming an unforgiving tyrant. And rarely, on the least often but most precious of occasions, Rin was her usual sweet self.

She became rounder and more stable. At about five months in, Rin was well-adjusted and mellow. Obito returned to his normal state as well, no longer crying or tormenting himself in response to Rin’s moods. She felt a little less sick, but sometimes asked for back rubs when she couldn’t tolerate the aches. He had only checked in with the Akatsuki once since Rin had become pregnant. They hadn’t needed much from him anyway and so Obito swiftly returned home.

It was a mild spring. Most days they would go for walks whenever they could. They visited friends in town but avoided Atsumi and her family at all costs, knowing Rin could be quickly provoked by the I-did-it-before-you mother. They bought supplies locally and set up the baby’s room in the bedroom Rin had first occupied. Blankets, clothing, bottles, a bassinet and other assorted necessities were picked up from the village, and Rin made it her mission to organize the room nicely.
There was one thing they could not find in Shincha.

“Diapers.” Junichi told them when they had stopped in Char’s shop, “Everyone is asking, but we just don’t have them…at least, not enough of ‘em. They sell too fast to resupply, and we need to get them from the Maple Village. You might as well go straight there and stock up when the time comes.”

Of all things to worry about, Rin thought, but Obito put her concerns to rest and assured he would get them.

And so on a warm spring day Obito and Rin parted in the garden and he set out. He had forgone his mask knowing that he wouldn’t be recognized by anyone. Obito had been to the Maple Village a few times, but that was before he had been reunited with Rin. He had cleverly brought a ninja-tool scroll with him to seal away large quantities of what they needed. It would make for fewer return trips. It was a three-day journey there.

‘Wow they really built this place up!’ He thought to himself, noticing the dojo had been redone and the main street of the village had a variety of new stores.

Obito bought himself lunch at a sushi bar and then investigated the shops. He zeroed in on a maternity store and nearly bought them out of not only diapers but medicine, linens and toys as well. Maybe it was too much, but he could always sell the surplus to Char’s shop for other families, he thought.

Next door, a beautiful robe in a display window caught Obito’s eye. It was a woman’s robe with a rainbow of floral embroidery. He went inside the shop and took a look at it. ‘I’m not sure if this will fit Rin properly now…but once the baby comes she might like to wear it.’ It was too pretty to pass up and it would remind her of the garden. Obito bought it and stored it away with the rest of his haul.

He had turned west to visit the dojo on the far side of town. The crowds had thinned out as the day wore on, and he could smell frying dough at the sweet shop blocks ahead of him. He smiled. It reminded him of his childhood. Obito thought twice about it, realizing it wasn’t just the atmosphere and scents bringing him back to the old days; it was something he had seen. Long, white hair.

He stopped and focused his eyes on a person who he recognized. Standing in front of a stand a few meters away, haggling down the price of the tobacco he wanted, was Jiraiya.

‘Jiraiya-sama is here! What do I-?’ Obito felt panic shoot through him, ‘I shouldn’t. I haven’t reached out to anyone, not even Minato-sensei. It wouldn’t make sense for me to just pop up out of the blue…no good could come of it.’

But there was an overpowering nostalgia tempting him to reach out to Leaf; to distinguish the past. Jiraiya was his teacher’s master, the man they had spent time with when Minato could not take them on missions…the same person they turned to for dirty novels as well as wisdom. Jiraiya could probably handle it, Obito thought.

‘What do I say?’ He wondered. A lot had happened.

Obito took a few steps towards the Toad Sage, willing himself to stay calm. When he was a few paces away and Jiraiya had successfully bargained for his indulgence, preparing to leave, they were bound to walk into each other. Obito knew that he had to set himself apart from the crowd. He had to make himself known before this fleeting moment passed.

“How are you, Gama-sennin?”
Jiraiya paused. His eyes fell on Obito and skimmed him over, initially devoid of any friendliness or recognition, but then he realized he was being approached by a young and respectful person. The older man’s frown disappeared, for the sake of courtesy, and was replaced by the well-meaning smile that he gave most people.

“Oh. Do I know you?”

Obito swallowed and gave a slight bow, trying to sell it, “Yes, you should.”

Jiraiya was confused, “Really? Damn, I’m sorry. I am just having a rotten time of putting names to faces these days…”

“That’s okay. I didn’t always look like this.” Obito pointed to the scars on his face, “You knew me when I was a kid. Can you recall?”

He was really trying his best, scouring his memory for anything that resembled the person he was talking to. Jiraiya shut one eye and looked Obito over again, failing to pinpoint his identity, “You’re killing me, kid. So you’re from Leaf?”

Obito nodded, “I am. I see that you don’t remember…”

“What do you expect from a man my age?” Jiraiya griped, “I apologize if I hurt your feelings, but you don’t exactly-” He stopped dead. The young man looked at him with a fully developed Sharingan in his right eye. Jiraiya closed his mouth which had been hanging agape, “Er-hem! You’re an Uchiha.”

“Uchiha Obito.” He clarified, “Minato-sensei taught me.”

Jiraiya just about shit himself. He grabbed Obito roughly by the arm, pulled him closer, and gave him a good, thorough look. Slightly terrified, Obito allowed Jiraiya to hold his chin and turn his face side to side, examining, poking his chest, tapping the top of his head to measure his height. He pulled Obito from the side of the road to the privacy of an empty alley.

“What the fucking hell are you doing here?” Jiraiya screeched, “You’re supposed to be dead! You were reported KIA!”

“I know!” Obito waved his hands, “I’m sorry but I couldn’t just let you go by without saying anything!”

Stymied, Jiraiya rubbed his temples as he spoke, “So this is when I ask…how are you alive?”

“That’s a long story.”

“Why didn’t you reach out to the village?” He jabbed.

With a hurt expression, Obito looked down, “I couldn’t…”

“Bullshit.” Jiraiya looked angry, “You were needed there.”

“You’re hardly ever around either!”

“At least I take responsibility and show up once in a while; I don’t play dead!”

“I can explain,” Obito promised, “If you want me to.”

The Toad Sage huffed before stepping out onto the road again, “For Minato’s sake…you had
They went straight to a bar. Without divulging anything about Leaf first, Jiraiya demanded that Obito give a true and proper account of what happened.

He explained everything: from being pinned under a boulder and gifting his Sharingan to Kakashi, being discovered by the Akatsuki who used him as a henchman, the years without memory, regaining it, and then settling in Shincha to protect people he had grown close to. When he mentioned Rin’s name Jiraiya held up a hand in Obito’s face, warning him to stop.

He refilled his glass with sake and downed it all at once. He refilled it again. Jiraiya returned his attention to Obito, “Go on! You were saying some bizarre stuff about your teammate…”

“Well…” Obito scratched his cheek. “Rin realized who I was after I helped her save a patient.”

“She did?” Jiraiya was glaring. “And did she send any word to Leaf about your status? No!” He sipped his wine again and slammed his glass down on the counter, “It’s unbelievable! How is it even possible that two of Minato’s students could be so unreliable! Kakashi puts you both to shame in terms of duty!”

“But he always did.” Obito reminded him.

“Argh!” He was incredibly frustrated. “Obito…I really just want to strangle you. I’d never hurt a woman, least of all Rin, but still…you really dropped the ball. Your absence is inexcusable.”

“Please don’t lecture me on that.” Obito replied icily, “Anyone but you can lecture me on that.”

“You know what, kid?” Jiraiya tipped back more sake and smiled. “Fuck you.”

“How can you accuse me of being any more selfish than you are? That’s a joke.”

“But you are.” Jiraiya handed him a big, fat, fully-endorsed reality check.

Obito let his head fall to the counter with a painful thump. It was true. He was leading the most selfish, wonderful life he ever could have wished for. He was just as guilty as he was happy.

“Alright, enough of that…” Jiraiya pulled him upright by the back of his shirt. “So you and Rin found each other. Super unlikely…but you did. It’s just as well. Then what happened?”

“We took care of the people in Shincha and lived together.” Obito lowered his voice. “Then…we got married.”

Jiraiya took Obito’s full, untouched glass of wine and drank from it.

They were silent for a while, listening to the ambient noise of the tavern.

Jiraiya sighed while refilling both glasses, “You married your teammate.”

“I did.”

“I wish I could have done that.” Jiraiya mused. “But she always beat the hell out of me.”

Obito had heard of how Tsunade would not hesitate to bring Jiraiya within an inch of his life. He shuddered and then sipped his drink.
“What are you doing out here if you and Rin live in Shincha?” Jiraiya asked, “The Maple Village is out of the way.”

“You’re right, it is out of the way, but this is the only place that had the supplies we needed.” Obito admitted as his voice grew quieter with each word, “We’re…expecting…our baby…in four months…”


“I am not! It was her idea.”

“It was your idea. It’s obvious.” The Sage deadpanned, “Nice try.”

They gulped simultaneously. When they were out of wine they ordered a new bottle.

“You’re awfully young to be a father.” Jiraiya reminded him.

“I know. But I’m happy.”

“Well that’s what matters…but I guess you have no intention of raising your child in Leaf?”

“No.”

“No clan association?”

“No.”

“Shinobi training?”

“Maybe. Just for protection.”

“Pfft!” Jiraiya cracked up, “I can hardly believe all of this. It’s so fucked up.”

“I don’t think it is.” Obito grumbled, “What are you doing all the way out here, Jiraiya-sama?”

“I’m…” He trailed off, “Getting my head right.”

The young man was intrigued, “You are?”

“I’ve basically been an alcoholic for these past years. I couldn’t write. I couldn’t think.” Jiraiya confessed, “Not since Minato died.”

Obito’s heart lurched. So this was what the world outside had to offer; the world beyond his perfect world. The tidings Jiraiya had to share were not going to be very good, Obito knew.

Teary-eyed, Obito asked, “What happened to him?”

“He was doing alright. He was Hokage. He married Kushina. Kakashi was in his ANBU and nothing could touch him.” The Sage recalled, “And I hate to fill you with pre-delivery fear, but…he died the night his son was born. He and Kushina both died.”

Obito’s hands fisted, feeling an empathetic and powerful fury fill him, “How?”

“The theory goes like this, from what the Third gathered…we understood that a seal weakens when a woman is in labor…but Minato had that under control. The Kyuubi escaped, despite his efforts, and attacked the Leaf Village. They sacrificed their lives to seal the Fox inside their baby.” Jiraiya
recounted, “The reason it stinks of foul-play is that both of Kushina’s attendants and ANBU guards outside were found murdered. I suspect someone knew what was happening that night and took advantage…”

“Oh my god…” Obito held his head in his hands.

“Yeah. I couldn’t deal with it. I thought about killing myself after I learned all of that.” Jiraiya admitted, “I never should have left them. If I had been around maybe I would have noticed something wasn’t right…someone was watching.”

“Who could have planned something like that?”

“An Uchiha, they say.” He replied grimly, “They can control the Fox with their Sharingan. Oddly enough…I don’t think your clan was responsible. Many of your clansmen even have alibis for that night, generally speaking. I dug up some info. It just…didn’t add up. Of course, the council accused them anyway and it all went to shit behind the scenes…and my Sensei is now the acting Hokage and trying to keep everyone calm. Years passed and they just couldn’t rebuild trust…until finally…” He stopped himself.

‘I can’t tell him.’ Jiraiya refused to speak about what had become of the Uchiha clan, ‘What would be the point of bringing Obito down any lower? Not when he’s outside of the situation entirely…”

“Jiraiya-sama?”

He snapped out of his contemplation and looked at the younger man.

“Did something happen?”

“No.” Jiraiya lied, “But I don’t think it’ll change anytime soon…the friction between Leaf and your clan…”

Obito sat in silence, reflecting on what Jiraiya was saying to him. There was tension between Leaf and the Uchiha. It was disappointing. Obito truly hoped a member of his clan wasn’t responsible for Minato and Kushina’s early demise, or he would be very interested in flaying the culprit. Jiraiya had indicated this scenario was not likely, so it eased his apprehension somewhat.

“It’s just one more reason for me to keep my distance.” Obito decided, “I can’t juggle the clan with Rin and the baby.”

“I guess that makes sense.”

“And the other reason…” He added.

“What other reason?”

“I am a henchman for the Akatsuki. If I returned to Konoha…if I build a life there and take missions, they would notice if I went missing…and they might suspect where I ended up.” Obito put it into perspective, “I’m keeping up appearances with them.”

“The Akatsuki…” Jiraiya muttered. The cogs in his head were beginning to turn, “Orochimaru was part of that organization…”

“He was until he left it. I saw his replacement.” Obito shook his head, “They’re a dreadful pack.”

“I want to keep tabs on that organization, considering they want to accumulate Tailed Beasts.”
Jiraiya announced, “It’ll help the kids.”

Confused, the younger man gave his attention to the Sage, “What kids are you talking about?”

“Minato’s son is named Naruto.” Jiraiya told him, “He is now the jinchuriki for the Kyuubi. He’s a little scrap now but I already caught him running away from the village once. I sent him home…but he brought an entourage with him.”

“An entourage, huh?” Obito chuckled.

“Yeah…it gave me such a headache…he found a boy-genius who has a rare Kekkei Genkai, as well as the jinchuriki for the Ichibi.”

“That’s…pretty weird.” Obito conceded, “And you brought them all to Leaf?”

“Where was I going to put ’em?”

“Right…but…maybe you should be with them now. They’re still so small.”

“I tried. I told you, I’m an alcoholic. It wasn’t working out.” Jiraiya gruffed at him, lighting up his pipe, “Those kids picked on me every chance they got because they could see what a bum I am. Once I clean up then I’ll consider checking on them. Sarutobi-sensei recommended that as well.”

“Hm. His name is Naruto…”Obito mumbled, “I bet the child of the Hokage has a pretty pampered life.”

“He’s living on public assistance.”

“What?” He was astonished.

“No one can know who he is. Every enemy Minato ever had would come running like someone rang a dinner bell. They’ll want revenge for the war, most likely. Naruto has his mother’s name for protection.” Jiraiya filled him in, “The Third’s looking after him and the other squirts. They’ll be okay.”

“There’s got to be…something I can do without being in Leaf…” Obito ground out, frustrated.

“Well…” Jiraiya blew out a line of smoke, “You could be my in.”

“Pardon?”

“With the Akatsuki. With Orochimaru. You’re only working for the Akatsuki now, right?” The Sage confirmed, “Then act as a double-agent and feed information between them. Screw them over and slow them down!” He recommended, “Orochimaru wouldn’t mind a low-maintenance, disposable informant. Give him good info he can work with, and you’ll be walking in the front door before long…”

“That could get dangerous.”

“It will get dangerous, but you seem to be…” Jiraiya gave him a sideways glance, “Quite dangerous yourself. You’ve been molded by an unpredictable life. You’d perform well in the ANBU, like Kakashi did.”

“Well that isn’t in the cards.” Obito sighed.

“Help me.” The Sage requested, “I’ve figured out I’m not a miracle worker. I need someone on my
side picking up the pieces with me.”

“If I do…” Obito was considering it, “Would you tell anyone about me in Leaf?”

“Maybe I shouldn’t. This would work better off the books, but…” He sighed, “I really should tell Kakashi about you two…”

Obito looked terrified.

Jiraiya sneered at him, “That face…that’s the face of someone who is too afraid to tell the truth to his friend. You’re scared that he’ll be angry at you, right? Right. Well he should! Kakashi should feel betrayed finding out that someone he mourns every day is not dead. That’s a shitty thing to do to your friend.”

“Enough!” Obito begged.

“No. I’m still pissed at you.” Jiraiya grunted, “I’m glad you’re alive…but I’m not letting you off the hook.”

“I’ll do it.” Obito told him, deadly serious, “I’ll get you intel that no one if Leaf will ever have. You’ll be way ahead of the curve, I swear it.” He lowered his eyes, “But don’t…tell Kakashi.”

“I won’t. It’d be cruel for him to find out indirectly. He deserves to see you in person…and you can apologize that way.” Jiraiya agreed, “I don’t care how you handle it. Just don’t wait until you’re an old man…I’ve found out that you can’t inspire as much change once you’re my age. Don’t let his life go by.”

Obito nodded, heartbroken, but still very much on the same wavelength as the Toad Sage.

“Well then…” Jiraiya puffed on his pipe, “No more drinking for me. No more fucking around. If you’re getting serious…then I definitely have to get it together. I owe it to Minato and every person I’ve ever let down…even Naruto.”

“How will we correspond?”

“Hmm…” Jiraiya scratched his chin, “We need to be smart about it. We should pick multiple locations and switch it up or else we’ll draw too much attention.” Jiraiya looked at his companion, “Let’s meet back here first. I’ll still be in the area. After that: Ine, Apple Village, the Jiri Zen temple…anything to the outskirts where people won’t notice.”

“Right.” Obito nodded, “The next check-in with the Akatsuki will be in two months. I’ll go learn what I can and then find you here. After that we’ll be waiting for the baby, so…it could take some time. I won’t try contacting Orochimaru until I’m sure Rin is okay on her own.”

“I’ll have to send Toads to Shincha to find you, I guess.”

“If all else fails I’ll track you with Sesshu.” Obito told him, “We’ll be in touch.”

Jiraiya stood from the bar and cracked his neck, “Yeah. This is…probably one of the riskiest things I’ve ever tried.” He smiled, “But something tells me you and I can pull it off.”

Obito was surprised he had abandoned a new bottle of wine on the counter, “You don’t want that, Jiraiya-sama?”

“No. I’m getting my shit together now. I don’t need it. Besides…” Jiraiya informed him, “You’re
paying for it.”

As soon as Obito returned home he woke Rin from a nap, as humanely as possible, and chronicled his encounter with Jiraiya. She was shocked by everything he recounted, but also glad they could assist the village from afar. She did question if Jiraiya really wouldn’t disclose anything about them to Leaf, or to Kakashi, at the very least.

“I’m just…surprised that he expects us to confront Kakashi.” Rin admitted, “It seemed like he wanted to throw us to the wolves and make us pay for avoiding him.”

“Jiraiya-sama definitely thought about it.” Obito agreed, flopping onto the bed, “But that would have generated more work for him than he was ready to deal with. It’s our responsibility.”

They laid side-by-side and stared up at the ceiling, lost in thought.

Obito broke the silence, “I got you a present, Rin. You can try it on later.”

“Oh?” She was delighted, “Thank you! But will this belly of mine fit in it?”

He took a look at the small globe that was her stomach, and then rubbed circles on top of it with his hand, “There’s a chance it’ll fit…” Obito’s raised his eyebrows, “It’s moving.”

She nodded sleepily, “I know…this baby is lined up perfectly to kick my gallbladder right now. It’s been rough…”

“Ouch.” He leaned down and spoke to her stomach, “Quit kicking your Mom, baby! She’s trying so hard to take care of you!”

Rin laughed, enjoying how he kissed her abdomen and insisted, “Kick me instead! I’m your Dad. I won’t go through what your Mom has to, so I don’t mind if you pick on me!”

She hummed happily while he chuckled, moving to straddle her knees. Obito bent and hovered over Rin’s face, “You know…I kind of like you round.”

“It’s not the worst. It’s not great. I’m glad this isn’t forever; let’s just leave it at that.”

“Of course, but you really do look beautiful…” Obito told her, smiling like a wolf. “We haven’t tried anything since we found out about the baby.”

Rin frowned in thought, “To be honest…I’ve wondered that myself. Since I started feeling less woozy I’ve been thinking about it.”

“Really?”

“Yes I have! I’ve also thought of something else,” Rin added, “You can’t argue with me on this one.”

“Well what is it?”

“We will not, under any circumstances, name this baby after Kakashi.” She told him point-blank.

“You…are mean.”

“I knew you were thinking it.”
“We wouldn’t pick that one if it’s a girl!” Obito protested, “And what’s wrong with that name, huh?”

“A lot of things. I just want an original name.” Rin’s voice was smooth, “But if you agree with me… I’ll make it worth your while.”

He looked at her face, deliberating, a bit put-out she had shut down one of his ideas even before he expressed it. She was good.

“Make it worth my while.”

With preparations to welcome the baby virtually complete, Obito and Rin went back to work on the garden for the coming summer weather. Rin moved slowly and carefully, but she was still handier than Obito when it came to tilling and planting. It had been two months since Obito had spoken with Jiraiya.

Knowing the plan was in motion, Obito kissed Rin goodbye on a breezy morning and set off to meet with the Akatsuki. He was surprised to learn that Zetsu had tasked him with a week-long infiltration of a Cloud stronghold, hoping to discern if the warehouse was a good place to corner a jinchuriki who visited frequently. It was unfortunate.

‘I thought I would be in and out like usual…but it looks like I’m not picking up food or contraband today.’ Obito thought in irritation. He did not want to leave Rin alone for so long. While such things happened occasionally, they ought not to happen when he was eager to meet his first child.

In Shincha, Rin and Sesshu were enjoying the sunshine as they strolled up the mountainside. Considering that she was her own caregiver, Rin decided walking would be good, light exercise. The peak was lofty and the green of the forest rolled and swayed in the soft winds. She looked down on Shincha and the valley from a ledge, letting her legs dangle.

“You know…” She said distractedly to her dog, “I can imagine what I would be doing now at this exact moment if I were in Konoha.”

Sesshu turned an ear her way from where he was laying, “You can?”

“Yes.” Rin affirmed, “I wouldn’t be married and I definitely wouldn’t be expecting a baby.” Her eyelids drooped, “I would be clinging to Kakashi since Minato-sensei is gone. I’d put in for some shifts at the hospital and then get loaned out to teams who need a medic-nin for missions. I would watch my sister raise her children and listen to my Dad go on and on about making something of my life.”

Sesshu flapped his tail, disliking it, “How dull.”

“But,” She continued, “Obito told me about Naruto. He’s Minato and Kushina’s son.” Rin smiled to herself, “I’d be looking after him right now.”

“Ah.” Sesshu preferred that bit of positivity, “Good. Obito said that he has two friends who shadow his every step.”

“Yeah…I didn’t catch their names.” She wondered, “I wouldn’t mind raising them too.”

“You have a good heart.” The dog told her, “Most people wouldn’t want to go near a child who is a jinchuriki.”
"That’s my Sensei’s baby. I don’t care. He would be safe with me."

“That sort of selfless love…probably would have made Kakashi notice you.” Sesshu pointed out.

She scoffed, “Yeah, right.”

“Why would he not feel as obligated as you to look after Minato’s boy?”

Rin sighed, “Maybe. I just can’t picture it.” She plucked a violet from the grass beside her, “Truthfully though…that wouldn’t be anywhere near as perfect as this. I love being with Obito.”

“Me too…”

She riffl ed through her bag and retrieved a chicken thigh for Sesshu and a bento for herself. They ate contentedly and watched the migration of clouds through the valley.

While crunching on a carrot, Rin thought, ‘Maybe I’ll name my baby after the clouds…” She considered Obito’s opinion, ‘He might get cranky about me not allowing the name Kakashi…or complain about a reference to Kumogakure…I don’t want to be tacky.’ She wanted to be creative. It wasn’t that easy. Rin pondered while she popped hand rolls in her mouth, her eyes trained on the horizon all the while.

Sesshu burped and then shook his head when lunch was done.

Rin finished her bento and got to her feet, “You know what, Sesshu? I just had an idea.” She patted her ninken’s back and set out, “If I want to dig up some uncommon names I should look through those books we have! I’ll bet I can find something good!”

“They ought to be good for something besides collecting dust.” He agreed.

She slowly picked her way down a gravel trail that would lead into the thick of the forest. The bubbling of the stream nearby was melodious. While watching Sesshu easily navigate his way down ahead of her, Rin had an uneasy feeling, ‘I am definitely feeling a backache from hell coming on…” She looked incredulously at her stomach, ‘No. It’s still too early. Too early.” Rin frowned, ‘Ow. Are you going to cause me problems, small fry?’

She felt a ‘pop’ and then began cursing like a sailor. This got Sesshu’s attention. The dog ran back to Rin and asked what the matter was.

The woman waddled frantically, trying to ignore the wet mess that had ruined her nice skirt. “Okay, let’s not panic…” She said sidelong to the dog, “We’re only at the top of a mountain and my water broke…several weeks early!”

“You’re panicking.” The dog whimpered.

“Well yeah! I am!” Rin screeched, “This isn’t supposed to hurt yet! Gosh…it’s like my back went through a meat-grinder a second ago…” Her expression was pure confusion, “What did I do? This baby’s early! And this is supposed to, you know, take a couple of hours!”

“You’re special.” Sesshu supplied.

“No! I don’t want to be special! I want to be like every other has-it-easy mom like that shrew, Atsumi!” Rin howled, “Ahh…it’s happening again…”

They had passed through the tree line and Sesshu was turning circles around Rin, who was moving
far too slow to reach the house, let alone get help in the town below. She continued for a half hour, wailing, complaining, and wondering why the woods seemed endless when she was crippled with shooting pains. ‘I can tough it out. It’s less than a mile.’ Rin was furious with her uncooperative body, ‘I’m a shinobi! I can handle this! Women have been doing this long before me…’

She stepped off of the dirt trail and leaned on a tree. Rivulets of perspiration ran down the side of her face and neck. ‘It’s no good.’ She counted the interval between one life-changing cramp and the next, ‘These are too close together. It’s so unfair…’ She sobbed for a second, ‘I know some women can wait all day before this happens…but I just went and got myself stranded. I really can’t move anymore.’

“Rin, what do you want me to do?” Sesshu asked, whining, “Do you want me to bring someone here?”

“If you did…it would take a while for them to get up here.” Rin observed, hobbling further into a shady glade, “And then…what would they do? They can’t really bring me the rest of the way down. I need to face the facts…” She stopped walking, “This is happening here.”

“Oh…”

“Yeah, it sucks. I need you to stay with me.” Rin told him, “I can’t protect myself right now. I need to concentrate.”

“At least it’s a nice day out…”

“I’m gonna smack you if you say that again.”

The dog was mildly entertained by her feistiness.

More time passed, swirling, immeasurable, and Rin had eventually settled against an oak with a grassy niche. She alternated between sitting and standing. After a time she was on her feet again, bent with discomfort, panting and trying to think. ‘I’m pretty sure the head is where it needs to be… low enough…I just wish it didn’t feel like a bowling ball weighing down on a pinhole.’ She did an informal check below, ‘That…is pretty dilated for a morning’s hike. Not all the way, though. Maybe I have more time?’ A contraction slammed into her and she groaned, still angry, fighting back against the pain indignantly.

‘Okay, it hurts, but that’s not my real problem.’ She acknowledged, ‘Baby is going to be small and fragile…he or she could be sick.’ Rin pulled her shirt off, which was the only the only thing she could spare for the child. She removed her skirt too, knowing she wouldn’t miss it. Since no one was around and Sesshu was oblivious, it didn’t matter what she looked like. She set the garment aside and leaned back. The bark was rough on her skin but she was hardly conscious of it. Rin tried to remember how to breathe better than a gasping fish.

Sesshu waited a meter away from her, statue-like and loyal.

The pain intensified to a degree she didn’t even think was possible. The sun was moving overhead, proceeding into the afternoon, and Rin could no longer distinguish minutes from hours. She was wracked with pain that came in regular bursts. It had almost annihilated her coherent, medical thought processes entirely.

A long time passed before she shimmied down the tree and kept her legs parted, gnashing her teeth. ‘I could be insane, but…pushing might be a good idea now.’ Rin checked herself again, ‘If that isn’t enough space to come into this world then I don’t know what is…’
“Hey,” She rasped to Sesshu, “Don’t freak out. I’ve got to push. If I tell you I am having trouble then you have to follow my instructions.” She added, “If I get stuck… I may need you to transform and help me cut this kid out…”

Sesshu was horrified, eyes wide and ears alert. This was above and beyond what was expected of most ninken.

“Yeah? That’s too nauseating? How do you think I feel?” Rin growled, “I’m giving it my best here…but I don’t know what’s going to happen.”

“I understand.”

“Good.” Rin gritted her teeth and bore down. It didn’t feel like it budged anything. A minute later she tried again with a battle cry. She repeated the routine for a while, estimating her limits.

‘I’m exhausted already. I had contractions for five hours or maybe longer… that’s not really that much… but pushing can go quicker. I’ve got to try… I’ve got to get out of here!’

She roared, trying again. Muscles and nerve endings sent signals of death to her brain. It commanded in a way that was so instinctual that she had to obey. She ached and fought.

Rin counted. She took a breath. She pushed again. She was able to rally, and while the functioning bit of her brain was aware of an emergence, Rin had to ignore it in favor of following through. Being a kunoichi worked to her advantage, as she understood her body was stronger and more in-tune with orders than most women. Pushing was actually easier than she had initially believed.

It was surprising how a gravity-friendly squat helped. The child arrived abruptly and Sesshu spooked, jumping up to his feet, and then paced nervously. Rin caught the baby and immediately began her examination, wild-eyed and focused, ‘It’s a boy. The cord is free, thank goodness… but he’s not breathing.’ Her heart pounded with pure fear for a moment.

She changed gears, immune to her pain and tearing, and wiped the boy off with her skirt. Rin cleaned mucus away as best she could and then kneeled down, laying him flat on his back. The baby was not moving or making any noise. She tried to stimulate him but as the seconds passed with no response, resuscitation became the best option.

Rin was thankful she had thoroughly educated herself. With extreme gentleness and precision, she put her hand on the baby’s forehead and titled his head back, opening the main airway. Two, tiny short breaths into the baby’s mouth were followed by chest compressions, which she carried out with a finger on the smallest breastbone she had ever seen. The little one jerked but couldn’t seem to catch a breath. She filled his lungs again with air, rubbed his chest, and watched him cough. A small scream followed. Rin sighed.

‘We’re not out of this yet…’ She thought. She looked like a real professional pinching off and tying the baby’s cord. With what chakra control she could muster, Rin used a chakra scalpel to make a clean cut.

It was exhilarating to bundle up the newborn in her shirt, even if he was still messy. Rin picked a clean spot in the grass and laid back, balancing him on her chest, ‘He’ll be warm here.’

Sesshu looked at her, awaiting directions.

“Relax, Sesshu.” Rin advised him, “We’re going to be okay. I need to rest for a bit, but I think I can make it home.”
“Are you still in pain?”

“Yes, but it’s not so bad.” She leaned her head back, “It was kind of a relief to get him out.”

She wasn’t sure how severely she had torn down below. It stung considerably. Her back wasn’t as excruciating as it had been before, but Rin noted her strength had been sapped. ‘If I can just get home and wash this little guy up…then I can take it easy.’ She still had to pass the placenta, heal herself and watch the child like a hawk in case he had any issues. Rin measured the baby in her hands, approximating his size, ‘Hm. Not too bad…he’s less than seven pounds but he’s got some meat on him…’

Rin held the boy close on her bosom. He was constricted comfortably in a bang-up swaddling job, ‘And I did it with my shirt!’ She thought proudly. His breathing was steady. He had only cried for a few minutes before tuckering out. She wondered if that indicated weakness, ‘Maybe pneumonia or infection…I’ll check soon…’ Or maybe he was just tired like she was.

Sunset was hastening. Rin laughed, realizing she had missed the day while being trapped in the hysteria of her mind and body.

“How could that have gone so fast and yet so slowly?” She wondered.

Her dog definitely understood what she meant.

Once Rin had rested sufficiently she staggered to her feet, clutching her infant, and ignored her nudity. She walked slowly, wincing in pain with each step. It was difficult and the path was long, but she knew it was better to be home than to be at the mercy of the mountain at night. Sesshu stayed beside her, allowing her to put a hand on his head for some balance.

“You didn’t even have the chance to look for a name.” The ninen observed.

“Right now he’s okay without one.” Rin decided.

“He was born under cirrus clouds, so call him Makigumo.”

Rin squinted her eyes and thought, “Nah. It doesn’t sound good.”

“Minato.”

“No. I don’t want to name him after anyone I’ve known.”

“Then what do you suggest?”

“I suggest…” She hobbled along the long bend that would end at her house, “Nothing. I’ll name him whenever the time is right. I said I wanted to read first and be inspired.”

“Call him the Hokage.”

Rin laughed at the idea, kissing the top of the baby’s head, “That would be great.”

At the end of the long and uncomfortable walk they arrived home. The sun was sinking below the horizon. ‘Thank goodness no one spotted me…’ Rin thought, ‘It’s hard for a naked woman to explain her baby needs clothes more than his momma.’

She shuffled through the dim house to the bathroom. Sesshu stood in the doorway in case there was an emergency. She was feeble and clumsy, but Rin managed to get to a treatment box where she kept an aspirator. She suctioned the baby’s nose again to be sure it was clear. Rin dabbed ointment
in his eyes to prevent infection and then moved on.

It was nice to hear the little Hokage cry as she weakly turned on the tap and filled the tub. Rin soaked a cloth with water and wiped him down from head to toe, revealing fresh, newborn skin. Then it was her turn to wash up, although in her case, Rin had to use a sanitized cloth and heal herself a bit more. It was a rudimentary fix, but Rin believed she had closed herself up as best she could for the time. She sluggishly entered the tub.

“Oh…my…gosh…” Rin sat in the warm water, “This is amazing…” She could hardly believe it; how it seemed to remedy every ache. She cradled the baby in her arms above water and looked down at him, taken aback by the small set of black eyes staring up at her. Rin smiled, “I am exactly who you think I am…and I love you.”

The baby had Obito’s coloring, as far as she could tell. His hair and eyes were as dark as ink, made more intense by his small frame. ‘Maybe as he gets older more of my features will shine through’

Rin turned and looked at Sesshu, who had finally relaxed on the floor, “Sesshu…I think I can handle this on my own now. I want you to go find Obito.”

“Are you certain, Rin?”

“Yes. Before you leave Shincha stop by Yoshige and Nozomi’s house. Tell them what happened so they can check on me.” She smiled, “Then go bring Obito home.”

The dog prepared to leave and asked, “Will you name him in the meantime?”

“I’ll just wait until his Dad gets to meet him,” Rin concluded, “In the meantime, he’s my little Hokage.”

Sesshu experienced three long days of tracking. First he had scented Obito at the territories bordering the Land of Lightning, but when he discovered the trail was stale the ninen about-faced. He sniffed and raced through rice paddies and wheat fields back up into the mountains, passing briefly through the Earth Country again.

Frustrated, the dog could only wonder what had taken Obito on such a roundabout route. It took another day before Sesshu picked up a fresh scent. He thundered through the undergrowth, scaring up birds and small creatures. By traveling day and night, Sesshu closed the gap in two days. The ninja hound came closer and closer as he trekked through a dense maple forest, and arrived finally at the trading town that Shincha often imported from.

It was early in the afternoon and Sesshu wandered down the main street with his nose pressed to the ground, ‘He must be close by…” Townsfolk were startled by the enormous dog prowling past, and were even more concerned when Sesshu stepped through the open door of a tavern. He stopped at the entrance. At a nearby booth, Obito had his mask on and was seated with Jiraiya, conversing about whatever he had just done for the Akatsuki. Sesshu barked to get his attention.

Obito leapt up from the table. Sesshu’s presence conveyed urgency; he knew Rin would not send him unless she had to. Obito crossed over to Sesshu and motioned that they go outside.

“Is something the matter? What are you doing here, boy?” His voice trilled with worry.

“The baby came early!” Sesshu informed him, “You should return home as soon as possible.”

Obito was astounded, “Are they okay?”
“They were when I left. Our friends will be looking after Rin until she’s strong again.”

Jiraiya poked his head out of the bar, giving them a questioning look, “Does this mean we’re done debriefing? What the hell is going on?”

“Rin had the baby!” Obito chirped.

The Sage raised his eyebrows, “Damn. She’s quick.”

“You won’t believe how it happened either,” Sesshu added, “We were on top of a mountain at the time.”

Jiraiya and Obito’s jaws dropped.

Obito hustled. The man moved like wind on that summer night and did not stop once. He made it back into town on the evening of the second day of his journey, Sesshu wheezing beside him, and raced up the mountainside in the dark. It was comforting to see their house lit, tucked in the blackness of the woods like a beacon. He quietly entered, supposing if the baby was asleep he ought not to run in shouting. It was strange how his heart was fluttering.

Exhausted, Sesshu collapsed on his rug and moved no more.

Obito switched the lamp in the living room off and continued to the bedroom. It was dimly lit by a candle. Rin was propped up in bed and breastfeeding. She gave him a tired smile, “Welcome home…”

Still in shock, Obito crept closer. He pushed a few books aside and took the spot beside her. For a few moments he confirmed reality, looking between her and the baby. He placed his hand on Rin’s cheek and touched his forehead to hers, “Rin, are you alright? I should have been here…”

She made a quiet sound of disagreement, “It couldn’t be helped. I’m fine! This little boy was the one who chose the day of his arrival.”

“A boy,” Obito glued his eyes to the baby, memorizing him, “Did you name him yet?”

“No. I picked a name I liked but I wanted to wait for you first.” Rin said quietly, “He’s been waiting seven days for a name.”

“I’m sorry I took so long…”

“Stop apologizing, Obito. You’re here now.” She reminded him. The baby was done eating. Rin helped him unlatch and then gently patted him against her shoulder to burp. She grinned at her husband, “Feel his head! He’s so soft and fluffy!”

Obito stroked the new downy hair and was immediately in love.

Burped and satisfied, the baby began to drift off.

“He’s not very fussy.” Obito observed, “Is it okay if I hold him?”

“Sure.” Rin helped him fit the baby in the crook of his arm, “There! He’s been waiting to meet you.”

He couldn’t help but smile. The sleepy infant had enchanted Obito, waking up a whole new part of his spirit. “Tell me the name you picked, Rin.” He encouraged.
“Well I liked the name in this book,” She held up a novel, “The character’s name was Hisahito.”

Obito quailed, “You like that one?”

“Yeah! It sounds a bit like your name.”

“Okay…but every time I hear it I’ll think of what a coward the guy in the story was.” Obito said grudgingly.

She balked, “A coward?”

“When I read it that character was kind of a flake…”

“Shoot.” Rin frowned.

“Did you see the name Yuma in there?” Obito offered, “He’s the warrior who rescues the royal family. I liked him.”

“That’s a short name.”

“But it sounds good,” He grinned at her, “Uchiha Yuma.”

She paused, letting it sink in, “It does sound nice. It’s much better than calling him Hokage.”

By the time Obito had ended his reverie he had set foot back in Shincha. His heart felt a bit lighter, but he grieved for Kakashi and his loss. As a father, the emotions he felt when he thought of his only son were powerful and blinding. He assumed that Kakashi would feel that way as well.

Down the road near the Hirano’s house Obito spotted Yuma and Sesshu pestering Fumitake. The older boy always tried to shrug Yuma off, not wishing to befriend him, but Yuma was persistent.

‘He called Yuma weird and creepy once.’ Obito recalled, ‘That little imp! He’s as unbearable as his mom. You don’t want to be friends with him anyway, Yuma…’

His boy deserved to be surrounded by people who cared about him. Obito could imagine Yuma being the darling of any Academy class. Obito’s thoughts turned to Leaf.

He wanted to be there for Kakashi. He wanted his child to have good friends.

‘Yuma, I promise…when I sort it all out…when we bring you to Konoha…’ He walked ahead to meet the boy half-way, ‘You’ll chase the same dream I did; that my Sensei did.’ Yuma caught him and hugged him fiercely, ‘And you’ll achieve it.’
“Lee, if you keep at that your tea is going to be cold by the time you finish,” Tenten warned, sipping her own drink, “And that would be a shame. It came from your Grandpa’s stash.”

“I...know.” Lee’s reply was fragmented. He was doing vertical push-ups with one hand, “But Gai-sensei…demanded…five hundred…of these…”

“How many are you at right now?”

“Two hundred…and…fifty-seven…”

“Well that’s more than half-way,” Tenten observed from her seat on a tree stump, “You probably won’t like me telling you this…but Gai-sensei didn’t say to do this routine without stopping. He just said you had to complete five hundred.”

Lee paused, balancing on one hand, “True.” He continued his exercise, “But it is always implied, Tenten! I can’t…stop…”

“This tea is expensive. It’s rare,” She tasted it again, batting her lips together, “And it’s really good!”

“I can…have it some other time…”

There were some mornings Tenten could not persuade Lee to take it easy. Even if their gift from Lee’s typically stingy grandfather was going to stay warm in a thermos for a while, there was no way it would survive five hundred pushups, ‘And Lee’s doing them slowly today…trying to feel that burn, I guess.’ At least she had gotten him to eat breakfast before he started.

She projected that Lee still would not be finished even by the time Neji arrived. Gai had gone off to the Jounin Standby Station for a short meeting but promised to return by noon.

Lee’s dedication was cutting into Tenten’s training time with him, ‘I wanted to help him practice with nunchaku today. He’s gotten so much better!’ She had even given him a spare set to keep, ‘But I need to open the forge in thirty minutes to fill those orders that came in…it’s good money…’

Tenten tipped the tea back and finished. She stood and said, “You are going to do this all in one shot. That’s fine. Give this tea to Neji then if you can’t make time for it.”

“I…will…” He puffed and then glanced at her, “Where are you going, Tenten?”

“I’m opening the forge early. I need to get some work done. I should be back by the time Gai-sensei is finished up too,” She estimated, “But then don’t get distracted, Lee! We agreed to work on nunchaku today so that’s what we’re doing later!”

“Understood!”

And she marched off, glad that she had gotten her way, sort of.

After leaving their training field, Tenten walked into town and passed the Jounin Standby Station to steal a peek at what was going on.

She could see several shinobi on the balcony above. It appeared as if all of Gai’s generation had
gathered into their old teams to discuss something. Kakashi, team-less, stood near Gai and his teammates, Genma and Ebisu. ‘I remember helping Genma once when he was too drunk to walk home by himself…’ That had been after the Third’s funeral. Gai had commended her compassion.

They spotted Tenten going by on the sidewalk below. Gai grinned down at her and gave her a thumbs-up.

She suppressed her embarrassment and returned the gesture tepidly. Genma whacked Gai in the shoulder, pointed to Tenten with a senbon needle, and then proceeded to ridicule them. Other Jounin asked them to shut up.

‘Jeez…I bet they were always like that…’ Tenten mused, entering the business district near her home, ‘I wonder if we’ll be like that when we’re Jounin too…Neji, Lee and I…just as we are now.’ It was a scary notion, but she knew she would never ask her teammates to change. Despite their quirks, they really were perfect the way they were. She thought so, anyway.

When she arrived at the back of the forge Tenten opened a padlocked door and proceeded, switching on lights as she went. She turned on the fan above the furnace on and then checked a clipboard on her workbench, ‘Okay. First, finish the tessen and then I can work on that set of kunai…’ Her father had taught her how to make several types of weapons before his death. If Tenten did not know how to make something, she knew of several suppliers in the Fire Country who sold wholesale through her father’s business. She was in frequent contact with them.

This worked out very well for Tenten, a blossoming Weapons Master in her own right; who needed a variety of tools so extensive there was no way she could meet her own demands. More often than she liked, she ordered weaponry from other professionals and then sealed it into scrolls by category. When Tenten decided she liked something in particular, it was brought along in her big scroll on missions or redistributed in the shop, where she could upsell the product to other shinobi. It was a fantastic strategy.

She had already constructed the metal war fan that was ordered a few weeks ago. All it required now was some sharpening and polish. Its soon-to-be owner was a member of the Sarutobi clan who had just entered the ANBU. That wasn’t the best part, in Tenten’s opinion.

It was that it was a kunoichi who was taking strides in such a career. It was a privilege to take the project, Tenten thought. She loved a tough female role model.

Coming in early was advantageous. Tenten finished her work on the tessen and then unlocked the front door of the shop to allow customers. She flipped the “open” sign on the window. She sighed and boxed up the super-sharp hand fan, saying goodbye to it, ‘I’m sure I would’ve loved using this. I hope it serves her well…’

Tenten hunkered down to continue work on a custom set of kunai she had started days earlier. She had to check balance and weight to be sure the measurements she had taken were accurate. The grooves along the longer-than-standard knives would allow them to fly farther when thrown. She made a set for herself after receiving the design and commission. She sat behind the counter on a stool and meticulously checked each kunai with a scale and magnifying eyepiece.

The bell on the door rang as customers came in. Tenten shouted Hello without looking up from her work. Two young men were browsing around the showroom. She noticed a familiar, nasal voice, ‘Oh no…’ She pegged her eye on Mion; the shotgun-wedding ninja who was teammate to Hyuga Hikune.

Naturally, Hikune was accompanying him.
‘I am not up for this right now,’ Tenten acknowledged, putting the eyepiece down, ‘I was in my happy place! I should’ve kept that door locked…’

Hikune smiled at her as they approached the counter. Mion wished her good morning and asked if he could commission a new sword.

She pointed to a stack of applications near the register, “You can fill out one of those order forms. Once you pick the specs you want I’ll look at it and tell you if I have the materials.”

“Awesome!” Mion was grinning, “Thanks, Ten-chan!”

“Don’t call me that.”

He grinned and took a form. He asked for Hikune’s help while checking boxes off, not sure of what the parameters were. They kept their voices down for a while and Tenten was able to work.

After Mion had completed the order form he handed it to Tenten. She glanced over it, “This is fine. No problem. When did you want this by?”

“Can it be ready in two weeks?”

“Give or take a day, it’ll be ready.” She assured him, “I charge after forging and assembly since I take market values into account.”

“Smart lady…” He nodded.

She frowned, “But this will be about 10,000 ryo.”

Mion frowned right back at her, “You’re pricey.”

“Making weapons is expensive and difficult. You can go the forge on the east side of the village if you don’t like it.” She reminded him, “But they suck and sometimes they charge more.”

“She’s right, Mion-kun. I don’t like going there anymore.” Hikune agreed.

Mion sighed, “Fine! Fine…I’ll set a little extra aside after a few missions.” He looked at the bun-haired girl with a more light-hearted expression, “I know you know what you’re doing. My cousin’s sword came from here.”

“When?”

“Maybe six years ago.”

“My Dad made it.” Tenten said shortly.

“Are you as good as him?”

“Not yet.”

He laughed, “I bet you are! You’re very professional.”

“Thank you,” Tenten handed him a receipt, “Have a nice day.”

Mion left the shop but Hikune did not. Tenten tried to make it look as if she were still busy inspecting the new kunai set, but she had more or less determined they were flawless. He stood in front of the counter watching her, smiling contently.
“Hi Hikune, I’m a little busy and I am trying to finish this up so I can get back to my team,” She thought that sounded too coarse so she added, “How are you?”

“I am well, thank you, Tenten.” His eyes were playful, “I hope you’ve been well. I haven’t seen you in a while.”

“Sorry,” She was genuinely regretful about her absence, knowing he had gone looking for her a few times before, “I’ve been pretty busy since Gai-sensei doubled our training.”

“Then maybe you’d enjoy some leisure…” Hikune ventured, “Why don’t you come out to dinner with me?”

“No, thank you.”

“We can go anywhere you want.”

Tenten set the knives down carefully, “Hikune…I don’t want to.”

“Would you like to do something else?”

“No.” She repeated, unable to disguise a hint of frustration, “Why are you…trying to start something with me? I am young. I am still trying to become a Chunin and get my life in order…but you insist on being around me.”

“I think you and I are a good match.” Hikune told her sincerely, “Everything about you…makes me feel happy.”

The words pierced her heart. Tenten knew it would happen eventually. He was going to say something to her that she was hoping, praying someone else would tell her. Now that it had happened she still felt unprepared for the emotional anguish.

“Honestly, I disagree,” Tenten replied with some dignity, “Spending time with you or dating you would be awkward, Hikune.” She added, “I’m Neji’s teammate. If you wanted to be with me it would be at my expense and his. That’s not fair.”

He was surprised, “You really think that would happen? That it would bother him?”

“I know it would.” She asserted, but in her mind Tenten was terrified that Neji wouldn’t notice, or heaven forbid, he wouldn’t care if he saw it happening.

“This isn’t about Neji. It should be about what you want.” Hikune told her, “He doesn’t care. All I want is the chance to make you happy.”

Tenten was beginning to fume, “Well you’re not succeeding at that right now! If you want me to be happy then please leave me alone.”

He looked hurt. The gentle features of his face reflected distress when he spoke, “Why are you so concerned about him, Tenten? He has nothing to offer.”

“Enough!” She exploded, “Even if that is the case, let me make this crystal clear: I am not starting anything with you. I considered it and it only made me feel terrible.”

“Tenten…” There was sorrow in his voice.

She felt just as bad hurting him as she did spending time with him. Tenten believed she had to shake loose, no matter the pain it inflicted.
“I love Neji. I feel that way without expecting anything back. That is where I am at. I prefer being independent, when it gets right down to it,” Tenten explained, “You are a great man. You’re talented, caring and a great role model among the Hyuga. I am just not going to do something I am not ready for.”

He touched her face gently, “Then I hope you’ll consider it when you are ready.”

Tenten jerked back from his hand, “This has been a mistake. Please leave, Hikune.”

Hikune locked his eyes with hers. She saw all of the despair in there that was so much like her own suffering. In her case, however, Tenten had cautiously and effectively imprisoned unrequited feelings in an internal dungeon where they couldn’t hurt her. Hikune did not have this mechanism yet, she supposed. Tenten wished him the best but hated him simultaneously.

After a few moments he turned and left the shop. Tenten jumped up and quickly locked the door behind him. She kicked an empty crate over and then returned to the counter. She was furious. Why did someone have to put her in this position? ‘I don’t want to be the one to trample on people’s feelings, most especially not when they’re good people!’ She never wanted to be like that. She empathized. She understood.

Hikune was a good man and a good choice, Tenten was sure, but she would be betraying herself if she handed her heart away to someone other than who she had chosen.

It was difficult to stay on the course she had set. Living every day with unacknowledged desires had taught her restraint and gratitude. Her mind was sharper. Her will was stronger. Tenten had come to find that she enjoyed being on her own. The reality was that she was more accustomed to being alone than anything else. Getting closer to people was quite the hassle. She wagered she would even have problems being with Neji, if the day ever came.

She returned to her work with sharp objects in order to calm down.

The same day, across the village from the forge, Kiba stood in the courtyard of his family’s homestead. He watched in silence a few meters away as his mother and sister greeted Nichiyo, his father. They were embracing happily. Akamaru sat beside the young man, watching curiously.

‘This is just…so disturbing.’ Kiba conceded, ‘I thought I was prepared for this…I knew he was going to show up soon.’

Seeing his father again was strange. It was even more alarming to see the tearful reunion ensuing. Kiba had expected such a reaction from Hana, but certainly not from his mother Tsume, who was the most hardened woman he knew. Kiba had already said hello and participated in an awkward hug earlier with Nichiyo, but he was not as emotionally awakened as the rest of his family. ‘Maybe I should feel bad about that…but he kind of did just leave us high and dry. I’m not over it, apparently.’

In time, Kiba supposed, he would acclimate to his father’s reappearance. Nichiyo had returned a bit thinner and shorter than Kiba recalled him being. There were more lines on his face and his hairline was receding. His voice was the same. His scent was the same. Kiba felt like he was a child again, in the days before he had enrolled in the Academy, when his father had been his first friend.

Behind Kiba came a grunt of annoyance. He turned to see his grandfather, Tsume’s father, seated on the porch with his hands on his knees. Inuzuka Utari was one of the elders of the clan and had never in his life suffered fools. Kiba was sure the events unfolding were grating on his grandfather’s nerves. He walked up to Utari and took a seat beside him.
"What’s up, Grandpa? You don’t want to join the group hug?"

“No. Like you, I am refraining from such idiotic posturing.”

“I…still don’t trust him.”

“You should never trust him, Kiba. He may be your father, but he is a coward who should never have been accepted by our clan.” Utari shook his head, “I can’t stand that fool. I want my daughter to come back…that’s who should come back!”

“Huh?” Kiba was confused, “Who are you talking about, Grandpa?”

“Your Aunt Rin, that’s who.” Utari clarified, “She ran away long ago when your sensei rejected her. I haven’t seen her since. All I can do is pray for her safety.”

The sheerest bolt of shock broke over Kiba, numbing his brain and extremities. Aunt Rin. Kakashi. Rejection?

“Um…” The boy took a deep breath, “Are you serious? Kakashi-sensei…did something mean to Aunt Rin?”

“They were teammates. He told her that he didn’t love her.” The old man sighed, “Tsume believes that is what made Rin sneak off, with the blessing of her sensei, of course. I wanted to hate them for letting her leave…but now I don’t feel as resentful as I did.”

“Kakashi-sensei broke my Aunt’s heart?” Kiba hollered, stunned.

“Yes, he did.” A small smile appeared on Utari’s face, “Of course…Kakashi would never tell you that, Kiba. No self-respecting man would.”

He was enlightened. The astonishment subsided as Kiba thought about it, realizing there was a whole other dimension to Kakashi besides him being the supportive sensei he knew.

“Is it wrong if I’m not mad at him?” Kiba was genuinely perplexed.

“It’s not wrong. He didn’t harm you after all. In fact, being honest about one’s feelings is never a crime.” Utari touted some wisdom, “The Hokage at the time, Minato-sama, spoke with me and said that Kakashi did care for my daughter…but there was some complexity to that situation that prevented him from getting close to her.”

“That’s a relief. I’d be upset if he straight up disliked her.”

“So would I.”

They watched Nichiyo talk to the kunoichi and ninzen while he kept one arm lassoed around Hana’s shoulders.

“Do me a favor, Kiba,” Utari growled, “And get him out of my sight.”

After the brief family bonding session Kiba whisked his father out into the village, as per his grandfather’s request. Nichiyo needed to be reacquainted with the community that had built up and expanded since his desertion. They made small-talk as they traversed populated roads, walking side by side.

“You’ve grown so much, Kiba.” His father tousled his hair, “Are you a Chunin yet?”
“I will be after the next exam.” Kiba knew he was being a bit arrogant, but he refused to remain a Genin any longer.

“You’re a real man now. When I laid eyes on you and your sister…it was like seeing Tsume when she was young.”

“Yeah…it’s kind of a shame…you didn’t get to see us grow up.” Kiba said carefully.

Nichiyo was quiet for about a block before he spoke again, “I regret that. I’m sorry, Kiba.”

“There was a time when I thought I was part of the reason you didn’t want to stay.” Kiba reflected aloud, “It didn’t occur to me that maybe you just couldn’t stand being around Mom. I thought Hana and I made you angry, or something.”

“No. You and your sister had nothing to do with it.” Nichiyo assured him, “Tsume and I…fought too much. Brutally. We just about never made peace. It wouldn’t have been right for you to grow and watch us thinking that kind of relationship was acceptable.”

“I knew it wasn’t.” The boy grumbled, “But it still didn’t feel any better while you were gone.”

“I know.” His father agreed, “I didn’t feel better while I was gone either. I missed my family.”

“It’s never going to be the same.”

“That’s why I came back. I didn’t want it to be the war that it was.” Nichiyo told him, “Now is the time for us to make peace. I’m older and wiser…and I still love your mother.”

Kiba was flummoxed, “How…is that possible?”

Nichiyo gave him an aggravated look.

“Dad! Come on! You didn’t talk to her for years.”

“She’s my wife.”

“She’s not the same person she was when you were married.” Kiba injected some reality into the conversation, “How can you love Mom when you don’t know each other? I don’t even think she loves you…”

A tremendous amount of grief was emanating from the man beside him. Nichiyo had stopped on the sidewalk, trying to keep it together. His teenage son was ripping his heart out and dragging it along for the tour. Kiba paused beside him and patted his back in apology.

“Shit…I’m sorry.” The boy said softly.

He shook his head, swallowing hard, “It’s alright, Kiba. It’s what I deserve. She won’t feel the same about any of this…even if we never fight again…she won’t love me.”

“Well we can’t know that for sure!” Kiba tried to salvage some of his father’s optimism.

They walked a few paces more and Kiba watched as Kakashi rounded the corner. He looked up from his book in time to spot Kiba and his weepy companion. Kakashi’s visible eye widened, fell on Kiba and begged the question: What the hell is this?

“Uh, hey Kakashi-sensei…” Kiba greeted uneasily, “You’ve met my Dad, haven’t you?”
Kakashi seamlessly assumed his friendly-greeting mode. His eye crinkled with a fake smile, “Oh yes, Nichiyo. How are you? I haven’t seen you around in quite some time.”

“Hello Kakashi.” The man was still somber, “Thank you for training my son so well. He’s needed a good mentor in my absence and I’m glad that it was you.”

“Thank you. I’m glad too.”

Turned so that his father wouldn’t see, Kiba gave Kakashi a telling expression: Make a break for it. I’m stuck with him!

Kakashi bid them good day and hurried onward.

Kakashi spared some precious reading time to think about Kiba’s predicament. So his father had returned and was moping…probably in a bid to get back in his clan’s good graces. ‘Good luck with that…and poor Kiba is going to bear the brunt of it all.’

He spotted Sakura chatting with Ino outside of the Yamanaka Flower Shop. Kakashi veered off the road to check in with his student.

“You’re not training with Tsunade-sama today, Sakura?” Kakashi’s tone was sing-song. He didn’t want to carry over the previous encounter’s awkwardness, but he couldn’t filter all of it.

“Hi Kakashi-sensei!” She was high-spirited, “Actually, Shishou said we’ll be performing a task at night. I’m not sure what it is yet.”

“Have fun, in that case. Maybe you’ll want to get some extra sleep.” He advised.

“I’ll nap later.” Sakura decided.

“Also…if you see Kiba today you might find him a little stressed.” Kakashi warned her, “He’ll be making an announcement soon.”

Sakura and Ino blanched.

“It’s not that horrible. He’ll explain.” Kakashi assured them, “See you around, girls.” He continued on.

“More drama on your team?” Ino intoned to Sakura, “Maybe you’ll want to avoid it for a day or so.”

“Maybe I will…but we’ve been pretty quiet lately.” The pink haired girl observed, “Since Gaara’s inauguration nothing crazy has happened.”

Ino grinned, “That’s right! Someone’s dating the Kazekage…”

“Lucky bitch.” Sakura was grinning too.

They kibitzed relentlessly beside a stand of orchids. No one was around to discourage the gossip, and so they talked for a long while before a customer interrupted them.

“Excuse me, ladies. Can I place a large flower order here?” A man asked politely.

Ino immediately noticed how the gentleman was dressed in elaborate kimono. Additionally, he was handsome, had a smooth voice and four retainers were at his side. ‘Rich aristocrat!’ The alarms in Ino’s head went off, ‘Time to make some serious cash!’
“Why yes! Of course!” Ino turned on the charm, discreetly moving Sakura aside, “I would be happy to fill an order for you.” She whipped out a clipboard, “Who is making this purchase?”

“Lord Moritsune, of the Oga Clan.” When Ino gave him an inquiring look he added, “I’m Moritsune.”

“Oh! It’s so nice to meet you! I’m Yamanaka Ino,” She gestured to the shop’s sign above, “My family has more experience with flowers than anyone else in this village.”

“It’s fortunate I stopped by then.” He was smiling, but he wasn’t taking the flirting-bait, “How many pink roses do you have available?”

Ino furrowed her brow in thought, “Well…I think we have about three dozen currently. We’ve raised more red, white and yellow this year.”

“That’ll do. Pink sends a message of trust and friendship.” Moritsune tapped his chin, “Perhaps some white anemone will convey sincerity as well…”

Ino whispered out of the corner of her mouth, “Sakura…he speaks the language of flowers.”

Sakura was amused, “Is he your long lost brother?”

Ino wondered if maybe he was, ‘We could be siblings alright, if not for that brown hair. Hmm…wait…but Mom has brown hair!’

A retainer reminded Moritsune that he had an appointment to keep. The man asked if Ino had the flowers available for an afternoon delivery.

“I believe so. Can you tell me where they’re going?”

“To the Hyuga estate.”

Something didn’t feel right. Ino and Sakura exchanged a short glance before Ino continued writing the order down. She accepted payment from a retainer, which was substantial, while trying to investigate the odd gesture, “So…are the Oga clan friends with the Hyuga clan?” They came from the outskirts of the Fire Country, if she had heard correctly.

“We have not yet been formally introduced. However, the kind elders of the Hyuga clan recently extended an invitation to the Oga to meet the lord’s eldest daughter.” Moritsune explained, “It was very flattering. I’m excited to meet the Lady of the House. They’ve encouraged the possibility of courtship and marriage, claiming that she is destined to have powerful heirs.”

Sakura turned around and walked into the shop, shoving her fist in her mouth to prevent a primal scream. ‘WHAT. THE. HELL?’

Ino somehow kept a poker face, “Well isn’t that lovely? I hope you have a nice time being introduced!”

“I will! I heard the Lady likes flowers,” He smiled, “Let’s hope they meet her approval!”

Blissfully unaware, Moritsune and his entourage ventured forth to sightsee in the village before afternoon tea with the Hyuga. Once they were out of earshot Ino ran inside past Sakura and screeched for her father. Inoichi rushed inside from the back door, wearing an employee apron. He was alarmed, “Ino? What’s wrong?”
“Dad! Oh shit. Dad!” She tossed him the clipboard, “Fill that! Pronto! I’ve got to sabotage the wealthy lord who just paid us an obscene amount of money!”

“Why would you do that?” He frowned, “That is a valuable customer!”

“No! He’s trying to marry my friend!” Ino screamed, “He’s thirty! He’s got to be at least thirty!” She was still running as she pulled off her apron and threw it aside. It landed on her father’s head.

She seized Sakura’s wrist and they set into a run, blasting out the front of the store and onto the streets. Crowds on the road parted for them as they stampeded across town.

They were slightly out of breath by the time they arrived at the entrance of the Hyuga estate. The girls took a moment to fix their hair and smooth their clothes before proceeding at a brisk walk. There was no need to look disheveled even if there was a crisis at hand.

Sakura stopped by Hinata’s typical hangouts: the garden and the porch near her family’s wing of the Main House. No sign of her. Ino folded her arms while Sakura tried to think of where to search next.

“She’s not on a mission is she?” Ino wondered.

“Most likely not…if the Oga are here to see her today.” Sakura pointed out the obvious.

“Oh. Right.”

“But she may not be here at the moment.” Sakura thought of how she could maybe enlist the help of Pakkun or Akamaru if all else failed, ‘But then we’d have to go looking for Kakashi-sensei or Kiba first…’

Another idea came to Sakura as she thought of Kiba’s new friend, Fujita; the freshly minted Genin. Though she had only met him once while he had been out to lunch with Kiba she remembered he was friendly. He would either be able to tell them where Hinata was or at least use those talented eyes to spot her. Sakura shared this bit of genius with Ino and they were off again.

They walked around for a while, circumventing the Branch House, and then noticed a young man coming up a gravel path.

Ino murmured to Sakura, “I don’t know about finding that pipsqueak, but that’s his big brother there.”

“How do you know?”

“Shikamaru hangs out with him sometimes.” Ino explained, “He’s a Jounin. Super good looking too…”

“Ino…”

“Let’s just ask him! He should be approachable, right?”

Sakura sighed, “Fine.”

Ever the socialite, Ino stepped up to Hikune and said hello. He was nice enough, but Sakura picked up on a strange tone of voice and posture in the man, ‘It’s not like he’s being mean or rude or anything…but he’s kind of…’ She squinted her eyes a bit, ‘He seems depressed?’

After learning what the object of the visit was Hikune voluntarily used his Byakugan and surveyed
“Hinata-sama is here.” He pointed them in the right direction, “She is with her teammate in the scullery. Would you like me to escort you there?”

Ino twittered in the affirmative. Hikune was not very talkative after that but he led the way through a side door and into an auxiliary building of the Main House. Down a long hallway and to their left they came to a small kitchenette. Hinata and Shino had their sleeves rolled up as they ground herbs at a table. Hikune knocked on the doorway to announce their presence.

“Oh! Hello everyone!” Hinata smiled in surprise.

“What an unusual assemblage.” Shino commented.

Ino thanked Hikune and then stepped into the workroom. Sakura looked at the young man when she thanked him, “I appreciate you taking us here, Hyuga-san.”

“Not at all.” He smiled weakly.

She wanted to ask if something was bothering him, but since she did not know him nearly well enough; Sakura followed Ino into the room. Hikune departed quietly after that.

Hinata apologized, supposing her friends had been looking for her outside. She and Shino had joined forces to make a healing salve they could bring with them on missions.

“I hate to bust up this project of yours, but…” Ino gave an impatient look to Shino, “We need to speak to Hinata privately.”

Shino was mildly insulted.

“Don’t go too far Shino.” Sakura recommended, “We only need to talk to her for a few moments and then you can resume.”

“Very well.” Shino agreed, stepping out for some fresh air, “Thank you for being polite, Sakura-san.”

Ino grumbled for a moment. The girls snapped back to task and stood across from Hinata at the table. The white-eyed girl regarded them with concern, “Is everything alright?”

“We need to warn you about something, in case you haven’t already heard.” Sakura informed her.

Hinata set her mortar and pestle down, “Heard of what, Sakura-chan?”

“The Oga clan is in town.” Ino announced, “They stopped by the flower shop for a large order of flowers…for you.”

She peeped in confusion.

“You didn’t know?” Sakura pressed, “The Lord of the Oga said that the elders of your clan invited him to meet you! They’re advertising marriage!”

“This is…the first I’m hearing of this.” She was troubled, “My father mentioned something like this could happen…but after the Chunin Exams at the earliest,” There was some frustration in her voice, “Did the elders say that to Father to trick him?”

“I don’t know, but you may want to figure that out.” Ino told her, “You’re having tea with Lord
Moritsune this afternoon.”

“Eek!”

“How would this happen in the first place?” Sakura inquired, “You’re barely fifteen. He’s like…” She and Ino looked at each other, thinking, *Thirty! At least thirty!*

“I suppose…” Hinata trailed off, “The elders didn’t want my father to get his way. They have been quarreling for a long time about the roles Neji-niisan and I will fulfill in the Hyuga clan.”

“So they want to marry you off?” Ino was irritated for her.

She folded her messy hands and considered it, “They intended to…but when I am grown! Our elders demanded that my father match me with a family of noble blood that I can preside over, since Neji-niisan will lead the Hyuga clan someday.” Hinata added softly, “But Father said I wouldn’t have to worry. He said…he wouldn’t let them determine my future.”

“It’s kind of happening anyway…” Ino pointed out.

“It’s because of your bloodline, isn’t it?” Sakura worked it out, “They want you to pass it on?”

“I don’t even know if I will…” Hinata lamented, “But they would gamble my future for the tiniest possibility of seeing a clan derived of my lineage. They didn’t even address me personally. They know that I object and so they mandate things Father cannot stop.”

“Jerks!” Ino was furious, “You’re not some chess piece they can move around! You’re a person!”

Hinata nodded sadly.

“You want to be with Naruto, right?” Sakura presumed aloud.

Hinata quailed, “Of course!”

“Then you’ve got to fight back and tell *those old men,*” Sakura gestured her thumb back at the Main House, “To take a hike! As soon as Naruto gets back he’ll protect you!”

“Um.” She pursed her lips, imagining the calamity Naruto would bring about in her defense, “That would help.”

“Let ‘no’ be your new favorite word.” Ino advised, “You won’t get married if you keep saying no! You just have to have more patience and willpower than your elders and eventually they’ll stop trying!”

“We’ll help you.” Sakura added.

“Thank you…” Hinata murmured. She reached out her arms and Ino and Sakura embraced her tightly.

After a group hug they called for Shino to come in again. Before leaving Ino turned to Hinata and said, “Just prepare yourself…the Lord of the Oga clan is nice…but he’s old enough to be your Dad.”

Kakashi had heard through the grapevine, via Tama and Gai; that Sato was wishing to speak to him. He stopped by his nephew’s apartment and knocked on the door. He heard multiple voices call out in response, “Come in!”
Kakashi stepped inside. He heard an additional shout that was Tama’s, “I just cleaned so please take your shoes off!”

Tama and Sato were mildly surprised when Kakashi came inside and waved hello. Sato had been expecting Hinata and Shino, but they were running late for some reason.

“I hope I’m not interrupting your lunch.” Kakashi told them.

The betrothed were seated with bowls of stew in front of them. A large piece of cake was set aside, most likely for Sato. His nephew was looking more robust and bright. He had some minor trouble walking, but he had built himself up again with physical therapy. Sato insisted he would be taking missions again but he understood that he could not rush it. Tama looked very happy to be sitting beside him.

Sato leaned back contentedly in his chair, “Nah, we just finished. Would you like something to eat?”

“No thanks. Gai’s team treated me earlier.”

They thought maybe he meant Gai and his students, but Kakashi clarified, “The Jounin council had a meeting today and then we went out to eat.”

“So like, his old teammates were there?”

“Yeah.”

“What are your old teammates like, Kakashi-sensei?” Tama asked innocently.

Sato bit his lip, horrified, realizing he had not schooled Tama on Kakashi’s painful history.

Her teacher just shrugged it off, “They’re not around anymore.”

She accepted the answer and collected empty bowls from the table. Kakashi took a free seat and watched in amused silence as Sato assisted Tama with the dishes, ‘Well this is good to see...he’s not being waited on anymore. He’s taken an interest in helping out.’ Not that Tama would ever complain about Sato being lazy, but she was accustomed to doing things for him. Kakashi was noticing these slight changes in the boy’s behavior even if she wasn’t.

After tidying up Kakashi advised Tama to keep an eye out for Kiba, who could potentially be stressed by his father’s arrival. She promised she would as she pulled on her boots, “I’ll cheer him up if I see him! I’ll be back after my shift! Will you be staying for dinner, Sensei?”

“Dinner here?” Kakashi verified.

“Yeah, we’ll make it together.” Sato said while tucking into his cake.

“I suppose I could. I don’t have much to do later.” Kakashi agreed.

Tama was thrilled. She ran out the door and Kakashi returned his attention to Sato. He was not maintaining the standard amount of distance he kept from Tama. It seemed as if his disinterest had become interest.

“How are you feeling now, Sato?”

“Much better.” He said with a full mouth. He lost a few crumbs.

“That’s good. I was told that you wanted to talk to me about something.” Kakashi approached the
Sato swallowed before speaking, “Yeah! I did. If you have the time.”

“I do. I wanted to talk to you about something as well.”

“Oh?” The boy was intrigued, “You can go first, then.”

Sato watched curiously as his uncle pulled up his headband to reveal his Sharingan eye. Kakashi leaned across the table so he could have a clear look. For a moment nothing seemed out of place, but then Sato witnessed the three separate tomoe of the Sharingan fuse into a kaleidoscope shape around the pupil. The boy sat back and rubbed his neck, “That’s different…” He looked helplessly at his uncle to confirm what he saw, “That looks different, yeah? I’m not sure what just happened.”

“It is.” Kakashi established, “I’m still trying to understand it.”

“When did that happen to your Sharingan?”

“Just after you were killed, I think. As you can imagine I was having a meltdown at the time…so I didn’t notice it immediately.” Kakashi described the incident, “The Sharingan responded to how I felt. I can’t explain why that is, but I believe it evolved into something much like what Uchiha Itachi has, the Mangenkyo Sharingan.”

“Freaky.” Sato was pleased.

“That’s not how I would describe it, but I’ll take it.”

“Does it do something weird?”

“I don’t know.” His uncle propped his chin on his hand while leaning on the table, “It might. It won’t matter to me either way. This eye has always been special to me.”

Sato smiled, “It’s like your friend is watching over you.”

“I know he is,” Kakashi then changed the subject, “Now tell me what it is that you wanted to talk about.”

“Uh, well…it’s not nearly as earth-shattering as your announcement.” Sato confessed, “It’s just that…”

“What?” Kakashi raised an eyebrow when he hesitated.

“Tama kissed me.” He said it quickly and then exhaled, feeling better.

“Oh?”

“At the hospital. And then when I came home. Then again earlier today…” Sato chronicled, “I don’t really know what to do about it.”

Kakashi had suspected that something was afoot with his student and nephew, but now he was getting a more accurate impression. It was healthy progress, in his opinion.

“Do you dislike it?” Kakashi asked.

“Nah!” Sato almost laughed at the question, “There’s nothing to dislike about it.”
“Then you don’t know if you want to reciprocate?”

“Yeah…”

“Try to.” Kakashi advised, “If it becomes uncomfortable then be honest with Tama. You owe each other such respect and you have all the time in the world to figure it out.” He watched as Sato crammed more cake in his mouth nervously, “You know, Sato, she was very fearful after you were hurt. Tama is more inclined to show you her true feelings now.”

“So I guess this means…we are definitely going to be together forever.”

“Not necessarily. In the event you both mutually agree to call things off, you’re free to go your separate ways without damaging our family’s reputation. If not, then you abide to the agreement.” Kakashi reminded him, “Your arrangement is actually quite a happy one, with all things considered.”

“I know.”

“I assume that was your first kiss.”

“Yeah. It was good.”

“Just so you know that was hardly news to share. I’ve expected it. My advice is to enjoy it and be aware of your feelings.”

“Oh, so you’re the expert on that, huh?” Sato teased.

“To you I am.”

A few days later at Mount Myoboku, Shima hopped out of the Enshinsui pool after a shopping trip in Leaf. She met with Fukasaku and Naruto inside the house and gave her critique of human stores.

“They can be so rude sometimes! As if I wasn’t good enough to be there, or the money I gave them wasn’t acceptable!” She ranted, “It was a battle, Naruto, but I was able to get these for you.” She had returned with a training outfit: a white shirt and black pants. He accepted it graciously.

In Naruto’s opinion the discrimination against non-human customers was stupid. People in Konoha had seen enough of the world’s curiosities by now. ‘I’d think that when people treat Ero-sennin reverently it’d only make sense for them to be nice to the toads who trained him!’ Evidently, not everyone was as well-informed or as courteous as he was.

Naruto changed into his new clothing and then volunteered to take some food to Jiraiya. Fukasaku handed him a tray with a bowl of soup and an assortment of prepared insects.

“And make sure he finishes this time!” The toad demanded.

Naruto ventured outside with the meal, past the yard and houses, and stopped at a green field ringed with mushrooms. Jiraiya was lying out on the grass and enjoying the mild weather.

He took a seat beside the lounging sage and set the tray down, “Make sure you finish your bugs, Ero-sensei.”

“Damn bugs.” Jiraiya grumbled, “The food is the only thing I don’t miss about this place. Everything else is just gorgeous…”

Naruto sampled a grub, “Hm…this isn’t so bad.” He nudged his teacher, “Go on and have one.”
Jiraiya reached with his uninjured arm and took the smallest insect. He quickly slurped it down and then groaned quietly. Shima shouted over to them from the settlement, saying she was off to visit friends. She too ordered Jiraiya to finish his meal.

Jiraiya remained horizontal and stared up at the vast blue overhead, pretending he hadn’t heard her. Although he didn’t know it, Naruto intended to finish eating the insects in the event his Master didn’t. In small ways, he was trying to make the man’s life easier, as if to apologize for harming him. Naruto had said that he was sorry many times, but he continued to show how regretful he was with action.

They relaxed in the grass and enjoyed their tranquil surroundings. Naruto was mindful of how he felt. His body was no longer sluggish or struggling. He had adapted to the chakra-dense environment of the mountain.

“I’ve got to say…” Jiraiya spoke after a long silence, “I feel like the biggest piece of shit, kid.”

Naruto smiled, “You really don’t have to.”

“I have to.”

“Why?”

“Because I haven’t done right by you; not you, not Haku, not Gaara…not even the first team I ever trained. Maybe I did a bit better the second time around, but…I have never supported you the way I was supposed to.”

“Look, it’s okay!” The boy insisted, “You don’t have to do this. We both understood! We wanted to test my limit and you keep blaming yourself, Ero-sensei.”

Jiraiya was pensive, “I’m not talking about that.”

“You’re not?”

“No. I’m talking about how I shirked responsibility when I brought you guys to Leaf. I shouldn’t have dumped you in the village the way I did,” His voice trembled a little, “I wasn’t making your lives much easier at all when I did that. I should’ve gotten my act together right then and there to support you. I’d be lying if I said I didn’t want to, and I’d twice be a liar if I said I was incapable of raising you three.”

Naruto stared at him. Jiraiya had closed his eyes and sighed.

“Looking back…” Naruto said quietly, “That might’ve helped.”

“Don’t get mad…” Jiraiya offered a preliminary apology. There was a pause that indicated he had more to say.

“About what?”

“Well…I’m your godfather.”

The boy sat up so he could breathe properly. This knowledge did not fit with everything else he had accepted as truth. Jiraiya had no familial or personal tie to him, at least not since their introduction as Master and student. Fearing it was a fact, Naruto braced himself. He felt his throat tighten and his head spin. If Jiraiya was his guardian, for whatever absurd reason that was…’Then why the hell didn’t he protect me?’
“Your parents appointed me.” Jiraiya continued, “I failed them. I fled when you needed me.”

“My parents?” Some outrage leaked into Naruto’s question, “You knew them?”

“Very well.”

Naruto’s heart was shredded, “Why didn’t you say anything to me?”

“Good question.” Jiraiya commended him for asking, “I was too cowardly to tell you. When they passed away I was totally unprepared to follow through with what I had promised them. I didn’t share it with you…because knowledge of your parents might be a bit overwhelming…”

“I can handle it!” Naruto snarled.

“I will tell you…but there are a few things you need to know about Leaf first before I explain.” Jiraiya smiled, more confident, “Give me a few days and I promise, I’ll bring you up to date with everything. It really is the least I can do.”

Naruto exhaled, “Alright.” He stood up and brushed off his pants, “I’m angry with you, Perv. I’ve got to walk away now.”

“Please do.”

Naruto plodded back across the green field in silence. Jiraiya must have understood what kind of agony this was for him, Naruto gathered. It explained his reluctance and apologies. He wanted to slap Jiraiya in the face for not being forthcoming about such precious information, but Naruto had already eviscerated him, even if it was accidental. That would cover the slap that was owed.

‘But now…I see why he did things the way he did…’ Naruto recalled what was more or less preferential treatment back when Jiraiya had been assigned as his team’s Jounin Instructor. He was taught the Rasengan in private and brought on trips that excluded his teammates, including the current (canceled) trip. Naruto had never pegged it on Jiraiya disliking Haku or Gaara for any reason, ‘And honestly Ero-sennin and I butted heads the most…’ So it couldn’t have been that.

Jiraiya had been looking out for him at the request of his deceased parents.

It was like a punch in the gut; uncalled for and dizzying. While it explained part of why he had been orphaned, ‘Maybe they died around the time I was born?’ Jiraiya’s confession had only spawned more questions. Naruto had pieces of information: he knew he was a descendant of the Uzumaki, he had some natural talent from that clan, his parents had lived in Leaf, and he could guess that maybe one or both or his parents were Uzumaki as well.

‘Why not just tell me?’ It was eating Naruto up, ‘Why wouldn’t Ero-sennin tell me? Or, if anyone in Leaf had known them or been friends with them…why did no one say a word?’ Infuriated, he stomped back into Fukasaku and Shima’s house. Naruto went to his room, slid the door shut and then flopped down on a futon. His indignation had consumed some energy.

As he calmed down, Naruto considered some other things the admission had confirmed. ‘Well…my parents were most likely shinobi…’ He had always imagined them to be, ‘And maybe that’s why they’re dead…’ He had been too distracted by life and adventure to ever think about visiting a graveyard or memorial to search for others with his family name, ‘What am I stupid? I never tried it! I know Ero-sensei said he’ll tell me about them…but I bet I could have figured it out on my own.’ For years, Haku and Gaara had kept Naruto in too cheerful a mindset to yearn for parents he had never thought much about. Without them, Naruto was more easily shaken by things.
“Naruto-boy!”

He rolled over and watched as the door slid open, allowing sunlight in again. Fukasaku hoped inside, beaming, “You have a girlfriend, eh? Wonderful!” He handed a scroll to Naruto, “Kosuke brought this for you.”

“Thanks, Pa. I’m glad I sent him.”

“Yes, this is the sort of task that he’s suited for,” Fukasaku agreed, “Time for me to go; I’ll be back later. Shima is off gambling again and I don’t want to miss it when she wins.”

Naruto smiled and thought, ‘Wow. Ma must be way luckier than Baa-chan.’

Fukasaku exited while Naruto opened up the scroll. A few dried flower petals fell free from the parchment and the scent put butterflies in his stomach.

Naruto, please know that I miss you too.

Thank you so much for my necklace! It is beautiful and I wear it all of the time! It made me so happy to read about your feelings. Truthfully, I feel the same way. I try to be patient, but I do sometimes get frustrated when I think about not being able to spend time with you. Every day seems a bit less enjoyable as a result.

I have always relied on you as well. You inspired confidence in me even during my darkest times. My happiest days were spent with you. I shall never take another moment for granted when you come home. For now, I am training very hard to become stronger. I imagine that Tsunade-sama told you already, but I was terrified when I fought against members of the Akatsuki. I could not do much but delay them. I hope to make a difference and protect comrades from them, because Sato should not have suffered at their hands the way he did.

I will make you proud, Naruto. There is less tension in my family now and we spend more time together. I have also learned some medical jutsu from Sakura-chan. When I can, I work on mastering my Water Chakra Affinity so that I can create my own jutsu.

Naruto looked up and thought, ‘She’s like…a secret genius.’

I have fun in my spare time, but it just isn’t the same without you. Shino and I collected herbs that we plan to make into ointment in a few days. Maybe that isn’t fun for most people, but I like how peaceful it can be. Neji-niisan asks about you frequently and hopes that you are getting stronger. I can tell he kind of misses you, everyone here does! Let me know what you’ve been doing and what it’s like where you are now. I am curious!

By the way, your house plants are doing well. If Mr. Ukki gets too big I will have to transplant him into my garden soon. Oh, and I was told that Gaara-kun has become the new Kazekage! Isn’t that amazing? It will be your time soon, Naruto, I am sure! You are always on my mind and I can’t wait to hear back from you. Take care!

Love, Hinata

Joy overtook him. All of the distress he had felt after listening to Jiraiya had been completely stripped away. Naruto rolled from his back onto his stomach and let thoughts of Hinata consume him.

‘Why is she so cool like that? I grew up with her and I always knew that she was dependable and smart, but Hinata could like…be Hokage…if she tried.’ Naruto grinned to himself, ‘That would make me happy! So what if I don’t get it? If Hinata did become a village leader, then Konoha would
Naruto reached and picked up a blue flower petal from the floor, ‘She’s been working hard on her jutsu and it shows. There’s no way I’ll slack when I know that Hinata’s pushing that hard! She’s also getting along okay and having fun…’ He envisioned her out on the town with friends, smiling, ‘She thinks about me a lot. She’s so sweet. Hinata’s probably…more grown up…’ He blushed, ‘Than when I last saw her…’ There was definitely an erection pressed against his stomach. He was thinking too much. Naruto lay in silence and stared straight ahead, perfectly visualizing her face; a pale beauty whose love and devotion would be coveted by many men in her lifetime.

‘And she loves me.’ The thought was euphoric. If nothing else in the world could go right in his life, Naruto thought, at least being the object of Hinata’s affection would keep him a very content man. It did not matter if he was educated about his parents or not, he reminded himself. He had learned how to be happy without that knowledge. What was the use in being troubled by it now? It was a piece of who he was, of course, but not the most important piece.

Naruto was sure of one thing: when he set next foot in Konoha and saw Hinata, even if it was a fleeting glance, he would never, ever chose to leave again.

Miles and miles beyond the verdant refuge of Mount Myoboku, nestled in the cliffs and crests of the River Country, Sancho was interviewing a potential new cook at the Curry of Life Shop.

The tiny old woman was seated at a low table with a teenage girl. The interviewee was a beautiful, freckled young lady with red hair, and the picture of manners and charm. Sancho’s son, Karashi, was peeking from the door of the kitchen, praying that his mother would hire such a fair blossom.

“And what is your name young lady?” Sancho asked, extinguishing a cigarette.

“I’m Ninomiya Rishan.” She was lively, “I live on the opposite side of the valley in Gakone Town.”

“Oof! That’s a walk. Why not just find a job in your town, rather than journeying out to Katabami?” Sancho suggested.

“I did just that. There’s no work left.” Rishan replied, “Grandma can’t work anymore since she had a stroke. My auntie looks after her…but I was told that I have to start making money. We need to support ourselves somehow.”

“Oh I see…how old are you?”

“Sixteen.”

“That’s good!” Sancho was warming up to the idea, “And you cook?”

“Very well!” The girl boasted.

“Do you have experience with curry?”

“No, but as soon as I learn how to make it,” Passion burned in her eyes, “I swear I’ll impress you!”

“Okay! Easy there, dear, I want to hire you. I’m only concerned about how far you need to walk to get here. It would mean that you’d be crossing the big bridge over the waterfall everyday too…it can be dangerous after rainy days…”

“Please don’t let that disqualify me!” The girl pleaded.
“It won’t. I have an extra room upstairs. You can stay here and I’ll have you work five days a week. Then you can visit home and bring some money to your family.” Sancho advised, “Of course, you may do that if your family consents.”

“They consent. If I’ll be employed they consent.”

“Very well then…” Sancho sighed, “Let’s get you started in the kitchen…” She called out to her son who quickly came bounding with a ladle in hand. “This is my son, Karashi. He’ll help you learn how to make all of the dishes served here. Practice with him for now and this afternoon you can learn the basics of waitressing.”

“Thank you!” Rishan was thrilled. Karashi awkwardly introduced himself while leading her to the back of the restaurant.

Sancho noticed a lone customer had entered the shop while she had been wrapping up the interview. Her bespectacled eyes quickly picked up on the flak vest of a shinobi, and she looked for a headband to identify the hungry ninja, ‘Well now! It’s a Leaf shinobi! How wonderful!’ She was reminded of Lee and his stalwart team. They forever had a place in her heart.

“Welcome, Leaf ninja!” Sancho greeted, “Please have a seat! What can I get for you?”

“Today’s special.” The man gave her a small smile, “Or whatever you suggest.”

“Ah, I hope you like your dishes spicy then!”

“I don’t mind it.” The ninja took a seat at an empty table while Sancho shouted for an order through the kitchen door. She returned to the table and put her hands on her hips.

“Now what is a Leaf ninja doing out here in Katabami? We’ve been having some harsh weather and your village is much nicer than this dump! I haven’t seen my friends around here since the rains began.”

“It’s not much better where I’m from.” The man said, “You have friends in the Leaf Village?”

“Oh yes! I sheltered some young Leaf ninja here while they worked on a mission to kick the Kurosuki family out of town.”

“You don’t say…” The man smiled interestedly, “Who were these youngsters? I bet I know them.”

“Let’s see…well of course Rock Lee, my best customer, and his teammates Hyuga Neji and Tenten. And they also brought along a cute little novice!” Sancho cradled her cheeks when she thought of Fujita, “He was an adorable boy…whatever his name was…”

“I don’t know about the boys…but I know Tenten.”

“Oh? She was a lovely girl! Very talented and brave.”

A plate of curry arrived and while the man ate Sancho divulged about her experience with Team Gai.

“Yes, she and Neji-san were the leaders of the group and very close. They came up with strategies to scare off Kurosuki Raiga. Things are so much better now without that brute!” She sighed, “And Lee, bless his heart…he’s a bit silly…but my goodness can he eat.”

“They sound like an energetic bunch.” The man told her, leaving some rice on his plate, “Thank you
for that meal, Madam. It has prepared me for my mission.”

“I’m glad you enjoyed it. Would you like anything else?”

“No thank you,” He set a few notes on the table and stood, “Farewell.”

Sancho had more to say, but the stranger strode out without another word. A crash came from the kitchen and was followed by Karashi’s wail of pain. Rishan was chirping in alarm as well.

‘Karashi dropped a pot on his foot again, I bet…probably while trying to impress my new employee...’ The old woman shook her head as she went to check on them, oblivious as the man outside, visible from the window of the restaurant, changed his appearance.

Shimofuri Koinyu had been transformed while in the Curry of Life Shop.

After discarding his henge he spat a mouthful of curry-flavored remnants from his mouth. He had gotten tips from Orochimaru that he could find useful information in Katabami for his master. Orochimaru might have considered giving him this intelligence himself, had he not been furious with Koinyu’s failed attempt to recapture Haku, ‘To this day I still cannot figure how that boy negated my seal...’

Rather than take another mission that could possibly result in failure and inspire more of Orochimaru’s ire, Koinyu wisely decided to investigate things himself. His lord and master, Dintei Bihokokuni, rightful heir to the Sasagainu line, wanted his young female competitor sniffed out and squashed. Their unfortunate target was Tenten, who they had suspected of burglarizing Sasagainu treasure within the last two years.

‘The only reason Konoha would choose to retrieve the Hiyumi would be if they still had an eligible wielder in their village...otherwise they would have let Iwagakure take possession of it. The Third Hokage was fully aware of that. Considering that Bi-sama killed all of his competition in Rock and Leaf over the last few decades, this girl is a loose end that needs tying...’

Of course, it had never been easy trapping dwindling Sasagainu turncoats outside of the Leaf Village. It took patience to pick them off. It had last been done several years ago, killing two adult clan members, but Bihokokuni had suspected that the Hokage was trying to avoid such ambushes in the future.

‘If we’re going to lure the little girl out into the open for Bi-sama...then I’ll need the right bait.’ Koinyu smirked, ‘And that lovely old lady gave me some wonderful suggestions.’

Being Kazekage was a lot of work, but it was also kind of fun, Gaara thought.

He was no fan of the extremely tall stacks of administrative work and files he reviewed at his desk, and sometimes it gave him a crick in the neck. To remedy the awful condition, Gaara took intermissions to visit other offices and parts of the village that requested his presence. He was often welcomed warmly by whomever he visited. Gaara’s favorite part of every morning was sitting with a panel to assign missions to the regular forces. It was a great way to get to know all of the Sand shinobi he was not yet familiar with, especially the Genin and Jounin. Shigenori’s occasional requests for missions were awkward, of course, but they kept things professional.

Council meetings were typically boring and uneventful. Gaara supposed that since he had only been acting Kazekage for a little over two weeks that he couldn’t expect excitement right away. He survived the meetings with some poise, often wishing he could get away with dozing off like many of his elderly counterparts did. Seeing him sleep would probably panic the council. He could just
imagine their toothless screams of fear and ignorance. Gaara had informed them that his seal had been strengthened and that he could rest safely, but the old folks just couldn’t wrap their heads around it.

If it wasn’t a particularly busy day he could get away with a short nap after lunchtime. Gaara found that he could sleep just about anywhere: benches, rooftops, alleyways, balconies, under desks, tables, storage rooms and basements…he was not picky. Kankuro had caught on to this sneaky indulgence of Gaara’s and had gotten him a hammock. It was tied between two posts out on the roof of the administrative building. Gaara bought him dinner he was so thrilled with the gift. Temari told them it was extremely tacky.

Matsuri’s superstardom among the students and trainees in Sand was taking a toll on her. She got along with the kids well enough and answered their questions, hundreds of times over, but she expressed her concerns to Gaara. Though he was Kazekage, he still prioritized his mentorship of Matsuri, and he made sure she knew that.

“They don’t really care about what I do or who I am. They only seem to want to know about you, Sensei.” Matsuri explained, “I already had difficulty making friends…but now it feels like no one will ever try to get to know me.”

“If you’re patient and open-minded, someone will eventually befriend you for your own sake,” Gaara assured her, “You’ll need to wait for all of the superficial people to leave you alone before genuine people have the chance to approach you. It will happen, Matsuri.”

She appreciated his encouragement.

Gaara’s office days varied in length, but by early evening he was usually free to go. He would then find Matsuri if she had not been sent on a mission with a team, or with Temari or Kankuro. Her training had intensified the way weapon-training often did in the Sand Village. His siblings had given Matsuri guidance as well. Her specialization was with the Jouhyou, a weapon used primarily for preventing an opponent from getting too close. Temari and Kankuro shared their perspectives with her, specializing in fan wielding and puppets, respectively. She was a quick learner who took advice and made it work in practical applications.

Gaara would swear she had even become somewhat of a phenomenon with a rope-dart…or any ranged soft weapon, like chains, whips or rope. She practiced day and night, had thousands of tricks and feints, and had learned to move so swiftly Gaara was sure even Temari and Kankuro couldn’t keep pace with her. Not bad for a novice, he told himself.

Her Ninjutsu needed more fine tuning. She had potential for Genjutsu, which unfortunately Gaara could not assist much with. He prayed for her Taijutsu to improve, which was essentially nonexistent, knowing the incremental training he gave her was all that she could take. Gaara believed that as long as she had her weapon in hand and teammates with her, Matsuri would be a successful kunoichi.

Five days earlier at a council meeting, some very good news was shared. Mara’s water treatment facility in the south had benefited many municipalities of the Wind Country, including Hidden Sand. The director of the facility was in fact a man who resided in the Sand Village, and he had submitted reports showing the gradual decline in costs for fresh water. The availability had enticed new residents and businesses to settle in an otherwise unattractive environment, which in turn had boosted, if marginally, the economy of the Sand Village. They had a bit more cash than usual.

The council had deliberated on what local causes to give to. Most of the money had been absorbed by Suna’s expenses. Some of it had gone to the Academy, some to the hospital and a bit remained
for whatever pet project cropped up. Then a day later a very interesting request came in.

While he sifted through a small pile of remaining work, Gaara noticed a scroll on his desk that was addressed to him. He was shocked to see it was sent by Tazuna.

Greetings from your favorite bridge-builder,

I just wanted to congratulate you on becoming a village leader, Gaara! My family and I just can’t shut up about it since we heard a week ago. Does this mean that your teammates will be in your line of work soon? We’ll have to throw a party if that’s the case. I’m a sort of unofficial village leader myself around these parts. Our civil committee just voted to name our city the Tide Village, which was kind of an ode to our people’s admiration of shinobi. Of course, there’s a little bit more to it than that. That’s my secondary motive for sending this message to you.

There was another venture that was voted on shortly after that. Our people here and our officials agree that the Tide Village needs an effective way to defend itself. We’ve never been this wealthy or well-equipped before here in the Land of Waves, but we still face the dangers that come with being in proximity to some rowdy ninja villages. It’s been decided that the defense system we intend to create is modern standard of shinobi village. The problem with meeting this demand, since we have maybe three ninja living here in Tide (and they’re virtually retired) is that we must fortify our village with our own ninja. The options were: outsource shinobi or outsource training. The people chose training. However, it’s a hell of a lot cheaper to hire an experienced ninja than it is to hire an experienced ninja to train inexperienced citizens.

It’s an ambitious goal to found a ninja village this way, but if you look at how the Grass Village or those rich bastards in the Hidden Moon Village did it, things can turn out alright if you have enough money and people cooperating. People here want to be trained as ninja so I’m going to make sure they get their wish.

We agreed that asking the Hidden Mist Village to participate with us would be the same as letting a rabid dog in the house. Not the best idea. Because I was close with your team, I was asked to pitch this idea to the Hidden Leaf Village. There’s just one problem.

Your Hokage said no.

When I asked Lady Tsunade why she would not consider our request she explained that she was already cementing a pact with the Hidden Star Village. She was already up to her eyeballs in complaints from her advisors, and she determined it would be impossible for Leaf to extend aid to another village currently. Quite a bummer, isn’t it? I understand her position but I was still very disappointed. It was a matter of bad timing.

And so, when I heard that you’ve made yourself quite popular in Hidden Sand I thought it might be worth at least asking you what you thought of this idea. I won’t hate you if you say no, but I do expect one visit from the new Kazekage to see how beautiful our home has become. It’s thanks to you and your friends that we’ve prospered and no one here will ever forget it. If it helps, we have a new vacation resort that just opened and the beaches there are glamorous. You could get yourself a good deal, being who you are.

I think I’ve greased you up enough. Say yes already. Help us out once more. It would make Inari and pretty much every person here happy. Then you can throw it in that old lady’s face while you’re kicking back on the beach.

Your friend, Tazuna
Gaara quickly thought: *too expensive…*

Then he thought: *definitely doing this.*

The next council meeting was quite riotous. There were mixed reviews about Tazuna’s proposal, as well as Gaara’s enthusiastic support of it. Chiyo was in attendance and was surprisingly verbal of how there was *no way in hell* Hidden Sand could pass up the chance to get free passes to a beach resort. Her brother apologized for her momentary insanity.

The arguments ensued. Every pro and con they could think of was debated for two days until, finally, after a close vote; Gaara’s support was favored by the council. Many decried the greenhorn’s lack of experience or knowledge of lending foreign aid, but Gaara promised he would research the best ways to be cost effective. He followed through on what he said.

While studying Sand’s previous out-of-country endeavors he learned that Suna had a great track record for inter-village cooperation. ‘*It kind of explains why they were so quick to support the Sound Village…*’ He thought wryly. Dating back to its founding, at the time of the First Kazekage, the village had strategically denied itself the offering of Biju at the first Kage Summit (they had already sealed away the Ichibi) in exchange for trade, wealth and influence. Ever since, Sand had flourished and secured allies.

The public funding for the endeavor was estimated and approved, but a new challenge arose when Gaara considered plans put forth on *how to go about training Tide ninja.*

It would take a considerable and diverse assembly. Every facet of the regular forces: Academy teachers, Sensory corps, Sealing corps, Interrogation corps, Medic-nin and any willing Chunin and Jounin…they had to be represented to train neophytes. It was a risk to send so many to the Land of Waves and leave Suna vulnerable, so Gaara surmised that it was best to deploy each division in waves.

Gaara imagined they wanted shinobi to be trained in secret operations as well, much like the ANBU Black Ops, whom he was chiefly fearful of parting with because of the sensitive information they could divulge to trainees. Gaara would give Tide Village time to train their shinobi for however long it took, and then allow their ‘best’ to receive training from one of his ANBU cells, or at least attempt it. The Black Ops team would get some very strict rules to abide by before he sent them, naturally.

He also needed to think about who was going to spearhead these efforts. Gaara would be delighted to visit the Land of Waves to give instructions to Sand’s forces and Tide’s trainees, but he simply could not be outside of the village for so long. He called upon the two people he trusted most.

“I want you two to decide amongst yourselves who will go.” Gaara had his hands folded under his chin as he leaned on his desk, “I know you can both do it.”

Temari and Kankuro were not exactly jumping at the chance to lead such a cumbersome mission.

“Why can’t we both go together?” Temari inquired, “Wouldn’t that work just as well?”

“I need at least one of you here. You’re my advisors, and if I needed to consult with someone while you were both away…” He frowned, “Then I would probably need to speak to Chiyo for advice.”

“That would…definitely not be good.” Kankuro agreed. The old kunoichi was a skilled veteran but she was rapidly losing her marbles.

Temari and Kankuro looked at each other, contemplating the offer.
“How about…you start off this mission and get everyone situated?” Temari suggested, “Then I’ll rotate down there after a few weeks and relieve you. That way it’ll be fair.”

“Big sis knows best.” Kankuro conceded.

“So you’ll be going first?” Gaara gave his brother a critical look, “That means you’ll be introducing the Chunin, Academy Teachers, Sensory corps and Medic-nin to the trainees for basic training.”

“I’ll do it.” Kankuro agreed, “I need to read over your report again to see what the game plan is… because I’m kind of flying by the seat of my pants. No one has done anything like this in a long time.”

Gaara produced a small file and handed it to his brother, “Here. Stick to the itinerary. It goes over the first four weeks in detail,” He added sternly, “But improvise if there’s danger.”

Kankuro nodded.

“One last thing,” Gaara told him, “You’re taking Matsuri with you.”

Haku was not very happy about it, but he was participating on another morally ambiguous mission.

It was a sunny day on one of the outermost, southern islands in the Land of Water, which was home to one of Koseki Inagawa’s cartel rivals. Inagawa had paid a large amount of money to make sure that his up-and-coming challenger was cut down. He had sent forth his two most lethal and reliable mercenaries.

Zabuza and Haku had accepted the task but upon arriving on the island, they realized that they had not been adequately informed of the target’s defenses. The gang leader’s residence was sheltered in rugged woods, tucked behind sheer cliffs that faced the ocean. The compound had two enormous concrete walls surrounding the perimeter. Patrolling along the border of the walls were hundreds of guards. Zabuza said all of this was fine. There was only one thing bothering him.

He pointed to the top of the wall. For a blink of a moment, a man was standing there, surveying the area; then he had disappeared in a cloud of smoke.

“That was a shinobi.” Zabuza stated the obvious, “Which suggests that there might be a few more of them in this asshole’s employ. Koseki had a lot of nerve not mentioning we need to get past other ninja here.”

“That’s because it would make this task more expensive.” Haku stated. He knew the rules now.

“Well he’s paying up when we get back. He’s got a death wish if he thinks it’s safe to be a cheap with me.” The nukenin growled, “We have one target and he is hiding behind hundreds of thugs and shinobi. That costs way more than what we agreed to.”

“How should we proceed?” Haku asked, “Entering the fortress unnoticed won’t be easy without intel.”

Zabuza was crouched on a tall branch in a tree, adjacent to Haku’s position. He rubbed his bandaged chin while he thought, “I’ve been in similar situations…” He glanced at Haku, “How’s your Genjutsu?”

“Much improved.”
“You said you were practicing some weird shit with it.”

“Um… it’s not weird, in my opinion.” Haku contested, “It’s a clever application.”

“Clever my ass…” The man snorted.

“Do you want me to cast an illusion or not?” Haku hissed in annoyance, “The fact is that I can enter that building more easily than you can. You’ll need a better distraction to do so, which I can provide for you.”

“Do it.” Zabuza told him, “But don’t call yourself clever.”

Haku sighed. They approached cautiously through the tree tops and were wary of traps, and came to the back end of the wall nearest to the tree line. Several guards were playing a game of cards on an overturned can. Haku made hand signs and produced small ice mirrors behind each unsuspecting sentry. His Genjutsu weaved through the net of mirrors, and just as soon as the lookouts noticed their reflections in the floating ice they drifted into catatonic states, ensnared in a happy illusion. They sat together in stupefied silence as Zabuza and Haku flashed by and over the first barrier.

Slinking along with great care, they arrived at the second wall, hypnotizing distracted guards with Genjutsu mirrors as they went. The pair passed through a tunnel and adeptly avoided detection. It was less likely they could skate by so easily once inside the mansion. The building’s architecture was designed to funnel people forward into small spaces, with many doors and a scarcity of windows. It was a gangster’s dream house.

Things got a little uncomfortable in a narrow hallway. Haku had a bad feeling as soon as he noticed the glass panel on the wall to his left; definitely a one-way mirror, ‘Without a doubt…someone is there watching.’ He was not really surprised when three ninja appeared at each end of the hallway to block their retreat. One shinobi was ahead of them and two approached from behind. The width of the corridor was shorter than the full length of the Seversword, but that wasn’t going to stop Zabuza from using it.

He drew quickly and Haku had been anticipating it. The boy leapt and rolled across Zabuza’s back as the man bent, getting leverage on the blade, and he somersaulted over Zabuza towards the lone ninja ahead of them. The Seversword ripped through the sheetrock of the wall and arced into the first idiot who had charged from behind.

Haku blocked a brief exchange of punches before kicking his opponent in the face, knocking him back, and stuck him full of senbon needles for good measure. He looked back to see Zabuza had bisected one thug ninja and beheaded the other. The fight had destroyed the walls of the hallway, with huge gouges carved into the soft plaster and glass shattered on the floor. Blood was artfully distributed among the debris.

“You made a mess.” Haku informed him.

Zabuza grunted, replacing the sword on his back, and they continued on, poking into doors until they came to a stairwell. It was another claustrophobic climb up, sandwiched in the echoing straight of the stairway, and they leapt up and up until they came to another metal door. It was locked. Haku focused, and with two hand signs, exhaled a chilly breath that froze the hinges of the door. They snapped off. Rather than kicking it down nosily as Zabuza would have, Haku opened the door quietly in reverse.

The top level was roomier and looked as if it was reserved for administration. The wood floors were new and the layout of the bureau resembled offices. Haku paused for a moment when he heard
footsteps. Zabuza grumbled behind him. A cleaning woman rounded the corner and straight into a Genjutsu mirror. She fell flat on her back, dreaming.

Haku produced two Shadow Clones to continue in opposite directions and search for the gang boss. He and Zabuza loitered, deciding not to commit to a direction until they knew it would take them to their target. They ducked down behind a filing cabinet and waited for Haku’s clones to send info back to them.

“Why didn’t you bring that rabbit?” Zabuza asked quietly.

“Pua?”

“Whatever the fuck its name is…”

“I wanted to. She’d be very helpful right now.” Haku agreed, “But I sent her to deliver mail to my friends. She won’t be back until she finds Naruto and Gaara.”

“I can’t believe you still concern yourself with talking to them.”

“They’re my best friends. I love them.”

“You’re going to make me barf.”

“Gaara-kun was just made the Godaime Kazekage.” Haku smiled proudly, “And Naruto will be Hokage someday.”

“I don’t know about the loudmouth,” Zabuza vaguely remembered Haku’s teammates, “But the other one will probably never fall in battle.”

“I doubt he will.”

“How did he get the job? He’s your age.”

“Gaara outclassed other candidates in Sand.” Haku said quietly, peeking over a desk, “And…his father was the previous Kazekage.”

“Sure. Leave that detail out.”

Haku told him to shush. A fuzz of visual information entered his mind and he could see what his dissolved clone had seen. It was working out well. The boss, a thin, terrified-looking man, had two henchmen with him. They fled the Shadow Clone when it entered the locked office via an Ice Mirror, exchanging projectiles, and the two thugs fell in defeat as the gang boss carried on screaming. He was chased into a corridor and, hopefully, the other Shadow Clone would shepherd him along into the lobby where Haku and Zabuza had stationed themselves.

Moments later, the gasping man darted out of a hallway to their right. He ran past the intruders’ hiding spot. A flurry of senbon needles sunk into his calves and he collapsed to the floor face-first. Haku stood and approached the boss as he frantically tried to drag himself to shelter, hollering for help.

“Are you Kunimura Maro?” Haku asked.

“If I said no would you let me go?” The man sniveled.

“No.”
“Well I am, fuckface! It won’t do me any good now.” Maro was confused as he regarded the young man, “I thought you were…chasing me back there. How’d you get here? And why did you do that to my legs?”

“I did it because I don’t have time to play cat and mouse. Inagawa-san asked us to eliminate you.”

“N-No…” He realized that they were seeking a bounty, “Please!” Maro began to weep, helpless, “Please don’t kill me! You won’t kill me, will you?”

“I won’t.” Haku assured him.

He stepped away and Zabuza brought his sword down.

An hour after the assassination Zabuza had bagged Maro’s head and bulldozed their way out. Most of the shinobi that the gang boss had hired were poorly trained. They did not put up much of a fight. Haku tried to prevent innocent causalities of janitors and housekeeping, since such people were often caught off guard by close-quarters shinobi scuffles. After a brief and one-sided gambit, most of the thugs retreated, knowing Maro could no longer provide them with paychecks. They left the fortress victorious.

The rocky cliffs whistled with an afternoon breeze as Haku and Zabuza leisurely made their way home. Some rainclouds rolled in with the winds and Haku looked up, noting the change in weather.

“Do you want to keep going?”

“What? Is there going to be a storm?”

“Yes. We won’t have much cover out here.”

“Whatever. You keep us dry.” Zabuza grunted, “I want to stop and eat and then get the hell off this island.”

A short time later, the clouds broke and Haku exerted a minimal amount of chakra to redirect the rain from their persons. They walked for a long while along a cliffside path and then stopped at a stone overhang. They sheltered beneath it for a break. Zabuza took a seat on a smooth faced boulder and pulled two packed lunches from Haku’s bag. He ate in silence, not even questioning his younger companion when Haku quietly walked off down a sandy slope. He rightly assumed the boy needed to relieve himself.

The dune overlooked a rock-studded beach below. Haku stared out at the rolling waves, careful not to stand in the wind (which made peeing a tricky affair), and did his business. His eyes glanced across something curious when he finished up. He hopped down the slope and took a look at prints left in the sand, ‘Someone has been here recently?’ The footprints were small, and judging by the spacing, the person had been moving fast.

Inquisitive, Haku followed the trail of prints north along the beach and then up a steep dune. The drizzle was passing over, thankfully, making the tangent more bearable. At the top of a hill he found a log of driftwood lined with kunai. It looked deliberate; like target practice. He tried piecing it together, ‘Is this a shinobi? But those feet were small…like an Academy student…’

“Is someone here?” Haku called out, “Are you a trainee?”

“Sort of.” A small voice answered.
Haku looked around, dubious, not seeing the owner of the voice. The little varmint was good at hiding.

“Don’t you want to come out?” Haku asked, concerned, “You’re not here alone, are you?”

“No. My friend went fishing for lunch. He said I can’t talk to people I don’t know.”

Haku smiled, “My friend is having lunch too. It’s good that we’re not alone.”

A tiny, round face poked out from among some cattails, superbly childlike. It was a young boy with violet hair and red eyes. He was obviously intrigued, “How did you find me here?”

“I saw your footprints on the beach.”

“I thought the tide would wash them away…”

“That would have worked…if it wasn’t low tide.”

“Oh.”

“What’s your name? I’m Haku.”

“Ranmaru.” He was smiling uncertainly.

Haku stepped over to the weeds and held out his hand. The little boy shook it and then stepped out of his cover.

“Are you training to be a Mist ninja?” Haku wondered.

“Well no.” Ranmaru admitted, “I’m training, though I’m not from that village. But I was born in the Water Country.”

“So was I!” Haku was genuinely surprised, “I’m actually a Leaf ninja.”

Ranmaru’s jaw dropped, “You are?”

“I swear I am. I’ve come here to the Water Country to find my clan and train.”

“I have friends in the Leaf Village!” Ranmaru told him excitedly, “Do you know Lee-san?”

“Rock Lee?” He laughed, “I’m friends with him and his teammates, Neji and Tenten.”

Ranmaru squealed. He darted over to the log and extracted his kunai. No more practice. This was set to be an ordinary day, made extraordinary by leaving his footprints on the beach. A kindred spirit had come along.

And he and this fellow named Haku got to talking for quite a while, discussing their common friends and aspirations. Haku had lost track of time and was abruptly jerked out of the conversation when he heard a furious shout ring out far down the beach.

“Oh my,” He was fearful, “I forgot about my companion…”

“I hope he isn’t mad.” Ranmaru said softly.

“He is…I should get back.” Haku smiled at his new friend, “You should visit Nanakusa after you find your birth village. That’s where I am staying while I train.”
“Good! I will!” Ranmaru promised, “I’ll ask Raiga to take me there soon. After lunch today he said he would teach me Lightning Style jutsu.”

“Really?” Haku was alarmed, “Why is he teaching you that?”

“I’m an apprentice! I’m training to be one of the Seven Shinobi Swordsman.” The boy divulged, “One day I will use the Thunder and Lightning Fangs.”

Haku felt his stomach twist with fright, ‘Another Swordsman is here with a companion!’

“You said your master’s name was Raiga…” Haku said carefully, “It just so happens…that I am training with an old acquaintance of his, Momochi Zabuza.”

“Oh! Maybe they’ll want to talk after lunch?”

Haku was horrified, “No! Absolutely not!” When the boy gave him a confused look he added, “You see…the Swordsman have disbanded and hate each other now…”

“That’s silly.”

“No, I’m serious!”

“But you and I get along so well…” Ranmaru said meekly.

“Ranmaru…that has nothing to do with them. They’re entirely different people and I assure you, no matter how much you and I get along, they never will.”

Ranmaru was discouraged by the news. Haku patted his shoulder, “It’s alright. You and I can be friends…but we should avoid reuniting Raiga and Zabuza.”

“You’re right…”

Nearby, a super-agitated shout caught their attention, and as soon as Haku turned to look for the newcomer, he was hit full-on by a ball of lightning. He was hurled back into the sandy dune with a cry, and Ranmaru flapped in a panic, distressed to see his new friend had been ambushed.

Raiga had appeared at the top of a rocky outcrop and his swords were drawn, “Get away from Ranmaru, you filth!”

“Raiga! No!” The little boy held out his arms, “He’s my friend!”

“I told you not to make friends out here!” He roared, “Everyone here is a mercenary! He’ll snatch you!”

Haku wheezed, grazing over his burn with the Healing Palm jutsu, and wobbled to his feet. He had truly been blind-sided by the assault, ‘He wasted no time attacking me…but what if he hits Ranmaru? He’s careless!’ Several successive blasts of lightning tore down at him again, and Haku tucked Ranmaru under one arm, feather-light, and leapt away from the volley. Raiga’s frenzied screaming was only intensified by the gesture.

“You really should put me down…” Ranmaru advised, “Raiga thinks you’re trying to hurt me!”

He was offended, “I would never! And he’s the one risking your safety by attacking that way!”

“He has never hit me!”
“Today will be the day.” Haku warned darkly. He set Ranmaru on his feet and stepped away from him, “I’m sorry. We can talk again some other time…but it isn’t safe now.”

“I’m sorry, Haku!” The boy peeped.

He made a break for it but it was no use; Raiga was incensed. The swordsman rushed after Haku, summoning lightning from the clouds overhead, and it crashed down in multiple bolts in the seaside valley. Haku frantically tried to evade, and even though he was not struck directly, residual electricity coursing through the moist ground was zapping him over and over. He did not want to fight back; fully aware that Ranmaru’s caretaker was only trying to defend his ward, despite his ostensible insanity.

Haku left a Shadow Clone behind to cause a diversion and then ducked behind a rock formation. Tremendous lightning jutsu shook the hillside, and Haku gulped in air, trying to calm down. His next move would be to sneak off through an Ice Mirror, and while making hand signs and focusing chakra, static crackled to life, sticking to him, ‘Oh no…” A lightning bolt pierced down right beside him and Haku tumbled, fried, struggling to escape while his paralyzed body betrayed him. When he stumbled and hit the ground Raiga pounced on him mercilessly.

The carving tip of one of Raiga’s blades jammed snuggly in his shoulder, pinning him, and Haku wailed. He flailed for a moment before deciding to hold still, hoping that the other blade would not come down and pierce him in any vital spots. He did not want to tempt the swordsman to roast him with a point-blank shock either. Raiga glared down at him, “What were you trying to do with Ranmaru?”

“We were…just talking…” He could hardly breathe.

“Liar!” The man bellowed, “You want him for his Kekkei Genkai! You’re a hunter aren’t you?” His eyes were crazed, “I’ll kill you for this…”

“I’m…not a hunter.” Haku managed, “I’m an…apprentice…just like him.”

Raiga paused, suddenly perplexed, “What?”

“We’re students! So we wanted…to talk.”

The swordsman grimaced, not buying it, “I don’t believe you.” He bore down on the sword and Haku shrieked again, “What are you doing out here then, apprentice?”

Ranmaru screamed. Raiga’s head snapped in the direction of the cry, and Haku strained to tilt his head; he could see that Zabuza had arrived. His eyes went wide as saucers when he saw that Zabuza was not taking kindly to the situation. He had Ranmaru’s neck surrounded by the circular opening in the Seversword, trapping him. The boy was quaking in fear; his knees knocking together in terror. Zabuza had supposed that the little boy might work as leverage.

Raiga locked his gaze on the fellow nukenin, stupefied by what he was seeing. It gradually clicked in his head; he could see that Zabuza had arrived. His eyes went wide as saucers when he saw that Zabuza was not taking kindly to the situation. He had Ranmaru’s neck surrounded by the circular opening in the Seversword, trapping him. The boy was quaking in fear; his knees knocking together in terror. Zabuza had supposed that the little boy might work as leverage.

Raiga locked his gaze on the fellow nukenin, stupefied by what he was seeing. It gradually clicked in his head. Very slowly, he withdrew his blade, freeing Haku. The boy gasped, clutching his shoulder, and then limped to his feet. He could feel Raiga pointing a sword at the back of his head, warning Zabuza not to try anything.

“Give me Ranmaru,” Raiga growled lowly, “And you can have this rat of yours back…”


“Ranmaru first!”
“No.”

“Stop!” Haku shouted, and then tried to catch his breath again, “Just send…Ranmaru…”

Zabuza lifted the sword away, freeing the violet haired boy. Ranmaru tottered on his feet, moving forward, too frightened to look back and see if his head was about to be lopped off. Raiga nudged Haku forward as well and he began to take pained steps towards Zabuza. While the boys walked slowly to exchange themselves, Raiga and Zabuza continued to bicker.

“What were you doing with my apprentice?” Zabuza demanded.

“He was trying to take Ranmaru away!”

“Like hell he was…why would he want some snot-nosed kid?”

“You probably put him up to it!”

“You’re out of your damn gourd!” Zabuza jeered.

“You want Ranmaru for his Kekkei Genkai!” Raiga snarled.

“Newsflash, asshole: Haku has his own Kekkei Genkai.”

“You’re a selfish defector and you want to rebuild the Seven Swords…you obviously want them both!”

“One student is too many, to tell the truth.” Zabuza struck a sarcastic tone, “He’s a pain in my ass. Why would I want the pain in your ass?”

“I should kill you…” Raiga was grinding his teeth furiously.

“Bring it, you stupid fuck. This is why I don’t work with you anymore…”

Haku stopped beside Zabuza and gave the man a weary look. Was it really a good time to pick a foolish battle? On the opposite end of the sandy stretch, Ranmaru was likewise persuading his mentor to think twice about fighting. After telling Zabuza that he was “scum” and should “go kill himself” Raiga retreated with his tiny student. The tension ebbed away and Haku sat down on the ground, focusing on healing his wound.

Zabuza slapped the back of his head.

“Are you out of your mind?”

“No, I’m not.” Haku was aggravated, “I understand perfectly what a fiasco that was.”

“You never should have approached them.”

“Ranmaru was alone. I had no idea he was an apprentice until he told me,” He fixed an impatient eye on Zabuza, “Moments before Raiga turned up. Don’t lecture me right now. I’ve been skewered and electrocuted for being friendly.”

“Serves you right.”

“Thank you,” Haku added, stilted, “For…not hurting that boy.”

“If I did that he wouldn’t have traded you back. Raiga would have gone and cut your eyes out of
your head.” Zabuza speculated, “I know how that moron thinks…which is pretty much not at all.”

“And he’s training an apprentice…” Haku sighed in disappointment, rising to his feet. His shoulder was adequately repaired. His hair and skin smelled like charcoal, though.

“That’s not going to pan out.” The nukenin guessed, walking a bit slower to accommodate the deep-fried young ninja with him, “He has no concept of what it takes to keep things alive, most especially not a kid. Raiga can’t think. If he tries to, he thinks in circles. He always needed someone to tell him what to do next.”

“So that was your duty in the Swords? To guide him?”

“He needed it more than the others did. Some people are born just smart enough to know how to breathe and fight and that’s it. He’s one of them.” Zabuza explained, “I was leader because I understood how to manipulate the others into functioning together. It’s not easy keeping that many assholes on the same page.”

“Do you not want to reunite the Seven Swordsmen?” Haku asked.

“I thought about it…but two of the people I need are not coming back.” Zabuza said simply.

“They’re not?”

“Hozuki Mangetsu was brilliant and did better work than me. He’s dead. He took the Master Scroll with him.” He broke it down, “His little brother was my student. He’s probably dead too. He disappeared after a Sound ambush. Then Hoshigaki Kisame,” He shrugged, “He prefers the Akatsuki over rebel causes and he’s not bringing Samehada back.”

“The Akatsuki…” Zabuza muttered, remembering Naruto and Gaara’s clash with Kisame and Itachi in Tanzaku Quarter.

“Now if I trained you…you’re probably no good with a weapon this big.” Zabuza speculated, referring to Kubikiri Boucho, “You would need to learn with the Nuibari sword, and I have no idea where the hell that blade is. Probably still in the scroll…”

“What’s Nuibari?”

“It doesn’t matter. I can’t even get it for you.” Zabuza dismissed the idea, “The point is there is no way that the swords could ever assemble again. Too many members and weapons went missing. All that matters…” He gazed out over the bay towards the main island, “Is that you do as I say and learn what I teach you.”

“We made a bargain. You said that you would tell me about my clan.” Haku reminded him sharply.

The man gave him a cold look, “That’s not happening until you lend me your powers. Then you can do whatever you want. You’re almost ready to help me finish this.”

“Finish what?” Haku pressed, frustrated.

“Retaking the Mist Village.” Zabuza enlightened him.

It was a long trip down to the Land of Waves. Gaara had notified Tazuna in advance that Kankuro would be spearheading the effort; Baki and Matsuri would be accompanying him. They had 50 Sand shinobi deploying with them which included 10 Academy Teachers, 15 Chunin, 10 Jounin, 5
members of the Sensory corps, 5 members of the Medical corps, 3 Genin excluding Matsuri, and 2 elders: Chiyo and her brother, of course.

During the trip, Chiyo swung between fits of complaining and gushing excitedly over the beach resort she was promised. Gaara had to rent her a luxury suite as a condition of her participation, which she had told him “was a dire wish for a woman nearing death.” He paid for it himself just to shut her up. Her brother apologized on her behalf, but Gaara informed him his apology would come in the form of keeping her under control.

Kankuro was glad that he was in good company. Matsuri was well behaved, helpful and obedient. Baki, his former Sensei, gave him good advice when he needed it. After several days of traveling through arid desert and rationing water, they entered hospitable lands. It was quite a scene as they crossed the famous Great Naruto Bridge. The orderly procession of Sand shinobi was met with fawning oohs and ahhs as they passed by locals. It inflated their egos a little bit.

Tazuna and Inari met them halfway along the span of the bridge, “Welcome!” The old man happily clapped Kankuro’s shoulder and shook his hand, “So you’re Kankuro of the Sand! I didn’t know Gaara had siblings until he wrote back to me.”

“Yeah, we lived apart for a while,” Kankuro replied, “It’s good to meet you, Tazuna.”

Tazuna patted his grandson’s head, “And this is Inari! He’s looking forward to training.”

“Hi Inari,” Kankuro was in a good mood so he smiled, “This is my Sensei, Baki.” He introduced his teacher, who nodded, “And this is Matsuri, Gaara’s student.” The girl waved and said hello. Inari stared at her critically.

“Gaara’s training a girl?” Inari balked, “He’s so tough I thought for sure he’d pick a boy to train!”

Before Tazuna could reprimand him for the rude comment, within a blink, Inari had been hog-tied around the ankles by Matsuri’s Jouhyou. With a yowl, the boy toppled over. She had clearly taken offense.

“Uh, yeah, about that,” Kankuro cleared his throat, “Matsuri here is the only one among a class of fifty six students that Gaara was willing to train. She had more character than all of them put together.” Inari freed his legs and stood, dusting himself off as Kankuro added, “So please, unless you want her to knock each of your teeth out one by one with that rope-dart of hers…show her the proper respect.”

“Thank you, Kankuro-sama.” She was beaming, “You’re too kind.”

“Jeez…” Inari muttered.

“Well now, she showed you, Inari.” Tazuna was grinning, “Remember: you know nothing. Even Matsuri should be treated as a teacher from here on out. She knows far more than you do.”

“Okay, fine.” He huffed, folding his arms.

Tazuna moved along to greet the division of fifty ninja behind Kankuro, who were for the most part very happy to have arrived. Chiyo was at the front, looking tired, but Kankuro was shocked to see she had a pair of sunglasses on already, ‘Where the heck did she get those?’

They moved on to the village where several blocks along the coast had been prepared to host the guest shinobi. The beach resort, which was far away at the end of the strip, would be Chiyo’s paradise. She said farewell to Kankuro and marched down the street with her brother. It was kind of
a relief that she had gone, he thought.

The coastal barracks were newly furnished and organized by class. Kankuro’s quarters, where Baki and Matsuri would be staying with him, was at the center, nestled in with the other Jounins’ lodgings. Tazuna told him it would make him accessible to all of his subordinates as well as townspeople who needed guidance.

The official tour followed and Tazuna and his grandson split up. Inari led one half of the shinobi coalition around town while Tazuna took Kankuro and his group. They walked past a near-complete Ninja Academy and two primary schools. A series of shops and residences led up to an Administrative Building and then a tall lookout. Tucked within a sea of substantial buildings was a large hospital, which Tazuna boasted was already quite successful.

Kankuro was surprised to see a small group of Mist ninja walk by and smile. Two looked younger than Matsuri while the adult must have been a Jounin.

“Some families have settled down here to live.” Tazuna explained, “A lot of Mist ninja came here because they were tired of fighting. They’re mostly from the rebel forces, but I think a couple of the Mizukage’s loyalists retired here as well.”

“And they help out?” Kankuro was surprised.

“Sure they do! They rave about this place!” Tazuna chuckled, “I used to be very suspicious of Mist ninja…but these days we don’t see any thugs types. We’ve hired too many upstanding shinobi for protection that prevent nukenin from trying their luck here again.”

“Are there any other shinobi living here?” Matsuri asked.

“Not yet. We get some commuters now and then. There’s a nice Grass kunoichi who’s a Medic-nin, and she helps out frequently at our hospital.”

“Have you discussed with your former Mist residents if they wish to become Tide ninja?” Baki arched an eyebrow, “They may not want to live here and forsake their heritage.”

“I asked. Some of them, mostly the younger ones, were all for it.” Tazuna told him, “The older folks…they’re done doing shinobi work for the most part.”

“Then they can help us too, if they’re willing.” Kankuro suggested.

After getting acquainted with the layout of the Tide Village, Kankuro wagered it was a hair smaller than Hidden Sand. The suburban residences and fishing district beyond the city were not considered annexes of the Tide Village, which had defined finite boundaries. Tazuna explained that regardless of what and where Tide was, everyone who lived in the Land of Waves took pride in the city, which had become the country’s crown jewel.

At the end of the day the Sand shinobi retired to the barracks and had dinner. Tazuna’s daughter, Tsunami, had stopped by and given Kankuro a meal to share with his friends. Tazuna’s family stayed for a short while before returning home for the night. Kankuro, Baki and Matsuri sat at a table together and digested.

Matsuri was very taken with the Tide Village, “I love it here! It’s sunny like home but there’s so much water and the breeze feels good…”

Kankuro smirked at her, “Do you want to move here?”
“If Sensei will let me…”

“Probably not. It’s our duty not to get carried away and forget why we’re here.” Kankuro reminded the girl, “Gaara said he enjoyed being here too, but back when he visited it wasn’t nearly this nice.”

“I heard them talking about all of the crime that was here.” Matsuri acknowledged.

“It wasn’t pretty. They struggled with corruption and gang bosses.” Kankuro recalled, “Gaara said he had to kill members of a drug cartel who had it out for Tazuna.”

She lowered her head sadly, “Even then he had to do such things…”

“Your Sensei had no option.” Baki told her, “Those gangs were notorious for executing innocent civilians. He acted to defend them.”

“Not to mention they were getting chased down by Momochi Zabuza.” Kankuro added, “Gaara and his teammates were only Genin at the time, but they had to protect Tazuna from a legendary assassin too. They didn’t sign up for that crap.”

“He…won’t come back, will he?” Matsuri was concerned by the mentioning of Zabuza. Gaara may have been strong enough to fend off a powerful nukenin, but she was aware that she certainly wasn’t.

“Surely he won’t.” Baki presumed, “Not unless there is any profit in it for him.”

“No one is going to try to mess with Tide after it has its own shinobi. Well…” Kankuro qualified the remark, “No one will mess with them beyond what's typical of competitive shinobi villages. They will be able to handle it, Matsuri.”

“Because we’ll be training them.” Matsuri affirmed.

“Yep,” Kankuro leaned back in his chair and yawned, “But that could take a very, very long time to accomplish…”

In the Leaf Village, it was an eventful day at the hospital. Tsunade had dropped by with Sakura in tow, intending to skip administrative work in favor of educating Leaf ninja. They had planned a seminar that would go over poison extraction and manufacturing antidotes. This offer had attracted many Medic-Nins who were not busy with missions.

Shoda was one such Medic-nin hoping to drop into the Hokage’s first-come-first-serve class. He had taken his teammate and good friend, Hikune, along for the day. They had not seen each other in a while and hoped to spend some quality time. Shoda was curious as to why Hikune had suddenly taken a high volume of missions in the last week. He wanted his friend to justify his absence.

“It isn’t necessarily because I was needed for those assignments,” Hikune admitted to him as they waited in the hospital lobby, “It’s because I didn’t want to be home.”

“Really?” Shoda raised his eyebrows, “Mion-kun said something was bothering you. Why won’t you just tell us?”

The Hyuga hesitated. Hikune had not really clued his friends in to the fact that he had been infatuated and forward with a fiercely independent, Genin-level kunoichi. Moreover, he had not discussed his rejection and dismissal by said kunoichi either. It had been painful. It had been humiliating. It had not been worth mentioning.
“I…” Hikune exhaled, “I’ve been in a bad way.”

“I can tell, Hikune.”

“The Hyuga clan elders have been inviting these strange people…families from all around the Fire Country…to meet Hinata-sama.” Hikune elaborated, “It’s terrible. That poor girl is accosted every week by older men. I can’t believe that Hiashi-sama would allow it in the first place.”

“I’m sure it bothers him too.” Shoda could imagine, “It wasn’t his invitation.”

“It bothers everyone. These people have no tact at all. No one is a suitable match for Hinata-sama.”

“It’s like the secondhand embarrassment Mion-kun gives me sometimes.”

“Yes, like that.”

They laughed for a moment.

Shoda continued, “Is that really all that’s been troubling you?”

Hikune trained his eyes on the far wall ahead, past where Tsunade was chatting with receptionists, “There is…something else…”

“What is it?”

“I’ve been trying to avoid Tenten.”

“Oooh.” Shoda’s expression was apologetic, “Wasn’t that going well? Mion said you just stopped by the forge to see her.”

“It’s not going well. She wants me to leave her alone.”

“You’ll have to accept it.” Shoda advised, “You really were pushing the limit. She seems lovely…but far too headstrong.”

Hikune gave him an annoyed look, “I like that quality in her.”

“To each his own,” His friend tried to disarm him with a smile, “What you’ll have to take away from this, even if it’s hard for you, is that maybe it isn’t a good time for her.”

‘As long as Neji is her teammate, it will never be a good time.’ Hikune thought, ‘It has kept her very close minded.’

They lined up outside of a meeting room for class just as Tsunade was pulled aside by a nurse. Inuzuka Tsume had her husband leaned against her shoulder as she led him inside the lobby. He looked absolutely dreadful; pale as a ghost and perspiring. Kiba and Sakura exchanged words that Shoda could not hear. The two rushed off to follow behind his parents as Nichiyo was admitted. Tsunade announced that the class was cancelled.

Shoda sighed deeply. Medical emergencies took precedence. He patted Hikune’s shoulder, “This is a sign that we need to go home and relax.”

“Hm. I didn’t interpret it that way.”

“That’s why I interpreted it for you, because your mind is in a dark place.” Shoda informed him, “I owe my little sister some quality time, so I’d like to go home and visit. Maybe you should hang out
with Fujita? Just take it easy and don’t think about her for a while.”

“I will.” Hikune agreed. They parted ways outside of the hospital.

At home, Hikune discovered that Fujita had left early to train with his Sensei. He wanted to shove Shoda’s interpretation where the sun wouldn’t shine. His teammate was very good at getting his way. As soon as class had been cancelled Shoda had decided he didn’t want to spend the day with a mopey-Hikune.

Hikune acknowledged that his friend was correct; it would make him feel better to horse around with his little brother, but now he was even more frustrated that he was on his own again. Hikune walked along a path through the garden of the Main House, trying to appreciate the fresh air. It would have been far more relaxing had he not kept thinking of how Tenten spent time with him in the same garden.

He checked with his Byakugan to see who was home. His father must have been out, but he could see his mother was weaving happily with some of her Branch friends. He didn’t want her to have to put up with his crabby mood. Hikune continued following the bend, considering some practice with Jyukken forms might help him shake off irritability. He took a left into the central courtyard.

He was surprised that Neji had dropped by at the same time. He was seeing off Hanabi who had finished complaining about something to him. The girl scampered away and Neji turned to face his older cousin. It was likely that he intended to practice forms as well.

“Hello Hikune,” Neji was appropriately respectful.

For some reason that Hikune could not rationalize, the friendly greeting felt like a spike being driven into the top of his head. His impatience began to manifest.

“Spare me your pleasantries.” Hikune retorted. He brushed past Neji and noticed the hurt expression on the boy’s face.

Neji genuinely had no idea why he was being treated so coldly. He and his immediate family, at least these days, got along extremely well.

Hikune decided that he wanted to leave, knowing it was best to spare his cousin from his temper, but he stopped and took a deep breath. He rounded on Neji, regarding his quizzical face; how the heir of the clan still looked so respectful and frustratingly naïve. How he had changed like everyone said. It was nauseating.

“I suspect…that you are ignorant of what has been going on, considering how conveniently blind you have always been.” Hikune no longer felt obligated to spare anyone from his foul mood. Speaking freely felt much better.

“What have I been ignorant of?” Neji asked, alarmed by Hikune’s venomous attitude.

He had never tried to upset the older boy, knowing what a valuable ally he was in the Main House. Hikune had always been mild. He had always been his brother Fujita’s idol. There was no rhyme or reason for his icy treatment.

“Your teammate.” Hikune announced boldly, “She and I have been spending a lot of time together. Tenten is unlike any other kunoichi I’ve met.”

The woeful confusion Neji was feeling quickly devolved into all-consuming dread. He wanted to say
something to discredit the words but it wasn’t possible. There was no rebuttal. Simply invoking Tenten’s name seemed indicator enough that something was terribly out of sorts. Could she have really done such a thing without him noticing?

“Unbelievable.” Hikune sneered at Neji’s shock, “You really had no idea, did you?”

One of Neji’s faithful standbys, anger, asserted itself accordingly, “How dare you talk so freely about my friend!”

“Why shouldn’t I? Because you are the heir to the Hyuga clan and I will be punished if you take offense? You…the head of this house…” Hikune spelled it out plainly, “Hinata-sama is more suitable. I am more suitable.” He was defiant, “Keep your title. Enjoy it, Neji. It’s the only thing of value that you acknowledge.”

“Why are you passing judgment on me like this? How have I wronged you?” Neji was openly upset, “You are someone that I have always looked up to.”

“It’s not me that you have wronged.” Hikune corrected him, “Tenten is the person you should look to for guidance. No one in this village cares about your feelings and future more than she does.” He raised his chin and added, “And no one will cherish her more than I do, most certainly not you.”

“Your words are careless!”

“I am deserving of her affection…there is nothing I wouldn’t do for her…” Hikune was rambling, “But she could not betray you…she’ll have nothing to do with me.”

He spoke more incoherent nonsense that Neji tuned out. While it was a rough picture, Neji had pieced together what Hikune was ineffectively describing. Although Tenten had never brought it to his attention, Hikune had been making advances towards her. ‘They became acquainted after the Retrieval Mission.’ He felt ill thinking of how long she had silently endured unwanted attention, ‘Did she not trust me enough to say something to me? That somehow my intervention would not have mattered?’ If anyone was going to defend her from his own clan, Neji thought, spiraling with frustration, surely Tenten would have asked him to do it?

“And you,” Hikune accused at length, “You’re the one who is careless. You have ignored someone precious. How can you be preferred…in spite of such neglect?”

This notion that Hikune kept bringing up was also worrisome. While Neji could not confirm what Tenten thought, Hikune definitely seemed to think that she had a preference. Hikune had come to believe, for some crazy reason, that Neji was a rival for affection. It did suggest that something must have happened, and it would require him to ask Tenten about a few things, but Neji couldn’t bring himself to ponder that incident just yet. He needed to set the record straight.

“I will not tolerate this disrespect any longer,” Neji was calm when he spoke, “You know nothing about me…and it seems you know nothing about Tenten either.”

He thought that he could diffuse the situation by walking away. It would be the mature thing to do, Neji assumed. The silence that followed was empty and sad; then the distinct rustle of gravel came from behind him. Hikune had lunged while his back was turned.

Neji whirled about with a cry, discarding all courtesy.

He countered Hikune’s successive Jyukken strikes that were delivered with tremendous speed. Initially, Neji only sought to defend himself, dodging and blocking Hikune as best he could, but he began to understand Hikune was not willing to let him go. That was abundantly clear when Neji’s
guard was broken by a non-traditional combination and he took a savage right hook to the face. He staggered sideways, catching himself, and Hikune switched to Gouken the likes of which Neji had never witnessed before.

He tried to draw on his experience with sparring Lee, but hit after hit, Neji understood that there was no comparing the angry Jounin’s skill. Hikune slipped between styles, crafty and ruthless, and gladly bloodied him for several minutes. Neji could only force him away with a Rotation. With several meters between them Hikune continued to attack with a perfected Air-Palm. Neji rolled and ran to avoid it, knowing his own technique was not yet refined.

They exchanged what projectiles they had with them. Both rotated to avoid being hit and then resumed. Jyukken was used again as they bashed each other, more than willing to damage organs, and Neji substituted several times when fatal strikes came close. Hikune was fast enough to evade and had not bothered to replace himself. When his patience wore out Hikune attacked again with Gouken, knowing Neji would have trouble with anticipating his movements. He then quickly switched, eyes narrowed, and closed thirty-two tenketsu in the span of a few heartbeats.

Neji leapt away, gritting his teeth, ‘I have no idea if... he really wants to hurt me.’ So far he was quite badly injured, and there was no telling what Hikune would consider “enough”. Neji’s plan was to keep up, maintain some pride, and then try to be fair while explaining the debacle to his uncle.

Another flat-palmed assault followed and Neji prepared to defend himself. He blocked, but the mere contact of skin abruptly electrocuted Neji. He gasped and fell over as Hikune stalked a few paces away, eyeing him unsympathetically.

“You’re not really a genius.” Hikune said lowly, “Maybe some would say you are…but you’re rather average for someone in the Main House.”

After a few labored breaths Neji hauled himself to his feet, “I’m not…disappointed by that.”

“Hiashi-sama already tested your Chakra Affinity, but I can see that you’ve done nothing with it.” The older boy observed, “I should share with you what I know.”

That was Neji’s tip off that Lightning-based attacks were in store. He had to avoid one last kunai aimed for his head before fleeing what he could only assume were shock-Jyukken strikes. Neji evaded and danced, straining himself, knowing he was too tired to continue. He closed some of the tenketsu in Hikune’s arms in an act of futility before his cousin rotated, spinning with a surge of lightning-infused chakra. The bolts struck him with searing hot pain and sapped the last of his willpower.

Neji landed on his back in the dust of the courtyard. Hikune kept his distance, supposing he had delivered proper punishment within ten minutes.

Neji stared up at the sky overhead, blue and empty, and had to mentally command himself to inhale. It was just about the same excruciation he experienced in Katabami, being struck by lightning on numerous occasions. He held still and tried to find any ounce of strength that would bring him to his feet again. There was none.

“I think that now you’re feeling…a bit of what I feel.” Hikune told him, approaching slowly.

Neji doubted it. He had never personally experienced heartbreak or rejection, but he estimated it was not on par with this level of physical pain. He just refused to entertain the idea that it was possible. Hikune, reciprocally, had probably never felt enough pain to understand that.
While his brain made gradual contact with his legs, Neji witnessed a shadow leaping over him, silhouetted by the sun above, and then swoop down on Hikune. There were brief sounds of a struggle and what was unmistakably Jyukken.

He came to a sitting position and could see Hinata had arrived and subdued Hikune. Earlier, Neji had thought it was odd that no one had witnessed their skirmish. Hinata obviously had, and she had also realized it was not a friendly contest. She did not receive any resistance from Hikune while she sealed his chakra points. The older boy sat on his knees in the dust, knowing he could not continue his tantrum with Hinata present.

Hinata rushed over to Neji and helped him sit up fully, running a healing hand over the angry bruise on his face, “Neji-niisan, are you alright?”

He nodded dizzily. She set to work healing the other injuries and burns he had sustained, finding tell-tale and discolored dots along his arms where his tenketsu had been shut. The momentary peace ended when several members of the Branch House rushed by, accompanying Hiashi and Hinata’s former babysitter, Ko, into the yard. They surrounded Hikune and demanded an explanation. Neji heard fragments of the exchange before watching his uncle settle an appalled gaze on the older boy. Branch members hoisted Hikune up and dragged him back into the Main House while he protested. Ko supervised the arrest.

Hiashi looked back to his daughter, “Hinata…”

“Yes, Father?”

“Help Neji and then bring him inside. I need to speak with you both.”

She nodded. Hiashi followed after the sobbing captive in silence.

Hinata took both of Neji’s hands and hoisted with all of her might, pulling him back to his unwilling feet. She healed him a bit more before he asked her to stop. Remorse and rage flicked through Neji’s expression as he reflected on what Hikune had told him.

“What happened?” Hinata asked softly.

He was quiet for a moment, thinking. Neji was still trying to make sense of it, distinguishing his imagination from reality.

“Hinata-sama…” His voice was low, “How often has Tenten stopped by?”

“To see me?”

“In general.”

“Very often, I suppose.” Hinata estimated, “She and I spend time, but then I was under the impression she went looking for you afterwards.”

“I’ve met with her here only on a few occasions.” Neji pointed out.

Hinata pursed her lips, contemplating it. She and her cousin walked slowly back to the veranda of the house. Hinata was getting an idea of why Hikune was upset, “Did she visit Hikune frequently?”

“If she did she hasn’t told me about it.”

Hinata blanched, “Was he…upset about something? About Onee-san?”
Neji stopped at the doorway. He didn’t want to go inside. He didn’t want to confront what had occurred.

“I’m sure he was.” Neji determined, “I will try to explain it to you and to Hiashi-sama,” He stepped inside grudgingly, “But…I don’t want to believe any of it.”
"Are you just going to keep avoiding me?" Jiraiya shouted up a steep cliff ledge, "You can’t learn much by doing that!"

Naruto had spent three days evading the Toad Sage. He timed his meals differently, ran off into the wilds where the wounded old man couldn’t follow, and limited conversations to one-word replies. Jiraiya knew some kind of retribution was due from Naruto, but it was starting to get old.

Naruto had taken to meditating anywhere in the valley where Jiraiya would physically be unable to follow him. It was part silent treatment and part practical application. Fukasaku had suggested he practice calming his mind in preparation for the training that was to come, ‘But that isn’t easy when Ero-sennin starts talking about my parents and how he left me high and dry!’

He blocked out Jiraiya’s whining and turned inward, listening to the stillness of the Kyuubi’s prison. If he sought tranquility, Naruto believed he should smooth over his connection with the Fox…which had been prickly since the Maple Village incident. Even if the Nine-Tails was untrustworthy and had nearly driven him to senseless killing, Naruto felt he ought to procure an answer from the Biju. He shed his hostility from earlier and appeared before the cage.

**Now why would I choose to talk to you? In the same way you are ignoring your Toady Teacher, I prefer not to fraternize with my jailor.** The Fox growled, You and I both know why I did it. I want you dead.

"See, I would believe you, but…” Naruto held up his hands for emphasis, “I’m not dead.”

**In time.**

"You’ve kept me alive on plenty of occasions!”

**It was convenient.**

"Right…” He injected a bit of sarcasm before asking, “If I died, wouldn’t that set you free?”

**The condition of this seal forbids such a thing.**

“So then…it’s always convenient to keep me alive?” Naruto postulated, “You’re attached to me so that you won’t survive without me…”

**It won’t be forever. I will find my way.** The Fox vowed, I’ll keep you alive long enough so that I may free myself…and then watch you squirm under my claws.

“**You are so passive aggressive! Worse than Gaara…**” Naruto sniffed, “And don’t even think about hurting anyone I care about again. Otherwise I won’t help you figure it out.”

The Fox was confused, **Figure what out?**

“**How we can separate from each other; without dying or maiming ourselves.**” Naruto clarified, “We are just not healthy together. It’s better to go our separate ways.”

The Kyuubi stared at him, considering that maybe it was complete baloney, but the serious
expression on the boy’s face cast no doubt, You, a jinchuriki…who can tap into such tremendous chakra…would just let me go?

“Well you’d stop trying to kill people, wouldn’t ya?” The boy huffed, “You didn’t attack because you were bored. I figured it out. It’s easy to see that anyone who is locked up constantly is going to hate people.” He smiled, “I don’t want that for anyone. Even you.”

You’re an idiot.

“Forget it! I was trying to be nice!”

You are lying anyway! You would never let me go. Even if you discovered a way that would spare your life and unshackle us, no shinobi could be so foolish.

“You’ve never had anyone who cared about how you felt, huh?” Naruto supposed, “That’s why you’re such an asshole.”

The Fox bore its teeth at the bars of the cage, Don’t even try to empathize with me, you runt!

“If that’s the way you want it, then fine!” He snapped, “I can understand you…or I can just forget you even exist.” Naruto grimaced. “But any beef you have with the world, from here out, you take it up with me and only me. No one else.”

What an unparalleled fool you are…

“I just want to be reasonable. I don’t need your chakra anymore, so why would I ask you to stick around?”

So that is your conclusion, is it? That I am no longer necessary? The Kyuubi snorted. You rank among some of the puniest shinobi I have ever laid eyes on. You are a speck. He grinned, You, Naruto, could scarcely imagine the power of those that preceded you…and they were not jinchuriki.

Naruto held up his fist, “And I promise you I’ll be just like them someday.”

You cannot promise me anything. No shinobi has ever kept his or her word on my behalf.

“Then it’s about time that changed.” Naruto said quietly, “I don’t need you. I won’t bother you. Just don’t lash out at innocent people.”

Oh. So this is goodbye?

“Yeah.”

The Fox narrowed its eyes, We shall see. Once the Akatsuki taps your shoulder…I’ll bet you will come crawling back to me.

“That’s not going to happen.” Naruto turned to leave, “The only person who can keep me alive is me. Just sit back and watch, Fox.”

Jiraiya’s voice waded back in, jogging his consciousness. Now he was really distressed, “Kid! Come on!”

Naruto opened one eye and let it settle on his teacher, “I am trying to concentrate.”
“And I am trying to break your concentration,” Jiraiya retorted, “You and I need to talk! Enough of your flitting around, Naruto!”

With a sigh, Naruto gave a disgruntled look to his teacher, and then hopped down a cascade of stones from his perch. They mirrored the other’s posture, arms folded and apparently grumpy. After a brief silence Naruto raised his eyebrows expectantly, “You want to talk to me?”

“Yeah, I’ve been trying to.”

“About what?”

“ Anything. At this point…” The Sage grumbled, “Just don’t run off again.”

Naruto wore a sly look, “I won’t run.”

“Well…” Jiraiya became uneasy after hearing the comment, “Don’t mess with me either… I’m not back at full strength yet.”

“Relax; I won’t hurt you, Ero-sensei.” Naruto assured him, “If you want to talk then let’s do it at Ma and Pa’s place.”

“Why not here? Their house is a ten minute walk-” Jiraiya faltered when his student vanished, “From here…”

It occurred to him after a moment that Naruto had likely left behind his three-pronged kunai at the toad residence. If it was to practice more with the Hiraishin or merely to cause Jiraiya inconvenience, Naruto would not say. He had teleported away without any warning.

“I’ll…” Jiraiya puffed as he struggled along a toadstool path, “Smack that kid…”

On the other hand, in spite of the long walk he had ahead of him, Jiraiya could not help but be delighted by Naruto’s progress. ‘He’s reminding me more and more of Minato…especially when he just zips off like that…’ He smiled, ‘It’s that same annoying gimmick.’

Ages later, Jiraiya dragged himself through the front door of Fukasaku’s house. While he gasped for breath Naruto and the Toad Elders greeted him animatedly. They were seated together at the table.

“Jiraiya-boy! You’re quick for an invalid!”

“Yo! Ero-sensei!” Naruto was grinning, “Look at all the money Ma won!”

Jiraiya eased himself onto the floor and laid back, wheezing.

The female toad proudly spoke up, “I’ve had a three-day streak. Gamabunta will be broke soon.”

“Goodness… my wife is a shameless gambler. I would tell her to do away with this vice, but,” Fukasaku shrugged, “She is very lucky.”

Naruto weighed the pouch of coins in his hand, “So what are you going to do with it?”

“Well I might plan a nice vacation,” Shima considered it, “Or…if I’m feeling generous…I’ll buy Jiraiya a new lung with it.”

“Thanks for your sympathy.” Jiraiya sat up slowly, “But if you’re going to spend money on me, just take me on vacation.”
“When you’re all healed I will consider it,” Shima told him, “I’ll be back later to check your wound.” She hopped towards the door, “Come on, Pa.”

She and her toad husband gave master and student the privacy they needed. Jiraiya hauled himself over to an empty seat at the table. He folded over it, resting on the tabletop as if it were a pillow. Naruto smiled, obviously in a better mood, “That was a workout for you, huh?”

Jiraiya blew a strand of hair away from his face.

“Well, while you’re recovering, Pa left this here for you. It’s definitely from Gaara.” Naruto pushed a scroll over to him, “I got one from Haku but I’m saving it for later.”

“Huh. So that means Haku’s bunny is here, right?”

“Yeah! I saw her outside playing.”

“Wow. That little fluff-ball found her way out here…where most ninja can’t tread safely.”

Naruto leaned back and folded his arms behind his head, “It doesn’t surprise me. Ma and Pa were saying that animals are innately better at feeling natural energy.”

Jiraiya was pleased, “Oh! So you’ve been listening…” He opened up the message, “It seems to me that you’re about ready to begin Sage Training.”

His eyes scanned over Gaara’s writing, ‘His penmanship got way better…must be that new position of his.’

Sensei,

Jiraiya’s heart nearly stopped, ‘What? He’s being respectful!’ He could only guess that Gaara had addressed him so formally because he was looking for guidance.

I am not sure why I have done this. Taking this position was the result of a lot of peer pressure and a bit of curiosity. I can’t deny that I have regrets. For a week or so after I became Kazekage, I was sure that I had made the wrong decision. I wanted to go back to the Leaf Village and forget everything. I wonder if it is still too late for me to do that?

I have been keeping busy. It distracts from these thoughts. Tazuna, the famous bridge builder from the Land of Waves, contacted me seeking help to fortify the new Tide Village. They intend to train ninja and could not get support from any other hidden village they reached out to. I agreed to it, although now I feel I did it on a whim. I thought that I had to do something of significance. So far, there is nothing that justifies me being Kazekage, but I imagine helping people might be the validation I need. There has been a lot of criticism and doubt, and so I am honestly not certain if this will work. In spite of conditions being ideal and my shinobi being willing…I think failure is still likely.

“Foo!” Jiraiya had not realized he had been holding his breath, “This kid needs some confidence! He’s a nervous wreck!”

“Gaara? Is he okay?” Naruto was intrigued.

“Hang on.”

I don’t know what I’m doing. I have fulfilled all of the administrative work required of me. I’ve adapted to the routines of councils and advisors. I try to reach out to every person who lives here,
shinobi or not. I have been told that I am performing well and I have impressed villagers...but this is the first milestone in my life that has truly scared me. More than dying, more than being alone; I am responsible for everyone here. There is no fear more acute than this.

Please do not think less of me for asking, but I would be grateful if you came by. Even if only for a day, I think there are some things you know that I need you to share with me. You have mentored a Kage before, and I need to know what it was like for him. Did he have doubts like these?

“Sure he did…” Jiraiya mumbled.

You and Naruto are always welcome. If there is any way that I can accommodate you, tell me. You have been away for long enough, and I have never needed the both of you more than now. After things are settled with Tazuna in the Tide Village, my next goal is to find Haku. Whether I assist him with finding his clan...or have to wrestle him to return here, clan-less, I am still debating. Your opinion on this matter is also appreciated.

Aside from my concerns, things are truly going well. My student, Matsuri, is becoming a talented kunoichi and I have continued my training to gain control over the Ichibi. It’s going well. You may find it shocking, but I am also quite popular here. People trust me. Even Tsunade-sama has faith in me. All of these things would mean so much more to me if you could see it for yourself.

I expect a reply soon. Don’t make me track you down, or I’ll be sending scorpions your way.

Gaara, Godaiine Kazekage

Jiraiya was squeamish of the possibility of a scorpion stopping by, ‘Good for him that he can summon...but I don’t need those nightmares for the rest of my life.’ He set the scroll down and exchanged a look with Naruto.

“It’s tough being a Kage.” Jiraiya informed his pupil, “It’s been so difficult that...it’s actually made Gaara miss me.”

“Ha ha!” A belly laugh escaped Naruto, “Hee...hee...yeah, sure...”

“I’m serious.”

The boy frowned, “Let me see that.” He picked up the scroll to read it himself. The Gaara he grew up with would never admit to Jiraiya that he needed help. It was practically a law of nature.

Jiraiya watched Naruto’s expression change as he swept through the message. Naruto put the scroll down and looked completely taken aback.

The Toad Sage shook his head in disapproval, “Even Gaara is going to get stuck sometimes. You believe that now?”

“He’s been really busy...” Naruto propped himself up on his elbows, lost in thought, “It’s great that he can help Tazuna though...”

“Gaara is undertaking way more than what I thought he would. He might be working with the Tide Village for a long time before they can stand on their own.” Jiraiya scratched his chin, “I also find it curious that he was only willing to take on one student...but when you look at the amount of patience Gaara has...one is more than enough.”

Silently, Naruto laid back on the tatami mats and thought about how high his friend was soaring. It was plain to see that Gaara was anxious about his new responsibilities, but he was trusted with the
title of Kage. He had always been thoughtful and responsible, though he had rarely ever vocalized his ambitions in life. Naruto had never taken into account that his aspirations could be aligned with that of his friend’s. ‘Could I do as well as him?’ Reflecting on how badly he had hurt Jiraiya, Naruto wasn’t willing to risk the well-being of a whole village if he intended to be a leader someday.

“I don’t deserve it.” He said aloud.

Jiraiya glanced down at him, “Don’t deserve what?”

“To be Hokage.” Naruto explained, “Gaara’s way more responsible than me. I don’t know why I ever thought that I…”

Jiraiya chucked the scroll, knocking Naruto in the head with it, “Way to be a downer! I’m gonna let you in on a secret, Naruto, are you ready?” His face was stern, “No one on this planet is ever ready to be a Kage. Ever. Not Minato. Not Tsunade. Not even my sensei handled that stress very well when he started out!”

“But I might-”

“You have every bit as much the potential that Gaara has,” Jiraiya insisted, “However, you are fortunate enough to be able to train for now. This is a time for you to realize your strength and not be burdened by anything else. And Gaara, on the flip-side…he was tossed headfirst into the political arena with no experience at all,” The Sage gestured to the scroll on the floor, “Hence his well-written freak out.”

“Well…yeah…”

“I’m getting pretty good at training Kages.” Jiraiya smirked to himself, “So don’t go selling yourself short, kid! No one in Leaf can do what you do. Period. Once you take the exam and are ranked accordingly, I’ll help you follow the proper avenues for leadership.” He grumbled, “Although you’re going to meet all kinds of irritating people along the way…”

“Even if I…didn’t…” Naruto considered it, “I would protect my friends and my home no matter what. It wouldn’t be terrible…if I didn’t make it all the way.”

‘This is just so weird.’ Jiraiya thought, ‘I’ve had the same conversation with Minato. He was going on that one day about how he could settle for less than his dream! I just want to be with Kushina, he said! I just want to serve the Hokage and win this war! Feh! I wanted to beat some sense into him…’

He smiled to himself, ‘But eventually…he worked it out. And so shall you, Naruto.’

“The two of you will be fine. You will.” Jiraiya told his student, “Gaara’s going to get the hang of it, and if it takes me talking some sense into him, then I’ll be crossing that damn desert to tell him what I just told you. You, Naruto…after your training here is complete, you’ll be outpacing most Jounin in Leaf. Relax.”

Naruto sighed, feeling a bit better.

“If anyone should be worrying, it’s Haku. He turned out to be the wild-child after all.” Jiraiya seemed amused, “He’s got to decide what he wants to do with his life once he finds his clan. Beyond that, he might return to Leaf or go to Sand, depending on who wins that argument: Gaara or Tsunade. He’ll be plucked up by the Medical Corps or the ANBU, depending on how adventurous he wants to be…”

Naruto thought about it, “He’s not like that. He’ll go wherever someone asks him to.”
“That’s why I can’t really figure out where his path is going to wind up.” Jiraiya then added, “I’ve thought about training Haku in Sage Arts too, but that’s only if he doesn’t disobey me or piss me off again.”

“Really?”

“Well…we’ll see; anything to keep Orochimaru away from him. I’m not messing around.”

Naruto was entertained. Things seemed to be almost back to normal between them, if not for the mental splinter that reminded Naruto that Jiraiya had abandoned him and never spoken of his parents.

“Did you want to talk about my Mom and Dad?” Naruto wondered.

The Sage flinched at the idea, “Uh…maybe not quite yet.”

“What the heck are you waiting for, Ero-sensei?”

“You need context.” Jiraiya contended, “I want you to know more about the village you come from. And I want you to know what it was like for them and their friends. You’ll appreciate a thorough explanation, I’m sure.”

Naruto sat up and crossed his legs, a bit annoyed by the delay, “Fine! Then where do we start?”

“In your parents’ time…the war was gaining steam. It was steadily getting worse and worse, and at about the time Kakashi was your age…that was the peak of violence.” Jiraiya began, “Leaf and Rock had made archenemies out of each other because of petty disagreements…and a general disregard of the cost of human life. I can’t even begin to tell you…the shinobi and civilian casualties that bloodied our hands. It’s why I tried to help the orphans from Hidden Rain. So many were lost…”

The boy shed his impatience and began to listen.

“Your parents grew up knowing the names of great heroes, like Maito Dai and Hatake Sakumo.” He grinned, “They were Gai and Kakashi’s fathers, you know. They were something else. I’ve never met two guys I enjoyed talking to more than them.” Jiraiya sighed, “They died so unfairly. The two of them fought for what they believed in, despite the ridicule they had to endure. I know they’d be proud of their children.”

“Yeah, they’re doing pretty well.” Naruto agreed.

“I fought many battles before I had the chance to meet Minato’s team and train them.” Jiraiya recalled, “Minato was a star among his peers and well-liked. He was invited to a lot of functions in the village and he’d try to get me to come along…teenagers.” He tilted his head back, “Hm. That was about the time that his friend Takaharu lost his entire team. So sad. That boy was a refugee who came to Leaf at a young age and was a brilliant shinobi,” Jiraiya gave Naruto a grave look, “He escaped the clan that Dintei Bi took over.”

Naruto was astounded, “That guy? Is that why he came after Leaf ninja?”

“One of the reasons. He was killing off competitors in his clan during the war; a coup of the rightful heirs that worked in his favor.” Jiraiya shuddered, “And to escape such tragedy only to lose your team and friends…it made Takaharu a very shy and isolated person for a while. Minato worked hard to encourage him. The Sandaime also took Takaharu under his wing after that.”

Jiraiya reclined carefully and propped his head up on his hand, “That was the heyday of Shikaku’s team too…I remember he, Inoichi and Chouza were the go-to team for most missions.” He chuckled,
“And Tsunade gave me the beating that almost killed me back then…”

“Sounds like good times.”

“You know Ichiraku Ramen wasn’t standing then? That came later.”

“How did people live without it?” Naruto was appalled.

“We went elsewhere. If you had been alive back then you would have eaten the things we ate.”

“Only because I wouldn’t have known any better!”

“Sure, but then there’s no harm in that.” Jiraiya smiled to himself, “But if you were looking for ramen, Minato would have showed you his favorite places to get it.”

“That…would be like a dream come true.”

“You’d definitely get along, no doubt about it…” The Sage nodded, “Those were unsure times, but we still managed to be happy and forge friendships.”

“I want to ask something else.” Naruto announced quietly, “I hope you know …or that you can actually tell me, if there aren’t any laws about it…”

“And what might that be?”

“Was there a jinchuriki before me?” He asked with searching eyes, “Did that person go through what I did?”

Jiraiya smiled to himself as he composed his answer, “That kind of info will definitely give you context, Naruto. It’s important. The village was not very understanding of jinchuriki even back then, obviously, but your predecessor had an advantage that you didn’t. She had the Kyuubi secretly sealed within her so she had a shot at a normal life.”

Naruto’s mouth hung open, “It was a girl?”

“Yeah. She arrived here as a little kid to replace the aging jinchuriki before her: the First Hokage’s wife, Mito.” Jiraiya was amused, “How’s that for some history? You are part of a very prestigious line, you know.”

“Can you tell me more?”

“Well…we really should talk about her. Soon I’ll give you the full story. You’ve got a ton in common with each other…” Jiraiya decided, “We can talk about her and the village…and your parents. It’ll make sense.”

“You’re going to make me wait again?”

“No. I’m asking for a little patience. Now that you’re talking to me again we can finally start your training.” Jiraiya informed him, “Go bring me some of those bugs for lunch…and then we are going to play with Toad Oil.”

On a clear morning, Matsuri woke up like she normally did. She was an hour behind Kankuro every morning since, naturally, he had more responsibilities than she did. Her room, to her delight, was separate from the room that Kankuro and Baki shared in the barracks. It was a relief that no one would witness her bed-head hair in the mornings. Matsuri washed up, brushed her teeth and dressed
for the day.

Occasionally, she would eat breakfast in the barracks and socialize with the other three other Sand Genin in attendance; however Matsuri had recently become fond of going into town to buy fresh fruit to eat. Such a treat was unheard of in Suna, and so long as she was in Tide Village she vowed to enjoy herself. The other Sand trainees would live without her.

Kankuro and Gaara had made it clear that she was not in the Land of Waves to be idle. She was asked to stop by at least three classes a day to help Tide students and tutor anyone who was struggling. Whenever a Sand ninja asked for help she was expected to offer assistance. Kankuro had tacked onto that requirement: help Tazuna with whatever he needs. So her days were jam-packed with running errands and supervising students.

Because most Tide trainees varied in age from six to forty-five years old, classes were organized by age and educational experience. Adult classes were held early in the morning with Academy Teachers, who were now getting into harnessing chakra with hand seals. Younger students in the 10 a.m. and 11 a.m. classes were still getting used to focusing chakra, and many still struggled to call upon it at all. Matsuri knew it had been challenging for her when she had been young, but it was very odd to see civilians endeavoring the same way. Sympathizing with their plight, she often dropped by the children’s classes to act as an aide.

In a courtyard shaded by palm trees, a group of Tide trainees were gathered around a Sand shinobi to learn about chakra. Matsuri waved at the Academy Teacher, Sugi, who breathed a sigh of relief when she arrived. He asked her to work with the students at the center of the formation, who were getting a bit distracted from their practice. Matsuri approached them and struck up a conversation, quickly winning them over. They set back to work with her guidance.

Inari was at the front of the group and had the attention of his classmates. From what Matsuri could discern he was doing very well. She glanced at the back of the class and was surprised to see a boy a full head taller than the rest of the youngsters. He stood behind everyone else and was speaking to a younger child who had lost confidence. ‘He might be a bit too old for this group…’ Matsuri walked over to them and politely interrupted.

“Yes, everything alright?” She asked the pouting trainee, “If you’re having difficulties I would be happy to help you.”

“I’m fine,” The youngster protested, “Menma showed me what to do.”

Matsuri locked her gaze with the older student. He quailed, a bit intimidated by her silent stare. He was a pale, flaxen-haired boy with hazel eyes and right away she could tell that he was not like his peers. ‘He’s probably my age.’ She pursed her lips, ‘I wish my hair was like his…’

“Thank you for helping.” She lightened up a bit, “How long have you been in training, Menma?”

“For as long as everyone else.” He was beginning to smile, “Are you a class aide?”

“Yes, I’m Matsuri,” They exchanged small bows, “So you can use your chakra?”

“Yeah!” The younger trainee piped up, “Show her! He impressed Sensei!”

“I don’t want to show off.” Menma said quietly, “I’m only trying to help you keep up with the class, Yuichi.” He nudged the small boy forward, towards the instructor who was speaking, “Please try to pay attention…”

“Sheesh!” Yuichi turned his back on them.
Matsuri helped a young girl who was hopeless with hand seals and noticed Menma was also quietly directing students. ‘He doesn’t seem like he needs to be in this class.’ She had a weird feeling about him. After a half hour a break was announced and Matsuri moved on, checking in with Kankuro in a yard outside of the new Academy. He put her to work hauling furniture inside, “There are only a few desks left. I brought in most of the heavy junk…”

Luckily, the furniture was put away quickly thanks to the volunteers nearby. Matsuri stopped for water before locating the next class, which had older and more devoted children who were starting to practice supplementary jutsu. She found Menma there, again, at the back of the class.

Matsuri cupped her chin as she watched from across the street, ‘He’s moving through all of today’s classes…and he definitely knows what he’s doing…’ Menma was assisting other students which; though noble, was not his job. Matsuri gave a clipped greeting to the Academy teacher before zeroing in on Menma. She tapped his shoulder, “Will you follow me please?”

Nodding in silence he followed her and crossed the street to a bench, where she indicated he should sit down.

“Can you please explain to me how you were trained?” Matsuri tried to be polite, “You’re already a shinobi, I can tell. Are you from the Land of Waves or…?”

“I was…trained by my clan.”

She raised her eyebrows, “Wow. So you’re not from here?”

“I just moved here a few weeks ago.” Menma admitted, “We lost our home and so…this looked like a good place to start over.”

“I’m sorry that happened. But it’s good that you and your parents came here. You’re exactly what the Tide Village needs.”

His smile was weak, “I don’t have parents.”

“Oh.” Matsuri’s shoulders slumped, “I…apologize…”

“It’s fine. After my parents died, my clan adopted me when I was small and I was raised as a shinobi.” Menma explained, “When I saw this place…I thought it was amazing how hard these people are working to become shinobi. It had been hard for me once too.”

Her eyes widened, “I felt that way as well.”

“You did?”

“I nearly didn’t become a ninja because I was so weak. Only after someone who believed in me came along and took the time to train me…there was no way I was going to make it on my own.”

“I was just like that.” He nodded, familiar with the feeling, “That’s why it feels good to help those students. It’s what I would have wanted.”

Matsuri took a seat on the bench, letting the words sink in. This was a rare occasion in which someone was talking to her, and not talking about her Sensei or themselves. There was a chance that she could befriend someone at last, just as Gaara had said. ‘I don’t want to mess this up!’

“So…Menma…” She chose her words carefully, “Would you be interested in working with me and other Sand shinobi to train the new students? I know I could use your help throughout the day.”
His eyes crinkled when he smiled, “I would like that.”

“Is that okay with your clan? Do they live here too or are they-?”

“It’s fine.” Menma dismissed the idea, “They wanted me to come here and help. I’d prefer not to do it on my own.”

And without further ado, they returned to the class to supervise the children who had some of the sloppiest substitutions Matsuri had ever seen. They passed the day tutoring learners, most having a rudimentary grasp of their abilities, and were surprised to discover that one among the class, a girl, had very precise chakra control. The teacher recommended she check in with the Medical Corps for private lessons the following week. Her peers griped jealously and Menma quieted them down.

At lunchtime they stopped for noodles and got to know each other more. Seated side by side on stools, the two spoke freely.

“When I first came here Inari showed me around the city,” Menma explained, “He also introduced me to his grandfather. Tazuna was hoping I would volunteer for the training program.” He chuckled, “They only paid Sand ninja to show up, so he felt bad asking me to do unpaid work.”

“I still wouldn’t mind doing this without pay.” Matsuri thought about it, “But what I’m getting isn’t much anyway…”

“I’m used to living on less. I think I prefer it that way.”

“Did you live in a ninja village?”

“I never have. We just lived in the countryside in a small town.” Menma slurped his noodles, “This place is huge by comparison and the food is much better!”

“It is great here.” Matsuri agreed, “So if you don’t live in a hidden village how do you earn money?”

“I do odd jobs.” His smile was shy, “It’s a bit of everything…I help stock the loading docks behind the shops on the main street…tutor at the elementary school…clean windows…play music.”

“Music?” She perked up, “What instrument do you play?”

Menma reached into the pouch on his hip and pulled out a small, vessel-shaped flute. She had no idea what it was but she tried not to look clueless. “We don’t see those in Sunagakure.” She said simply.

He laughed, “It’s an ocarina,” Menma played an arpeggio of sweet notes and then added, “I can also play the xun, shakuhachi and panpipes,” He hung it around his neck by a string, “Things like that…”

“That’s amazing!”

“Thanks, I’m glad you think so,” He turned back to his meal, “But the ocarina is my favorite.”

“How did you learn to play all of those instruments?” Matsuri wondered.

Menma hesitated to answer, “It’s a…popular pastime in my clan.”

“They also play?”

“Yes. Everyone does.”
“Will you play for me once we finish up today?” She smirked playfully, “I’ll tip you.”

“No, no…” He laughed softly, “Your company is payment enough.”

The next few days passed this way. Matsuri rushed through her mornings with barely a single word to her superiors. Kankuro had reminded her that she had to check in once in a while; just as being idle was unacceptable, so too was being very busy. Matsuri had shrugged off his advice. She was early to every class in anticipation of Menma’s arrival.

Inari had noticed this tendency after the second day. He stood beside her and folded his arms, “So Miss Kazekage’s student! Who is that guy who shows up here every day?”

“He’s a shinobi tutor. His name is Menma.”

“I see.” Inari adjusted his hat casually, “How come he hasn’t spoken to me yet?”

“Because he works with the students who struggle, so he doesn’t have much time to talk to the number-one student,” Matsuri chuckled, “And I already know you’ve been introduced to Menma.”

He pouted, “What’re ya talkin’ about? I don’t know that guy…”

“You showed him around the village, Inari. He told me.”

With the ploy exposed, Inari sighed, “It’s just…you guys get to go off and do whatever you want…and I’ve got to go to every class on the schedule. Grandpa won’t let me hang out with anyone until I finish. It burns me out…”

She patted his shoulder, “Aw…don’t be lonely…”

“I just wish I was a ninja already!”

“It takes time.” Matsuri told him, “Before you know it you’ll be done with the fundamental courses, then you only have one or two short seminars each day.” She smiled, “That’s way easier than what I was put through!”

“Oh really?”

“Yes! Gaara-sensei made me chase him through the desert when we first met.” She informed the younger boy, “Would you like to try that instead of your classes?”

“Nah. You Sand ninja are crazy.” Inari knew how fortunate he was, “Take it easy once in a while! Have you been to the beach yet?”

“Well, no, not yet.”

“I’ll take you there later. You can invite blondie if you want.” Inari was grinning, “But if you don’t own a bathing suit yet, I suggest you go get one!”

Matsuri was silent for a moment before she asked quietly, “Where…should I look?”

Inari promised to take her to the surf shop after class. Menma arrived shortly after that and Inari continued to be pushy, monopolizing the conversation with the older boy. He asked Menma to play a few songs for students after class, since he had been told by Matsuri what a skilled musician he was. Menma reluctantly agreed and then spun Inari around by the shoulders, “Now say good morning to your Sensei, please.”
Inari faced the Academy teacher who had arrived, “Mornin’…”

Matsuri was a tad distracted throughout the day. She advised students as best she could, but she was caught up on reflecting how easily she could make friends in the Tide Village, ‘Back home in Suna…no one would bother with me. I was the uncool girl in every class at the Academy. No one wanted to be my friend, although…I didn’t really know how to make friends and be outgoing after Mom and Dad died…’ She felt partly responsible for the solitude, ‘Even when I looked so pathetic that day…Gaara-sensei chose me. He and Kankuro and Temari gave me confidence.’

She looked around at flailing trainees who were being introduced to Taijutsu, ‘No one here...will ever know me as that failure. I came here as a real kunoichi. They all respect me.’ It felt good to be acknowledged after being overlooked for so long. In Sand, she still had to put up with the superficiality rampant in her age-group, but the Land of Waves was host to a much more diverse assembly of people.

And after lunch break and the final class, Matsuri took a walk with Inari to the surf shop. On the way, Inari had asked Menma if he was familiar the west beach, “We’re going to hang out there! Do you swim?”

“I do. You want me to go?” He was delighted.

“Yeah. Just don’t tell my Grandpa that I have homework.”

They split up after Menma promised to meet them there. Inari entered the shop with Matsuri and indicated the swimsuits on racks, “Here you go!”

“I don’t know…” She quickly picked through the hangers, “These are kind of skimpy.”

“Ladies around here where those kinds of things all the time.”

“I’m from Sunagakure. I’ve been to the beach twice in my life,” Matsuri added inaudibly, “And a t-shirt and shorts was enough.”

“Just get what you want! You don’t need to impress anyone.”

As soon as she found a one-piece about her size Matsuri snatched it up, examining it. It was white with navy trimming and had a keyhole at the neck, ‘This is fine I guess.’ It wouldn’t show too much, ‘Though I don’t have much to show yet! When will I get my boobs?’

Lamenting her flat chest, Matsuri tried it on in the back room, ignoring Inari’s impatient complaints. It did the trick, and luckily she had developed a darker hue to her skin from spending time in the sun. ‘This doesn’t look half bad…’ She told Inari to settle down when she stepped back out to pay for it. He rushed her along to a snack shop, bought a mountain of treats, and then hurried to the west side of the island.

“What’s your hurry?” The girl gruffed.

“Grandpa might come looking for me! I don’t want him to see where I went, or he’ll send Chokaro to sniff me out,” Inari explained that he had a dog, “Also; one of your Sand ninja friends might snitch on me since they’re friends with Grandpa.”

“Doesn’t he let you have any fun?”

“He’s taking this shinobi training super seriously. Tch! It’s because he’s too old to train, so he expects me to work twice as hard!”
They snuck down a back alley that was parallel to the busy street where the barracks had been built. Further down the way, the hotel resorts were fenced off by a wall of palms and greenery. Inari was crafty, and had apparently found a way to sneak unnoticed to the private beach that was reserved for resort guests. Matsuri followed without a sound, exhilarated, and when they arrived at the top of a dune of white sand, Inari gestured to a closed snack stand.

“No one works there anymore because there aren’t enough customers. You can change in there.” He told her, “I’m going to see if Menma made it!” He raced ahead and the kunoichi pulled open the unlocked door at the back of the shack. She changed clothes quickly, a bit nervous, ‘I went to the beach with Gaara-sensei and Temari-sama before…but it was a lot different from this.’ Her chaperones had basically slept on towels and lazed about, preferring not to swim.

Matsuri scuttled across hot sand and raced down the slight hill, relieving her feet in the cold water. She looked over to see Inari attempting to wrestle Menma into the incoming waves, but the young boy was easily overwhelmed and tossed into the water head-first. Menma laughed at his outrage. They pulled their shirts off, tossing them beyond the water’s reach, and scuffled. She could only wonder how they were not affected by the cold water, ‘I thought it would be warmer…now I really don’t want to swim.’

She retreated to the towel where Menma’s belongings were gathered. Matsuri sat down and watched the two play together. Inari was trying to use the skills he had learned in class, but Menma countered him with little effort, being mercifully gentle. At one point Inari put his play-opponent in a full-nelson hold. Menma was too tall to be trapped by such a thing and Inari was promptly flipped into the waves with a splash. The blonde boy leapt away and ran across the surface of the water when Inari gave chase.

“Come on! You know I can’t do that yet!” The trainee complained.

Menma stopped and put his hands on his hips, calling to Matsuri, “Don’t you want to join us, Matsuri?”

“Maybe if you two stop horsing around.” She replied, shading her eyes with her hand.

“We won’t anymore.”

“I’m not done with you!” Inari charged, hurling himself forward, and got a face full of saltwater when Menma dodged him.

Matsuri waded into the water gradually and Menma stopped by to talk to her. Inari had given up and was floating on his back, grumbling in defeat.

“So what do you think?” He asked her.

“I think…you need to let Inari win one of these days.”

“No, I can’t do that. The most important part of his training will be to learn how to accept defeat.”

Matsuri patted herself down with handfuls of water, trying to acclimate to the temperature, “Is that what your clan taught you?”

“Yes.”

“I’ve got to admit, I lose much more often than I win.” Matsuri thought about her shinobi career, “And when I win, it’s usually because my Sensei is with me.”
“It’s only natural. That means we can look forward to being teachers one day and help our students be successful.”

“You’re a very optimistic person.” She pointed out. Matsuri was up to her chest in water and hopping over waves that rolled in.

“I want to be. Many people I know don’t think the way that I do.” He told her, and then wondered, “May I ask you if you know how long you’ll be here?”

“Four weeks or so, depending on how the programs wrap up,” Matsuri replied, “Kankuro-sama is my Sensei’s brother. He and I will return to Sand after the first rotation and then Temari-sama, his sister, will come here to train higher-level ninja.”

“Three siblings!” Menma was impressed, “You know them very well.”

“I live with them.” She explained, “After my parents died I was alone. Gaara-sensei said that I could stay with them.”

“He’s very kind.”

Matsuri laughed, “Only to some people.”

The chatted and floated, enjoying the last of the afternoon sun, and later retired to the beach towel. Inari was futilely trying to figure out water-walking at the shore, a concept that had not yet been brought up in class. He had seen so many ninja accomplish it, including friends from Leaf, and he was determined to achieve it at his own pace. It wasn’t going well.

Matsuri spoke for a while, shying away from the fact that her mentor was the Kazekage. She feared that bringing it up might distract too much from her personal endeavors, although Menma did seem to truly care about what she had been through. He played music for a short while, stopping only to answer Matsuri’s questions.

As the sun began to set, a visitor walked past on the beach. The youngsters were approached by Chiyo, who cackled at the sight of Matsuri, “Oh my! Kankuro has been looking high and low for you, missy.”

Matsuri leapt to her feet, “He has?”

“Yes. Should I tell him you’ve been enjoying yourself at the beach with two boyfriends?”

“Granny Chiyo! You know that is not what this is!” The girl squealed, “I’ll report to Kankuro-sama right away.” She rushed back to the snack stand to change clothes.

“Aw man, why does Matsuri have to listen to this old lady?” Inari gave Chiyo a critical look, “Are you a ninja?”

“I’m retired now, it’s true,” Chiyo told him, “But…I can make you wish you’d never been born.”

“She is a Sand Village Elder,” Menma said quietly to Inari, “You must show her respect. She’s probably more powerful than most Jounin that came here.”

They looked at Chiyo who was frozen on her feet, silent, her eyes closed. After a minute Inari whispered to his companion, “Are you sure about that? It looks like she just fossilized.”

Matsuri returned and sighed at the sight of Chiyo. She took the sleeping woman’s hand and tugged
her along, “I’m sorry! Baa-sama does this a lot. I’ll see you in the morning?”

Menma nodded, “Of course.”

“Put that Granny to bed.” Inari advised her. As Matsuri carefully made her way up the dune with a half-conscious elder, Inari turned to Menma and asked, “Would that old lady…really beat me up?”

The new friends continued to have fun throughout the week, but Matsuri was mindful of checking in with Kankuro frequently. He was pleased to hear that she had made friends and was a highly-praised tutor.

Inari often invited them to the beach to swim, and occasionally allowed some classmates to tag along. Matsuri had discovered that she and Menma, though great fans of the beach, preferred relaxing at the municipal garden or cafes on the main avenue. He played music for tips and happily used the money to buy her lunch.

One day after an early-morning class, Matsuri was thinking of a way she could repay Menma for his kindness. ‘He has treated me to many things, kind of like Sensei has…’ But she noted there was quite a difference between Gaara and the boy she had met. Her teacher, along with his siblings, had become pseudo-parent-figures for her, and while she cared for them all deeply, they had filled the need in her heart for a family. Menma, on the other hand, ‘I think maybe I…have a crush on him.’ It was both exciting and disconcerting.

They had met a short time ago, but it had been enough time for Matsuri to realize she was attracted to the bright and compassionate boy. Whenever she thought of her imminent departure from the Land of Waves in a few weeks she would retreat into a gloomy state. Matsuri accepted the unfortunate timing of it, and was very grateful she had at least had the chance to find a friend. She had decided not to speak of her troubles to anyone. Many of her male companions on the mission would likely tell her to shrug it off anyway.

Lost in thought on her way down the street, she considered ducking into the Odds & Ends shop to find a gift. Before stepping inside, Matsuri witnessed a curious scene. She recognized a young student from the class that had ended. He was speaking to a grown man who, in her opinion, had a very untrustworthy look about him. Something had been offered to the youngster who was then nodding in happy agreement. When the man slinked off into an alleyway with the boy in tow Matsuri chose to follow her gut feeling.

She pursued them in silence from a rooftop, suspicious of the encounter. She shouted down to them before they left public view of the adjacent road, “Hey!”

They looked up at her in surprise.

“What are you? What are you doing with that student?” Matsuri barked.

The man quickly took off, leaving the child behind. She rushed after him, ignoring the indignant boy who stood on the sidewalk.

Onlookers stepped out of their way as they raced down the road with great speed, and Matsuri had rightly assumed the shady man was a shinobi. He darted through crowds of people without looking back. The kunoichi had considered using her Jouhyou, but feared that she may hit a bystander by mistake. She rounded a sharp corner into the residential district, her hand resting on the rope-dart on her hip, but the target had disappeared. Rather than continue a pointless chase, she quickly returned to the child who had been approached on the previous street. The boy was still unhappy he had been
interfered with.

“Tell me your name.” She addressed him in a hurry, “I’m Matsuri, a Sand tutor.”

“I’m Taro.”

“Who was that man?” Matsuri asked the student, “What did he say to you?”

“Why is that a big deal?” Taro groused.

“He was not a Sand shinobi, so you could have been in danger!”

“Sure he wasn’t a Sand shinobi, but he was gonna teach me anyway!”

“What are you talking about?” The kunoichi was alarmed.

“He asked me if I wanted to join a real ninja clan.” The foolish student explained, “He said he would introduce me to them and I could learn their Ninjutsu.”

Matsuri shook her head, “I doubt you would have been so lucky. Did he tell you his name?”

“Shin Nobu.” Taro announced it clearly, “He was nice! He said students were welcome.”

“He was lying!” She retorted bluntly, “Did he have a village headband?”

“No, he didn’t.” He folded his arms, “Why does it matter? He’s gone now so he won’t come looking for me. You messed with my chance to join a ninja clan!”

“You’re crazy if you think you’d have an opportunity like that. He probably intended something quite awful.” Matsuri warned, “You’ll need to explain this to Kankuro-sama so we have a record of what happened.”

“I’m not going anywhere with you! You’re not my boss.”

“You’re coming with me now.” Her voice rose in pitch. When the stubborn boy refused to move Matsuri was incensed. She would no longer tolerate disrespect. Gaara had instilled ferocity in her that, very occasionally, Matsuri chose to release.

She lashed out with her rope-dart, snaring the boy’s hands, and bound him at the wrists. Taro shrieked in fear, stumbling, and fell to the ground on his rump.

“Get up and walk,” Matsuri commanded, “Or I’ll drag you. This is serious so you are coming with me, whether you want to or not!”

Taro shakily rose to his feet and did as she said. Matsuri led the disobedient boy along by the leash.

She had to harangue a few Chunin at the barracks before someone would point her in Kankuro’s direction.

“Gosh they are getting lazy…” Matsuri muttered, “They’re starting to think they’re on vacation!”

Sadly, she could identify with that feeling. Relaxing and playing had dulled her shinobi senses more than what was acceptable. However, her guard had been raised by the almost-abduction of the student she was tugging along.
Matsuri released the student and guided him into the Sensory Corps tent. She was surprised to see that a few Sand ninja were seated together, cross-legged, hands poised, concentrating on a smooth sphere of glass between them on the floor. While her knowledge of Sensory skills was very limited, Matsuri could quickly tell they were looking for someone by “feeling” chakra. Kankuro was waiting beside the group, expecting a report.

The young kunoichi cleared her throat and the Jounin then noticed her.

“Hey Matsuri,” He sounded a bit perturbed, “What’s up?”

“I wanted to tell you about something I saw.” Matsuri replied, patting the student’s arm, “This is Taro. He’s from Class A that trains in the morning. I saw him speaking to a shinobi; a stranger.”

She had his attention. He turned to face her and folded his arms, “Go on.”

Matsuri exchanged a glance with Taro, “Will you please tell Kankuro-sama what you told me?”

Sullen, the boy divulged, “He invited me to join a clan of shinobi.”

Kankuro’s eyes were wide, “He what?”

“The man gave a name, although it could be an alias,” Matsuri added, “Shin Nobu. Do you know him?”

“No, but that is definitely a clan alright.” Kankuro replied, “Several months ago we were informed that the Shin clan was wiped out by Orochimaru. Maybe they weren’t. If that guy was telling the truth, then maybe he was trying to recruit someone.”

Matsuri was confused, “That can’t be true…”

“We’re searching for five missing Tide students right now. My hunch is that they were lured away by the same ninja, or anyone working with him, with that same promise.” Kankuro updated Matsuri on the situation, “Those students were gullible. I don’t know if this is the work of that clan or if someone is posing as them, but either way those kids aren’t safe.” He looked over his shoulder at the Sensory ninja, “For some reason…they can’t pinpoint the chakra signatures of the missing.”

“Are they alive?” The girl squeaked.

“They are. They can be felt, but there is no specific location we can begin to look. Kyoji told me it’s as if the trace is being jammed.” He referred to the veteran Sensor with a sigh, “Meaning…other ninja are hindering our efforts to find them.”

Matsuri digested the troubling information in silence. Kankuro shooed Taro away and told him to go straight home, “And do not approach any ninja who is not with the Suna Training Program!” The boy ran out of the tent, apologizing.

Matsuri walked over to a canvas stool and sat down, holding her head, “Five children are gone…”

“Gaara is going to kill me.” Kankuro said matter-of-factly.

“What should we do?”

“I’ve asked all instructors to bring students to the barracks so they can be accounted for, and I warned Tazuna to tell villagers to be cautious,” His voice lowered, “But even I don’t know where to go from here. We don’t have any trackers with us. Our Sensor ninja are the best bet, for now.”
“How many shinobi would it take to jam a chakra signal?” Matsuri wondered.

“More than one.”

“Is it really that clan?”

“I don’t know. If it is, this mission is headed straight down the toilet.” The Jounin estimated, “I don’t have many shinobi with me. We can’t protect everyone here. I’ll make the students my priority and send search parties, but I need to tell Gaara as soon as possible.” He patted her shoulder as he walked out of the tent, “I’m going to talk to Baki. Please be on the lookout for anything suspicious, Matsuri.”

“I will!”

Kankuro reminded his Sensory division to check in with him if anything changed. Matsuri ventured out again, wondering if she could improve the situation at all, ‘Where should I even begin to look?’ She thought about requesting Inari’s help; perhaps his dog could track people, ‘But his Grandpa wouldn’t let him out of his sight during an emergency like this…’ If there was one person who would be willing to help, it would be Menma, ‘Though I haven’t seen him all day!’

She strolled out of the barracks and down the road, wondering why new students had become targets. It didn’t make much sense to her why one would pick up novice, unqualified ninja for any reason, ‘It could be for a ransom. They might what the Tide Village to comply with certain demands.’ Or, as her gut instinct had alerted her earlier, the perpetrator could have more wicked intentions, ‘I hope they’ll be alright. The Tide Village will lose faith in Sunagakure if we don’t get those children home soon!’

While passing by the outside porch of the mess hall, Matsuri felt a tug on the back of her shirt. She noticed a chakra string had attached to her, linking back to Chiyo. After the elder had gotten Matsuri’s attention, she released the thread and complained, “Maybe you can tell me what’s going on here, Matsuri. Why is everyone running around like imbeciles?”

She stopped at Chiyo’s side on the steps of a dormitory, “Kankuro-sama told me that Tide trainees were abducted. Our best clue as to who did it came from a student who was approached by a stranger. The man was a shinobi and claimed he had ties to the Shin clan.”

The old woman had a vacant expression as she thought, “Such a person took those children?”

“We’re not sure who did. I think the Shin clan may be responsible, but I need to help Kankuro-sama investigate.”

“Well if finding clues is what you want to do, follow me,” Chiyo declared, “I think I found one for you already.”

Energized, Matsuri followed the old woman beyond the last few buildings of the training center. They returned to the resort, passing through the hotel lobby and ignoring the concierge. Chiyo marched to the door of her suite, entered it, and ushered Matsuri along. They passed through the luxurious room and exited through a lanai door. The terrace overlooked the private beach she and her friends had played on.

Matsuri was puzzled, “Granny Chiyo…what are we doing here?”

“This way.” The old woman commanded, stepping down from the deck and onto the sand. They crossed over to the adjacent bungalow and stood in its backyard. Chiyo pointed to the rooftop, “Look there, Matsuri.”
The girl observed the faux-thatched roof of the suite building. Support beams hung below the arch of the roof, creating a noticeable gap. It did not provide any kind of clue that Matsuri could recognize.

“While I’ve stayed here, I have heard music several nights in a row…and it was coming from the top of that guest house. I know it wasn’t coming from within, because the person staying there is a talentless, annoying twit.” Chiyo explained, “Why does this matter? Because I know what you clearly don’t.”

“What’s that?”

“That the Shin clan you speak of…is famous for their Sound Ninjutsu.” The old woman said gravely, “You are likely correct in assigning them as the kidnappers. How could it be pure coincidence that musicians are plentiful in this village?”

A fluttering fear wreaked havoc in Matsuri’s stomach.

“If you want to find out more about what we are up against, I suggest you speak to whoever plays music on that rooftop at night.” Chiyo added, “I would rather not. I’m too old to play such games.”

“Baa-sama…did you…” She was reluctant to ask, “See the person?”

The old woman said nothing. Matsuri got the impression that Chiyo had identified the individual who had been sneaking around in the dark.

“You have nothing to fear when talking to that shinobi,” Chiyo assured her as she returned to her suite, “I could tell that he likes you very much.”

When her search for Menma ended in vain that afternoon, Matsuri regrouped with Inari while he waited for clearance at the barracks. Tazuna understood that trainees were in jeopardy, and he promised he would drop off dinner for his grandson later. He trusted that Sand ninja would get the situation under control.

“Just tell me one thing,” The bridge builder wrapped up his conversation with Kankuro, “If we’re dealing with another group of outside ninja…are you going to be able to take them down and get the kids back?”

“So long as we outnumber them, we can handle it,” Kankuro replied, and gestured his chin towards Chiyo on a bench, “And we have Chiyo-sama. She doesn’t like exerting herself these days, but if there’s real danger she’ll get it under control.”

Tazuna raised an eyebrow at the old lady seated nearby and then returned his attention to Kankuro, skeptical, “Thank goodness.”

The reassurance was as good as it was going to get. So long as things didn’t get much worse, the old man could avoid having a very public and ugly conniption.

After Tazuna had walked off with a wave to his grandson, the quiet scurrying of ninja continued. Kankuro spoke in low tones to his subordinates, relieved that a message had been sent with speed to Gaara.

Matsuri remained on the sidelines while pondering her role in the crisis. Inari had politely and more so, wisely, ruled out her idea of tracking the missing students, “If we did find them…we’d probably be grabbed up too.” He fidgeted against the wall, folding his arms, “If I were trained a bit more I’d go for it, I swear!”
“It’s smarter to avoid them, if we can,” Matsuri agreed, “I just wish…I could talk to Menma about this.”

“What? You’d feel safer with him around?” The boy griped.

“No, Inari. I’m concerned that…” She trailed off. At this point, it would not be too far-fetched to assume that he was a Sound ninja, as Chiyo had warned. Yet there was no need to accuse their friend when Matsuri still lacked the evidence to incriminate him. If he admitted guilt, well, that was a different matter.

“Fine.” Inari said at length, “You like him. It’s okay to worry.”

“I never said that.” She squeaked.

“Oh please, I can tell,” Inari spoke from experience, “You’re not the first kunoichi I’ve known who liked a blonde guy.”

Inari excused himself and then joined an Academy class that had gathered for attendance outside. Matsuri, with her superior’s permission, returned to the heart of the city where she conducted a very thorough sweep of the streets and alleys. She spent the better part of the day on rooftop perches, wondering if any strangers would reveal themselves.

‘They seem to be aware that we are looking for them…so I doubt any other shinobi will approach a child now.’ She considered the enemy’s next move, ‘If they still plan to abduct children…they might cause a diversion for Sand ninja or try to exchange them for other hostages.’ Or, her heart added, they might just surrender and peaceably be on their way.

Matsuri stopped at a rendezvous with two Sand Chunin to discuss their findings. No one told her anything she did not already know from Kankuro, and so, as the sun set, she returned to the barracks to feed herself.

While distractedly eating her meal, Matsuri deliberated whether or not she should inform Kankuro of her lead, ‘If I told him I was going to speak to Menma to find out more…he might come along or send someone with me. Oh…if Menma is a Sound ninja then he’ll be in trouble.’ She knew it was stupid to go alone, but she’d prefer risking a bit of danger than letting her suspicious Sand counterparts having at him, ‘Besides, I can call for Chiyo-sama if there’s trouble.’ Hopefully the old bag would hear her from the comfort of her bungalow.

She willed herself not to think once she finished and silently ventured away from the barracks. As darkness fell, Matsuri followed the beach along the strip to where she and Chiyo had stopped earlier. She peeked into the window of the resort suite, spying the old woman asleep on a backless settee, ‘Maybe I’m on my own after all…’ No amount of screaming would wake her out of a dead sleep. Only luck could do that.

It would be most appropriate to wait for the music to play. Matsuri camped out behind a white, checkered fence on the veranda of Chiyo’s suite and settled down. The rolling melody of beach waves eased her anxiety, and after a long while of waiting in the dark she dozed off. She woke later in the night beneath a canopy of stars, distinctly hearing one solitary note. As if regretful of beginning, the music stopped. Matsuri rubbed her eyes and wobbled to her feet, letting the environment flood her senses. After her eyes had adjusted properly to the low light she silently moved to the alcove next door.

She frowned, looking up at the niche in the roof, ‘I hope that I don’t have to use any means beyond my words here...’
Getting a foothold on a support beam, Matsuri carefully crept up into the dark space, discovering a glowing lantern within. She pulled herself up and kneeled down, somehow staying calm while the occupant jumped back in fright. The ocarina that had been hesitating beneath Menma’s lips slipped from the boy’s hand and clattered. He stared in shock at his guest.

“Menma,” She kept her voice down, “I need to talk to you.”

“How did you find me?”

“Chiyo-sama hears you play music. She said I would find you here.”

He lowered his chin, deeply troubled.

“Will you please tell me what’s happening?” Matsuri continued, “You’re the only person I trust to ask.”

His eyes rose again and met hers, sad, “I don’t know…if it would make any difference.”

“It will. Please, Menma.”

Menma sighed, moving his instrument and supply bag aside, and faced the kunoichi fully, “I will answer every question you ask.”

“Are you a member of the Shin clan?”

“Yes.”

“Are they the ones kidnapping students?”

“Yes.”

“Did you help them do it?”

“No.” He shook his head, “I tried to stop them.”

“Why?” Matsuri was tense, “If you really wanted to protect those kids…why didn’t you speak up? Why didn’t you give us any warning?”

“I was being watched.” Menma clarified, “I was told to interact with students and gain their trust. If I had blatantly disobeyed Ongakare-sama…they would have removed me from the task. Then those children would have no defense.”

“They never did.” Matsuri was not buying it.

“I distracted my clansmen. I bent the truth. I led them away whenever I could.” He added, “The more time I spent with people in the Tide Village…the less I wanted to finish my mission. I made true friends here.”

“Your change of heart is not helping anyone. Those students were still abducted.” She pointed out, “And I would have helped you…if you had just said something.”

“It’s not too late. The Shin clan is hiding in a base near the forest levy. They won’t be leaving until they have at least a dozen students.”

“Then why aren’t you there now? And why do they want those children?”
“Once they suspected my dissent I had to flee. This clan…is not compassionate in the slightest sense, and they won’t tolerate my disobedience. They never have, not since I was adopted as a child. I know how they are…so I had to hide.” Menma confessed, “They are doing all that they can to replenish our ranks, even if it means taking gifted children from their homes.”

“Why not just train children born in the Shin clan?”

“They were taken from us.” Menma explained, “They and many others are with Orochimaru now.”

“Sound ninja.” She nodded, comprehending, “Kankuro-sama told me about that.”

“I don’t want this to happen, Matsuri.”

“Then you and I should tell other Sand ninja. Show us where that hideout is so we can rescue the children!”

“I’ll be arrested by Sand.”

“Isn’t that better than what’s going to happen to the students?” She pressed, “If you help us then maybe we can work something out,” Matsuri lowered her voice, “I know you’re not like the rest of them.”

The boy stared at her while he contemplated it. He picked up his ocarina and hung it around his neck, pulling his bag onto his shoulder, “I would rather get locked up…than see them go through what I did. Let’s hurry.”

Kankuro had just settled down to sleep for the night when there was a knock at his door. He lifted his paint-free face off of the pillow, grumbling. He strained to lift himself up from the bed; his muscles overcome with sleep, and then trudged across the floor. Baki remained fast asleep, immune to noise. He undid the lock and pulled the door open.

“Matsuri?” Kankuro was surprised that his brother’s apprentice was awake and alert, “What are you doing up?”

“Kankuro-sama, I need to talk to you.” She said quickly, “I know where the kidnapped students are.”

His eyebrows shot up towards his hairline, “You’ve been looking this whole time?”

“Not exactly.” Matsuri turned and zipped down the corridor, “Please come with me! There’s someone who can tell you more.”

With a sleepy grunt, he followed with bare feet. The hallway emptied out into the Jounin lounge and Matsuri pointed to a boy who was seated on a sofa. He stood and bowed to Kankuro in greeting. Kankuro folded his arms, anticipating this was a good reason to be woken up from the precious four hours of sleep he could afford.

“This is Menma, my friend.” Matsuri introduced, “He’s from the Shin clan.”

Kankuro settled an eye on the girl, disapproving, “He came here willingly?”


“Convince me.” The Jounin rumbled.
“I was told to gain the trust of students so that they could be recruited by our clan. After a short time of getting to know everyone here...I changed my mind. They wouldn’t be treated well by the Shin clan and the training will be severe.” Menma explained, “I also know that they won’t have much time to prepare before Ongakare-sama returns to the Rice Country with them.”

“Why?”

“He intends to take revenge on Orochimaru.” The boy said gravely.

“A bunch of rookie trainees will get slaughtered if he tries to do that.” Kankuro was disturbed, “Does he realize that?”

“Perhaps…but the children do not know what awaits them. Our leader made promises to them I know he will not keep.”

“So you expect me to just take you at your word that you’re on our side? You could be leading us into a trap.” The man was cautious, “Just because Matsuri trusts you does not mean that I will. I was betrayed by my own teammate once…I know better these days.”

“I can’t make you trust me. All I can do is tell you what I know.”

“I have an idea, Kankuro-sama.” Matsuri chimed in, “We can test to see if Menma is telling the truth about where the hideout is.”

“If it’s risking my shinobi I don’t know if it’s worth taking a chance.”

“Why not disguise a few of our Jounin as Tide students? Or some of our Sensory corps? They might be abducted the same way the children were.” She suggested, “If skilled shinobi are brought to where the Shin clan have been hiding, they should be able to fight them off or at least get a message to the rest of us!”

“That depends on how many of them are there. It could still go wrong.”

“There are fourteen, including myself.” Menma informed him, “The only advantage they have is their Ninjutsu and Genjutsu. They’ve been using it to avoid your Sensors. If they hadn’t...they would have been wiped out already.”

“What if they use the children as leverage?”

“I don’t think they will.” The boy replied, “Ongakare-sama hopes to keep them...but he will fight you tooth and nail to do so.”

Kankuro groaned, running a hand through his hair, “Fine...it’s a start. I thought I’d be able to get some rest...but it looks like I’m going to have to talk over a strategy with Baki.” He settled a stern gaze on Menma, “I appreciate your help. The next step you can take to prove yourself to me is to surrender your weapon.” He held out his hand for the ocarina, “I’ve dealt with enough Sound ninja to know you’d tie me in a knot with that thing.”

Menma did not hesitate to pass the instrument to Kankuro. Matsuri smiled in relief, ‘This is going well!’

“Now...” Kankuro looked to Matsuri, “You go to bed, Matsuri. You’ll need your strength for tomorrow.” He held up his hand and nonchalantly twined chakra strings around Menma, “My prisoner is going to help me come up with a plan tonight. We’ll see you at dawn.”
Matsuri exchanged an alarmed glance with Menma before the boy was tugged along.

She slept restlessly until the morning bustle of shinobi began in the barracks. Matsuri prepared herself quickly and set out to find Kankuro and Menma.

The puppet master was having a discussion with six ninja who Matsuri recognized as Jounin. Somewhat excluded from the conversation, Menma stood nearby, unbound and visibly exhausted. She jogged up to him and put a steadying hand on his shoulder.

“Did he keep you up all night?” Matsuri asked softly.

“It’s fine, Matsuri. We were able to think of a strategy together.” He dismissed her concern, smiling weakly, “I know it will work.”

She glimpsed Kankuro who seemed to have rallied the support of the Sand Jounin. He ended the briefing and then turned about, putting his hands on his hips, “Mornin’ Matsuri!”

“Good morning, Kankuro-sama.”

“I have a job for you.” He announced, “I need you to bring Chiyo here. If she starts whining please tell her that I need her to assist with the ambush once we get our operatives in the hideout.”

“Um…I’ve heard her say that she wasn’t interested in-”

“She’s been saying that she abstains from combat for years,” Kankuro interrupted knowingly, “And every once in a while she remembers how much she enjoys massacring enemies.” He beckoned a gaggle of Tide Genin forward, introducing them to the Sand Jounin, “Hey kids! Just let these guys copy your appearances for now…”

Matsuri hesitated, “Can I bring Menma?”

“No.” Kankuro said flatly, “He’s my jester until we subdue the Shin clan.”

“But-!”

“He’s not going anywhere without me.” His voice rose, “I gave you an order.”

“Yes, Kankuro-sama!” She nodded, recalling her place, and gave Menma an apologetic look before racing away.

The sooner she recruited Chiyo to their cause, the better…even if it required her Jouhyou or a wheelbarrow, ‘Once I finish with this then I can stay with Menma! Kankuro is giving him such a hard time…’ She knew it was inevitable that he would be treated poorly by Sand ninja, but he was handling the conduct graciously. She stopped to confirm with a Sensor-type shinobi that Chiyo was at her resort suite before running full-speed out of the barracks.

‘Gaara-sensei…I don’t want to lose my friend. He is my true friend, the first one I have ever had…’ Matsuri blinked a tear from her eye, steeling her resolve, ‘He is by no means perfect, and may even seem like an enemy to most people…but how is that any different from the way you were perceived? Misunderstood. Kind. I know you are a wonderful teacher and shinobi! I won’t let Kankuro judge him without first showing him what I know about Menma!’

Matsuri stepped off of the concrete strip, running through a narrow alley between residences, and moved onto the beach near the resort. She skimmed over the sand like wind. The whistling in her
The rolling waves on her right seemed to flip, orienting on her left. Then the resort ahead of her vanished, causing her to look franticly in all directions. It reappeared behind her, kilometers away; the sand dunes inexplicably rearranged themselves. The musical notes were coming from the plucking of a lute, *This Genjutsu belongs to the Shin clan!* She grimaced, forming a hand seal, “Release!”

Not a half a moment after she had freed herself from the illusion, a sash whipped over her shoulder and wrapped several times around her nose and mouth, yanking her down to the ground. Matsuri struggled, trying to pry the ribbon from her face, landing a lucky kick on the leg of an approaching ninja. The shinobi cursed and then seized her by the ankle, beginning to drag her along the beach in the opposite direction. Her head swam, vaguely aware of the presence of three ninja. With no air left to fuel her flight instinct, the kunoichi fell unconscious and was hauled away by her captors.

After having her hair trimmed by Ino’s mother, Sakura thanked the Yamanaka family and set out for the Hokage’s tower. She reflected on what she and her blonde friend had openly discussed in front of Ino’s parents: Hinata audaciously defying her elders.

“I think so far it’s been about six different men,” Ino recalled, arranging flowers in a vase, “They all gave up and went home.”

“If her young age didn’t discourage them, she killed them with kindness.” Sakura added, “And disinterest.”

“My oh my…” Ino’s mother, Noriko, worked carefully with Sakura’s pink locks, “How incredibly persistent the Hyuga are. I’m glad your friend is so brave.”

“She is. It just stinks that she has to go through all of this...they don’t even acknowledge the fact that she has a boyfriend.” Ino was frustrated, “No one seemed to care about that!”

“From what I know...the Hyuga clan has different traditions than we, the Yamanaka clan.” Noriko explained, “If you have a boyfriend or girlfriend, Ino; that is entirely your business. No one, except for maybe your father, could contend with your decision. The Hyuga...” She lowered her scissors, “They are strict. Every significant other a clan member has must be approved first. Hinata-chan never had her boyfriend introduced to her father, did she?”

“Not formally...” Ino muttered, “And I have a boyfriend you know.”

“I know, dear, and I approve. But until an introduction can be arranged...” Noriko continued snipping, “He does not exist in their eyes.”

Sakura held still in her seat, balling her hands into fists, “I really don’t like those people.”

While walking, Sakura gradually shed her irritation. Today was a good day, she reminded herself. Tsunade had asked her to participate on a mission; a decent one, she had been told.

‘Kiba-kun won’t be joining us since he is still recovering at the hospital…’ She noted. Her teammate had donated bone marrow to his father to help jump-start his failing immune system, which had been diagnosed suddenly, ‘And Tama-chan is taking Sato to physical therapy today...’

Which only left Kakashi, of course; ‘Unless Shishou sends me with another team...’ She pondered the possibilities as she entered the administrative building and climbed the stairs.
Sakura passed by Shizune in the top-floor hallway and had a brief exchange with her before finally arriving at Tsunade’s office. She knocked once and then walked in, knowing that Tsunade had no guests, ‘I’ve got her schedule down like clockwork!’

Tsunade brightened at the sight of her, looking somewhat mischievous, “Oh! There you are, Sakura. Hm. Your hair looks longer today.”

“I just got it cut, actually.”

The Hokage rubbed her eyes, blinking, “It was a good guess. And before you say it, no, I don’t need my eyes checked.”

Sakura smiled, “I never dreamed of suggesting it. How are you, Tsunade-sama?”

“Excited. There is an organizational meeting for the next Chunin Exam at noon, so I get to leave the office early.” She grinned, “Then I’ll strong-arm the committee into letting me leave their conference early. I need some *me time.*”

Sakura sighed, knowing that “me time” often meant gambling away whatever pocket change she had on her.

“Don’t sigh at me, young lady,” She laced her hands beneath her chin, “I set aside a very appropriate mission for you, so don’t make me reconsider…”

“What sort of mission?”

“I’ll have Kakashi accompany you, because you can look forward to crossing the desert.” Tsunade’s eyes twinkled, “And then you’ll report to the Kazekage in Sunagakure.”

Sakura’s breath hitched.

“You heard that correctly. I offered a new medical technique to the Medical Corps in Sand, one that I taught you a few weeks ago, if you recall. I’d like you to tutor them over the next few days.” Tsunade expounded, “It’s my way of apologizing to Gaara about not helping out in the Land of Waves. He’s hosting a training program in the Tide Village and I’m not proud that I declined…but we cannot spare that many shinobi right now.” She quirked an eyebrow, “This should make up for it, no?”

“Shishou…” A wide smile slowly spread on Sakura’s face, “Thank you.”

“Why are you thanking me? This is a job after all!” She played dumb, “I expect you to work diligently before you even dare have leisure time with any handsome or powerful man you might find there, am I understood?”

“Perfectly.”

“Good.” Tsunade sat back in her chair, “Now have a seat; I anticipate that Kakashi won’t be more than an hour late today…but that’s a fool’s hope.”

About an hour later Kakashi arrived and was filled in on the mission guidelines. He was attending mostly to show Sakura the safest route through the desert. Tsunade supposed they would be quite safe after a border patrol report quoted that no suspicious activity or Akatsuki members had been sighted. Tsunade wished them well. Afterwards, Sakura packed a travel bag with lightning-speed and ignored her mother’s protests. She nearly mowed down Asuma’s team as she hustled down the
While leaving the village Kakashi asked her to slow down, “You’re running. We don’t need to run, Sakura.”

“Sorry.” She pulled the straps of her bag taught on her shoulders, “I just…can’t believe I finally get to visit Hidden Sand…”

“It’s exciting, I know.” His eye crinkled happily, “You have been very patient. I was wondering when the Hokage would throw you a bone.”

“Did you suggest it to her?”

“No,” He admitted, “But I suspected all along that she’d send you to see Gaara.”

“I was trying not to get my hopes up. It was starting to feel like I was passed over for every mission that involved Suna…” Sakura thought of a few missions that her friends had been chosen for in her stead. She walked on a tightrope over the resentfulness she felt about it, and the slightest push from Tsunade might have incited her to scream, I quit! to her hard-nosed mentor.

“That may or may not have been intentional. Thankfully, that doesn’t matter anymore.”

By the early afternoon they had crossed over the boundary between the Fire Country and the Wind Country. Kakashi pointed out a few landmarks, plain though they were, that marked a commonly used path through the desert. Sakura committed the stones and shrubs to memory, knowing that she had every intention of returning again.

Kakashi set a sensible pace through the desert, hoping to reach a small, rocky ridge he knew of for shade. It was just shy of the halfway point to Sunagakure. After reaching it they took a break in the shadow of the stone slab and sipped from their rationed water canteens.

“I’ve taken hundreds and hundreds of missions in my lifetime.” Kakashi reflected, “And of those, I’ve been in and around the Wind Country maybe a few dozen times.”

“So…not that much?”

“Enough to have a sense of direction, anyway. The first time I came here was when I was a Genin.” Sakura’s ears perked up at the admission. Kakashi hardly ever spoke about his past. “What was it like?” She asked.

“Not what I had expected. My father told me stories about it and I began to think that it wasn’t a big deal. From how he described his missions, I was under the impression that shinobi could come and go as they pleased.” Kakashi chuckled, “I was mistaken. For my age, I was the most skilled and capable trainee on my team. My first experience in the desert showed me that I didn’t know as much as I thought I did.”

“Huh. Cocky much?”

“Very. I paid for it.” He assured her, “We were a few miles into the Wind Country, I think. Before my Sensei could get us under control, my teammate and I had gotten into a brawl. Mind you, I had a million insults for Obito. It was my area of expertise. He wasn’t going to take it lying down and that was part of the fun. It was fun to win the fights I picked!”

“Why do you sound so happy about it?” Sakura was appalled, “You were a classic jerk!”
“My idea of friendship wasn’t typical.”

“Yeah. Most people don’t drive their teammate nuts just for the thrill of a fistfight.” She agreed.

“As I was saying, Obito and I took a nasty spill down a dune and then realized, after Minato-sensei broke it up…” His eyes were trained on the horizon, “We had lost our water rations.”

“Dumb.”

“Yes. Our Sensei disciplined us the only way he could: he and Rin did not share water with us.”

“That sounds about right.” She nodded.

“Well…we nearly didn’t make it. The both of us collapsed before we reached Sunagakure.” He laughed, remembering how stupid he had been, “Minato-sensei dragged the two of us in the front gate. I think we embarrassed him…and Rin too. She yelled at me for a few days.” Kakashi tilted his head back, thinking, “But…she didn’t yell at Obito…”

“That’s because he didn’t start that fight.” Sakura summed it up, “Or maybe because she expected more of you.”

“A bit of both, I’m sure.”

“So…” She trailed off, hesitant to ask, “Kiba once asked me…why we’ve never seen your teammates…”

“That question nearly answers itself.”

“He said…he said Rin was his aunt.” Sakura blurted out.

“That’s correct.”

“Where is she?”

“I don’t know.” Kakashi said quietly, “She left the village a long time ago.”

“And no one tried to find her?”

“My Sensei was the Hokage at the time. He made it possible for her to live how she wanted. He said that she had no interest in living in Konoha, and he wasn’t going to force her to.” He recalled glumly, “I did look. My hounds and I tracked her several times.”

“So then you didn’t find her.”

“No. It wasn’t due to a lack of trying, either.” Kakashi sounded unhappy, “She didn’t want to be found. I regret what I said before she left…and I’ve got no way to apologize for it now.”

Sakura said nothing. It was surprising to hear her Sensei acknowledge the mistakes he’d made. She briefly wondered that if enough time passed, would Sasuke be mature enough to regret his actions? ‘I don’t know if that’ll ever happen…’ She thought as she and Kakashi set out again, ‘Kiba reached out to him and wasn’t sure if it made a difference at all. If we don’t matter to Sasuke now, why would we begin to matter to him in the future?’

The trek was hot under the cloudless sky, and during the remainder of the trip only one merciful breeze blew from the south to break up the aridity. Sakura clipped her hair up off of her neck and tried to pay attention as Kakashi pointed out landmarks.
About a half mile after Sakura’s last sip of water, the walls of the Hidden Sand Village were tall on the horizon. Excitement replaced the tolling resignation that had filled her. Her pace quickened incrementally and Kakashi didn’t complain about it. She pulled ahead and then slowed down a short distance away from the gate. A few Sand shinobi were supervising construction on the entryway, and waved them along beneath a scaffold piled high with stones.

Kakashi kept his hands in his pockets as he strolled leisurely along the admission road, “So…if I recall the Administrative Building is to the left…” He looked in both directions, trying to get his bearings, “Hm. Actually…I’m not sure. Let’s try left.”

With a sigh, Sakura followed her Sensei down the street and feasted her eyes on the Sand Village. It was dusty and dry but it rumbled with life. Crowds of people bustled around and children dithered and played. Sakura overhead a nearby team of Sand Genin chatting about a mission they had been assigned for the following day. Kakashi and his student passed through part of a residential area before getting into the thick of the business district.

Stand owners heckled them to try their products and a waiter outside of a restaurant handed them a menu, “You Leaf ninja look like you need a break!”

“We might drop by later…” Kakashi turned down the immediate offer to be seated.

Down the stretch of shops and businesses, the Administrative Center was nestled among other office buildings and a short distance away from the Kazekage’s mansion. As they approached, Sakura did everything in her power to remain calm.

‘I’ve got to play it cool. Poise. I want to look good in front of Gaara…I want to train the Medic-nin here quickly but properly…and then maybe…’ Her heartbeat quickened, ‘Maybe I can finally go on a date?’

Kakashi gave her a sidelong glance, “You look like you are freaking out, Sakura.”

“No way.” She furrowed her brow, “I’m just a bit sweaty.”

“What’s the use in lying about it?” Her teacher chuckled, “We have seen each other’s panic faces already.”

Sakura recalled how they had not handled flying very well after their first take-off with Sato. While humiliating, it had been a sort of bonding experience. She warned Kakashi not to comment on her nervousness because he didn’t understand what it was like to date a Kage.

“I definitely don’t know what it’s like.” He agreed.

Sakura got a grip as they entered the lobby of the Admin Building. A friendly Chunin wearing a turban greeted them and then led the way upstairs.

“Gaara-sama is expecting you.” The young man informed them, “He looked really happy today! I guess he’s been missing his friends in Leaf.”

Sakura swallowed a gleeful sound that nearly escaped her. So Gaara had been told that she was on her way, it seemed. Apparently he had been very pleased with the news. She reined herself in again as they travelled down the hallway of the top floor. The door to the Main Office was wide open and the Sand Chunin led the way inside. They came to a stop a few strides away from the desk. It was piled high with correspondence and files.

“Kazekage-sama, the Leaf ninja you were waiting for have arrived.”
Gaara’s eyes were just visible above a towering stack of paperwork. He took in the sight of his guests, set aside the scroll he had been reading and then stood up. His outfit was a tasteful balance of black and maroon. He nodded to the Chunin, “Thank you, Enoru.”

Enoru bowed and then excused himself. Sakura, though silent, knew she was not displaying proper manners at the moment. She clenched her mouth shut as she gawked at Gaara’s height, ‘Tall.’ Taller than she remembered him, anyway. Her eyes darted from his feet up to his shoulders, approving of every detail, and then stopped on his face. ‘He’s...so much more grown up. Sure he’s handsome and more mature...but just the way he’s standing makes him look strong.’ They shared a moment of surreal, assessing eye contact before Gaara broke it off, graciously acknowledging that Kakashi was also present.

“Thank you for coming, Kakashi,” Gaara smiled a bit, adding, “And Sakura.”

“Not at all. The Hokage insisted that our visit with you was overdue.” Kakashi was aiming for subtlety, “Congratulations, Kazekage-sama.”

Sakura gave the most imperceptible bow, echoing, “Congratulations!”

This gesture seemed to throw Gaara off of his axis. His countenance dropped as if Sakura had slapped him in the face. She did not pick up on it right away and she allowed herself to smile. Gaara had half of a second to evaluate what her signals meant, ‘Smiling. Bowing. She’s treating me formally.’ He was drawing a hasty conclusion; she was suggesting that she viewed him as inaccessible. While Gaara thought he should hardly be surprised by her arm’s length attitude, he was troubled by how abruptly it stung.

“Thank you. I hope your trip wasn’t difficult.” Gaara spearheaded conversation, “Tsunade-sama did send you with speed.”

“I thought we were a bit on the slow side.” Kakashi admitted. He didn’t know much about the concept of “promptness”.

“I kept us on time.” Sakura chimed in, “When would you like me to meet up with the Medical Corps?”

“They have a meeting at three o’clock at the hospital, but you should relax until then.” He stepped out from behind the desk, “I’ll bring you there myself.”

There was a perfect storm of feathers in Sakura’s stomach. Gaara walked out of the office and gestured for them to follow. They were a step behind on either side of him as Gaara took them down hallways, stairs and finally out of the building. The Kazekage elaborated, “Normally I would send you with an escort to see the village and bring you to your accommodations, but I don’t feel like doing that.” He stopped on the side of the road, “Have you two eaten yet?”

“Not yet.” Kakashi retrieved the menu that he had stowed away in a pocket, “We were invited to try this place. It looks like it serves Han food...”

“Tanwei. That’s close by. It is decent there but it’s expensive.” Gaara shrugged it off as he continued walking, “You’ll eat for free if I go with you.”

“You want to? Don’t you have work to do?” Sakura was startled.

“It can wait. You saw the state of my desk,” He gave her an amused look, “I will send a Shadow Clone later to examine an important document. Not much else is that urgent...”
“How responsible.” She fought back a grin.

“How responsible.” She fought back a grin.

“Ah, now that’s a tip that Tsunade-sama might need to consider.” Kakashi mused, “Kage Bunshin can help ease a heavy workload…but I think she has a habit of hiding or dismissing reports she doesn’t want to deal with.”

“She has them shredded.” Sakura deadpanned.

“Awful.” Kakashi shook his head, “My Sensei was far more finicky with such things.”

“Yes, but he also cared more.” The pink haired girl reminded him, “Tsunade-sama is not enthusiastic about most of her duties. She tells me she became Hokage to make Naruto and Jiraiya-sama happy.”

“It was better than her alternative.” Gaara observed, “As it stands, she is a good leader and she has given me more support than I expected.”

“She does it because she believes in you.” Sakura wanted to add, And so do I! but he could likely tell she felt that way when they exchanged glances again, shy and excited. The waiter that had been outside advertising earlier animatedly welcomed them back, astounded that they were friends of the Kazekage. He had them seated at a booth without delay.

Sakura helped them decide what to order since she occasionally ate Han food with Tenten. Kakashi complained about limited selection before picking a seemingly safe and not-so-mysterious noodle dish. Gaara and Sakura agreed to share roast duck, rice noodles and dumplings. As they sat beside each other across from Kakashi, the man began to feel like a classic third wheel.

“I should just leave you two alone.” He droned, “You’ve got catching up to do…”

“No!” Sakura was still a bit apprehensive about being alone with Gaara, “It’d be rude to exclude you, Sensei.”

Kakashi pointed to a small table across the way, “I could go right over there. I don’t mind.”

Gaara raised his chin a bit, “Is my company bothering you, Hatake-san?”

“Of course not, Gaara.” The Jounin chuckled, “I forgot how easily you get offended. It makes me wonder what training with Jiraiya was like for you. I know he hardly ever censored himself.”

“It could be taxing.” He described it less vividly than he wanted to.

Kakashi proceeded to ask about Jiraiya and Naruto and the conversation carried on pleasantly. While waiting for food, Sakura unthinkingly moved her hand from her lap and settled it on the seat…unexpectedly landing on top of Gaara’s hand. She chirped and immediately withdrew, letting timidity get the better of her.

‘Whoa.’ She discreetly checked her radial pulse at her wrist, ‘I’m going to give myself a heart attack at this rate! Just cool it, Sakura! Don’t embarrass yourself! This is going to feel normal again soon…’

Her mental prayer for the food to arrive was answered, and she filled up her empty plate with morsels that arrived on platters. From the corner of her eye she observed Gaara, who was completely unfazed by her zaniness. A beat later, his eyes widened as he stared straight ahead.

‘What’s he looking at?’ She followed his gaze and saw that he was surprised by Kakashi’s mask-free face, slurping up an unfairly long Han noodle from his bowl. Sakura nudged Gaara gently, smiling,
“You’ll get used to it.”

“I suppose.” He agreed and then addressed Kakashi, “You look like Sato.”

“Hm?” Kakashi had to snip the kilometer-long noodle with his teeth, “Do I?”

“Almost exactly.”

“Sato has blue eyes though.” Sakura pointed out, nibbling the divine duck, “This is really good…”

They stuffed their faces and the pitcher of water they shared had to be refilled a few times. When the subject turned to Jiraiya and Naruto’s current location, according to the letters Gaara had received, Kakashi was incredulous, “Mount Myoboku?”

“Yes.” Gaara confirmed it.

“How did they-?” Kakashi was stymied, “They were so far away from the Fire Country… I never imagined they could get back here so quickly…”

“Where is Mount Myoboku?” Sakura was out of the loop.

“It is hidden within the Land of Fire.” Gaara brought her up to speed, “Naruto told me that he and Sensei were reverse-summoned there by Toad Elders. It would have taken them over a year to reach it by foot.”

“If it’s in the Fire Country why is it a secret?” Sakura asked, “Is it off-limits like the Shikkotsu Forest where Katsuyu lives?”

“Much like that, toads maintain their privacy in an uncharted location.” Kakashi then added, “It is notoriously difficult to get there. I can only assume that Jiraiya-sama intends to teach Naruto Sage Arts, then…”

Gaara nodded while he chewed.

“Naruto is learning Senjutsu?” Sakura was elated, “That’s amazing!”

Gaara was surprised she knew of it, “Did the Hokage discuss it with you as well?”

“Not really, I learned about it while I was studying in the Hidden Star Village.” She blushed slightly, “I want to tell you all about it later.”

To be fair, Kakashi asked about how Haku was doing. Gaara had a well-rehearsed lie that was entirely plausible, claiming that he and Temari were on a mission. Without questioning it, Kakashi then asked about his duties as Kazekage. Sakura, on the other hand, was a bit crestfallen that she would not be seeing their friend at the Medical Training session.

Sakura and Gaara finished their meals before Kakashi; the man was struggling to get to the end of the long Han noodle. Sakura spoke about current events in Leaf, such as Kiba’s father and his health scare, and also Hinata’s rebuffs of every suitor her elders threw at her. While listening, Gaara snuck Sakura’s hand out of her lap and held it beneath the table. She faltered in her story only for a moment before blazing onward; mentioning some of Tsunade’s harshest training methods and how she coped.

After Kakashi gave in and stopped eating he replaced his mask, noting the time, “Sakura will need to be at the hospital in ten minutes.”
“We should be on our way then.” Gaara agreed, catching a server’s eye. The man gave Gaara a thumb’s up and then waved them out. Kakashi ‘tsked’ at the young leader’s pampered treatment as they left the restaurant.

The hospital was located at the center of the village and all roads seemed to lead to it. Gaara notified Sakura that the class hours and frequency were at her discretion and that she could teach as she saw fit. Upon arriving at the lobby, he introduced her to a gaggle of Medic-nin who were on the younger, friendlier side. They fawned over the Hokage’s apprentice.

“Are we only learning one technique today?”

“Is it true that you have Tsunade-sama’s super strength?”

“Your hair is so pretty!”

Sakura tried to take it all in stride, “Thank you, everyone. I’m here to teach you about how to extract poison from a victim’s system and derive antidotes. If you’d like to get started let’s go to the test lab…”

And so she was hurried along by her new Sand protégées. Gaara watched them disappear down a long hallway with folded arms. A moment passed before he turned and nodded for Kakashi to follow.

“I bet you wish she didn’t have to teach a class.” The Leaf Jounin observed.

“I’m grateful that she can. I’m even more grateful that I had an opportunity to see Sakura.” Gaara admitted, “I was shocked by the Hokage’s kindness.”

“Were you? Where’s your sense of entitlement?” Kakashi chuckled, “For a Kage, you are very humble.”

“No one owes me anything. My duty is to serve now.”

“My Sensei said things like that. Every day he woke up amazed that he was a village leader…he never wanted to let anyone down.” Kakashi recalled, “But in your case…you are still incredibly young…” He scratched his cheek, “Your maturity scares me a little…”

“Don’t be alarmed. I can horse around when Naruto prompts me to.”

He elicited a true laugh from Kakashi, who had nearly forgotten how Gaara and his team had some famous pranks in their past. They walked down a street and passed by the Academy, greeting curious students in an outdoor Taijutsu lesson.

“To be honest,” Gaara went on, “I don’t think I have done the right thing.”

“By becoming Kazekage?”

“Quite often I regret it. The burden of these responsibilities…has made me imagine what it would be like to have stayed in Konoha. I’ve asked Jiraiya about what he advised the Fourth Hokage to do when he had doubts.” He somberly added, “Yet I am aware I cannot undo my decision. I vowed to help Suna…”

“Of course it is difficult. Minato-sensei had tough days too…and Jiraiya-sama checked in on him frequently to make sure he wasn’t overloaded.” Kakashi recounted, “Your feelings make sense. You never meant to stay away from Leaf, as I understand it. It was not truly an obligation of yours to
serve your birth village, even if they tried to convince you of that.”

“I was convinced for a time.”

“I also suspect that it has not been easy hardly seeing your friends.” Kakashi rightly determined, “If it’s any consolation, Sakura has every intention of returning here…and she’ll pester Tsunade-sama for assignments.”

A small smile, “It’s more than consolation.”

“She has improved drastically. The Hokage has been sharing some intimate knowledge with her…and I have not yet taught Sakura a technique that she couldn’t master.” He paused, “She’s not suited for the Chidori…but she has options.”

“I knew she was a genius from the first moment I met her.” Gaara announced, “I should be the one bragging.”

Two training dummies had been set up in the lab that Sakura was escorted to. Although she was among shinobi who had about six to ten years of age on her she immediately took charge. Sakura noted how the simulation tools on the counters and shelves were jumbled or in disrepair, ‘Konoha orders new kits every year…’ She would be sure to drop a hint to Gaara to send some funding towards the decrepit Medical Corps.

After inquiring where the mock-fluids were and getting a resounding, “We don’t use this lab often…” Sakura tore open cabinets until she came across an unopened box of poison simulations. She ripped the packaging open and set the tools down on a rolling trolley between the tables.

“Okay…” She sighed, lifting up a plunger, “Does anyone here have experience with this sort of thing?”

One solitary hand was raised. Sakura called on the older man and he explained, “My sister was a puppet master who trained under Chiyo for many years. She and I spoke often about the poisons she used. I learned a few techniques to help in case she accidentally harmed herself.”

“Great! So you already know how to extract poison from a shinobi’s system?”

“No.” He admitted, “But I can slow it down and treat it.”

She was a bit discouraged, “That’s fine; this just means you’ll be adding one more jutsu to your countermeasures.” Sakura injected the first dummy with a neon-orange liquid. Per her instructions, a student used the doll’s manual pump to circulate the fluid in the pseudo-bloodstream. The transparent top of the dummy showed where the orange “poison” was creeping.

She lectured briefly before demonstrating the jutsu they would be using. Talented Medic-nin were no strangers to the ability to “feel around” a wounded individual’s system with their chakra. Sakura clarified that the System Survey Technique that detected internal injury was the basis of a more advanced jutsu; one that could lock on to a suspicious substance within blood, and with a Medic’s poised chakra, redirect and extract it. With her flawless chakra control, Sakura showed how she could move the orange liquid around the doll with a glowing palm, “Of course, you won’t be able to see where it has spread within a real body. You’ll need to survey first and feel how far it’s gotten. Always check if there are multiple wounds…contact poisoning is trickier than ingestion. It can be in more than one area…”

It was a long afternoon of practice with Sand’s Medics. She gave practical guidance and scenarios
that they should keep in mind while each student took turns with the jutsu they had learned. While she had made it sound quite simple, most of the Sand shinobi had trouble “latching on” to the faux poison in the dummies. Sakura took extra time to help those who struggled.

By evening they wrapped up, having a fundamental grasp of the technique. Sakura requested that they return to the lab for another lesson at 9 in the morning. She received plenty of thanks for her patience and dedication to teaching. Only after the last trickle of students had escaped into the dark streets outside of the hospital had Sakura realized she had forgotten to ask for directions, ‘Damn. I don’t want to risk getting lost on my way back to Gaara and Kakashi-sensei…’ She opted to ask the sleepy-looking desk receptionist nearby until she heard her name being called.

Sakura stepped out of the automatic door and onto the road, looking left and right. Gaara gave her an amused look from where he stood on the sidewalk, “You took your time.”

“Were you waiting here for me?” She was startled, “That was almost five hours!”

“I’m a shadow clone. I didn’t mind watching your class.” The clone Gaara pointed to the second floor of the building, “There are observation balconies up there.”

“Oh.”

Gaara closed his eyes and bent his arm, offering it. Without a word Sakura looped her arm with his and they set out under the illuminated streetlamps. The roads were now scarce of people and had grown quiet.

“So where are we off to?”

“My house.” There was a hint of pride in his voice.

“And the real you is there?” Sakura confirmed.

“Yes, and Kakashi was fed dinner and sent to bed already. He was trying too hard to make conversation.” Gaara added, “He’s probably occupying himself with that book.”

“There’s no doubt about that. So…does that mean you ate already?”

“I waited for you.”

“Thanks!” She grinned, “Will it be just us?”

“It will.”

“So that means Kankuro is on a mission as well?”

“He and my student Matsuri are on a mission in the Land of Waves.” Gaara confirmed it.

“Wow. I keep forgetting you have a student.” She bopped her head with the heel of her hand, “I want to meet her! You’ve told me she’s making great progress.”

“She wants to meet you too. She’s a decent kunoichi, for a beginner,” The corner of his mouth curved upward, “But nowhere near as talented as you.”

“You know…I think this is the most I’ve ever seen you smile.”

“You’re the one who’s smiling.” He frowned reflexively.
“I know I am, but at least I can admit it.” She gave his arm a light squeeze, “So… I need to talk to you about the sad state of that training lab…”

“This place technically belongs to my sister.” Gaara explained as he welcomed Sakura into the mansion, “My father could only assume I was dead, and so Temari inherited most of his property after his passing. She was in line to do so anyway.”

“That was thoughtful of him.” Sakura supposed, “It’s good she lets you stay in her house.”

“I could argue that, as Kazekage, I have a stake in it now.”

She laughed, “You’ll need to get that in writing…”

Village leader or not, Sakura thought, it was not entirely Gaara’s to claim. Temari would flash the deed to the home in her little brother’s face and win the argument. Yet there need not be strife. It certainly was big enough to comfortably fit a dozen residents. ‘So they sure aren’t fighting over space…’ As they passed through the vast, furnished atrium that qualified as a “living room” Sakura estimated it was about the same square footage as the entire Haruno house.

Just off of the formal dining room was a homier kitchen with appliances, and Gaara flipped a light switch and motioned for her to sit down. A chair was scooched back at the table, most likely where Kakashi had been seated earlier. Sakura took her place and gave Gaara an uncertain look, “You don’t want me to do anything?”

“You’re my guest. Sit.” He commanded in a surprisingly sweet voice, “Now… why am I spending money on that lab again?”

“It stinks, that’s why! All of the kits are outdated… you should be replacing and updating training supplies annually,” She folded her arms and leaned back in the wooden chair, “Come to think of it… those Medic-nin didn’t have a clue how to use their own lab. It’s one thing if you don’t buy supplies… but at least tell them to use it weekly and be familiar with it. I had to show them how to use their own test center!”

“That truly is shameful,” He agreed, procuring a covered pan of food from the counter, “I want to keep things at the standard that Konohagakure enforces, at minimum.”

“And well you should, especially when I stop by to teach.” Sakura smiled proudly.

The pan was put into a preheated oven and Gaara offered the pink haired girl a glass of cold, sweet tea. He took a seat across from her at the table after he set two plates down.

“What are you heating up?” She asked, taking a sip, “It smells good.”

“I made okonomiyaki.”

Her mouth hung open, “You cook?”

Gaara frowned slightly, “My brother and sister taught me.”

“I’ve tried making okonomiyaki once before on my own… but my mom said I added too many ingredients to the batter.” She huffed, “She called it a freakshow-pancake.” Sakura sipped the tea again, “The most critical woman in the world shouldn’t have asked me to solo dinner if she was only going to hate it…”
Gaara was studying her face when he spoke, “More than likely…it tasted fine.”

“It sure did.”

“Mine was passable. Your sensei didn’t vomit.”

“Full points.” Her pink eyebrows rose in delight, “You get double points if you put kimchi and shrimp in it.”

“I didn’t.” He laced his hands under his chin, “I apologize.”

“That’s my favorite.”

“But not your mother’s preferred style?”

“No. I don’t think she has any understanding of what flavor is.”

The corner of his lips tugged upward again, “I’ll try it your way, next time.”

“I hope you’ll like it,” She tilted her head, charmed by his flattery, “If I recall…you and I like to eat a lot of the same things.”

He closed his eyes and nodded. Thirty seconds passed in silence as the two remembered Konoha; in those brief days together as students when they didn’t have real worries. Sakura’s eyes absently took in the sight of the chilled glass in her hand; it was sweating with condensation. Her chin rose again and she looked at Gaara, startled, “You didn’t want any tea?”

“I do, but I’m a shadow clone. It would be impolite to take what the real me would enjoy.” The clone reminded her. The ice-filled pitcher nearby was less than half-full.

“Oh yeah…I completely forgot. It feels like I’m talking to the real you.” Her hands folded, trying to warm up from the icy drink she’d been holding, “How courteous of a clone not to impose like that!”

“Well,” His smile was impish, “It doesn’t always work.”

Sakura adopted a curious expression, “It doesn’t?”

“No. And one day, Sakura, when you make use of shadow clones you will come to understand that even if you reason with them…” The clone stood from the table, “They are solely invested in the desires and mannerisms of their creator…and don’t always have the capacity to obey.”

“Oh.” She voiced her understanding.

Her green eyes widened a fraction when the clone leaned down, putting one arm of the back of her chair and the other on the table in front of her. The shadow clone’s face hovered in front of hers; the same sharp, ice-eyes, cheekbones and red hair as her boyfriend…the same everything, down to the smug expression.

“It would only be impolite to take something that can’t be replenished, but since you’ll still be here in a few minutes,” They shared a breathless gaze, “I will enjoy.” And the brazen clone kissed her with every bit as much conviction as his originator would have.

Without giving much thought to the “moral correctness” of her actions at the time, Sakura shut her eyes and reciprocated. It was a kiss that heralded the end of the drought she had endured. Memory did not evoke any kiss with Gaara nearly so adult or bold, and the newness of it all flooded her senses, hot, quivering, and it stripped away the façade of civility she had put up. He tilted the seat
back to kiss her more deeply and Sakura moved automatically, raising her hands and settling them behind his neck. They were cold from the glass.

It shocked his skin and he made a soft noise against her mouth. Before they could get carried away in the manner they so badly wanted to, a kitchen timer dinged from the counter, signaling attention to the food. They parted when he set the chair straight again. The clone held the sides of her face, concluding a deep kiss, and then looked her squarely in the eyes, “Maybe I will not share…”

“When I…” Her breathing was ragged, “Really liked that…” She pushed the clone back gently, “I think I would prefer my real boyfriend at this point…”

The clone looked a tad dejected, “If real is something you can touch…” He stroked the back of her hand, making a nonverbal point.

“Uh, I mean…real as in original,” Sakura smiled, planting a kiss on the lips of the frisky Kage Bunshin, “Thanks.” Her super-punch connected with the clone’s stomach and a cloud of smoke erupted, eliminating the temptation.

“Phew.” She stood and moved to the oven, extracting the pan with an oven mitt and setting it atop the stove.

Sakura stole a peek at the okonomiyaki, which had a lovely geometric design drawn into the sauce and mayonnaise. A few pieces of the pie were missing: Kakashi’s portion, she presumed, ‘This looks so fancy! Nothing like my…freakshow dinner…’

It would have been too pretty to eat if not for the fourth of the circle that was missing; its slightly jagged edges made the masterpiece less memorable…more edible. She considered helping herself, but she had no idea when Gaara would turn up. ‘I should have asked where Gaara actually was before I destroyed that clone…’ She took her seat again to wait.

After a full minute of being alone with her thoughts Sakura had finished her tea. She stared blankly out the open window on the far wall, noting the silence of the night in Suna. ‘No crickets…not like in Konoha…’

“You,” Gaara strolled in the second entrance of the room, “Punch much too hard.”

Her brows danced in confusion, “Oh! Uh…how…did you know I punched that shadow clone?”

“They transmit information to the user of the jutsu once they dissolve. I remember what we were talking about,” His faint smile was replaced with a serious, apologetic look, “I am sorry that the clone was not well-behaved.”

“I forgive you…er…it.”

Gaara took the plates from the table and fetched two pieces of the okonomiyaki. Sakura was trying to keep her rubbernecking discreet. It was plain to see that he had just bathed: his hair was tousled and still drying. He had traded his day attire for loose, gray and black clothing, ‘I want to call them pajamas.’ And his shirt hung open just enough to demand the attention of her eyes. The glimpse of the smooth plain of his chest was the first she had ever seen of it. Whether he meant to stir her curiosity or not Sakura was feasting her eyes, at least while his back was turned.

He set the food on the table alongside chopsticks and then shared the last of the sweet tea with her. Gaara took a seat across from her, completely relaxed and unaware of Sakura’s distraction.

“Let me know if it has flavor.” He asked playfully, “I trust you as a capable judge.”
“Hold on.” Sakura quickly sampled a piece of the grilled treat, “Hm. Very good. Onion.” She paused, frowning in thought, “Potato. Some kind of meat…”

“Don’t overanalyze. Just tell me it isn’t horrible.”

“Like I said, it’s very good.” She smiled, “It just needs more cabbage.”

“I prefer less of that.”

“Ham.” She identified the last element, “Everything goes well. I guess this combination doesn’t need anything more…but I’ll make you one of mine sometime.”

He smirked while he chewed. Gaara kept his eyes shut and listened to her speak, savoring her voice more than the food.

“You should…come visit me in Leaf when you can…” Sakura suggested carefully, “Cooking for you would be fun.”

“I would like to do that…but I’m afraid that I can’t do it anytime soon.” A faint sigh escaped him, “Until the shinobi I sent to the Tide Village return I need to be mindful of Suna’s vulnerability.”

“Right…”

“When I get there,” He balanced a tiny green onion on the end of his chopstick, “Would you want me to stay with your family?”

“Uh…” She swallowed, alarmed, “The major reason I would advise against it is…well…I don’t want you to see any ugly arguments. My mother and I can be…” Sakura took two fists and bashed them together, “Destructive. My dad is immune to it…but for your sake you might want to stay at your place.”

“Thank you for the warning.”

She brightened, “Your apartment is in great shape, you know! Hinata dusts every week and waters the plants.” Sakura snickered, “Naruto gave her a key. He probably never wants her to return it…”

“I should have given you mine.”

She blushed and tried to hide her embarrassment with a gulp of her beverage.

Gaara qualified the statement, “I don’t live there anymore. At best, I would only be able to stay for a few days at a time. You should keep it if you need a place to decompress after an altercation.” He mimicked the fist-bump motion she had made earlier.

“Wow. You are really generous.” Her cheeks were still pink, “Honestly, I’d kill for a closet to hide in when Mom loses it…” She propped up her head with one hand while she imagined it, “I’ll scream into a pillow at your place.”

“Very well. I’ll find that key for you later. It’s upstairs.”

Sakura polished off her meal and declined when he asked her if she wanted more.

“Do you plan to spectate at the Chunin Exam? Tsunade-shishou should have asked if you were interested.” She wondered.

“It’s a ways off still, but I will be there.” He finished one last bite, “I’ll have the best seat at the final
“Good! Then you’ve already got a place to stay.”

“Speaking of which,” He stood and took the empty plates, “I can show you to your room here. You need to rest.”

“I’m fine.” She chuckled.

“You crossed the desert for the first time today and then taught a five hour class.” Gaara gave her a skeptical look, “You’re fine?” The plates clinked when he left them in the sink.

“Okay.” Sakura stood, knowing she couldn’t dispute it, “I just don’t want to go to sleep right away. I like talking to you.”

“We can…for a little while.” He agreed to it, shutting the light off, and in the dimness of the mansion he led her onward.

Up a tall staircase and past many windows, the landing of the second floor was flooded with moonlight. It gleamed on the antique wood furniture and cabinetry. While it was certainly the home of a well-to-do family, most of it was understated and practical. Sakura observed her surroundings thoughtfully as they proceeded to a long corridor. Every bedroom door was shut and Gaara pointed them out while labelling their owners.

“That’s Matsuri’s room.” A room nearest the staircase was indicated, “We invited her to stay here because she was orphaned a few years ago. Her previous home was in bad condition.”

Sakura hopped a step forward and hugged his arm, “That’s good! I hope you’ve made her feel right at home.”

“I think so,” Gaara pointed to the room next door, “Temari’s room.” Four doors down from that, “Kankuro.” At the very end of the hallway on the corner, “This one is mine.”

He nodded to the room diagonally across the hallway from his own, “That was my uncle’s room. Kakashi is staying there for now.”

“Your uncle doesn’t live here anymore?”

“He’s dead.” Gaara clarified, “Except for my siblings and me, everyone else has passed on. We’re a much smaller family now.”

“Oh.” She glanced around at the many doors, “Where can I sleep?”

He opened the door to the room next to his own and motioned for her to take a look. Sakura poked her head in and regarded it in the faint moonlight. Aside from some furniture, a carpet and some wall scrolls, it was quite austere. She had been expecting a futon, but there was a bed off to the right of the window. Her travel bag had been dropped off and was leaned against a chest of drawers. Gaara did not follow her inside and lingered at the doorway.

Sakura turned to give him an approving look, “This will do fine.”

He nodded to her silently. The pink haired girl removed her shoes and then hopped onto the bed, testing it, ‘Twice the size of mine at home…’ She patted the sheets, ‘These linens are fresh. It really feels like I am a guest of honor around here…’ Sakura smiled and sat cross-legged, fiddling with the nearest fluffy pillow. She did a double take when she noticed Gaara had not moved.
“Won’t you come in?”

“I should leave you be.”

“You said we could talk for a little while.” Sakura reminded him.

“I did say that,” He confirmed, turning to the hallway, “Come with me.”

Without questioning his change of direction, she followed. Two doors down from her room, she was shown to a bathroom. Sakura flipped the light on and found that it was appropriately spacious and modern. She padded across the tiles in bare feet, taking the hint, “You think I should wash up?”

“It is a courtesy that I did not want to forget to offer you.”

“Well,” Sakura took a towel from a wooden shelf, “Thanks. But…what will you do in the meantime?”

“Dishes.”

“Oh.” It was really taking her aback that the Kazekage was responsible for his own home, “So later we can-?”

“I promise we can still talk.” Gaara assured her, moving to leave, “For now make yourself comfortable.”

She thanked him again before he shut the door. Not wanting to waste time, Sakura ran the tap to fill the tub, ‘This could take a while…’ It was family-sized. She looked over her shoulder again at the door, a nervous tick, and then undressed. Sakura cocooned herself in the fluffy towel, trying to get a grip, ‘It’s been a waltz of the two of us trying to be proper.’ She thought, ‘I think that shadow clone had the right idea. We both wanted that…’ But the presence of her sensei warded away any inappropriate behavior, and Gaara, as a village leader, was more likely to exercise restraint. Echoes of dripping water bounced off of the walls. She slowly rinsed herself, discovering that sand had stuck to her skin in a thin sheet. ‘Well there isn’t any rush. I know that I would really like to get close to Gaara…but this mission demands a lot propriety. I’ve got to respect that.’ Sakura shut the running water off after the tub filled, ‘But man! I’m going to need to secure myself some real vacation time, eventually. Tsunade-sama will need to give me a break, especially after I become a Chunin!’ She was counting on being promoted, ‘I don’t want to hold back every time I visit Gaara…’

But until then, she supposed, this would become a routine. While they were both aware that they wanted to move things along, neither would be able to act on the desire. Each meeting would be formal, tasks would be accomplished, conversation would be dignified, and most likely, Sakura guessed, they would be scrutinized by teammates or some type of chaperone. Ino would classify it as “mission cock-blocking.” She puffed her cheeks and grumbled at the thought.

“At least I got one good kiss out of this.” She muttered, stepping into the warm bath. It sure as heck wasn’t the Sand Medic-nin she’d taught that made the trip worthwhile.

Sakura leaned back and shut her eyes. For now, silence was comfortable. The bath was a welcome relief from the surprising chill of the desert night. Bit by bit she relaxed. Sleepily, she surveyed her surroundings, ‘Gaara sure does have a lavish place…but even if he was living in a shack right now and we had been sipping broth for dinner,’ She smiled to herself, ‘I’d still be happy that I got to see him.’
She had been delighted that he was still as sharp as ever when it came to conversation. It had been one of the first things about him she liked, Sakura recalled, back from when they had entered the Academy. While he often came across rude and coarse, she considered Gaara very keen of mind and forthcoming with his opinion. She could also go toe to toe with him, or really, anyone, when it came to witty insults. These days he was more polite and mellow, but he would always have that underlying acuity that she admired.

Aside from his personality, which was intact, he was physically quite different. Gaara had the unmistakable leanness of a man, and when her thoughts began to focus on his shoulders that were distinctly broader than she remembered, Sakura slapped a washcloth on the top of her head. There was no way to combat the attraction she felt. It was the explorative curiosity that automatically made her stare whenever Gaara’s back was turned, and it had even made her test boundaries with a Kage Bunshin, ‘Which is an event I plan to keep to myself.’

She began to doze and after a few minutes woke up in a slight panic. The water had cooled off and she was unsure of how much time had passed. Sakura drained the tub and stepped out, drying off tiredly, ‘I guess I am pretty beat after today…’ She combed her fingers through her hair and it turned out fine, ‘Love short hair.’ And she skittered from the bathroom to the bedroom she had been offered.

After dressing in the “mission-downtime-clothes” she had packed, Sakura rolled onto the bed and stayed there. If Gaara had meant what he said then he would stop by later to talk, ‘And if he doesn’t…’ She yawned, ‘I’m getting shut eye.’

A nearly-full moon poured in light through the window. Sakura had nested with a few pillows around her head and was, essentially, asleep by the time Gaara had turned up.

She stirred after feeling a finger trace across her cheek. Gaara was seated at the edge of the bed and looking down at her with a serene expression.

“Sorry,” Her voice was husky with sleep, “Bath made me…tired…”

“Don’t apologize. I wondered if it was better to let you rest.”

She shook her head weakly, “I wanted to you to tell me about what…it’s been like for you…” She yawned, “Now that…you’re Kazekage…”

“Not too exciting. The work is similar to what you see Tsunade-sama do, day to day.” He was not too fond of the subject.

“I guess that’s true,” Sakura folded her hands under her cheek, “But what do you think of it?”

“What do I think of it…” Gaara repeated quietly. He shifted over and folded his legs to sit, pondering a suitable answer.

She shut her eyes and listened when he spoke, “It is an honor. Many people have come to depend on me. To be appreciated in a village that once feared me has been enjoyable.” Gaara fell back on a pillow and sighed, “At least, all of that is what you would expect me to say, isn’t it?”

“Some of it must be true,” She mumbled, “But I know you better than that. I bet you’re worn-out.”

“It’s been exhausting.”

“I could tell.”
“Should I be honest?”

“I won’t judge.” With her eyes still shut, she smiled.

“If I could do it over again I would have declined.”

“And why would you do that?”

“The work is not thankless, but it is incessant and impersonal. At every committee, mission briefing, official visit… I appear as more of an object than a real person to most people.” He amended, “A well-respected object, of course.”

“Well your brother and sister don’t see you that way. Neither do Haku or your student.”

“And I’m grateful for that. But as a Kage, it can’t be helped that people will think you lack flaws. Like how a child looks up to a parent, villagers have set expectations of what I will do for them. It’s overwhelming.”

“And you’re sixteen.” She observed.

He folded his hands on his stomach, staring at the ceiling, “Yeah.”

“Seems like you becoming a Kage at such a tender age…” She stopped to yawn, “Was a hasty undertaking.”

“I won’t argue with that.”

“You’ve always worked hard, and I always knew that it chipped away at you bit by bit, all of your life.” Sakura opened her eyes a margin, “I’m glad you’re Kazekage…but you’ll need a break soon.”

“I miss Leaf.”

“I know you do.”

“And…” There was a hint of frustration in his voice, “It seems we unintentionally built barriers between one another, you and I.”

“They don’t seem to be a problem at the moment.” She countered.

“No. But because I am apart from you here in Suna, as a leader,” He elaborated, “And you are the Hokage’s apprentice, and an instrumental part of your team…the times when we get to see each other will be limited.”

“That’s true, but I guess that’ll just make me look forward to seeing you more.”

“I was worried that when you first arrived here…that you would treat me as a stranger.”

Sakura was surprised, “Did you really think that?”

“I am never sure how anyone I care about will react to me these days. Even Naruto.” His apprehension was miniscule, but she could still hear it, “I fear that formality will take precedence over friendship.”

“It hardly ever does. And sheesh! Remember who you’re talking about!” She laughed lightly, “Naruto will never let anyone forget that he’s their friend, no matter their station in life. He’s probably going to tease you more than ever.”
Gaara turned his head to look at her appreciatively, “You’re right.”

“Of course I am.”

“Perhaps the Hokage sent you here with the intention of providing me therapy.”

“Hey, don’t give Shishou the credit. This is all me,” Sakura corrected in a sleepy warble, “Only a girlfriend can know…how to get into a man’s head during stressful times.” Her eyelids drooped against her will.

“Only you know.” He agreed. His smile began to reflect mischief, wholly agreeing with her statement.

The pink haired girl was beginning to drift from consciousness again and the conversation came to a lull. She did her very best to stay awake and watch Gaara; keep their eyes connected to communicate without sound.

The young man shifted to reach her. He fit his lips to hers; sincere and possessive, then touched her face gently. Sakura made a small sound of approval and was almost immediately asleep after that. Though he lingered for a few minutes more to adore the creature curled up in front of him, Gaara pushed himself back and retreated. It was prudent to maintain decorum. Sakura was a guest.

But, he thought, as he shut the door gently behind him; he really, really loved this guest.

Class the following day went a bit better. Sakura deemed that after four hours of practice following the initial lecture, most of the Medic-nin were able to perform the jutsu she had taught. It was easier to show them how to test poison correctly after extraction. By noontime they were synthesizing antidotes together, with the Sand ninja congratulating themselves for not being too dense for Leaf’s techniques.

Gaara was very pleased to hear of the achievement. He walked with Sakura back across the village to where he had dumped Kakashi at a bookshop. Without a doubt, he was searching for Jiraiya’s newest volume, though neither man said a word about it.

After greeting a Jounin sensei and his students for the sole purpose of introducing Sakura, they stopped at a nearby bench beside a small pool. Chiyo frequently went fishing there for the few carp they stocked. It was a secluded spot off of the main road and offered some shade.

“I guess Kakashi-sensei will want to leave immediately, now that the training’s complete.” Sakura observed sadly.

“Perhaps for your next mission you won’t need an escort?”

“I won’t,” Her eyes flashed, “I memorized the way.”

Though it need not be discussed aloud, both wanted to be sure that future visits would not have third-wheels or interruptions. Sakura took a seat on the bench, resting her hands beside her. Gaara took the place next to her and stared out down the long, narrow alleyway that connected the niche back to the main road.

“I didn’t have the chance to tell you yesterday before I fell asleep,” Sakura hesitated, “I…think you look really grown up.”

His head did a three-quarter turn when he looked at her, interested, “You do?”
She gestured to his outfit ambiguously, “Yeah, you’re dressed for the part and you…carry yourself with dignity…” She added, “You became more…”

His mouth was pursed as he awaited her opinion. When she trailed off shyly Gaara fully faced her, unabashed, and lifted her hand from the stone seat, “I’m more what?”

Sakura struggled to speak while her inner-self had a third party chorus resounding in her mind, “You look…”

He pressed her hand to the side of his face. His smile was a deceptive mix of gentleness tinged with smugness. Gaara knew what she was trying to get across as she failed miserably at articulating. He had, for most of his life, a much easier time telling people what he thought of them.

Gaara’s other hand settled behind her head, pulling her close, “I can see that you’ve changed a lot as well.” His fingers played with strands of pink, “And I never would have thought…that you could be more beautiful than when I first met you.”

“I was-” She continued to speak even while he kissed her, “Six. I think.” She began to smile, remembering, “No…”

“What?” Gaara murmured against her mouth.

“It’s been that long?” Sakura’s grin was halting the fun, “That you liked me…”

“Well,” His lips delicately touched the corner of her mouth, “It’s not the same as it was.” His swift hands pressed her flat on the bench, “Not even when I left Leaf for Sand…I wasn’t…consumed this way,” Her hands traced his neck, “I refuse to believe that I can’t have you just because I am here.”

Gaara folded over her, savoring the smooth texture of her lips. His role as a Kage seemed miles behind him, forgotten just as soon as he was bewitched by the quiet but titillating sounds she made. Sakura held him steady for a deep kiss, and for a time the balancing act continued uninterrupted.

At one point, while Gaara had captured her hand again and was pressing avaricious kisses on her wrist, a nervous voice came from behind them.

“Um, excuse me…sir…”

The Kazekage’s head snapped towards the passageway. The turban-wearing Chunin from the day before stutter-stepped in fright, not daring to come any closer; his voice trembled, “Please forgive me, Gaara-sama…I would never intrude if it wasn’t important…”

Gaara calmed down after a moment and was genuinely surprised, “How did you find me here, Enoru?”

“Hyoshigi-sensei was out on the street with his students! H-He said he saw you go this way-”

“What do you have to report?” Gaara demanded, not really concerned by then. He carefully parted from the pink haired girl before they quickly preened themselves and stood.

“A message arrived by messenger hawk from Kankuro-sama.” Enoru explained, “There’s trouble in the Tide Village.”

Alarmed, Sakura observed Gaara from the corner of her eye. He had gone tense.

“Of what sort?”
“He is requesting support to help locate and defeat the Shin clan, who were discovered to be operating near the village. They’ve abducted at least five Tide students with the intention of assimilating them as clan members.” Enoru explained it concisely, “He has done all that he can to safeguard other students and track the perpetrators…but his forces are limited.”

“I will deploy two teams there to assist,” Gaara began to walk, but shepherded Sakura along. “Did he say anything else?”

“A follow-up report did come in a few hours later,” The Chunin added quickly, keeping up with them, “It said that your student was reported missing.”

Wide-eyed, Gaara stopped to look at his informant in disbelief, “Matsuri?”

“Kankuro-sama indicated she did most of the investigative work to uncover the student’s abductors. He fears that her efforts may have attracted the enemy’s attention.”

Gaara’s gaze traveled from Enoru to Sakura, “Sakura.”

“I want to help.” She announced firmly, “I think you were going to ask me to, anyway.”

“Yes. Are you and Kakashi available?”

“Shishou won’t mind.” The kunoichi kept up with his pace, “She’s got no reason to object this time.”

“Send a reply to Kankuro.” Gaara commanded over his shoulder to Enoru, “Tell him that in addition to those cells Hatake Kakashi and Haruno Sakura will be arriving shortly. And it is advisable that he find my student unharmed before they get there.”

With an affirmative cry the Chunin darted off towards the aviary to send a message.

“Even if Kankuro can’t find her, I promise we’ll get her back, Gaara.” Sakura vowed, “Kakashi-sensei and I can track her, so don’t worry!”

“I won’t,” There was a wild edge to his voice, “I’m going with you.”

Electric silence hung over the Hyuga compound for several days. Members of the Cadet Branch whispered among one another, truly shocked by the unrest in the Main Branch. Witnesses had identified the heir of the clan, Neji, as well as his older relative, Hikune, as the combatants. Older, wiser Branch members pointed to evidence that suggested the two young men who had brawled had fought for reasons that often concerned young men in general, And not because it had anything to do with clan matters, a man wisely put it.

The clan elders, who had these days only concerned themselves with Hinata’s woebegone matchmaking, swept the indiscretion under the rug. This was the first outburst that the prodigy Hikune had ever had, they contended. And though it had not been Neji’s first outburst, they pardoned him as well. All told, they just didn’t want to deal with it. Hiashi had been instructed to keep the youngsters under control and preserve the immaculate reputation of the Hyuga.

So Hiashi kept his comments to himself and returned to his nephew, who had been healed by the clan Medic, and asked him for his opinion.

“Do you feel that Hikune deserves to be punished?” The man asked Neji.

Neji, bandaged and on the mend, contemplated it, “I don’t know.”
“You and Hinata explained to me that he was frustrated by a rebuff from a young woman, your teammate,” His tone suggested it was kind of a big deal, “And he saw fit to harm you in response. I do not know the particulars, nor do I wish to hear them, but…” Hiashi sighed, “His behavior is not fitting of this family.”

“I won’t demand…any further correction for him.” Neji spoke softly, “I was told Hideyasu dealt with him.”

“That is a parent’s duty…” Hiashi reminded him, “If Hikune’s offense was serious enough to involve the Hokage, by your estimate, then-”

“No.” Neji said flatly.

“He attacked you savagely.”

“I recall.”

“You are my brother’s child and heir to this clan. I will not allow anyone; not a member of the Main House nor any other clan…not even our esteemed elders to disrespect you.” Hiashi’s voice was sharp, “You should not tolerate it either, Neji.”

“I didn’t tolerate it. I distinctly remember my retaliation, and by that measure…” He frowned, “This matter seems settled to me. I see no reason to humiliate Hikune further.”

What Neji did not tell his uncle was that aside from not wanting a more serious punishment for Hikune, he did not want to make it a public matter for the village to discover. It had been two days since the beating. Tenten and Lee, mercifully, were not aware of the altercation. If he could keep it that way, Neji had every intention of doing so. They had once questioned his wounds the day before while at their training ground, but he had attributed it to rough practice with his clan. He had showed up lacerated and bruised before for such reasons, so both Lee and Tenten readily believed it.

“Very well.” Hiashi let it drop, “I’ve been doing all that I can to support my daughter through these troubling times,” Referring to her forced courtship that he had little power to stop, “And I will not let you face adversity either. It’s my hope that this confrontation is settled, but if it isn’t, Neji…” He looked the young man squarely in the eyes, “He must be dealt with. You will lead this clan; the Main and the Branch House. Hikune cannot be allowed to oppose you.”

“I understand, Hiashi-sama.”

His uncle excused himself after that. The next order of business was to speak to Hanabi’s Chunin Instructor who had spoken of her aggression towards antagonistic classmates. While Hiashi knew that he would never get his youngest daughter to curb her belligerent attitude, he could at least save face with fed-up Academy teachers. Off he went.

Neji stood and left the room as well, swirling with emotions. He was grateful that he did not pass anyone in the corridor, because his face was freely expressing every detail of his mood-swing.

There was a passing moment of pride he felt that Tenten had pledged fealty to him. It had rubbed Hikune the wrong way, of course, and it had gotten him beaten up too, but he would not have it any other way. He had been angry enough when Haku had caught her eye long ago, but she had discarded that admirer as well for his sake. The ego-boost faded when he realized she had been out perusing in the first place.

Every inch of him seared with rage at the thought of her secretly cavorting with anyone. A Hyuga clan member. A stranger. Other shinobi their age. It didn’t matter who. While they had not
established this as a taboo, nor were they romantically involved in any way, he expected Tenten to know better. He tried not to think about whether or not she had been intimate with anyone. That possibility existed, and it ought not to tarnish his opinion of her so long as he was her impartial teammate, but…it wasn’t his business. He shed the thought. She belonged to no one and he belonged to no one, therefore they certainly didn’t belong to each other.

But more often than not he was angry anyway, almost unable to help it.

A strange new feeling, a gentle one, came over him as he stepped outside into the daylight. He had quickly forgiven every party involved. After all, there had been some truth to Hikune’s garbled, crazy words. There would be no point in blaming himself, or Tenten, or even the man that had been heartbroken. He wanted to resolve the problem without fanfare or attention.

He had not approached Tenten yet, deciding that if he ever did discuss this mishap with her, it would be better to do it with a clear mind. He was mostly lucid in spite of the sparks of emotions that flared up, trying to accuse someone or make sense of it all. Neji followed the veranda to the end and turned the corner before pausing at a lonely room. Hikune was inside this one.

They had not spoken since, well…

He knocked once and then slid the door open, letting himself in. Hikune was having tea at a low table and was unruffled by Neji’s arrival. He had probably seen the Hyuga heir approaching. Neji took a seat across from him and didn’t blink when Hikune shifted to bow on his knees in greetings. At least now he could show the proper respect.

“Please afford me this moment to apologize once again, Neji-sama.” Hikune sounded completely normal, “I regret my words and actions.”

“I think you regret your words less than your actions, but rest assured, your message was relayed.” Neji told him, “I came here to tell you something.”

Hikune was silent. He was expecting an extension on his house arrest and mission inactivity. Or, perhaps by prodding the elders, he was about to become the newest member of the Branch House.

“Let’s forget all of this.”

Hikune’s tea nearly went down the wrong pipe.

“It’s disappointing that Hinata-sama had to see it. I would prefer if no one else learned of this, not even your brother.”

“Neji-sama…you are in a position to destroy any and all credibility I have. It wouldn’t make much sense to merely forget what I did to you.” Hikune pointed out, “And even if we did put this behind us and pretend that we get along…” His voice was a dark as a storm cloud, “My feelings are unchanged.”

“There’s no need to change how you feel. I’m asking only for your self-control.” Neji stood from the table, “This will be the last time I ask for it. Going forward, I will command it.”

“I promise to be civil. Though I don’t suppose you have any reason to trust me in the future…”

The young man moved to the door, “I may be a fool for doing so, but I will continue to depend on you as I always have.” And as he forcefully shut the door behind him, he thought: But I don’t have to like you.
Hikune observed with his Byakugan as Neji stalked away. Only a few years ago, Neji had been known to throw tantrums and look down on others. Today he had a level-headedness that was uncommon among Hyuga heirs. Hikune imagined that he might make a good clan Head after all.

He stood to leave the tea room, entering the main hallway of the house, and Ko watched him carefully as Hikune returned to his room. He nearly jumped out of his skin when he found his father there waiting. He stood with his back turned and arms folded while looking out an open window at a wind-chime. Clearing his throat, Hikune shut the door behind him.

Hideyasu glanced over his shoulder, “I watched Neji go to speak to you. Were you punished?”

“No.” He lowered his chin, “He forgave me.”

“He forgave you,” A dubious laugh escaped him, “What incredible mercy that boy has, don’t you think? You could have crippled him for life over something as petty as rejection…and he absolves you…”

Hikune took a seat on a floor cushion and his father, not his benevolent self today, turned to face him, “Well I for one don’t forgive you, Hikune. I did not raise my children to act this way, whether or not you were from a noble family, whether or not you were justified…I will never turn a blind eye to such shameful acts.”

“Father.”

“I’m not finished,” Hideyasu growled, “You owe Neji your allegiance. Before anyone else in this world, he needs you the same way Hiashi leans on me, don’t you understand?” His voice was furious, “It is disgraceful to take out frustration on clan members; our Branch house or our Main house. These are the steps we are taking to abolish the Caged Bird Seal: to first treat all of our clan with compassion. We’ve discussed this.”

“I know, Father.”

“And what’s worse is that you should be setting an example for Fujita. Do you think your mother and I want him to emulate an older brother so foolish?”

“I know you don’t.”

Hideyasu paced for a few moments, brow furrowed, almost comical in his anger which was rarely ever expressed.

“You’re fortunate that Hiashi-sama is understanding! He vouched for you before our clan elders and he left your fate up to Neji.” The man’s voice softened, “He too was understanding. He didn’t have to be.” He sat down across from his eldest son, “Tell me why you did it, Hikune.”

“You haven’t heard already?” His eyes were trained on the floor, degraded.

“There were vague indications that this started because of a girl. Hiashi was trying to make sense of it, but you know him…it’s like playing the telephone game…”

“Neji’s teammate Tenten and I were very close.”

“Ah, and did he discover and object?”

“No, he didn’t. She turned me down.” Hikune added quietly, “She loves him.”
His father looked childishly enlightened, “Oh.”

“I reacted very poorly, I acknowledge that.”

“Ugh, Hiashi-sama really didn’t have a clue what he was talking about.” Hideyasu ran a hand through his hair, “He had his lines a bit crossed…” He smiled slightly, “I know that it’s hard to have your heart broken, son.”

Hikune was silent so his father reached over and tugged him, pulling him into a hug, “Nothing that feels this bad stays this way forever. You’ll feel right again before you know it. And remember, when I first fell in love with your mother she dumped me twice…it took three years for her to come around!”

“I’m not so sure that this is that kind of situation…”

“Well there’s no way to be sure it isn’t.” He chuckled, “Now if you’re not going to be a brat or beat anyone to death, please go to the Hokage’s office and take a mission. A Jounin should not be sitting on his laurels.”

Hikune squeezed him briefly before standing. Hideyasu followed a few paces behind his son as he strolled out into the yard, with Ko still shadowing. Fujita could be seen practicing forms in the courtyard and Hikune called out to him. His little brother came scrambling.

Matsuri awoke with her face pressed roughly into grass. With a groan she fidgeted, realizing her arms were tied by complex knot-work behind her back. She could see the feet and legs of shinobi walking about the forest clearing, not paying any attention to her at the moment. They conversed urgently in low voices.

Her eyes scanned along the ground to a refuse pile of assorted garbage including beverage cans and foodstuffs. She contained her outrage when she saw her Jouhyou and tool-summoning scroll had been discarded as trash. ‘I’ve been disarmed! But they didn’t even want to keep my weapons…’

She was immediately aware that she was a captive of the Shin clan. While frustrated by her predicament, she did not despair, ‘Maybe I can find a way to draw Sand’s forces here…’

“Ongakare-sama! The little runt woke up!”

Matsuri rolled like a log in a futile attempt to make a break for it, but her legs refused to cooperate. She was still under the debilitating effect of Sound ninjutsu.

A hand grabbed her roughly by the shoulder and hoisted her to her knees (since she couldn’t stand) and then released her. She saw before her a pale man with narrow, empty eyes; he seemed to be estimating her value. He rolled back a long sleeve and tapped a finger to his chin, “I wonder how experienced this kunoichi is?”

From off to the left a Shin clan lackey suggested, “She’s just a Genin, Ongakare-sama. She won’t be causing us trouble.”

“Hm.” The clan leader seemed intrigued, “She won’t? I was informed she was the one who turned Menma against us.”

Another voice spoke, “We can’t make her one of us. She’s a stuck-up Sand ninja and she prevented me from recruiting a student. Our ways won’t appeal the same way a cozy life in Suna does…” Matsuri quickly recognized the voice of Nobu, the man she had chased after a near-kidnapping.
“So you can’t be very useful to us,” Ongakare turned his attention to Matsuri, “At least, not without persuasion. Menma was a promising student…I’m very disappointed that he’s become a traitor.”

“He has a conscience,” Matsuri spat, “He knows that it’s wrong to take children away from their homes!”

“We provide them with a new home. Even Menma can’t deny that he would have perished if not for the generosity of our clan.” The man frowned, “Those students who wish to train as shinobi…surely they can decide for themselves what kind of future they want. If they seek to serve this so-called Tide Village I won’t stop them, but I can offer training in prestigious arts that Sand grunts can’t.”

“You’d be welcome if you helped the Tide Village; they appreciate support! But your reasons for being here are selfish: you’re only training ninja so you can go after Orochimaru!” Matsuri accused.

Ongakare looked amused, “Did Menma tell you that? Well there is truth in it; however my goal is very far down the road…these children will be seasoned adults with real skill before I even consider striking against my enemies. Just think…” His glare was cold, “What could I accomplish with stupid trainees of your caliber?”

The kunoichi gritted her teeth furiously.

The clan leader smiled, “Now, now, young lady! You know I’m right. Nobu seems to think that we can’t trust you…that you’ll never acquiesce to becoming a member of the Shin clan.” He chuckled, “But a decade of imprisonment can change people’s minds. I hope you look forward to it.”

The trill of a wooden flute plunged her back into sleep.

“Hey! Pst! Wake up!”

Matsuri felt a nudge. Young voices whispered over her face while she lay on her back. She cracked an eye open and saw a child looking down at her, clearly worried.

“You’re awake!” His voice was quiet, “Try to sit up…”

Woozy, Matsuri opened her eyes fully and saw three Tide students crowded around her. Her hands were still bound which made her movements clumsy, but she righted herself and took stock of her surroundings. Seated several yards away at the base of a tree there was a Shin clan guard. His chin was tucked to his chest; he had dozed off.

All of the Tide students had their hands bound with rope as well. Matsuri even recognized the girl among them to be the child gifted with perfect chakra control. The two boys with her had bruised faces, ‘I don’t think they came willingly…’ They appeared to be in the same forest clearing as before, but most of the Shin clan was absent.

“You’re the captured students?” Matsuri asked quietly. They nodded and so she continued, “I’m Matsuri. I’m a Sand tutor. I’m going to help you escape.”

“Did you plan to get captured so you could find us?” A boy asked hopefully.

“Not…exactly,” She furrowed her brow, “But I know I can help you. Where are the other students?”

She recalled five had been reported missing.

“They wanted to be here,” The other boy said disapprovingly, “Those two really believe they want to join this clan! They didn’t seem to care that these weird ninja were beating up Gemba and me
when we resisted!” He looked to the girl with them, “I’m glad they didn’t hurt Miki, though.”

“It’s only a matter of time.” Miki wisely surmised.

“Okay. And what’s your name?” Matsuri asked.

“I’m Hisao.”

“Alright…” Matsuri peeked over her shoulder at the sleeping guard, “So the Shin clan isn’t here?”

“They went with the willing students into the village. Sagi and Jiro are going to help lure other kids away from the Sand ninja and into town.” Gemba explained, “I hear the Shin clan talking about using their jutsu to blend in and using sewers to escape…”

The Sand kunoichi pursed her lips, thinking, “While they’re gone…how many are here supervising you?”

“Two guards.” Miki reported, “One hasn’t been around for a while and the other just fell asleep. Should we do something?”

Matsuri nodded, “Yes. But with my hands bound I can’t do much.” She eyed the guard, “I need to get a kunai off of him…”

She wobbled to her feet and silently padded towards the slumbering shinobi. She came to a good position to kneel down and reach for a holster when the man started and stretched his arms. While trying to think of an alternate strategy she hopped backwards, trying not to be too blatantly suspect.

“Hey! What are you doing over here?” The man barked.

“I…I need to use the bathroom.” It was the lamest but most believable excuse she could come up with.

A short distance away Hisao chimed in, “I’ve gotta go too!”

Gemba feigned sleep while Miki kneeled beside him, deciding not to join the bathroom-break train.

“You rodents think I believe that crock?”

“You don’t have to believe it…I just hope you have a change of pants for us.” Matsuri prodded, “We can’t be kept waiting all day…”

“Bah!” He was clearly frustrated, “Fine!” He grabbed Matsuri and shoved her in Hisao’s direction, “Get a move on you two! I’m supervising. Don’t try a damn thing or none of you will be shitting for a week!”

When they had marched to a secluded thicket of trees a few paces away, they began to clamor to have their hands freed. He only permitted one to be free at a time, and so he untied Matsuri first, grunting, and pointed to an oak tree where she could do her business. Once out of sight, the kunoichi seamlessly replaced herself with a clone and scaled the tree in silence. A believable sixty seconds passed before the guard saw her again. Her doppelganger returned without a fuss to be tied up with rope. His suspicion had been avoided.

Matsuri watched from a tree branch as Hisao was freed. While the guard’s back was turned she positioned herself carefully. In the same moment the Tide student below complained for toilet paper she swooped. Matsuri landed a cruel kick on the back of the man’s head and he collapsed with a
small sound of shock. Hisao dove in to help her bludgeon the guard senseless and then search for weapons. He had no kunai. She took a spare length of rope and tied his hands and ankles before dragging him into a bush to be hidden.

“Untie them and then follow me.” Matsuri advised Hisao quietly, “That other guard might be here any moment…”

Matsuri’s replication dissolved as she rushed to where the guard had been sleeping. A small hand drum was at the base of the tree, and beside it was an empty bottle of wine, ‘No wonder he was vulnerable…he’s liquored up…’ She picked up the drum and ran back to the refuse pile where her rope-dart had been thrown away. Matsuri retrieved her belongings and then stuffed the hand drum into a dirty paper bag, ‘They won’t look for things they care about near things they don’t care about…’ She nodded to the gaggle of students before rushing into the forest with them.

“What’s the quickest way back to the village?” Matsuri demanded.

“It’s the same path the rest of the Shin clan will be taking.” Miki informed her, “There is a main road over a foot bridge that leads to the business district.”

“Then the next best way?”

“Along the side of the river.” Gemba replied, pointing to the calm waters held back by a levy, “It takes longer but it can bring us really close to the barracks!”

They raced across the footbridge and the Tide students hurried down a small hill to the water’s edge. Matsuri had no time to join them at the walkway below; the second guard was on her heels, howling furiously. He drew a short sword while he charged.

She wheeled her Jouhyou around to keep the newcomer at bay. Matsuri kept the man’s eyes trained on the red cloth that was tied eight inches above the metal tooth of the rope-dart. This was a very common trick with soft weapons, she had learned. Brightly colored flags caused enemies to misjudge the distance of the dart at the end of the rope. He dodged clumsily, getting tagged once in the ear, now bleeding, and a second time on the chin; hideous purple from the impact. Matsuri was too fast for him to close in with his blade, spinning and whipping her weapon round and round. The frustrated member of the Shin clan finally leapt off of the bridge, abandoning his fight with her. He ran across the water’s surface towards the children.

‘Turning your back on me is a mistake!’ She swung like an acrobat from the bridge, using the momentum to send her Jouhyou streaking like a rocket to its full length. It coiled around the neck of the ninja who was just short of catching the escapees. With a gag he fell backwards, splashing in a panic before he was abruptly released from the chokehold. When he surfaced the metal dart hit him squarely between the eyes. Matsuri hooked the rope with her foot, spinning it in a final arc, and then lashed the metal tooth down on the crown of the man’s head. Unconscious, he sunk like a stone.

Her Tide student companions gasped at the barbarity of the tiny weapon in Matsuri’s hands. She hurried across the stream with chakra and caught up to them.

“Jeez! You made those guys look like amateurs!” Hisao was thrilled.

“I’m lucky they underestimated me.” The kunoichi observed, “They gave me every opportunity to overwhelm them, and my Sensei taught me to never squander those moments.”

The children absorbed the lesson. They ran along the stone path and then followed Gemba into a wide drainage tunnel. Light was limited but the boy seemed to have a grasp of where to step and
when turn, unafraid of the sprawling shadows. It was nearly fifteen minutes of navigation and consulting with Hisao and Miki (who had also eluded adults in the tunnels) before they decided to breach at a particular manhole cover. Gemba peeked through before deciding it was safe, and hoisted the metal plate aside. They scaled a ladder into daylight again.

Matsuri looked around, unable to recognize their location, “This is…the suburban part of the city?”

“Yeah, there’s only houses and lagoons.” Gemba began to run again, pointing to a dockside residence, “That’s Inari’s house!”

“Oh!” Matsuri was glad to hear it. She doubted Tazuna would be resting at home at such a critical time, but it couldn’t hurt to stop by.

Miki knocked on the door and it was briskly answered. Tsunami looked shocked to see the children, “Miki! Matsuri?” She stepped onto the porch, “My father said you were all captured!”

“We busted out! We’ve got to help the Sand ninja stop the Shin clan!” Hisao updated the woman, “Are Inari and Tazuna-san okay?”

“I’m sure they are, but the sooner you find them, the better. They told me they were going to be in the Academy yards that just opened today.” The woman urged, “Please hurry.” She gave Matsuri a thankful look, aware that she was responsible for the safe return of the students.

The group took off again with Matsuri at the front. She spoke to the children with her, “Listen to me, I’m going to the center of town. You three go straight to the barracks and warn the first shinobi you see about what’s happening. I need to find Kankuro-sama or Tazuna.”

They agreed to do as they were told. Once within the city limits the group divided. The Tide students entered the barracks and Matsuri rushed down the main avenue, keeping tabs on the alleyways and sewer entrances in her peripheral. ‘I hope they haven’t taken any more students! I want to make sure Tazuna and Inari are safe and then ask Kankuro-sama to track the Shin clan with me!’ She hesitated to drag Menma back into such messy business, ‘I don’t know what they plan to do with Menma if they see him again…’

“Stop!”

She paused when a voice from the passing crowd implicated her. Matsuri turned and was confronted by a member of the Sand Sensory corps. Chiyo was puffing tiredly beside him.

“Matsuri, you’ve been missing for over a day. Kankuro said that you were captured on your way to find me. He wanted to blame me for neglect!” The old woman huffed, “I knew that the Shin clan couldn’t contain you for long…”

“How did you get away? We still haven’t pinpointed the enemy’s chakra signal.” The sensor with Chiyo asked.

“We weren’t well guarded because the Shin clan is here in the city; they’re trying to lure more students.” Matsuri told them breathlessly. “I brought three students to the barracks, but the remaining two are helping the Shin clan trick students!”

“That’s no good. Many students are visiting the new training yards today.” The sensor then took a moment to check the area a few blocks away, “We might be in time if we go there now.”

“If you insist on running for the rest of this jaunt then you should carry me on your back, Muta.” Chiyo proposed.
“Chiyo-sama…”

She took off at a feeble jog, “Ahaha! You sucker! I’ll beat you and the little lady there!”

They sighed in response to the juvenile gesture. Matsuri and Muta overtook Chiyo in a few seconds and she cursed under her breath. They had clear passage down the adjacent road as they made for the Academy. Matsuri watched as Chiyo drew a scroll from within her sleeve and tucked it in her sash.

“I’ve never felt so lively on vacation….” Chiyo decided with a liver-spotted grin, “Matsuri…I’m going to show you my collection today…”

“Are you serious, Baa-sama?” The girl was shocked. She had never seen the old crone lift a finger to fight.

Chiyo cackled, “Oh yes…and these fools will learn why I am known for clearing the fields of war with a sweep of my hand…” 


Dismantling

Chapter Soundtrack: “Technicolor Beat” by Oh Wonder

“The greatest way to live with honor in this world is to be what we pretend to be.” - Socrates

Hinata was seated beside Kurenai on the low-hanging limb of a maple. The girl had her hands customarily folded in her lap while her sensei, far more relaxed, had her hands at her sides; legs crossed. She was smiling as she looked out over the training field.

Sato and Shino were nearby sparring. It would appear that Sato was back to his pre-Star-mission health. He whirled over the grass, dodging swarms of insects. Shino exchanged volleys of shuriken with him, holding back just a hair with his throwing speed. He and Hinata were both aware that Sato’s energy and athleticism distracted from the numerous wounds he had sustained. His maiming was not very far behind him. The scars on his hands and arms, and, revealed with the Byakugan, scars that scored his back and chest frightfully, were sure to be permanent. Sato had said that he didn’t mind them, “It makes me look a bit tougher…”

“You did very well today, Hinata.” Kurenai’s voice was warm, “I may have only nicked you once.” She recalled that when Genjutsu failed to ensnare her student, a hail of weaponry was not much more effective.

“Once.” The girl nodded, “I hope…that I did not hurt you, Sensei.”

Her teacher chuckled, “The pain has passed,” She glanced down at her bruised arms where Jyukken had broken through a defensive block, “I think it was wise of me to ask you for a rest.”

“I’m sorry, I should have held ba-”

“Do not apologize for outclassing me in hand to hand combat.” Kurenai said sternly, “I was hardly a match for your Taijutsu when I first took you on as a pupil. I have no right to complain now that you’ve grown so much.”

Hinata’s smile was small. Kurenai had always been a practitioner of positive-reinforcement, with her, at least. The woman had other methods of communicating with Sato and Shino. At the moment, she was haranguing Sato from a distance for using kodachi when he had been expressly warned not to. In retaliation, Shino thought it fair to use a pole-arm. The boys had at each other and Kurenai sighed with a shake of her head.

“Their punishment will be the injuries I wanted them to avoid.” She decided.

“Sato-kun is feeling much better. Today may be a good day for him to practice with swords again.”

“Maybe…” Kurenai glanced at her, “So while we have this moment, may I inquire about the unrest in your clan?”

“Um,” Hinata hesitated, wondering which particular issue she was referring to. There were several occurring simultaneously.

“You’ve had suitors.” Kurenai provided an example.

“Oh.” She then understood, “It’s…not something that I enjoy dealing with, but I am free to decline every offer a visitor makes.”
“I hope your father is advocating for you.”

“He is.” Hinata reassured her.

“Good. Such an asinine tradition is tragically typical of the Hyuga clan, forgive my criticism. Many clans within the Leaf Village no longer subject their children to matchmaking and other foolishness…”

Hinata nodded silently.

“If at any point you feel that your rights have been violated by your elders, or if your freedom is not adequately safeguarded by your father, I will vouch for you.” Kurenai declared, “I would happily take it up with the Hokage. Your clan may claim to have unquestionable influence over your duties as a Lady of the Hyuga,” Her tone was sharp, “But as a Sensei, I have influence over your career as a shinobi. No one will jeopardize it so long as you are my student.”

“Thank you, Kurenai-sensei.” Hinata was relieved, “I don’t think I will be forced to marry anyone. It’s just unfortunate that I have to humor so many guests…”

“We can take more missions if you like, if sabotaging your schedule will help,” The woman was clever, “Just as soon as Sato is cleared for it.”

“I’d like that.” She watched as Kurenai turned her attention back to her male students. While no one could replace her mother, Hinata felt that her Sensei often protected her in the way a parent would. She liked to imagine Kurenai that way.

A short while later the training session wrapped up and the team members went their separate ways, intending to meet again the next morning. Hinata ventured into town and considered how she wanted to spend her afternoon. Since she was not immediately needed by her father or relatives, she wished to default to a favorite pastime. The garden was looking a bit dull these days.

Hinata had a light spring in her step as she cut across town. She anticipated a letter from Naruto soon. She was also glad she had at least a full seven days that would not include entertaining suitors. For now it was business as usual with her team and it was a lovely feeling.

Ahead of her, Chouji was parting ways with Ino and Shikamaru, trading their company for his father’s. He and Chouza ventured in the direction of the Akimichi estate while Shikamaru followed a half-step behind his girlfriend down the street. Ino’s radar quickly picked up on Hinata approaching. She altered their course, partially dragging Shikamaru, and then met up with her.

“Hinata! I heard this rumor-!”

Shikamaru’s subtle nudge stopped her, “You said you were cutting back on perpetuating the rumor mill, Ino. At least give Hinata-san a proper greeting first.” His said pointedly before adding, to great effect, “How are you?”

“I’m fine, thank you, Shikamaru-kun.” She smiled sedately when Ino put an arm around her shoulders, steering the group towards the flower shop.

“Hi Hinata! Shika got that greeting out of the way for me,” She said while ignoring his sigh, “So now I’m going to go ahead and tell you the latest gossip…”

“Of course. After you do I would like to buy some flowers.”

“Sure!” Her voice lowered slightly, “Shikamaru said that he heard about a fight at the Hyuga
compound.”

Hinata wilted, “Yes…that did happen.”

“Was it really Neji? Was it about a-?” Ino was interrupted by Shikamaru again who reminded her that it was a sensitive matter.

“I…” Hinata hesitated, “I know that Neji-niisan did not instigate anything. But he was attacked by a member of the Main House. It may be wise not to discuss what motivated it.”

“That’s the best part!” Ino whined.

“I’m surprised,” Shikamaru commented, seeing Hinata wasn’t especially tight-lipped about the event, “It happened at the Main House…that makes me wonder if it was…” He trailed off, rapidly deducing that Hikune’s comings and goings from the Hokage’s tower and Shogi tables indicated some kind of distress. Giving Ino that bit of information would feed the insatiable monster, though.

Upon arriving at the flower shop Ino relented and gave up on the mystery, for the time being. She knew she could extract a hypothesis later from Shikamaru with certain persuasions.

Hinata was magnetically drawn to purple irises that were on display. She inspected them briefly before taking two small pots over to Ino at the counter. Ino rang her friend up with a discount, “How are you holding up? I hope they cut it out with the omiai business your elders mandated.”

Shikamaru leaned on the countertop, lost in his thoughts while the girls chatted.

“It’s not so bad. I’m free for most of this week.”

“Thank goodness. I hope you didn’t meet any real weirdoes…”

“Well…some were…blatantly incompatible…”

Ino cocked an eyebrow, “Aside from being way older than you?”

Hinata nodded, “Yes. Many of them couldn’t even hold a conversation…some had strange pastimes…” Her brows knitted in disdain, “And there were a few who said they expected me to cease all ninja activity if they married me.”

“Ass…” Ino elongated the word, “Holes. Why would they say that? They’re trying to marry a kunoichi! You’d think a man would do that because he liked how you can defend yourself.”

“No. I was told it was unbecoming of a quiet lady.”

“You abandoning your shinobi career was probably the only way those guys could feel good about themselves.” Shikamaru supposed, “A secure man would never ask for such a thing.”

Ino gave him a brief, appreciative smile before turning to her friend again, “I’m sorry you’ve got to put up with that garbage. It’s a good thing Naruto would never flat-out tell you: quit being a ninja, it’s ruining my confidence!”

“He never would.”

“How about we all do lunch sometime? You’re free this week and Shikamaru is getting two days off.”

Hinata brightened, “I would like that!”
“Good! I’ll swing by and get you tomorrow.”

They parted on a happier note and Hinata waved to her friends before ducking out of the shop with her potted irises. On her way out, she could see Shikamaru catching Ino before she nearly toppled from the top rung of a footstool. She smiled to herself, ‘Ino seems so happy. Shikamaru does treat her very well…even though he doesn’t make a big show of things.’

Hinata returned home without incident and switched into her “serious gardening outfit”. It was kept in the bottom-most drawer of her bedroom’s armoire. She used the same pair of brown-kneed pants and weathered apron for every venture in the garden. Naruto, who often knew where to find her on Hyuga grounds, had once told her that she looked very “cute” dressed in raggedy clothes. Hinata tied her hair up with a white handkerchief before she and her new plants arrived in the garden. She set down a wooden tool basket before scanning the flowerbed for spots to dig holes.

‘I haven’t had a chance to do this for some time.’ Hinata thought to herself, ‘Mother was here every day, back then.’ She could remember the woman’s dedication; the way she was stooped over azaleas and white aster for hours, pruning, ‘And Father used to watch her quietly.’ Hinata looked over her shoulder to a window, ‘From there. It made him happy.’

In the back of her mind, Hinata knew that the undeniable similarities she shared with her mother were the exact things that made her father’s heart ache. Her appearance and demeanor; even her taste in food and hobbies, ‘I know he misses her so much. I think he always wanted me to be more like him…so he didn’t have to think of her whenever he saw me.’ While Hinata had adopted her father’s fortitude over time, she would forever be a carbon-copy of her mother.

She re-homed the first iris in damp soil, humming to herself, and then heard voices coming from the house. While patting the dirt around the flower’s base, Hinata watched as Hikune and Fujita emerged from the veranda door. The older boy was clad in his Jounin vest and had a travel bag with him.

‘So his mission inactivity is over.’ She noted. She was surprised that it had gone quickly. In all likelihood, Neji had not been enthusiastic about punishing him.

Hikune accidentally shared eye contact with her for a moment, sending a bolt of awkwardness through them both. Fujita swept him along while begging to be taught a new jutsu, oblivious to the tense moment. Hinata turned back to her work and excavated the second hole a bit more, ‘I am still unsure of how to feel. Hikune is a very caring person and is close to his brother and parents…’ She frowned sadly, ‘But I can never forget what he did to Neji-niisan…’ She had to witness about a minute of violence with her Byakugan before she arrived to break up the fight. It had been dreadful.

What was most puzzling to her was Tenten’s involvement. Neji had explained, with his limited knowledge, that Tenten must have been visiting Hikune frequently. ‘Why would Onee-san spend time with Hikune when I know that she…?’ Hinata was a stalwart believer that Tenten had a deep-seated and romantic love for the Hyuga heir. There could be no other explanation. Yet there was no way to determine why the kunoichi had grown close to another member of the Hyuga clan. While Hinata was sure that it hadn’t been a serious relationship it had still caused unintended damage.

And she would never feel quite right about Hikune again. Every gentle smile he gave could barely conceal Hinata’s memory of swiftly sealing his tenketsu; hearing his wails.

She looked once again to see Hikune joining his teammate, Mion, before bidding Fujita farewell at the gate. Hinata paused in her work and sat on her heels; her eyes met with Hikune’s once more. There was a true apology communicated in his gaze. It made her heart lurch.
Naruto had no trouble waking when Fukasaku asked him to. After quietly stretching and then
dressing he could hear the distinct protest of Jiraiya coming from the next room over. ‘This is the first
time we’ve woken up Ero-sensei early since he was injured…’

Peeking out of his doorway, Naruto observed as the small toad and Jiraiya had a verbal altercation.

“Jiraiya-boy, you’ve healed significantly. Eventually you’re going to have to resume a normal
schedule.” The toad reasoned.

“Eventually never meant now, did it?”

Fukasaku seethed, “You asked me to help you with Naruto’s training, so that’s what I’m doing!
Wake up and join us at the Toad Oil pool.”

“Sure. In an hour.”

The toad hopped into the room and slaps could be heard. Naruto slinked past in silence and exited
the house, not wanting to be involved in an argument between two old geezers.

The majestic sunrise bathed the valley and its vegetation in soft light. Naruto lingered in the grassy
yard for a short while before Jiraiya emerged from the house, defeated. Fukasaku followed after him,
carrying a cane as if to discourage any further mutiny from his old student.

“Mornin’ Ero-sensei!” Naruto was a bit cheeky with his greeting.

Jiraiya snorted at him before mumbling, “Hey kid…”

“So you wanted me to start training today? You’re not exactly…all better…”

“Yeah, I definitely know that, but I’m not participating in strenuous activities today…Pa is doing the
physical demonstrations.” Jiraiya smirked, “I’ll just stand around and lecture.”

“If that’s all you plan to do, then you best not complain while doing it.” Fukasaku remarked sharply.

“That request would make sense if I wasn’t, you know, injured.”

The toad raised his cane in warning, “Mark my words, Jiraiya-boy…it could be much worse.”

“Uh…right.” Jiraiya’s attitude did a self-preserving 180 and he lead the way to the training pool. It
was a slow procession as the group walked beneath giant banana leaves all the way to a courtyard
surrounded by toad statues. With a relieved groan, Jiraiya took a seat in the grass and Fukasaku
hopped to the top of stone steps beside the pool. At the center, a toad fountain was spouting oil.

“And here we are!” Fukasaku announced, “Would you care to begin this lesson, Jiraiya-boy?”

“Not entirely, but,” He gave Naruto a warm look, “If Naruto’s making the effort then I might as
well.” Jiraiya cleared his throat, “Hm! Senjutsu is the art of absorbing and harnessing natural energy.
I bet Pa’s told you about this already, but maybe not so much about how it’s done.”

“No, we didn’t discuss how to do it.”

“It’s tricky business. Feeling the chakra in nature all around you takes patience and discipline. It
won’t feel the same as the chakra within your body.” Jiraiya scratched his chin, “I can’t properly
describe what natural chakra feels like…but we can help you discover it for yourself.”

Naruto astutely glanced at the pool, “It has something to do with that oil?”
“You bet it does. Toad Oil is a great tool for helping a shinobi become more sensitive to natural chakra. If you hold still and focus, with a bit of practice…you’ll be able to feel it. From there, you’ll have to learn how much is appropriate to absorb, because if you take in too much,” He nodded towards a behemoth statue, “You will quickly transform into a toad statue if you’re saturated with natural energy.”

“How do I…” The boy looked perplexed, “Not do that?”

“I’ll give you a good smack that’ll bring you back to your senses,” Fukasaku announced, “I can prevent that transformation.”

“Oh. Phew…”

“Yeah, so you don’t need to worry about that. Pa will keep an eye on you.” Jiraiya assured him, “If you take in too little natural chakra, it’ll barely make a difference. Once you strike the proper balance of mental energy, physical energy and natural energy within your body…” He smiled, “You will reap the incredible benefits of Senjutsu.”

“Your speed and strength will become exponentially greater!” Fukasaku added.

Jiraiya continued, “And you’ll have a tremendous, external source of chakra to tap into.”

“Then we can teach you some time-honored techniques…” The old toad was getting excited.

Naruto was quickly revved up, standing between the two sages. The prospect of having a reservoir of chakra that did not come from the Kyuubi was too good to pass up. The pride of mastering jutsu his teacher was famous for was also enthralling. He rushed up to the steps where Fukasaku was settled, and was about ready to douse himself in oil.

The toad’s cane barred him from the pool, “Not so fast, Naruto-boy.”

“Yeah…I need to mention the realistic outlook of this training,” Jiraiya informed him solemnly, “Naruto, you are very likely to spend most of your days patted down with oil…and getting the shit beat out of you. Then you’ve got to learn to accumulate nature chakra without oil and practice…” He squinted his eyes, estimating, “Probably for the next five years.”

Naruto whipped his head around, aghast, “What?”

“Well that’s how long it took me to get the balance right. I meditated my ass off!” He pointed accusingly at Fukasaku, “And Pa and Ma beat me over the head until I was cross-eyed, regularly, for pretty much five years. It was nearly ten years before I had mastered all of the techniques…”

“No, no, no…there’s no way I’m staying away from home that long!” He crossed his arms, fuming, “I’ll miss the exam! Hell, I’ll miss a lot of exams! I might as well tell Baa-chan that she can’t count on me as a Leaf ninja!”

“Relax.”

“No! And what about Hinata? Or Gaara or Haku? All of my friends!” Naruto’s nostrils flared angrily, “We agreed that two years made sense! Why would you encourage me to start training like this when I’m getting prepared to go back to Konoha?”

“Someone had to go and forsake Kyuubi-chakra.” Jiraiya nagged, “Need I remind you that the Akatsuki will be after you? Quite soon, might I add. You need to be able to at least escape them, or better still, clean their fucking clocks!” The sage raised his voice, “I am not losing you or Gaara to
criminals like them.”

“I…” The boy hesitated for a moment, “I…understand all of that. But is training more important than me living my life and accomplishing what I want to do?”

Jiraiya looked at him with a stone-faced expression, “You won’t get to live or accomplish things if they kill you.”

“Ohay!” Naruto accepted that argument, “So…what if I really train hard…and then when it’s time for the Chunin Exam I take a month off to return to Konoha?” He brightened with another idea, “If I make enough progress maybe I could travel between Leaf and Mount Myoboku? I’ll keep up with Sage Training!”

“No.”

Naruto scowled at his teacher, “Why not?”

“Because I know that once you’re in Konoha you won’t leave again.”

“Sure I could if I-”

“I’m not an idiot, Naruto!” Jiraiya was furious, “It will be hard enough for you to rationalize that shitty, turnaround trip as soon as you see your friends and start missions,” He was bristling, “You’ll tire of that routine. You won’t take this training seriously. And forget it if you carry on dating that princess of yours! I know you well enough to be absolutely certain that she will wipe that cockamamie plan of yours right out of your head!”

“Ero-sensei-!”

“I’m putting my foot down.” Jiraiya announced, “If you’re going to take on a member of the Akatsuki, you’re going to need all of the chakra and training you can get. I won’t always be around to protect you. That anti-Fox chakra stunt of yours was the last straw. You’re going to master Senjutsu or bust. Got it?”

Wide-eyed, Naruto stared at Jiraiya and wracked his brain for a solution. He wasn’t going to pass over Sage Training, but he wasn’t willing to sacrifice the next few years of his life either.

“Then I’ll stay here. I’ll train.” Naruto relented, “But I’ll finish early.”

“That’d be impressive.”

“In less than a year!”

“That’d be pretty goddamn impressive!” Jiraiya ground his teeth at the declaration, “You have no idea how intense this gets! I trained for ten years to learn all that I know now! You can’t make light of it, because-” He gestured his thumb towards a toad statue, “That’s gonna be you.”

“I can do it.” Naruto insisted.

“You can’t.”

“I will because I really need to.”

Jiraiya brought his uninjured arm down and slammed his fist on the ground, “You need to listen to me! This isn’t like the Rasengan or the Hiraishin! No amount of your inherent talent is going to
speed you along…if you screw up there are severe consequences. I don’t want you to get captured and killed, but I sure as hell don’t want to walk up to a statue and say: **hey Naruto, how’s it going?**

“Enough, Jiraiya.” Fukasaku finally intervened, “Before this argument starts to circle in on itself, I suggest we give Naruto a taste of what he is to learn.” He motioned for Naruto to approach him, “Come here, Naruto.”

He knelt down beside Fukasaku and got a comforting pat on the shoulder. Some tension escaped him, but Naruto was still not quite returned to his amicable mood. The length of Sage Training was an issue he would need to revisit later. Fukasaku scooped a handful of toad oil from the pool and rubbed it onto the back of Naruto’s hand.

“Jiraiya is right. This training is long-winded.” Fukasaku explained, still rubbing, “No one who has ever studied Senjutsu has ever mastered it in so little time.”

“What’s the record?”

Fukasaku chuckled, “I’m not sure. Jiraiya was the fastest learner I’ve met. I suppose past disciples were not in as great of a hurry as the two of you…”

There was a tingling like static electricity, but far more faint, seeping in through the spot on his hand. Naruto noted that the sensation then coursed through his whole body, a rich, profound, organic energy that was at the same time gentle and fleeting. He thought his eyes were deceiving him when he watched his fingers fuse into the webbed hand of a toad.

“What the-?”

He was clubbed over the head by Fukasaku’s cane. Jiraiya laughed vindictively.

While whimpering in pain, Naruto could see that he had returned to his human state. Fukasaku sighed and hopped over to the nearest stone statue, “I expect that you felt something?”

“I think I did…just a tiny bit.”

“Yes. You’ll be able to feel natural energy more easily with more training. A master such as myself can feel it whenever I am still, without the assistance of toad oil.” Fukasaku told him, “You may think it foolish to endeavor to learn a skill like this, at least for now…” He paused for a long minute, still and silent, then spoke again, “But you’ll be glad you did once you can do **this**!”

The small toad heaved, getting leverage on the bottom of the towering stone statue, and with a grunt of effort, the toad lifted the effigy over his head. Naruto’s mouth hung open in shock and Fukasaku slowly turned, balancing tons of stone over his head. His arms wobbled slightly.

“Jiraiya-boy,” Fukasaku called, “Catch!”

Jiraiya screamed in terror when the toad let go of the statue, but was relieved when it was set back on the ground harmlessly. The ground trembled. Fukasaku cracked himself up, “Ha! You really thought I would throw it at you? Ho ho…no, I respect these disciples far too much to break them over your head…”

“That wasn’t funny, you damn prune!” Jiraiya barked, “I’ve been through enough!”

Naruto had found it entertaining. When Fukasaku returned to the steps he asked for Naruto to take his shirt off. A bit fearful, Naruto complied, and was splashed with more toad oil.
"It’s time for you to give it a try, Naruto-boy. Be still and calm. Be one with nature!"

He folded his legs and took a seat, ‘Is it really that easy, Gramps? If this is gonna take me years…I doubt I’d know nature even if it came up and punched me in the face…’

The prickling, delicate chakra surrounding Naruto began to find its way in again, by far more rapidly. Almost immediately he was bashed on the head. Without opening his eyes, Naruto lurched over and groaned, massaging the sore spot.

“Off to a great start!” Jiraiya chortled.

“Quiet!” Fukasaku warned his former student, turning back to the blonde teen, “Sorry, Naruto-boy. Let’s resume.”

And they resumed and resumed for hours.

It was a dismal, tedious morning eclipsed entirely by pain and frustration. By noontime Naruto was wondering if Fukasaku could see the growing, scarlet lump that was rising up from the crown of his head. He could feel nature chakra well enough, Naruto estimated, but his mentors insisted he was moving too fast or absorbing too much. Since “too fast and too much” was the only speed Naruto had ever been comfortable with, Sage Training, he concluded, was utterly foreign to him, ‘Never mind Pa and his hate-stick…’

By early afternoon Naruto experienced a small breakthrough. He had held back, concentrating more deeply, honing in on the delicate tendrils of energy all around him. Ever so slowly and cautiously, he let the vibrant rays permeate him, mixing warily with his own chakra. Then there was a warm, creamy substance on his face. It was most assuredly not nature chakra or anything of the sort. Naruto opened an eye and then, with a sigh, relinquished his sharpened, meditative state.

He wiped his forehead with the back of his hand and inspected, ‘Okay. This looks a lot like-’

Jiraiya was peeling with laughter, “Ha ha! First time’s a real bummer! Ha!” Naruto confirmed that it was bird excrement trailing down his head and cheek as Jiraiya continued, “Better get used to that! The more in-tune with nature you are, the more frequently animals and other wildlife will approach you. There will be plenty more birds where that came from!”

“Aw will you shut up, Perv!” He flicked his hand in Jiraiya’s direction, shaking the poop off.

While Jiraiya hooted mirthfully from the grass, Naruto turned to Fukasaku, pleading for assistance, “Please tell me he won’t be here every day when I practice?”

“I assure you he won’t, in fact,” Fukasaku shouted to Jiraiya, “Get lost already! You’ve given all the input we can stand!” And Jiraiya happily retreated, “There…now he will sleep and you and I can avoid further antagonizing.”

Frowning, Naruto watched as Jiraiya disappeared around the bend, “Hey, Pa…”

“Hm?”

“I know Ero-sensei told me that I can’t treat this training like any other technique of tried to learn, but,” He made a hand sign in preparation of making Kage Bunshin, “I think I would do better if I was getting more experience. That’s just what works for me, you know?”

“So you wish to use Shadow Clones?”
“Is that cool?”

“Well,” Fukasaku rubbed his chin, “The trick is that while they can relay their experience to you they can also absorb too much natural energy. You should not make more clones than I can smash, or we risk turning you into a statue in double the time!”

“Whoa, okay…how about four?”

The toad approved of the suggestion and Naruto proceeded, letting four clones materialize beside him with a puff of smoke. Without protest the doppelgangers sat and closed their eyes, preparing to meditate deeply.

“Naruto-boy.”

He cracked an eye open.

“Jiraiya is not trying to discourage you. I suspect that he has a mountain of worries…and it seems to be most palpable when you are near. While I can’t approve of how he has been trying to impress upon you the seriousness of Sage Training and how your life can be in jeopardy…I do believe he has said those things because he cares for you.” The toad reasoned, “To be quite frank, I am on your side, child. You can pursue this training as quickly and intensely as you see fit. After all, if you can achieve it in a year’s time, why in the world wouldn’t you?”

“Ero-sensei doesn’t think I can.” He pointed out sullenly.

“Naruto…he was not the brightest student in the world.” Fukasaku grinned, “Jiraiya-boy was downright hopeless! Look how far he made it! I am confident you will surpass him…and maybe that is what grates on his ego. He must expect that you will.”

“Sheesh! I’m not doing it to be better than him! I’m doing it because I want to stay alive!”

“A perfectly sensible motivation.” The toad nodded.

Naruto closed his eyes again and relaxed, ‘At least Pa thinks I can do this.’ And he got the sense that, once he had the opportunity to ask Hinata, Gaara or Haku what they thought of his endeavor, ‘I guess…they’ll plan to see me soon.’

Two days later, a few miles beyond the perimeter of the Leaf Village, Hikune and his teammate were completing their return journey. Their mission to escort a terminally-ill young lord and his family to a seaside palace was successful, albeit very sad, they had conceded. The journey home was a bit more pleasant.

“I’m telling you, I didn’t say a word to her,” Mion insisted, “I just went to the forge and picked my sword up. She didn’t even charge me as much as I expected.”

“Are you certain Tenten doesn’t know about it?”

“Just chill already. If your cousin wanted to sweep it all under the rug and forget about it, what makes you think he’d be inclined to tell her?”

With a deep sigh Hikune acknowledged news of his tantrum had not spread very far. His teammates had safeguarded him adequately and had happily resumed missions with him when the Hyuga elders gave permission. He counted himself lucky that his outburst had not gotten back to the young lady who had caused it.
Mion commented on how the forest always smelled different, smelled better, the closer one came to Konoha. While Hikune agreed distractedly, he heard the faint snap of a tree branch behind them. His trained ear registered that it had a distinctly human quality to it, and so he held out his hand to his teammate, signaling caution.

Without a word, Mion waited for directions as Hikune surveyed their surroundings with the Byakugan. The pair dropped down from the treetops to the ground, watching the undergrowth knowingly.

“We already know you’re there.” Hikune warned, “Come out.”

A long, eerie pause ended when a man stepped out of the leafy thicket, holding his hands up helplessly.

“I need some help.” The stranger told them.

“Apparently. You’ve been following us for quite a while.” Hikune observed, “What do you need?”

“I have friends in the Leaf Village. Since I don’t know my way around very well, I thought it’d make sense to ask Leaf shinobi.”

The precise moment they lowered their guard, the man’s arm snapped, hurling a kunai that landed between the two and sunk into the tree bark behind them. Mion laid his hand on the hilt of the sword at his back while Hikune pulled the knife free and read the message tied to it. ‘What is this? It’s…’

There was no demand, no threat, nor any kind of intimidation conveyed through the note. It merely had three names scrawled on it, ‘These are the members of Team Gai.’

Hikune’s suspicion was rapidly evolving into alarm. He folded the note and tucked it into his belt, surmising it may need to be presented to the Interrogation Corps, ‘This man might need to be brought in for questioning if he does not explain himself right here and now.’ Two people Hikune was very concerned about had been named on the list, and he highly doubted it was for cordial reasons.

“You can’t be friends with people you don’t know.” Hikune told the stranger, “Otherwise you’d have recognized me.”

Mion gave his friend a confused sideways glance, whispering, “What’re you-?”

The man was delighted, “Oh! So I found a friend I’ve been searching for,” His eyes narrowed, “Your features would suggest that you’re my Hyuga friend, are you not?”

“I’m Neji,” Hikune’s lie was almost panned by Mion’s stupefied expression, “And you are a nukenin.”

“See? We know each other quite well already.”

“I don’t know why you’re searching for my team, but I suggest you quit while you’re ahead. We have no business with the likes of you.”

“But I’m sure you’re at least a little curious about why I stopped by,” The nukenin prodded, “I’m Koinyu, by the way. I’ve been so rude! We ought to get better acquainted.”

The name was familiar but the young Leaf ninja could not exactly place what significance it held.

“So you’re a Rock outlaw.” Mion spat a toothpick from his mouth, gripping the sword hilt firmly, “I
think we can guess why you’re looking for Leaf ninja to torment…”

“You can?” Koinyu raised finely-groomed eyebrows in surprise, “I thought I’d need to give an oaf like you a few minutes to figure it out.”

Hikune had to order Mion to stay put and not cut the insolent rogue’s head off. He returned his attention to the instigator, “Either you tell us what you need from your ‘friends’ or I will personally escort you to our Interrogation center.” He fell into a Jyukken stance to illustrate.

“Where’s the kunoichi of your team?” Hikune nearly lost his nerve when Koinyu continued, “She’s the only one Bihokokuni-sama is troubled by. There’s no need for us to quarrel if you’d be willing to exchange her.”

“Forget it.” Mion hissed.

“What do you want with her?” Hikune demanded.

“What do we want? We want to make a statement!” Koinyu smiled, “Though…you two shall serve as a decent introduction. Your severed heads will look especially good, I must say.” He did not delay a moment more and unleashed a tremendous storm of magnetized kunai and projectiles. They rained down with ferocity from all directions.

Koinyu flitted about, weaving hand-signs as Mion was cut up like a schoolyard target. Hikune rotated to defend against the assault and immediately countered. He rushed after Koinyu, dodging traps, and came close to cornering the nukenin for a 64-Palm strike. A wall of knives separated them, and while Hikune dealt with it Mion dove in, bloodied as he was, and used a Fire jutsu to steer Koinyu back in the direction of his teammate.

Hikune’s Air-Palm hit their adversary squarely in the back, knocking him across the clearing and into the trunk of a tree. Mion descended first, preparing a mighty swing of his sword, and was greeted with Koinyu’s visage dissolving into a substitution: a substitution comprised of a shrapnel-bomb. He had no time to escape, and, while rolling away behind the cover of trees, felt metal slice into the back of his vest and legs when it detonated.

Hikune had his opportunity to engage the nukenin in hand to hand combat. He was not very skilled at all, and had taken substantial punishment from several palm strikes. Hikune reeled back as his hands began to bleed profusely. His Byakugan picked up on the issue, seeing Koinyu’s skin was capable of producing sharp edges as if it were comprised of iron.

“People have never been comfortable with getting close to me.” Koinyu droned; taking the offensive before Hikune could retreat properly. He directed another typhoon of kunai and weaponry, forcing Hikune to rotate. Mion charged at him from the right, cutting down on Koinyu’s impervious shoulder with a clang, and was then quickly ensnared by a cable. The nukenin had produced the wire from a trigger up his sleeve. Hikune was swift enough to cut his friend free with a Jyukken strike and they regrouped, flanking the enemy on either side as his weaponry darted by like a flock of birds.

Mion felt the sword in his hand shudder after Koinyu completed another jutsu. Magnetized, it wrenched free of his hand, “Wait a-!” and shot forward, missing Koinyu handily, and then impaled Hikune as he was readying a Lightning Style technique. His hand-signs faltered and he paused, eyes wide, swooning where he stood. He had been skewered from front to back through the center of his chest. Mion moved to catch Hikune, barely functioning with his own metal-battered body, and ignored Koinyu’s quip about “the uselessness of teammates”.

Another storm of knives came down on them, rendering them pincushions, and then they were still.
The cawing of a crow echoed in the distant reaches of the forest. Koinyu put his hands on his hips and observed his fallen targets, “Well now…you two were all bark and no bite! I really do appreciate that you didn’t waste much of my time,” He walked out of the clearing, dusting off his shirt, “I don’t want to keep the lady waiting.”

An eternity passed within the span of a minute after Koinyu had left them to die. Stuck full of blades, Mion struggled to prop himself up on his arms, looking over to his wounded friend, “Hikune.” He slipped his knees beneath him, feeling a cascade of blood rush from the punctures in his back. The man hauled himself closer to his teammate, sliding across the stained grass, repeating Hikune’s name.

A soft cough answered. Petrified, Mion laid a hand on Hikune’s arm, “You’re awake? Good! I thought he’d double-check us.”

Hikune’s breath was a shuddering rattle. His eyes opened and shut for a few moments, as if the nerves firing in his brain could no longer process commands. He only said, “No.”

“No- what? Come on, we’ve got to-”

“I won’t…be awake much longer,” His eyes shut again, resigned and calm, “Can’t move.”

“I’ll get us some help.” Mion valiantly tried to stand and collapsed, “Just give me a second.”

“Shoda.”

“I know…I wish he came with us this time. He was busy at the hospital.” Mion lamented, believing that the medic-nin of their team would have made all the difference in their dire situation.

While Hikune lay still on his side, Mion struggled to move or do anything practical in nature. He extracted some of the knives that limited his range of motion and hastily bound up his leg with cloth ripped from his shirt sleeve.

“Take it out.” Hikune’s words were nearly inaudible.

Mion’s voice cracked, “You’ll die if I do.”

“I will anyway.”

Hating himself, Mion did as he was asked. The blade was removed quickly and Mion began to weep, despairing, having never imagined he would have to do such a thing. Hikune’s vest was saturated and the man no longer had his faculties. Behind closed eyelids he pictured his father’s face and then his younger brother, his mind conjuring images with impressionist features; soft color and light.

Concluding that there was no escape or possibility of help, Mion stopped struggling. He slumped over right beside his friend, no longer crying, and breathed more slowly.

“You know, the Hokage has such a big crush on you.” Mion said in all seriousness, “I can just tell. It’s good she’s single. If you asked politely I’m sure she’d keep you secret.” He laughed in spite of himself.

Hikune’s silence was expected. Mion stared at him for a long moment and then wondered if his wife and unborn child would be angry if he didn’t try to get up and be there for them.

He drifted off.
Tsunade scanned over two notes: one was from Yuuhi Kurenai and the second was from a medical examiner. With a ‘hmph!’ of annoyance she settled her eyes on Hatake Sato, who stood expectantly in front of her desk.

“You do look a lot better.” Tsunade conceded.

“Does that mean you’ll clear me?” The boy smiled excitedly.

“It’s just an observation.” She glanced over the notes again, “Shino.”

Shino had been waiting without comment beside his teammate. He respectfully obliged the village leader, “Hokage-sama?”

“Is Sato keeping up well?”

“Just as well as he did prior to his injury.” The young Aburame confirmed.

Sighing, Tsunade set the documents down, “Kurenai is vouching for you as well. I suppose I can give you permission for D and C ranked missions with a clear conscience, however,” Her tone sharpened, “If you experience any complications or set-backs while performing your duties you must report it to me. There is no guarantee that you are at full strength yet.”

“Let me find out. I promise I’ll be honest, Tsunade-sama.”

“You damn well better be honest! After all the work I put in fixing you…” She gripped the arms of her desk chair, “Don’t expect me to be your personal physician should you sustain injury again. I don’t care if Kakashi cries or begs.”

Without warning, an ANBU agent materialized in the room and knelted about a pace away from Sato. He flinched in fright but regained his composure, miffed that Shino had not spooked in the slightest.

The masked shinobi spoke, “Hokage-sama, I have urgent news that I need to share with you.”

Eyebrows raised, the woman stood from her chair, “You’re cleared, Sato. The both of you are dismissed.”

Inquisitive and a little uneasy, Sato and Shino both left the office and shut the door behind them.

“I get the feeling this is bad news,” Tsunade murmured, “What is it?”

“My squadron was beginning a patrol of our third sector, about two and a half miles outside of the village,” The agent explained, “We discovered two Leaf shinobi fatally wounded in the forest. The attacker has not yet been determined and I sent three of my subordinates to begin tracking whoever was responsible. One of the shinobi, the Chunin, is still alive. He is being cared for at the hospital.”

“Which pair was this?”

“Hyuga Hikune and Runruna Mion.”

Tsunade sat down again, shocked. She had been quite fond of them and had even had a pleasant conversation with them days before.

“Hikune is dead then?”

“Yes.”
“You retrieved his body?”

“Affirmative, ma’am.”

She twisted her chair around to face the window and stared out at the horizon, dotted with treetops and patchwork buildings. Her mind raced before she could come to a decision, rising to her feet, and then addressed the Black Ops ninja, “I need to speak to the survivor. Was he conscious?”

“In and out.”

“Alright. I’ll be on my way now. Prepare another team and survey the perimeter. I want the Sensory Corps notified as well.”

“Right away.” He vanished.

Tsunade briskly made her way out of the office and down the hallway. She passed Shizune and beckoned her to follow, “Walk with me.”

“What is it, Tsunade-sama?”

“A team of Leaf shinobi was attacked just outside of the village. One fatality.” She began descending the stairs, “I want to get to the bottom of this before I lose any more of my ninja.”

“Right!” Shizune followed and Ton-Ton kept in single file behind her.

Feeling that the incident with the Akatsuki was not too far behind, Tsunade could not help but suspect another attack. She reflected on Hikune; she had been the one to approve of his promotion to Jounin, trusted him with several high-profile missions, fancied him in her afternoon daydreams, and appreciated him just as much as other shinobi that had found a place in her heart, ‘He had such promise.’ She wasn’t listening to whatever Shizune was saying, ‘On my watch… this will never happen again.’

By the time Chiyo had plodded into the Academy training yards behind Matsuri and Muta, their presence seemed wholly unnecessary. A more experienced class of students was doing demonstrations for a younger, newly accepted class. Tazuna and Inari circumvented the crowd of students and met with the Sand ninja. Inari grasped Matsuri’s arms, wide-eyed, “You’re back! Are you okay, Matsuri? They were saying you got abducted!”

“I did. I helped some of the students escape.” She clarified, “But we have to be careful! The Shin clan has moved into the city in an effort to take more children.”

Tazuna raised a bushy eyebrow at Chiyo. She was doubled-over and trying to catch her breath.

“She’ll be fine.” Muta assured him, “Chiyo-sama is here to provide protection.”

“Golly-gee, we’ve got superior security today don’t we?” The old man nearly rolled his eyes, “Where the heck is Kankuro? If there’s a problem I expect him to get his butt over here and watch these kids! Not your Sand grandma and grandchild.”

Matsuri opened her mouth and then shut it, not wanting to speak out of turn. Muta estimated that Kankuro would arrive at the school after doing a sweep of the city.

Chiyo waggled a finger at Tazuna, righting herself, “Now that’s no way for a grandpa to talk! If a granny can’t make a difference in these children’s lives then why are you standing here, you old
“Fart?”

“You’ve got twenty years on me.”

The old woman strode past him into the fenced-in yard, motioning for Matsuri and Muta to join her. She called over her shoulder, “It seems to me you’re just jealous that I’m a Legendary Ninja!”

“Keep dreaming.” He gruffed and then turned to yell at a pair of latecomers, “I told students to be here at 10am! You’re going to make up whatever you missed.”

The two boys shouted an apology before joining the audience. The lesson continued for another ten minutes before the majority of both classes ventured inside to the lobby for refreshments. There was a lull as Matsuri and Muta took a seat at a picnic table. Chiyo stifled a yawn.

Tazuna’s stomach twisted in horror when two adult shinobi suddenly vaulted over the fence and pounced on the gaggle of students that had lingered outside. Two more Sound ninja ambushed the students, tossing a net over them with a practiced motion.

“Oh! I love it when they rush in without thinking...” Chiyo made a hand sign and flicked her wrist, revealing ten of her puppets that had been disguised as students. Hacking the net apart, several of her puppets swung forward and stuck the attackers with bladed arms. Bloodied, the men fell backwards and dared not move.

Shrieking in fright, the remaining two darted about, trying to regain some control with Sound Ninjutsu. While Chiyo and her Sand companions scrambled after them, Inari cautiously led his grandfather out of the training yard and around the back of the building. He kept a kunai steadied in his hand, reflecting on the situation, “You know what, Grandpa? That old lady can probably handle it.”

“I don’t want to take that chance, Inari. We need to stay clear of the fighting.” Tazuna peered into the lobby through a window, seeing there was mayhem inside, “What the-? What’s going on?”

Tazuna opened a disarmed emergency exit door just a fraction. He and Inari stuck their heads in and beheld the rest of the Shin clan wrangling up over a dozen students, binding the screaming youngsters like prisoners and dragging them out the double-doors of the cafeteria. The two boys who had arrived late were assisting in the harvest. Inari recognized them and hollered, “You rotten traitors! I’m gonna have you kicked out of the program and-!”

A hail of kunai and shuriken shot towards them, and Tazuna shut the door fast enough to deflect the strike. He and his grandson took off running, hoping to inform Matsuri and her esteemed elder of the trickery.

At the front of the building they found it was not going so well. A Sound Genjutsu had put Chiyo to sleep and her puppets lay scattered around her. Muta was trying to shake her back to consciousness while Matsuri scared off the last able-bodied enemy. With a sigh, Tazuna gave Muta the update while a platoon of extra Sand ninja arrived at the Academy just a minute too late.

“What am I paying you people for?” Tazuna roared, pointing to Chiyo, “If this lady is what you consider elite then I hope I can get a refund! Go get my kids!” Inari directed the squadron towards the back of the building.

When Kankuro and Menma rounded the corner onto the grounds Tazuna held up a hand, halting them, “No. I don’t wanna hear it. Honestly, I want to fire you.”

Kankuro smiled, “You sure? I’m having them funneled into a trap.”
“Bullshit."

Alarmed, Menma vouched for him, “Tazuna-san, Kankuro disguised one of his puppets as a hostage and lured three members of the Shin clan. We’ve captured them.”

“Where? Back in town?”

“Yup. We extracted the truth from them about where their rendezvous point was. I’ve got my Jounin waiting there now.” Kankuro filled him in, “If the rest of the clan brings the kids there while my tracking platoon is following them…they’re gonna be right where we want them.”

Frustrated, Tazuna criticized the dangers of the rescue plan. Menma spotted Matsuri and hurried to her, enclosing her in a tight hug, “Matsuri! I was told that-!”

“I’m fine.” She was very pleased that he cared, “Thank you for helping Kankuro-sama! I knew I could trust you.”

“I’m sorry that I didn’t do more to prevent this…”

“You’re making up for it.” Matsuri assured him. They followed after Kankuro and Tazuna who were moving along to the ambush site. Muta was stuck with hauling Chiyo away while she snored.

It was exhilarating to finally coordinate with her allies, Matsuri thought. Kankuro was at the head, storming down a series of memorized alleyways and streets, and Menma and Matsuri tagged along, aware of Inari and his grandfather trailing behind them. Overhead, Baki had flashed by over brick rooftops, positioning another squad. ‘Now we have the opportunity to overwhelm them! There are three times as many Sand ninja here than there are Sound!’

The group halted, feeling the earth beneath their feet rumble. People scattered away from a small building’s collapse and then they about-faced, avoiding another explosion near a footbridge. Screams of panic intensified as smoke bombs peppered the streets. Kankuro continued on, calling to his subordinates, “They’re trying to create a diversion! Stick to it! The Sensory Corps are onto them.”

Wind jutsu cleared the smoke on the road, restoring visibility, and Matsuri sighed happily to see about ten students rushing back to the protection of Sand Academy teachers. The Shin clan, it seemed, had used the last of their explosives. Sand ninja dove in and met them boldly. Matsuri looked over her shoulder to scold Tazuna on his cynicism and then glimpsed him being bodily dragged into passageway. With a gasp, Matsuri tapped Menma on the shoulder, “We’ve lost Tazuna and Inari!”

Without notifying Kankuro, who was using Karasu to discipline his enemies, the two turned around.

“What happened?” Menma had his ocarina in hand, “They were just with us!”

“I don’t know. I saw Tazuna’s feet and then-” She was interrupted by combative shouting, “This way!” Matsuri leapt up, crossing over an awning, a tavern sign and then stone edging, keeping pace with the retreating Sound ninja and his captives. Menma barreled down back to the pavement, tackling the shinobi from behind. He dropped Tazuna, who was much too heavy of a hostage, and then raced away with Inari tucked under his arm.

Tazuna pulled a cloth gag out of his mouth and struggled to his feet, “Get Inari! I’ll find some help!” He hobbled back to the main road while Matsuri and Menma flew on, keeping the lone Sound ninja in their sights.

Disoriented, Tazuna returned to the main drag’s sidewalk and found that the avenue was a mess.
‘Unbelievable! This damage is going to cost a fortune!’ He held his nose as he passed through the fading gas of a smoke bomb, trying to flag down a Sand ninja. No one seemed to hear his impassioned, indignant demands, “One of you bums has to go help my grandson! Come on already!” He didn’t have the heart to take the Academy Teachers’ attention away from their frightened students, and so he popped into every unlocked shop door and eatery, screaming for a shinobi’s consideration. After six failed attempts, he got someone’s attention in a café.

“Hey you!” Tazuna rasped at a Mist ninja seated at an antique table, “We’ve got a crisis on our hands! You like this town, right? If you think it’s worth stopping thugs from screwing with the Tide Village then lend a hand!”

“It’s nice here…but I’m not a resident.” The young twenty-something was hip and well-dressed; “I just arrived here a day ago.” He sounded utterly disinterested.

“So, you’re not the motivated sort, eh?” Frustrated, Tazuna gnashed his teeth, “Well the Sand kunoichi who is chasing down a criminal to save my grandson has only been here for a few days. She thinks it’s worth fighting for.”

The man gave him a long, even look. He balanced his chin on his left hand regally, “I really don’t like fighting if I don’t have to.”

“Who the hell does?”

A tense 30 seconds passed as onlookers (bewildered coffee-drinkers) watched the old man and the shinobi engage in a stare-off. The young man reluctantly stood up and pushed his seat back, finishing his last sip of tea. He walked over to the demanding old man, “You’re Tazuna, right?”

“Yeah.”

“I’ll help,” The ninja offered, “But I don’t want anyone to know about this. I’m trying to lay low,” He moved to the door, rolling up the sleeves of his yukata, “Oh…and I want a gift voucher to this restaurant when I get back. You can do that for me, I’m sure.”

“Fine, you stingy bastard!” Tazuna relented, “The youngsters ran into the forest near the canal. Please…just go help them.”

“Very well.” With the matter settled, the shinobi went ahead and ignored the waitress’ complaint of an unpaid lunch bill.

“Hang on a second,” Tazuna followed him out the door and onto the smoky street, “What do I call you?”

The man raised his eyebrows as if surprised by the question. He swirled a pipe around in a small detergent cup and a smile spread on his face, “I’m Utakata.”

“Matsuri,” Menma kept his voice down as they stalked through treetops, “We need to be careful. This is the leader of the Shin clan.”

“Yes, I recognize him. He spoke to me a day ago.” She recalled, “I don’t think he’ll be so tough when he’s not surrounded by his precious clan!”

He shook his head, “Please don’t misunderstand. Ongakare is not physically strong…but if he separates us from each other we won’t stand a chance. Stay close to me.”
“Will he hurt Inari?”

“He won’t.” Menma frowned, “But I don’t think he’ll hesitate to punish me.”

A surge of adrenalin coursed through the girl, ‘That’s not happening! I know we can do this. As soon as I have the chance to get Inari back…’

Fortunately for them, Inari was cursing up a storm and being as difficult as possible. The two young shinobi were able to follow his incensed babbling to a grove of cedars. Ongakare had dropped Inari, fed-up, and was thinking about silencing him with a jutsu. Matsuri and Menma leapt down from the canopy, weapons poised, and were both swiftly pummeled by a cloth sash that arced up to meet them. They landed in the undergrowth nearby and Ongakare clucked his tongue, drawing his sash-whip back into his sleeve.

“Your calling in life must be to pester me.” The man groaned, “I have bad taste in trainees. Why do I always find whiny, disobedient children?”

“Have you ever thought it’s because we don’t want to join you?” Inari was struggling with the tie around his wrists and ankles, “You’ve gotta learn how to take no for an answer!”

“I can’t afford to. Not anymore.” Ongakare turned his gaze back to Menma, “You are exceptionally disappointing. I thought I could rely on you…my last devoted student. You’ll throw away your heritage for some mock-up shinobi village full of mediocre charlatans…”

“I don’t want any part in your way of life. You helped me survive, but…you have no regard for others. I was taken in not as your family, but as your pawn; that’s what a clan is to you. You have never cared about the harm you inflict!” Menma was bristling, “I would rather stand alongside the friends I made here.”

“Hm. Well…that is the typical language of a bad investment…” Unimpressed, the man made hand signs and then clapped in Inari’s ear; the boy went rigid and then toppled like a wooden plank.

Tense, Menma muttered to Matsuri, “He’s using Sound Ninjutsu.”

Ongakare cut Inari free and then whistled, looking smug when the bewildered boy rose to his feet again. He patted Inari on the shoulder and gloated, “You children seem to think that if you don’t come willingly then you will not be subject to my commands.” He took a step back, aloof, “But you’ll wish you came of your own accord after I’ve made you dance.”

Hollering, Inari warned his friends to avoid him as he charged. His movements had been high-jacked by each whistle and trill Ongakare made, directing him like sheep dog. Matsuri was grateful that Inari only had about three or four kunai on him, which she capably deflected. Inari’s close-combat was virtually harmless, but it did drive a wedge between Matsuri and Menma, who were both concerned about hurting the innocent boy. While dodging and defending, Ongakare’s sash coiled around Matsuri’s leg and tripped her. A blink later, Inari had punched her several times in the face, “Oh gosh! I’m so sorry!” The boy was inconsolable as his mutinous body engaged in terrible violence.

Several melodious notes reverberated from Menma’s ocarina as he flitted from the branches above, hoping that Ongakare would not interrupt his song. Matsuri quickly noticed the effect it had on her, ‘Wow! It’s as if I could-’ She caught Inari’s hand and then hurled him like a Frisbee into a tangle of ferns, ‘Oh! I hope I didn’t hurt him!’ Matsuri hopped up, pulling Ongakare by his sash and mightily flung the man with a cry when she wrenched herself free. Menma landed beside her, continuing the jutsu.
“I feel like…” She tried to put the sensation into words, “Like a bull. A stampeding bull.” He laughed at her description but could not waver. Chakra flaring, muscles alert, Matsuri took off after the lone Sound ninja and summoned from her scroll, procuring a chain-scythe.

While the kunoichi went back and forth with Ongakare, avoiding his sash and slashing sections of it with her weapon, Menma located Inari. The small boy announced his imminent spring but was freed in the nick of time; Menma had countered the jutsu with a few hand seals and clapped for him.

“Thanks,” Inari wheezed while slouched over, “That took a lot out of me…I hope Matsuri’s okay…”

“I’ve got to get back to her. The Rush Melody is going to wear off! Stay here.” Menma pushed his friend down into the cover of greenery, “If you have the chance you need to get away.”

“I can help!”

“He’ll use the same jutsu on you if he gets close enough.” Menma warned, “Return to your grandfather and let us handle this.” He darted away before Inari could protest.

The momentum Matsuri had built up was fading. She and the Sound ninja dueled with their ranged weapons, evading each other, ensnaring their weapons and tugging. They had a tug of war before their respective whips broke apart, snapping against tree trunks. Menma started up his melody again from behind Matsuri, bolstering her.

The girl grinned as she rocketed down, looping her scythe dangerously as she would a Jouhyou’s dart. She hacked through tree branches and then sunk the blade into her enemy’s back. He collapsed and then the substitution broke, revealing a small tree stump. A panicked sound came from behind her and the music abruptly ended.

Matsuri turned to see Menma’s throat snared with Ongakare’s sash. With his free hand, the Sound ninja tossed his second cloth whip at her, knocking her off her feet. She reached desperately for her weapon when she felt the sash wrap around her neck, squeezing tight. She and Menma flailed as they were ruthlessly choked and dragged around the grove. Ongakare took the time to kick Menma while he was defenseless, “You are a first-class idiot. Don’t you understand that even if you wish to be on their side and support their cause you will never be accepted here? You’ll never have a home again!”

Eyes wild, Menma hissed ferociously; his hands prying urgently at the ribbon around his airway. The cloth dissolved and then tore apart. Ongakare fell backwards in surprise and Matsuri watched as the section of sash imprisoning her was also burned through. If she wasn’t crazy, she was sure that she saw a bubble eat through the fabric as if it were acid.

Matsuri staggered to her feet and was relieved to see Menma heaving in the grass, finally able to breathe. A man in a long, blue yukata strolled past, blowing bubbles with a pipe. He regarded her curiously and then asked, “You two are friends of Tazuna’s, right?”

She nodded stupidly, unsure of whom her savior was.

Utakata glanced over to Ongakare, “And you are annoying villagers here…” Before the Sound ninja could begin a witty retort, a huge bubble enveloped him from behind. His screech of shock was muffled within the sphere.

“You know,” The Mist ninja was conversational with Ongakare, “Many scoundrels have tried to take over this land before you…they’ve tried to coerce and intimidate people here. Have you learned nothing from witnessing their failures?”
The clan leader’s screaming intensified. The liquid of the bubble was alkaline, burning the man while he was trapped. Utakata let him writhe in agony for a short time before setting him free. Ongakare howled while he rolled in the dirt, trying to relieve the chemical burn that was devouring his skin.

“There.” Utakata folded his arms, satisfied, “He should hold still for you now.”

Menma, who was on his feet again, exchanged a look with Matsuri. It had to sink in that the stranger intended them to finish what they started. The boy began another tune on his instrument and Matsuri, invigorated, completed the Sound ninja’s beating.

Menma and Matsuri had tied Ongakare up in his own sash and dragged him back into town. They thanked Utakata as he walked ahead of them, incredibly nonchalant.

“Oh, it was nothing.” He shrugged, “All I really did was stand there and talk.”

While that was certainly true Matsuri thought of how the man’s odd jutsu could wreak havoc, ‘It seems to me that there are many shinobi around here with unusual talents.’ Menma’s music, an elderly puppeteer, and now a gloomy bubble-blower; she was feeling very normal in comparison.

After arriving at the main avenue near the Academy they stopped to rest. They were greeted by Sand ninja who had defeated the rest of the Shin clan and were inspecting the well-being of all trainees. Inari had returned to Tazuna’s side and was taking stock of every single displaced brick and shard of broken glass. Even from several blocks away, she could hear the old man’s furious, penny-pinching grievances.

Baki happily took the unconscious clan leader from Matsuri and sent her over to Kankuro. She and Menma observed as he used smelling salts to rouse Chiyo, who had been left on a bench. The old woman’s head snapped up, “Woo! Ha ha! Take that you pigs!” She was waving her arms as if her prized puppets were still at her command.

“Chiyo.” Kankuro snapped his fingers in front of her face, “You’re not fighting anyone!”

“Of course I am, you fool! I’ve just whipped every last one of them!” She cackled.

“You’ve been asleep.”

Chiyo regarded him quizzically for a moment and then looked around at the wreckage and smoke. “I did all of this…while I was asleep?” She stood up and dusted off her tunic, “My word…Ebizo will have my head if he sees this.”

“That’s not what I mean.” Kankuro sighed and gave up after the old woman tottered away. He smiled when he saw Matsuri, battered and bruised as she was, “Hey kid…it’s good to have you back.”

“I’m glad I made it back.” She agreed.

“Did you take the leader down?”

Matsuri indicated Menma with a tilt of her head, “I had help!”

The Jounin’s unyielding stare fell on the blonde boy, “Huh. So you’re definitely with us?”

“I am.” Menma nodded, wondering when he would no longer have to affirm it.
“Well then, you owe Matsuri a lot. She stood up for you since the start.” Kankuro rolled his neck to relax and then froze, bewildered, when other shinobi appeared at the far end of the road, “Oh you have got to be kidding me.”

“What’s the matter, Kankuro-sama?” Matsuri quickly realized what the problem was. Gaara had turned up with Leaf ninja at his side, walking slowly between the devastated store fronts, his face revealing plainly how he did not have money to fix this.

“Rescued the kids. Stopped the Shin clan.” Kankuro shook his head, dismayed, “Gaara’s gonna kill me anyway.”

“Sensei won’t do that! We did what we had to do!”

“We’re gonna go broke paying for this and Temari is gonna rub it in my face…” He trudged to his doom. ‘We didn’t need backup after all…and Matsuri was just fine. I kind of shot myself in the foot by asking Gaara for help and then letting him see this disaster…’ He prayed that if he kissed up to the Kazekage and apologized for his blunder he might escape with minor injuries.

Matsuri kept her distance for the time being, watching as Gaara seemed to reanimate and begin speaking to his brother in the coldest, severest tone she had ever heard. Even the Leaf ninja who had tagged along shrunk away in fright.

“Matsuri…”

She turned back to Menma. He blushed when he told her, “I really do owe you a lot. I owe you everything.”

She was flustered, “D-Don’t be silly!”

“If it hadn’t been for you… I doubt I ever would have had the chance to make this place my home. I couldn’t have escaped the Shin clan on my own.” Menma furrowed his brow, resolute, “Allow me to make it up to you! I want to thank you by taking you out.”

“You…do?” Her voice was faint, “Out where?”

“On a date.”

Matsuri wasn’t sure exactly what she said while sputtering in the affirmative, but she noticed that it made him smile. Afterwards she asked if he wanted to meet her sensei, “That one over there with Kankuro?” He shuddered but with her assurance he consented to it. They passed by Tazuna and Inari who were seated on the edge of a fountain (its spout now crooked) and Tazuna gave them a half-hearted wave of thanks. His grandson sighed.

The old man looked up when a hand was extended to him. It didn’t seem like it was held out to help him up either. Utakata, as casual as before, had stopped in front of him with an expectant expression.

“What?” Tazuna rumbled.

“My voucher.”

“You greedy little snoot!” Tazuna slapped his knee, shouting, “I didn’t even buy it yet!”
The following morning, in one of the Leaf Village’s most heavily abused training grounds, Tenten and Lee had joined their sensei to begin a weaponry drill. Lee had grown proficient with nunchaku thanks to the kunoichi’s weekly lessons, and so Gai had necessitated that they train as a group. This would mark the third practice session that, in Tenten’s opinion, had gone rather well. For about a half hour they went through forms and listened to Gai’s critiques.

To show off, Tenten summoned a three-sectioned staff that was fundamentally similar to nunchaku. She wheeled around with the longer weapon and continued the exercise. Gai stopped what he was doing, intrigued, “Tenten! Why don’t you let me have a go at that?”

Lee looked devastated when his mentor stepped away to try something new. Tenten stood beside him and watched as Gai proved that he was rather gifted with a variety of melee weapons. ‘Wow. He’s a natural.’ It was one of the few, if not the only, real way she connected with her teacher. She just didn’t have it in her to wear the jumpsuit or run hundreds of laps.

“Lee, if you want,” She grinned, “I can teach you three-section staff next! I know you can do it.”

He hugged her tightly around the shoulders, close to weeping.

Gai’s very impressive and unexpected flaunting of Tenten’s weapon stopped when Neji arrived. He was over twenty minutes late but everyone greeted him happily anyway.

“I should have come earlier,” Neji told his team apologetically, “I cannot join you today.”

“Ah, do you have clan duties to attend to?” Gai asked understandingly.

Neji’s expression was miserable, “There has been a death in the Main House.”

Lee dropped his nunchaku after hearing the announcement. After a few brisk steps closed the gap between them, Tenten got a firm grip on Neji’s arm, apprehensive, “Not Hinata-?”

“No. Hinata-sama is fine.” He clarified, “Hiashi-sama requested that I assist him throughout the day with arrangements. Also,” His voice lowered, “I need you to come with me, Tenten.”

She was sincerely perplexed, “Oh. Can I…be helpful…in some way?”

“I’ll explain.” Neji muttered.

“Well, if the two of you have such matters to attend to I have no choice but to cancel training,” Gai regarded Lee, who was distressed, “Never fear, Lee, we can continue if you wish!” He looked back at his gloomy student, “You have my condolences, Neji.”

It was odd how Gai’s words truly did convey just the amount of compassion that Neji needed. Even though he hadn’t disclosed much about what had happened, Gai instantly knew how heavily it weighed on him.

They parted ways and Tenten was confused as to why she was necessary in this event. She pondered if it had been a clan elder, one of Hiashi’s compatriots, or heaven forbid one of the youngsters. It did not surprise her that much that Neji wanted her around. She did have an affinity for calming his nerves and getting his temper back in check. She also had a very well-rounded knowledge of his clan.

The silence between them persisted. Tenten was too afraid to ask for particulars when they crossed into town and then entered the grounds of the Hyuga estate.
The Hyuga clan’s grief was very apparent. Tenten had never seen anything like it. Near the steps of the main building Hiashi had dozens of Branch Members beside him, speaking softly with their heads bowed.

“Over here.” Neji instructed, leading her around the mass of bereaved clansmen.

They took cover beneath a tall tree to the left of the house. It shielded them from the sporadic but large raindrops that swept down in the breeze. The clouds overhead were rolling by on a rushing wind.

With a clear view of the veranda of the house, Tenten could finally see Fujita curled up on the corner of the porch. He was seated with his knees pulled up and his arms folded to hide his face. She understood.

‘Hikune.’ Her stomach sunk. It seemed as if the ground under her feet had disappeared and a vertigo-like feeling made her head spin.

Neji stood to her left, also watching, “He hasn’t been talking. He doesn’t want to accept it.”

Tenten watched silently as Hinata and Hanabi hovered nearby the small boy. They were encouraging him to eat snacks, what looked to be fresh cookies, and Hanabi was eating whatever Fujita turned away from. Hinata sat beside him and hugged him, resting her head on top of his.

Neji had not explicitly said who had died, but he didn’t have to. He now grasped that Tenten was cognizant of his close relatives.

“When?” Tenten asked.

“They were found two days ago. His teammate barely survived.” Neji elaborated solemnly, “The Hokage refuses to explain who attacked them or why. She did not have enough information.”

After her throat had gone dry and tight her ability to speak was gone. A mountain of guilt came crashing down on Tenten, ‘I should have treated Hikune better than I did. If I had known what was going to happen…I would have at least said that I appreciated what he did…’

Hideyasu took a spot beside his son and tucked him under an arm. Fujita pressed his face into the man’s shoulder and shook with soundless sobs. Hideyasu nodded his thanks to Hinata and Hanabi and relieved them of their sympathetic efforts.

“How well did you know him?”

Tenten stared blankly ahead, unable to answer the question.

“I wasn’t performing any clan duties or training during my last absence,” Neji admitted, “I was recovering from injuries.”

She snapped out of her stupor, “What?”

“I’m telling you the truth so that maybe you will do the same. Hikune and I had fought.”

“Why? You two got along!”

“He was angry with me. He spoke about you several times.” Neji met her gaze assertively, “Hikune knew you very well.”

Terrified, Tenten held her breath for a moment and wondered how in the world she ought to go
about explaining herself. He waited for her reply.

“It’s true.” She said simply.

“You were seeing him?”

It was humiliating to recap the events, “No. We became friends after we brought you home and then I trained Fujita.”

“He made it seem as if he knew you as more than a friend.” His voice was smooth but had the faintest edge of accusation in it.

“That’s what he wanted,” She confessed, “But I refused.”

“You should have said something.”

“Maybe I should have.” Tenten agreed.

“If Hikune was bothering you, why not notify me?” Neji asked, insulted, “Did you think that I would be indifferent?”

“I had no idea what you would think.”

His eyes softened slightly, but she could tell that he was still displeased, “Friends like us can often tell what the other is thinking. I’m quite sure you had an idea.”

“I still chose not to. I can’t change that.”

“And I cannot change how he and I subjected each other to violence shortly before his death,” Neji observed, “It was not a fitting way to honor someone I respected.”

She turned to face the opposite direction, hoping that he hadn’t noticed her lip quiver. Tenten had become a master of hiding sadness and she was not about to crack now. The flimsy rainclouds overhead were cleaved apart by a beam of sunshine.

“Tenten.”

‘Don’t look at him. If I look at him I’m going to lose it.’ She took a deep breath, regaining a shred of composure.

“You’ve done nothing wrong.” Neji reminded her.

Like a true fool, she looked over her shoulder, teary-eyed. Her face declared that she disagreed, that she had gone about it all wrong. Though she couldn’t say it aloud, at least he could see that she was despising herself.

Neji was processing. Comforting people was by no means something that he excelled at. She turned away again before he could initiate a pat on the back or anything akin to it. Tenten cleared her throat and then inquired, “Is there…something you want me to do?”

“I think you should attend the funeral.”

“Isn’t it supposed to be private?”

“Hiashi-sama did not object to it when I asked.”
She shook her head, “It won’t feel right.”

“I don’t see why it would.” Neji figured the whole clan would be in turmoil, “It would be appropriate for you to be present.”

“I’m sorry.” It was the only phrase she could utter without blubbering. She left briskly, unwilling to let the iron façade she had proudly sustained to crumble away in front of someone who prized strength.

Neji watched her retreat. Maybe it had not been fair of him to request it, or maybe he had not asked because her attendance was something Hikune would have wished for; but he had wanted her there. Since Tenten could not abide such a thing, perhaps it would be better to let her sulk and continue feeling whatever it was that she had briefly revealed with that single glance. He supposed that now was an ideal time to return all of the courtesies and empathy she had given him during his troubled days.

In the spring sunlight he strode towards the Main House, ‘If I am truly worthy of my friends…then now is the time for me to prove it.’

On a morning like most other mornings, Haku awoke, dressed and then assisted Hiroshi in opening the tea house.

While the portly man heated a tall kettle on a burner and prepared fresh treats, Haku swept the floors before taking the stacked seats apart and setting them up. There was scratching at the door of the shop. Haku unlocked it and allowed his rabbit to hop inside, “Pua! I haven’t seen you in a while. You’ve been travelling a lot.”

The rabbit perched on a stool and then pushed three scrolls onto a table with her nose.

“What a haul!” Haku was thrilled, “Well done!” He took a dandelion top from his pocket and offered it to his hardworking pet. It was not often that he received correspondence from Jiraiya, Gaara and Naruto simultaneously. Haku concluded the opening routine for the storefront and then took a seat, intending to read until a customer stopped by.

Pua re-settled in his lap while he began with Jiraiya’s message.

**Hey Haku,**

*I know that it’s been a while since I wrote to you, but I can chalk that up to being seriously injured for these past several weeks. It’s a legitimate excuse. It was kind of my fault, too. Getting up close and personal with Naruto’s Kyuubi chakra while training is no picnic, and I know that I pushed him too far. I’m lucky to be alive.*

*As I recall what you told me in your last letter, I’m starting to see that you are lucky to be alive as well. You are deep in dangerous territory. Never mind that Zabuza is training you, which ought to have its benefits, but you don’t want to get mixed up in the fighting between Mist Village factions in that area. You’re more likely to stumble across rebels than you are supporters of the Mizukage. You’ll know them when you see them: rebels are kind of like Zabuza. They are dissatisfied, battle-hardened jerks who are fighting to have some stake in a village that can’t seem to get its act together. Oh, and if you are up to any funny business or illegal activity down there I suggest you knock it off. You are not a sword-for-hire and if I see your face on a bounty poster I will put my foot SO far up your ass.*

Haku looked up from the parchment, astounded, ‘This sounds like how he normally threatens
Naruto…’ He felt that he should think twice before accepting another mission from Inagawa, for his posterior’s sake.

Now that I’ve established that, I’ll lighten up. I had an existential crisis when I woke up here on Mount Myoboku. The Toad Sages here have been looking after Naruto and I, and I couldn’t help but reflect on how cruddy of a mentor I’ve been to you all. I was in and out of your lives when you really needed consistency. I wasn’t enthusiastic about being your Sensei when I know I should have been. I am a dirty old man whose books don’t sell and his students always seem to have a life of hardship…

While I may regret many of my past choices, I have never felt more proud than when I think of our team. You, Naruto and Gaara are among the most outstanding, responsible and virtuous shinobi I have ever met…not to mention talented for your age…I take comfort in that. I truly do want you to find your clan, Haku. It’s a tall order. It could take many years or it could happen tomorrow. They may not be quite what you expect them to be either, but when it happens please know that I look forward to hearing all about it.

Keep being there for your friends; do not lose sight of who you are. I can’t forget about my bright, friendly bookworm and I sure hope that when I see you again you’re still the nice farm-boy I saw last. You have a great future ahead of you just as Naruto and Gaara do. Oh, and when you wrap things up I think you ought to visit the Toad Mountain. Your bunny loved it here.

Take care of yourself, Haku.

Jiraiya

By the way, Gaara and I are lying to Tsunade to cover your tracks. You’re welcome. We do it because we love you, now show us some love.

Smiling contentedly, Haku chuckled to himself, ‘His trip seems to have reformed him! Sensei is being awfully affectionate in his letters.’ He quite liked it. It was also heartening to read that Jiraiya fully supported the search for his clan. So long as he stuck to wholesome activities and made honest money, Haku believed he could stay in Jiraiya’s good graces.

He moved on to Gaara’s submission while he stroked Pua’s velvet-soft ears.

Haku,

You and Naruto had very different advice to give me regarding my insecurities as a village leader. For as long as I have known you, I have relied on your understanding and logical approach to things. I never had to tell you much in order for you to see things from my perspective, however cynical I could be. I did as you asked and reached out to Jiraiya about how I felt. It was surprisingly cathartic. I expect to hear back from him soon. And as you suggested, I made short-term goals for myself. I know what I hope for in the future, but I am not in the best position to engineer most of the important projects I have in mind. No, I have not made many new friends in Sand, though you were optimistic about it. It is most likely because I have been too anxious and short-tempered to seem… approachable. Forgive me; I will make a better effort after the Suna Training Program ends. I am cooking frequently. You’d be impressed.

Naruto had already heard about my doubts from Jiraiya. His only counsel for me was this:

He had none.

How dare someone who aspires to be a village leader not have one single suggestion? Surely he’s turned it over in his mind? What he plans to do when he is made Hokage? What impudence. I don’t
even think Naruto tried to put himself in my place, or if he had, he did not quite like what he felt! I am disappointed in him, to say the least.

Haku laughed at Gaara’s tirade. He understood his friend’s irritation, but he could not condemn Naruto’s lack of an answer either. Hiroshi poked his head out of the kitchen in the back, spying Haku’s reading material, “Oh! Is that a good one?”

“It is!”

My mood has not been completely horrible. Yesterday, Sakura arrived in Suna to impart some of her healing expertise to the Medical Corps. I think you would have enjoyed that class. Despite the fact that she worked with students for more than five hours, she was unfailingly pleasant. While she was gone I had to accompany her sensei, but he was abundantly aware of my desire for space. He left us alone that evening. She looks different.

I had not dwelled on it much; how our time apart could give us a shock with respect to our change in appearances. When Sakura arrived I am certain that I stared. Her shape and her voice were almost entirely new. Right away I schemed about a dozen ways that could have given me a moment alone with her. I am glad that I stopped myself. After all, my lack of control has never in the history of my life been safe. Restraint did not help much when I sent a Shadow Clone to retrieve her from the hospital. It tried seducing her.

“How bizarre!” Haku mumbled, fascinated that clones could think and act independently, even in inappropriate situations. He was slightly worried by the fact that Sakura had to deal with such a nuisance.

She quickly destroyed it, Haku sighed in relief, But I could tell that she didn’t mind kissing it first. Haku’s stomach churned. It was weird to think of Sakura, a childhood friend and fellow intellectual, in such a way.

I wanted more. I loved talking to her and being close to her. Everything felt right in the world. Tomorrow she will be returning to the Leaf Village when she finishes her second lesson. I’m half tempted to sabotage it and find other ways to occupy her time. Kakashi won’t appreciate it, but I am the Kazekage. He can fight me if he doesn’t like it.

While it may not be my place to discuss this, you may want to know what Temari has been doing.

His eyes widened thirstily while he read.

She has, and I use this term very loosely, “dated” approximately three men since you parted from us. They were all trash. Well, as a brother, that was my take on them. Thankfully she stopped humoring anyone who called on her after she became a Jounin, and more recently she has become hostile towards males in general. I really approve of this. She stated that “all men infuriate her” and, at least for the time being, she’ll have nothing to do with them. Kankuro and I agreed and were spared her wrath.

I am sure it doesn’t please you to hear that she has had her pick of men here, but maybe that comes as no surprise. Your abandonment is something she grapples with to this day. I care about you on a personal level, but as Temari’s brother and village leader, I have plenty of reason to kill you.

Haku gulped.

I will spare you at Jiraiya and Naruto’s request. I suspect that Temari may even care for you still, but it won’t do to get your hopes up. Like me, she is capriciously violent.
I hope your training and your search continues unhindered. Do not put yourself in needless peril. And be aware...when my training program expires in the Tide Village, however many more months it takes...I will set my sights on you. If the quest for your clan appears to be in vain, I will relocate you to Hidden Sand as you agreed. You ought not waste your time in the Water Country when I have found several jobs here that could use your skills. I would rather send an investigative squad of mine to track your kin than watch you cavort with a nukenin. It's reprehensible.

Outraged, Haku’s mouth hung open in preparation of a retort. It was pointless. He would need to write back some scathing words, because he wasn’t about to take that criticism lying down!

Though I know you’ve stopped trying to contact her, if you wish to get a message to Temari you may send it to me. I have no interest in examining it before forwarding it to her. Now may be a better time to reach her. I should get some rest now. I feel like I will be able to sleep. Stay well and do the right thing.

Gaara

“My goodness…he is brutal even on paper.” Haku huffed, rolling up the scroll and then set it beside Jiraiya’s message.

A customer poked his head into the tea shop, friendly and inquiring, “Hi Haku! Did Hiroshi-san tell you what today’s lunch special was going to be?”

“He did. Pork dumplings in broth.”

“Great! I’ll be back later!” Cheery, the man zipped right back out and the bell on the door chimed after him.

With a deep breath, Haku moved on to Naruto’s letter.

Hi Haku!

I’m doing better since last time. I know that I wrote to you immediately after Ero-sensei got hurt, but I just wanted to tell you that I’m not trying to jump off a cliff anymore. He’s feeling good enough to bitch and moan, so I don’t feel that guilty.

What I should say is that I really miss you. I wish you and Gaara were here. Mount Myoboku is pretty amazing and it’s not too bad having bugs for breakfast, lunch and dinner.

“Naruto-kun, I don’t know if I have the constitution for it…”

When you guys aren’t around it’s like I don’t have a foundation. No backup. No way to get bailed out. I’m sorry that I took that for granted. I feel...sad...a lot more often. It’s so weird. Things feel heavier and more lonesome. And I was scared that if Ero-sensei didn’t make it...what you and Gaara would think of me...

Haku shook his head, ‘We would never blame you, Naruto!’

I’d like to tell you that I’m happier, but that’s not true. Ero-sensei worked up the gall to tell me that he knew my parents! He’s my godparent or guardian or whatever.

“What?” He muttered in disbelief.

So my parents are either from the Hidden Eddy Village or the Hidden Leaf Village or it could be a mix. He’s too damn scared to explain it. They were good friends. I want to kick Ero-sennin in the
When he gets around to telling me the complete truth I will tell you all about it. It’s just…I never really worried about where I came from. A kid who only remembers an orphanage and then living on government assistance can’t really get a straight answer about their parents, even though I think I asked a few times…I stopped caring. I had you and Gaara and I felt fine. I didn’t research it. I didn’t check cemeteries. I didn’t even look for people who resembled me! I had everything I needed. Why is learning about my parents so frightening? I feel like once I know…it’s going to change me. I mean, if you found your clan and then discovered you were supposed to be their cleaning guy or something…wouldn’t you feel upset?

“I guess I would.” Haku agreed.

I just hope that…they didn’t leave me. I hope they loved me.

Haku felt tears well up, ‘Why is everyone so emotional now? Good grief!’

Okay, enough of that. In case you didn’t already know, Hinata is amazing. She and I get back to each other really quick using the Enshinsui. Toads here use it as a portal to the Leaf Village! Her family is annoying her…although she wasn’t very specific about what they did. She said Sato is doing great and that she’s working hard. I can’t wait to see how gorgeous she is when I get home! Also…

He rolled his eyes. Being single was a bit underrated, as it turned out.

Have you had sex?

Haku knocked his knees on the table painfully, blindsided by the question. Pua leapt away from him in surprise.

What I’m trying to say is, I don’t know if you or Gaara would skip over stuff like that when you write to me. Ero-sensei is trying to talk to me about it. I guess I have to listen. I was wondering if you’d done anything and if you’re willing to describe it. Otherwise I’m stuck with this old Perv and his creepy books. I want to know because it’s something I have been thinking about a lot.

Haku had thought it inappropriate to imagine Sakura earlier in Gaara’s tale, but poor Hinata, the object of Naruto’s affection and the untouchable princess of her clan…

Sorry if that was uncalled for. I guess I just thought you’d have more experience than me! I hope you find your clan soon! It’d be awesome if we could both learn about our families. I’ll keep my fingers crossed.

Talk to you soon, Haku!

Naruto

Haku gathered up the scrolls and mulled over what his team had told him, ‘We are all experiencing a great deal of change. I have no idea how Gaara could be hostile towards me while simultaneously wishing me well…and Naruto thought that I might have…’ He shook his head in embarrassment, ‘Does he really think that I’d know something about sex? And if I did, that I’d discuss it?’ Naruto had naïvely thought that because Haku had mingled with girls and had a brief relationship with an older kunoichi that it indicated some kind of experience. ‘Not by any stretch of the imagination…’ He supposed that if he did engage in such activities, he would only choose to do it with someone he cared for deeply. That was a personal preference.
“Haku, will you help me for a moment?” Hiroshi asked. He was at the store window hanging up an advertisement for holiday specials. “Step outside and tell me if it looks even. I always set these up cock-eyed!”

“Of course.” He left his messages on the countertop and then went outside. Hiroshi had managed to hang up his sign properly, but before Haku could return to commend the man’s handiwork he spotted a disconcerting pair down the road.

Raiga was stalking up the sidewalk with Ranmaru a few paces ahead of him. The small boy was happily pointing to shops of interest. They hadn’t noticed him. Haku’s eyes fell on the Thunder and Lightning blades strapped to the nukenin’s back. Haku bolted inside the tea house, bell jingling, and turned in a small circle. Hiroshi gave him a quizzical look, “What? Does it look alright?”

“Your sign is perfect, Hiroshi, but I…” He picked up his rabbit and made for the kitchen, “I need to stay out of sight!”

“What are you talking about, Haku-kun?” Hiroshi was annoyed, “You said you’d help me this morning with customers!”

Haku answered from the backroom, “For your safety and mine, I don’t want to be seen for the time being!”

“This is ridiculous! There’s no danger at all.”

The bell chimed again. Haku pressed himself flat against a storage cabinet and listened anxiously as a small voice greeted Hiroshi. A bead of sweat formed on his temple, ‘Of course I invited Ranmaru to visit Nanakusa before Raiga attacked me…’ At least Zabuza was not a player in this production; today was one of the man’s weekly 24 hours of uninterrupted sleep. That left only one loose cannon to steer clear of.

There was an amicable exchange of words and then a pause before Hiroshi stormed into the kitchen, twitching his mustache, “What are you doing, Haku? You know I need to finish steaming the red bean cakes! I can’t serve a customer right now.”

“Hiroshi, I-”

“Get out there or I’ll-!” He furrowed his brow, “I don’t know what I’m gonna do. But you had better hurry up and see what that child wants!”

Haku put Pua down, sighing. ‘Fine. I’ll help as I promised, but I’m not foolish enough to show my face and have everyone around here electrocuted!’

Haku transformed into the likeness of a young, short-haired girl; apron intact. Hiroshi scratched his bearded chin, still not comprehending, “Why do you need to parade around as a lady? You could do that anyway with a bit of chest padding!”

“I don’t want to be recognized.” Haku whispered, “That ninja and I have met before and he knows what I look like.”

Hiroshi peered from the doorway discreetly, “That teeny little boy is a ninja?”

“Yes; an apprentice to another swordsman.”

Hiroshi considered it, looking back again to see the angelic child flip over a menu and marvel at it.
“Is he friendly?”

“Quite.” Haku conceded.

“Then he’s welcome! Quit acting so weird!” Hiroshi waved his hand, indicating the henge, “And who is this supposed to be? A girl you know or an original creation?”

“It’s not original. This is what Naruto-kun’s girlfriend looks like…”

“She must be a sweet young lady.” The hefty man pushed Haku back into the restaurant, “Now get to work!”

Haku contritely scurried into the dining room and the round man set back to work making snacks.

His impression of Hinata was fairly good, at least he thought so, and he took Ranmaru’s order without fear of Raiga bursting in. Ranmaru disclosed that his friend had dropped him off so he could shop and explore town. The sign in the tea shop’s window got his attention and Ranmaru wanted to know if the sweet bean buns were available. Oh, and the oolong tea too.

Haku fetched the snacks and returned with a pot of hot tea. He set it down on the table, pretending that the white rabbit hopping around the shop was not his.

While pouring a cup of oolong, Ranmaru politely interrupted his small talk, “I know it’s you, Haku. It’s okay.”

Disguised, Haku stared at the small boy and elected to give up the ruse. He ditched his transformation and then folded his arms, “Ranmaru…you should know better than to come here after seeing how Raiga and Zabuza interact.”

“I was going to be careful.” He looked a bit sad, “Well…you were being careful too. You transformed!”

“It would only stop Raiga from finding me. You’re lucky that Zabuza isn’t around.”

“Raiga doesn’t know! I didn’t say anything.” Ranmaru chomped on one of the buns, “Mmm. Besides…I can see people coming from far away and make illusions. We don’t really have to worry.” He washed it down with tea, “Ah! I just want to make a new friend.”

Quizzical, Haku took a seat across from him, “What do you mean by you can see people coming?”

“My Kekkei Genkai.”

“It’s a doujutsu?” Haku was astonished.

“I think so,” Ranmaru shrugged uncertainly, “But I don’t know what it’s called. I’m the only one who has it.”

That quickly ruled out the Sharingan and the Byakugan in Haku’s mind. He relaxed a fraction and Ranmaru asked if he wanted a red bean bun. He declined politely and ruminated on the situation.

“I want to visit this place a lot. It’s nice here and I like the food!” Ranmaru explained, “You’ll let me if I don’t let Raiga cause trouble, right?”

“You would have to keep a low profile. If Zabuza notices either of you around here I don’t think I would be able to stop him.” Haku added, “It would be irresponsible of us to risk the safety of townspeople if those two started fighting again…”
“We can keep them distracted.”

“Zabuza catches onto things quickly.”

“I’ll keep Raiga away. Your teacher won’t get mad if it’s just me visiting, will he?”

“That is a very good question.” Haku folded his arms, thinking, “I suppose he isn’t actually threatened by you…”

“Good!”

Hiroshi had emerged from the back and stopped at the table, glad that Haku was no longer masquerading as a girl, “So you aren’t a troublemaker, little shinobi?” He laughed when Ranmaru ruefully shook his head, “That’s fine! You’re welcome here. I’m Hiroshi, Haku’s friend.”

“Ranmaru.”

“Pleased to meet you.” The shop owner looked to Haku, “Now tell me…is he going to be a regular?”

Haku was inclined to say yes. If Ranmaru intended to frequent Nanakusa, then some conspiring and caution ought to keep their ruffian companions from crossing paths.

In a private chamber in the basement of the administrative building, Tsunade was reclined on cushions and reading by candlelight. She had needed to knock back some wine to get through the grisly details in the files she looked over.

She had been winding down from her inter-village endeavor with Hidden Star and then calamity had struck close to home. What had initially been a senseless slaying of one of her Jounin was appearing more and more to be a deliberate act. The notes from recent ANBU investigations, along with older documents that her sensei had handled years ago, had painted a coherent picture of what treachery was afoot.

The Chunin, Mion, had identified his assailant as a rogue Iwa shinobi: Shimofuri Koinyu. He was connected with a notorious war criminal from Rock by the name of Dintei Bihokokuni, a man who Jiraiya had given her ample warning about. From what she could decipher from dusty files and reconnaissance reports, Bi had been a bastard child of the renowned Sasagainu clan in Iwagakure. When his persistence to ascend in leadership and inherit clan treasures were rebuked time and again, he had taken several decades to eradicate any who opposed him, most especially descendants of the main line. The clan proper was virtually extinct.

He had been branded as a traitor by both Rock and Leaf, one of the rare bits of common ground they shared after a bloody war. Tsunade had no difficulty digesting all of this information, prying open a sealed file from Leaf archives regarding refugees from the decimated clan. They had not been any safer in Konoha than they had been in their homeland.

[Sasagainu] Withhold surname, Takaharu

[Sasagainu] Withhold surname, Chinatsu

Tsunade looked over their stats, birth dates, personal information and rank, noticing that they had been particularly accomplished ANBU under Hiruzen’s command. She did not know them well, but she had heard about their acts of good will throughout the village. Three other members of their clan, excluding their parents who had died of old age, had also been killed. She glanced over the cause of
After responding to a distress message near the border of the Fire Country, Squadron 1, i.e. Team Hikki, was ambushed, resulting in three causalities and two shinobi hostages. Three days after the attack a response team discovered two decapitated bodies, that of the captain and the second-in-command, heads removed from the scene. This method of killing is consistent with other deaths perpetrated by Dintei Bihokokuni and his following.

Her eye twitched when she read a note scrawled beneath, added in by the Third:

A tip off was provided to me by the Root ANBU who had surveyed that area a week prior. I had been told a missing team could have been taking shelter in this expansive region, but it was misinformation. I sincerely hope Root was not involved with this incident. Shimura Danzo denies this, but I fear I made a grave mistake of assigning this mission to Team Hikki.

She flipped the report over to its final page, her thoughts racing with the possibility that Root had participated in the tragedy. ‘Not that I’ve much cared for Danzo and his sniveling…or how he was always a thorn in Sensei’s side…’ She bit her lip, ‘He may have been getting away with murder…and the Third had no real way to prove his guilt.’

[Sasagainu] Withhold surname, Tenten

There were no vital statistics aside from personal information and birth date. The photo provided showed the girl at a young age, still attending the Academy. It was noted that after the ambush the Hokage had provided the aspiring kunoichi with a government stipend to support herself; a week later she had graduated and become a Genin.

Tsunade shut the file, exhaling, and then tipped back the last of the sake in her glass. ‘If Sensei couldn’t prove Root was involved…how the hell can I? This is a cold case.’ She lowered her eyes to a report on Hikune’s death, ‘And just how was that young man involved so that he could become a target? This doesn’t add up.’

She would like to believe that the only person in danger would be a Sasagainu descendant, but that was evidently not the case. Other shinobi were at risk. Mion had told her while still confined to a hospital bed that Hikune had pretended to be Hyuga Neji in order to extract information from Koinyu.

“Why do such a thing?” The Hokage asked, her nails rapping on the railing of the bed.

“Because…that man was looking for the members of Team Gai. He said he wanted Tenten.” Mion expounded, “Hikune would never let anyone hurt her.”

Names had been named. The culprit had all but vanished, and was undoubtedly ready to pounce on any target that ventured beyond the walls of the village. With this in mind, Tsunade was contending with the tough decisions she had to make in order to prevent new attacks.

The Hokage stacked the reports on a small lamp table and acknowledged the Black Ops shinobi who had arrived and kneeled respectfully.

“Were the files insightful, ma’am?”

“Thank you for organizing them. I’ve seen enough.” She rose to her feet, “As soon as Tenzo returns, send him to me.” The hard look on her face added, Now move it.

The ANBU agent nodded and then promptly exited the chamber.
Tsunade climbed the stairs of the building and felt energy seep out of her as she tried to imagine how she was going to tackle this problem. She needed more scouting teams. She needed to have a word with Jiraiya.

‘And with Gaara borrowing Kakashi and Sakura to assist in the Land of Waves,’ She sighed at the thought, ‘Most of my go-to cronies are tied up for now. I can only hope their issues are resolved, otherwise I’m probably going to get a request to help the Tide Village.’ She frowned, ‘I really, really don’t want to. Gaara needs to deal with it. I’m not going to hold his hand for everything!’

Luckily, there was at least one assistant remaining who could shoulder some of the stress.

Shizune held the door of the office for her, smiling slightly, “You were gone for so long. I put on some tea for you, Tsunade-sama.” Tsunade nodded her thanks, “I can tell you already have a headache.”

“Shizune,” The Hokage fell into her desk chair, “You are a saint.”

As if to drive the point home, Shizune moved to the desk and picked up a packet of forms before Tsunade could touch it, “Don’t worry about these! I’ll fill them out. They don’t require your signature.”

“Oh. Thank you…what were they for again?”

“I said don’t worry about it,” Shizune snapped her fingers so Ton-Ton would follow her, “I’ll bring you the tea in a few minutes. Just do what you need to do, Tsunade-sama.” She was out the door.

‘Hm. She’s probably looking for a pay raise.’ Tsunade thought, ‘And she’ll get it.’

She wrote another long and beseeching message to Jiraiya, hoping that he would not be gone too much longer. More than ever she needed a reliable teammate and friend, and it didn’t hurt that he had a thorough knowledge of her new enemy. A short time later Shizune returned with her tea and poured it, preparing to go back out.

“Shizune, come back as soon as you’re finished with that paperwork.” Tsunade instructed, “My next appointment is going to be awful…”

“Of course.” She shut the door behind her.

Tsunade sat in silence and sipped her tea. She stole a peek at the clock on the wall and noted that she had less than ten minutes of solitude remaining. The woman had enjoyed two cups before her tranquility was disturbed by a knock at the door. She called for the team to come in.

Gai entered merrily and was followed by Lee and Neji, who had been at the tail-end of a conversation. She cleared her throat to signal she wanted everyone’s undivided attention.

“Hokage-sama, is this perhaps an update on the mission you assigned to us for tomorrow morning?” Gai was curious, “I had heard you are sending many teams out for reconnaissance. Would you prefer us to do that?”

“No, you’re best suited for the mission I gave you. I need to go over a few things with your team.”

“Ah, then we need a few minutes. Tenten is running late!” Gai was a tad disapproving.

Tsunade rested her gaze on Neji, “I have not yet given you my sympathy, Neji. I’m sorry for your loss.”
He thanked her quietly.

She continued, “One thing I should make clear now is that, because of an ongoing investigation, from here on out your team can only be assigned missions that are executed within the borders of the Fire Country.”

“Investigation?” Neji was guarded, “Does it concern what happened to Hikune?”

“It concerns several parties, including but not limited to his death,” Tsunade confirmed, “You and Lee, no matter whose team I allocate you to, I expect you to abide by this stipulation until further notice,” When they nodded in acceptance she added to Gai, “You are the exception, Gai. I will keep you on regular activity.”

“Yes, ma’am!”

“Now to the next order of business…” She took a deep breath, “Tenten is not late.”

The men stared dumbly and so Tsunade pressed on, “She is following an order. I apologize for not giving you advanced warning,” She seemed most apologetic on Gai’s behalf, for he was just as mystified as his students, “For security purposes, I have officially unassigned Tenten from your team and Maito Gai’s mentorship.”

The news crashed over Gai and his facial features turned upwards, contorting in absolute despondency.

“None of you may contact her in any fashion until I permit it. What I am investigating is a serious, classified crime that implicates Tenten’s welfare, as well as the safety of all of my villagers.”

Neji was quick to ask, “How long will she be gone?”

“Indefinitely.”

His eyes flashed furiously, having suspected such a response, and he thought back to how he had spoken to Tenten the day before. She had stood at the back of the funeral. He thanked her. They later trained and things seemed to be back to normal. Neji could only assume that she had been given short notice as well.

“I will comply with your regulations for our mission assignments and limitations,” Neji stated, “But I refuse to observe a no-contact order. It serves no purpose.”

“It isn’t optional.” Tsunade bristled, “No one is going to jeopardize my investigation.”

“Tenten is not at fault.”

“This has nothing to do with what she did; it has to do with an unpredictable, outside issue.”

Gai and Lee stood, stunned into silence, and watched as Neji insolently and verbally unhinged on the village leader.

“What kind of outside issue produces a gag order on a team? It’s illogical. Clearly not a single one of us knows what you’re talking about, albeit we’d be inclined to obey if we had at least an ounce of information,” At some point he inhaled between the words, “We are entitled to know if your investigation involves any of our personal safety. Surely you’re aware of the disclosure laws in your own village? It seems to me that you don’t. Such a thing reflects your competency. If you-”
Tsunade stood and brought her fist down on the corner of her desk, hacking it off with super-strength. Her odious glare halted him and she roared, “Shut that arrogant mouth of yours and do as I say. I am the Hokage!” With a wave of her arm, she flipped the desk over and hurled it into a wall. The scroll intended for Jiraiya was mercifully plopped to the floor, “I can kill you a thousand different ways right now if I wanted some peace and quiet, which I rightfully deserve! I’d rather spare myself your objections! Is it too much to ask for a proper: yes ma’am?”

Gai and Lee flinched behind Neji. The young man was still outraged, but had shut his mouth as she had demanded.

They engaged in a stare-off and were equally matched competitors. There was no mistaking their mutual abhorrence. After several tense minutes Tsunade’s shoulders relaxed and she cocked her head, hand on her hip, and regarded Neji like she would an adversary, “I will humor your whining, but this is not negotiable. You are all completing your mission tomorrow as scheduled.”

Her icy gaze went to Gai and Lee, “Are you two going to give me grief as well? You’re lucky I didn’t reassign all of you!”

Sad and very scared, they accepted her orders. Neji was still seething.

“I expect more of you,” Tsunade told him, “I don’t care if you hate me. I don’t care that you don’t understand any of this…or that you think I am an incompetent leader. You are one of my shinobi and you take orders from me, no matter what they are.”

His silence was the only appropriate reply. Neji would have called her many ugly things if he had spoken again.

“Dismissed.” She said severely.

Team Gai turned around and ventured out the office door while Tsunade watched them. She had not wanted to make it any harder for them than she had to, but Neji’s rebellion had been totally unexpected. If Tenten was a sore spot of his; fine, she understood, ‘But shut up and don’t talk back to me!’ She stared at the open doorway for a few moments, clearing her head, and then stomped over to the wreckage of her desk.

With a powerful arm, she set it upright and returned it to its original position. She fetched her list of daily appointments and Jiraiya’s message. Tsunade then sat down and ignored the debris and papers that were scattered about the room. The teapot had shattered.

She looked at the appointment list, ‘Hmm…I need to drop by the hospital at 2:00 to check on Nichiyo.’ He had received a donation of Kiba’s bone marrow and was on the mend, but she wanted to make sure of it. Tsunade scanned down the schedule and blinked when Kotetsu and Izumo announced their entry. The best friends stepped gingerly over the papers and other paraphernalia on the floor.

“Oh good! Will you two please pick this up?” Tsunade asked pleasantly, “I almost killed someone.”

“Sure…Hokage-sama.” They dubiously walked around the room and retrieved her items. While they worked she reminded them that they would be on lookout duty at the village gates that evening.

She enjoyed her downtime and thanked Shizune when she returned will a stack of finished forms. Her former apprentice took a look at the crater in the wall, frowning worriedly, “Tsunade-sama…was that the awful appointment?”
“It was, but I got it over with.”

After everyone cleared out of the office again and it was restored to order (mostly), she leaned back and groaned. Was it better to let Team Gai roam free and loose-lipped while a hunter lurked, or was she right to hush them up and hide them until she caught the perpetrator? ‘Both options are unattractive…but I had to make a choice. I don’t have everything under control just yet.’ Maybe her sensei or Jiraiya would have done the same.

She daydreamed for a while and began to feel better. A shinobi entered the office without knocking. Tsunade sat up straight and held her chin in her hand, “You’re fast. I sent for you not too long ago.”

The ANBU agent was wearing a colorful cat mask, “How can I be of service, Hokage-sama?”

“I had originally thought that I would assign you to some light overseeing. I just separated a team and I knew that they would dislike it…but one member in particular was belligerent.” She pointed to the damaged wall, “I don’t think Hyuga Neji is going to follow my orders. I will not have anyone interfere with the inquiry I am conducting, and so I would like you specifically watch him.”

Tsunade pushed a folder forward on her desk.

The Black Ops shinobi picked up the file and thumbed through it to get an idea.

“Tenzo, I need you to keep him away from the kunoichi of Team Gai. I included her photo for reference.” She folded her hands, “The criminal I am dealing with can capitalize on her being near any of her team members. Until I have a grip on this situation, I would like you to keep vigil and report back to me.”

“Understood.” He nodded, holding up the folder, “Shall I keep this?”

“Yes.”

“Hokage-sama…”

She acknowledged him by pursing her lips impatiently.

“The damage to your office…this young man didn’t cause it, did he? Otherwise you ought to take different steps to deal with erratic behavior.”

“No…actually…I did that,” She wasn’t proud of her reaction, “He had a few choice words for me…and I chose to break an inanimate object instead of his neck.”

“My! What a confrontational Genin!” Tenzo chuckled.

“You won’t be laughing when you have to deal with him,” She warned, “He’ll give you shit too.”
Youth Ignited

Chapter Soundtrack: "Best Friend" by Foster the People

"Wait, hold on a second…” Obito reordered Yuma's knuckles in the proper position, "There. That's a perfect Horse seal now."

The boy studied his hands, the Sharingan flashing in his eyes, and then committed it to memory.

"So then what's next? Do you remember?"

"The last one is Tiger!" Yuma grinned. He had no problem with the final seal required for their clan's staple jutsu.

The man proudly nudged his son's cheek, "Great job! We're just about ready to use chakra and start practicing!"

"Yeah!" Yuma jumped like a happy lamb. He settled down and then turned his head in all directions, assessing the budding, mountainside forest, "Dad…why did we come all the way out here?"

"Well…remember when I gave you the first demonstration, a few days ago?" Obito reminded him and the boy nodded affirmatively, "Your mother was watching. She said she didn't want any fireballs near the house…and she's right. We don't want any accidents." He gestured to the lily pond, "When I think back to how I was taught, long ago, the Uchiha clan always trains children near a lake at first. That way you won't set anything on fire…"

"I won't do that, Dad."

He laughed at the declaration, "You probably will, even if you don't mean it."

"I'm going to practice 'til I get it right!"

"I know, Yuma, and once you have the hang of it then you can go where you please."

Yuma puffed in reluctant agreement. His mother always sent him out into the woods when she didn't trust him to not to destroy things. Kunai and shuriken…Inuzuka-style Taijutsu…and now Fire Jutsu; he was banished to the mountainside whenever there was a possibility of shattering glass or wrecking the porch. Rin never chanced it. *Six-year-olds, you know? They explode.*

"Okay then! Now you've got the hand seals to use the Fireball Jutsu. We're going to work on molding your chakra properly next," Obito pointed to his abdomen, "In here you've got that furnace we talked about."

The boy poked his own stomach, "Yup."

"I know that you've been using a bit of your chakra already…but you don't want to overdo it with this technique. You don't need all that much. You'll feel a twinge, or something like it, when you've used enough. Measuring chakra is mostly about intuition, but I bet you'll know it once you do it. So…” Obito traced a path lightly from Yuma's solar plexus, up his stomach and throat, then to the mouth, "While your hand seals direct the jutsu, chakra that you build up will funnel this way through your pathways. It's gonna be a little weird the first time since you haven't done this before."

"It won't hurt." Yuma supposed.
"No, your chakra won't hurt you." Obito's brow furrowed, "But breathing fire might. That's what you need to be careful about."

The child moved through six seals quickly, imagining the next step. His face belied some anxiety. Frowning, Yuma folded his arms, "I want to see you do it again, Dad. You know...before I use my chakra."

"Sure." Obito stepped over to the pond and stood on the water's surface, "Watch carefully! I'll try to do it slowly."

"Okay!"

There was no need to move through the sealing slowly; Yuma had grasped that aspect of the lesson. But Obito lingered on the inhale and viewed his son from the corner of his eye; filling his lungs, holding the Tiger Seal, carefully stringing chakra along... The boy was watching studiously and breaking it down in his head. When there was no point in delaying the exhale any longer, Obito breathed out, guiding the flame with a cupped hand beside his lips. The sphere of flame smoldered over the pond and singed cattails at the water's edge. He stopped and turned to Yuma who was tapping his foot.

"How was that?"

"You did it so slow..."

"You don't have to do it that slowly. Use the pace that feels best."

"Okay." Yuma stood beside his father who had returned to the grass, "Maybe...could you do it again? I'll try it...at the same time."

"Together?"

"Yeah."

Obito was amused that he had butterflies in his stomach while watching the boy's first attempt at Ninjutsu. He moved through seals again, noticing Yuma had performed them just as quickly, then inhaled, 'He's looking good!' And Obito breathed out a healthy fireball while his son sputtered a rather sad one, which was evidently a mixture of apprehension and inexperience.

"Ow!" Yuma had ceased the jutsu and hissed, shaking his hands, "I think I got a little-!"

"Let me see." Obito kneeled down and held the child still, inspecting the minor burns and heat-wear to Yuma's shirt, "This is okay. It can be worse! Do you want to try again?"

He nodded. Without waiting for his father's guidance, Yuma made his second, more confident attempt. 'Huh, he's using more chakra...he's pretty close!' Obito thought as the child's fireball was substantially larger but spewing stray embers. Yuma stopped with another screech of pain.

"Ooh, ouch..." Obito could see there was a glossy patch of skin on the boy's chin and hands, "Do you want to call it a day? I'll get you fixed up."

"Wait!" He caught his breath, "Show me how you do that..." Yuma gestured with his hands towards his mouth, determined, "After the Tiger seal! I saw you made the fire skinnier, or something! Can you show me again?"

"Skinnier?"
Yuma cupped his hand next to his mouth, raising his eyebrows as if to say, *This! Do you remember when you did this?*

"Oh! Okay, yes, if you can't get the hang of it simply by breathing it out," Obito mimicked the hand gesture, "You'll see shinobi narrow a breath of fire with their hands like this. It's a subconscious thing that happens with Ninjutsu."

"That means…you don't know you're doing it?"

"Right. It's called channeling. I think teachers often forget to mention it." Obito explained, "Let me show you again."

And again, after the final seal, Obito made sure to emphasize that he could direct the flame further away from his face with the simple motion. The spout was narrow for a few feet past his lips and then ballooned over the water into a sphere of fire. Yuma pointed and nodded, "Yeah, that's what I meant!"

Obito stopped and chuckled, "Give it a try. It's pretty easy. You're just taking more careful aim at your target with that kind of channeling…but you can still do it if you hold a hand seal too."

"Well it was burning my face that way…"

"You'll figure it out."

"I'm going over here, Dad!" Yuma ran around the circumference of the pond to its opposite end, "I'll try it again and you watch, okay?"

"You got it."

It was like reliving a moment of his childhood. Obito watched as the boy moved through the seals, channeled and exhaled, producing a better-than-average fireball that did not sear him. What was a rite of passage to bear the clan crest of the Uchiha, in Obito's day, was now just another technique Yuma had learned for survival training. *He picked it up faster than I did. They'd make a big deal of him! Though...no one really congratulated me when I did...* Obito thought, *Well, I also didn't have my Sharingan at the time. Yuma isn't as mediocre as his Old Man.*

Yuma generated another fireball, no longer fearful of being burned. It glowed with the same childish exuberance the little boy did. Obito waved him over and Yuma scampered back to him while laughing triumphantly.

"Dad! I can do it!"

"I know!"

"So is this," Yuma indicated the channeling hand motion, "Something we only use with Fire Jutsu?"

"Hm. Well no...channeling goes with all parts of Ninjutsu. Like I said, most ninja don't realize they're doing it," He stood back and made hand seals for an Earth Jutsu. Obito laid his hands on the ground and overturned a linear portion of rock and soil. *See? Earth Release is another common example. Sometimes it's just easier to perform jutsu this way, but there are some people who can focus so well that they flat-out direct it with a thought!"

"Can you, Dad?"

He smiled proudly, "Sure I can."
"Show me!"

"Fine, but please understand that this is more difficult. Don't you dare try this kind of thing yet," Obito made seals for a fireball but bent at the knees, freeing his hands as if they had something better to do, and roared a jet of flame over the pond with a gaping mouth. He actually had to try a little, 'Or I might burn the hair off my head doing this kind of shit…' Vapor rose wearily from the water while Yuma clapped in amazement.

"Seriously…don't do that." Obito warned him again, "That's something only a seasoned ninja should try and they can still mess it up!"

"I got it."

"Good! Now come here," He scooped Yuma up and settled him on a bed of moss a few paces away, "Let me take a look at you…"

"I feel okay! I want to keep practicing…"

"We'll practice more tomorrow. I just wanted you to get your toes wet today." Obito gently shot the idea down, "Though I was impressed by what you did, Yuma."

"Thanks, Daddy."

Much like how his child was learning a new jutsu, Obito had been taught an important technique by Rin. After a discussion about accidents, emergencies and how to handle them on their own, Rin proposed, "Why don't I teach you the Palm Healing Jutsu?"

"I don't know if I have a knack for it…"

"You're chakra control is…" She refrained from laughing, "So much better than it was when we were kids. You've got a better chance now."

"Thanks."

"So do you want to try it?"

And he did. Or at least, he was still trying. Obito had a full day of explanations and lessons from his wife, who was a very good teacher (he told her). The days that followed were filled with little tests and exercises. Rin made him practice all the time on small, meaningless things: paper cuts, puncture wounds, bruises and such. She told him that he ought not to tackle a broken bone or any severe injury without her supervision, Because it is possible to screw up, she warned him. The precision and care he needed to take with his chakra was utterly unlike breathing fire and destroying things with powerful Ninjutsu. But he was getting the hang of it.

"Hold still, Yuma," He wrapped an arm around his son and pressed his hand to Yuma's chin, erasing a sting-pink burn. Faint green, glowing chakra wiped away the marks on the boy's skin as Obito passed his hand over them, and Yuma sighed in relief while hugging his father.

"I'm glad you can do what Mama can do."

"Me too." Obito took a seat and just held him, enjoying how Yuma was neatly tucked under his chin, "She's much better at it than me…but it's good for when I stub my toe, I guess; or when you knock me over during Taijutsu practice."

The boy giggled wildly.
"You've gotta be gentle with your Old Man. I'm getting frailer every year."

Yuma shook his head, "No way. I can't go easy on you!"

"Really? Not even when I ask nicely?"

"You're the strongest ninja there is, Dad. I want to be better than you!"

"Oh, I see," Obito nodded in understanding, "Then that's okay. Don't get mad if I win, though. I've got my precious reputation to defend."

"Ha! Mama can beat you too!"

He grinned, "In more ways than one, she can."

"Two versus one!"

"You guys would beat me to a pulp. That's no fair."

"Fair."

They cuddled and mused beneath the golden trees.

"You're much more talented than I was at your age," Obito observed, "The Uchiha clan will welcome you."

"They'll like me?"

"Without a doubt."

"Will I get to see my grandma and grandpa, just like Fumitake does?"

"Well…" Obito sighed, "Your grandma and grandpa have been dead since I was a little boy. You can meet your aunties, though. They're my big sisters. There are many people in the clan who will want to meet you."

"Oh!"

"And the leader of the clan too, Fugaku-sama."

"Hmm."

"You'll definitely get to meet everyone from Mama's family. Gosh…there's going to be a lot of people who will want to see you."

"When can we go? Can we go soon?" Yuma's eyes were pleading, "I don't want to be lonely anymore. No one around here really likes me."

"Hey! There are plenty of people who think you are super cool!"

"But…kids my age…"

Obito stared out into the sea of straight tree trunks ahead of him, deep in thought, "I don't know exactly when…but we'll get there. I promise you that we will. Your mother and I don't want to coop you up here forever, so don't worry."

A soft sigh, "Okay…"
They lounged until Obito heard the distinct gurgle of Yuma's empty stomach, 'Oh. It's lunch time.' And they marched home along the forest path.

"Dad! Which jutsu can I learn next?"

"You just tried out the Fireball Jutsu. We can think about that after you've mastered it."

"Oh, come on…"

Obito smiled slightly, "You're being pushy. There isn't much you need to learn right now. If anything, your mom and I might teach you Supplementary Jutsu. Remember that we said we only teach you things that can keep you safe?"

"So no more fire jutsu?"

"When you're older, sure. And not a moment before you've gotten all the Supplementary techniques down."

"I bet Mama will teach me!"

"She will," Obito winked at him, "When you're older."

"Bah."

He lifted the boy up by his arm pits and helped Yuma avoid the coiling vines of a thorn bush. Obito set him back down and watched him cross a log carefully, 'He's at about the age when he could take the entry exam for the Academy. Yuma would be accepted in a heartbeat.' It was another fleeting daydream of his, 'I just don't know how I'm going to go about it. Rin promised she would take Yuma to Konoha if something ever happened to me...but otherwise she won't entertain the idea.'

Obito often wondered if her reluctance stemmed from not wanting to face her family, 'Or Kakashi...' He had vowed that he would stand by her side and make the process easier; after all, he was due for a lot more harassment than she was. No. Rin hated the idea. She insisted that there was no way their peaceful life could continue in the Leaf Village, 'Everything will be ripped apart all over again. Even if we did our best to rebuild there, people won't understand.'

He worried a little bit that she could be right.

'Maybe I can ask Jiraiya-sama for advice. He suggested that we go back anyway...' Obito frowned anxiously, 'Though I haven't heard from him in a long time. I hope he's alright...I may need to track him down to make sure he's still in one piece.'

The forest thinned out as they approached the house. Beyond the line of trees that stopped at their front yard, Obito could make out a shape lying down in the grass. A bit closer still he could see that it was Rin, asleep on her back with her hands folded on her stomach. Sesshu was slumbering beside her.

Yuma turned to his father and gave the "shhh!" signal before sneaking over to his napping mother. He stopped and crouched beside her, trying to hold back his giggles.

Rin stirred, keeping her eyes shut, "You're laughing."

The boy hovered over her face, "Mama! Only babies take naps."

"Oh?" She opened her eyes, smirking, "Well you should tell your father that."
"Hey!" Obito had settled on Rin's opposite side, "If that's true then that makes the two of us babies."

She smiled at Obito, sat up, and then began to look Yuma over. Rin had been expecting a burn or two after the first day of practice but he appeared to be unscathed. She plucked at his crispy t-shirt that had a few holes in it, probably caused by the heat, "You'll need to change, mister. Go put a new shirt on and then have some blueberries. I put them on the table for you."

"Okay Mama." He pressed a wet kiss to her cheek and then took off again, leaping over Sesshu.

"Hmm." Rin's chuckle resonated in her chest, "I thought maybe the Fireball Jutsu would have left that boy worse for the wear," Her chestnut eyes met her husband's, "But he was in capable hands. You did a good job healing Yuma."

Obito sighed quietly, leaning back on his hands, "Thanks for the compliment. I'm not nearly as good as you though, Rin."

"Oh. Then would you like some extra training?" She had turned towards him on the grass, wearing that puckish smile of hers. Obito could tell that she was not referring to medical techniques.

Intrigued, he bent down over her, "You've got something to show me?"

"I do."

"Can you show me out here?"

"Maybe." Rin pulled him gently by collar of his shirt and pressed her lips to his. A warm rush rolled down his neck and back and Obito pressed against her, tracing down her tunic with fingertips that were curious about the skin beneath.

The harsh breaths of their kissing disturbed Sesshu and the dog flattened his ears. With a short growl, he rose and then stalked off, seeking his favorite rug back inside the house. After tousling briefly, Obito lifted his wife up and proceeded across the yard, deciding it was time to bring things inside after all.

Rin, who was compliant with this unspoken decision, smiled to herself while she kept her arms properly looped around Obito's neck as he transported her. They passed Sesshu at the entryway who muttered in annoyance at the sight of them.

Yuma was seated in cross-legged fashion at the kitchen table with a green t-shirt on. He looked at his parents curiously while he scooped blueberries into his mouth by the handful. 'Sometimes Dad just picks up Mama like that and takes her everywhere. He won't put her down.' And of course, Obito did not set Rin down again. He liked her where he had her.

"I'm glad you changed," Rin addressed her son, "Yuma, would you mind giving me and your father an hour alone? Sesshu will take you into town."

The dog protested weakly in the background.

"Well...okay." He chomped one last handful of fruit before hopping to his feet. As an afterthought he asked, "Hey Mama, what do you and Dad do while I'm gone?"

Rin opened her mouth to answer, stopped herself when she thought better of it, and then burst into a fit of wild laughter. Yuma stared with wide eyes, not comprehending. Obito shook his head at Rin's hilarity.
"Just husband-wife things." Obito assured him, "Totally normal."

Yuma nodded. That was the answer. If anyone ever asked him, that was the explanation he could use. He was not a child who desired details; at least not yet.

Rin composed herself for a moment, "That's right. Have a good time in town, sweetie."

The boy grinned at her before darting through the living area and shouting for the ninkeen to wake up, "Race me into town Sesshu!" The golden dog sluggishly complied.

"He had…blueberry bits in his teeth." Rin lamented, "Oh…I don't want him walking around looking like that! I should have told him to brush first…"

"He's a kid." Obito reminded her, progressing down the hallway, "Kids are messy."

"Yeah."

A few minutes after sunrise beside the Toad Oil Pool, Naruto was seated on the top step, drifting harmoniously with nature and the energy all around him…

"You moved."

Naruto held still, keeping his eyes shut.

"You definitely moved."

"No."

"Well now you did, because you spoke." Gamakichi teased him from where he lounged a few feet away on a large mushroom top.

The young man's head snapped towards the antagonizing toad, eyes fiery and nostrils flaring, "Gamakichi, I told you before to stop talking. Seriously."

"Jeez! I just want to hang out with my best human friend."

"I am here to work on tranquility. Pa asked me to relax and try meditating without oil," Naruto added pointedly, "OR distractions. We can hang out later."

Gamakichi propped his head up with a webbed hand, "Fine."

He did not wish to leave, but it was best not to pester Naruto any further. Fukasaku had explained to many of the toad residents in the valley that they were not allowed to hinder Naruto's training. It was hard enough without interference, but due to Naruto being very friend-minded and attentive, he was sure to be distracted by any type of companionship. It had to be cold-turkey, silent work.

By calling upon some inner-strength, Gamakichi managed not to disturb Naruto for a full hour. The sun gradually crept upwards over the valley. Naruto had not moved a muscle all the while. The toad found his concentration truly remarkable.

"Naruto!"

Gamakichi glared across the clearing at the offending newcomer, Kosuke, who was shouting as he
hopped towards the pool.

"Keep it down! He's trying to meditate, you twerp!" Gamakichi hissed.

"I'm sorry," Kosuke stopped on the steps, distraught, "I know Pa said we shouldn't hold up Sage Training but, but…"

Naruto had snapped out of his trance and addressed his small friend, "What's the matter?"

"I was in the Leaf Village the other day, checking out the comic book shop and all that…then Hinata-sama came looking for me. I don't know how she found me so fast…"

Naruto suspected she had used the Byakugan to find the toad.

"She was upset! I couldn't tell why but I promised that I would get her letter to you," Kosuke offered up a scroll apologetically, "I'm sorry, Naruto. I know you're working hard…"

"Hey! It's okay! I'll take that," He accepted it, "It must have been important. This is a situation where it is totally fine if you interrupt me, just so you know."

"Gotcha."

Naruto laid eyes on the words that had been scrawled in a frantic rush:

Naruto,

I am so frightened. I wish you were here. The past few days have been absolutely terrible. My eldest cousin was killed just outside of the village as he was returning from a mission. He was mistaken for Neji-nisan, and my father was told that the attacker introduced himself as an outlaw from Iwagakure, Shimofuri Koinyu. Most of my clan is in shock and even I am unsure of why this happened. My cousin's teammate told me that Neji-nisan and his team were targets.

Why on earth would someone want to hurt them? I feel so worried, like we all need to look over our shoulders now. Father says that this kind of grudge is unheard of these days, because the Rock Village and Leaf Village are no longer at war. I just don't understand. Perhaps you can ask Gama-sennin if he knows about this person? And please…

Her writing had a small cross out and what looked like a water-droplet mark

Be very careful, Naruto. I was fearful enough of the Akatsuki, but it seems that our village still has many more enemies than we thought. I don't want you to be so far away. I don't want you to encounter people like this who can hurt you.

His chest felt tight as he read about her heartache.

I know that when I am by your side I won't let anyone hurt you. Not with their words or actions, I will always stop it from happening. It sounds selfish, but all I can think about is you coming home to me. I don't think I could go on in this world if anything ever happened to you, Naruto. Please be safe. Please come home.

Love,

Hinata

Dizzy, Naruto looked up from the parchment and got his bearings. His skin had gone cold. The Akatsuki was not the only coalition trying to sink its claws into the Leaf Village. Hinata's alarm had
dislodged his peaceful mindset and essentially halted any progress he might make with meditating that morning.

Naruto stood and spoke sidelong to Gamakichi, "I'll see you later."

"You're not going to keep going? Is your girlfriend okay?"

"She's not, but I want to make sure that she will be." Naruto rolled up the scroll and thanked Kosuke for notifying him.

The toads blinked and Naruto had teleported back to his anchor in Fukasaku's house.

Naruto found Jiraiya seated at the dining table, drinking tea while editing a draft of *Icha Icha Paradise*.

"Ero-sensei," Naruto took a seat across from him, still frazzled, "Can I bug you?"

"Sure, you're doing it already so feel free," The man chuckled, "Do you have a question about Sage Training?"

"No. Hinata sent me this," Naruto handed the scroll to his mentor; "It's not good. I was hoping you could weigh in on it…"

Finishing a sip of tea, Jiraiya opened the scroll and flattened it, scanning over the short but pleading message. He looked up again after a minute and sighed, "Oh boy…"

"Well?"

"I was aware of this. Tsunade sent me a message too, although she's piecing together a lot of reports. She was hoping I could tell her more about these assholes and how they've messed with us in the past." Jiraiya fidgeted his bad arm, which was not nearly so bad anymore, "This fellow from Rock is a servant of Dintei Bi's, without a doubt. He's not really hunting down Gai's team, because it's the girl that he wants. Tsunade can probably already tell."

"Tenten? Why just her?"

"She's Takaharu's only child; a loose end. Those lunatics will do anything to wipe out the true line of succession to put themselves on top." Jiraiya scratched his chin, "They probably won't kill her until they have what they want…but I wouldn't put it past them to execute any Leaf shinobi they suspect might be affiliated with her. They've done it this way for years. They smoke out their targets until they're inescapably cornered."

Naruto sat in troubled silence, staring at the flower vase on the table. Jiraiya casually sipped his tea. He had a better hold of the crisis than his student. Jiraiya had always known that the list of Konohagakure's enemies was a few miles long, but now it seemed that the overlap of threats and violence was overwhelming Leaf. In his opinion, Tsunade had chosen a decent time to make new allies, *'We're going to need Sand and Star to be on their toes when this shit hits the fan and blows all over us.'*

"You were right." Naruto spoke suddenly.

Jiraiya, wide-eyed, regarded the teenager in delighted bewilderment, "I was?"

"Hinata will make me forget. As soon as I'm back in the village with her…I won't be able to leave." He confessed, "When I read all of that…I wanted to get to her. Just for a second, I thought I might
make a run for it. I don't want her to feel like that. I'm never gonna let her feel so low all on her own like that!"

Jiraiya patted his shoulder, "I know it's super hard for you, kid. Think of it this way...her clan is supporting her. She's safe and she won't feel crappy and scared forever. And you? When you finish up here you can look forward to being with someone who really does love and connect with you back at home. I didn't have that. It'll be worth it, you'll see. Sage Training will save your ass and then neither of you will have to be paranoid like this."

He poured Naruto a cup of tea and pushed it in front of him. The blonde took a tentative sip of it, absorbing Jiraiya's words, "You can write back to your princess this evening. Do me a favor...and relax. Please try. Tsunade and I are still a team, and I am going to work on this with her. There's nothing you can realistically do at this point other than master Senjutsu." He smiled, "Go back to the pool and meditate."

Naruto groaned, releasing some pent-up stress.

"Let it all out, kid." The man nodded in approval, "Yeah, go and master Sage Training in record time, like you planned. I want to be astounded. I want to be dazzled."

A small laugh escaped Naruto, "I've already done that."

"Well, yeah, I'm pretty impressed. But like you said, you're not going home until you get this right...since you're so excited to put on the old ball and chain for your girlfriend."

"Damn right." Grinning, Naruto flashed away to the Toad Oil Pool.

Kakashi had the distinct look of having finished a marathon. Disheveled and slightly dehydrated, he walked beside Sakura down the road towards the center of the Leaf Village. He listened as his resilient student recapped the few events of the Tide Village he missed.

"I finally got to meet Matsuri after the whole, you know..." She was wincing at the memory, "Gaara losing his temper thing."

"It was spectacular, wasn't it?"

She frowned, "Don't joke! I was worried he'd make headlines when he started screaming. It just didn't go how it was supposed to. Honestly, I'm glad that the Sand ninja didn't need help stopping those bandits...and that the students were safe. It was all we could hope for when we hurried to the Tide Village." Sakura shook her head, "But if Kankuro had somehow resolved everything...inexpensively...it would have been the perfect outcome!"

"Yes, that one little detail..." Kakashi agreed, "Better that he prevented casualties than fret about a pristine thoroughfare."

"Gaara said it would cost Sand a bit less than half of what is spent on funding a Chunin Selection Exam."

"That was just the first estimate. That's only if Tazuna doesn't choose to fine them."

Her chin dropped for a moment, troubled, but then Sakura livened up again, "Matsuri was great. She seemed so happy...and Gaara said that she was the first shinobi to track down the Shin clan."
"So that's why she had that little Sound ninja following her around?"

The girl grinned, "I heard he took her on a date! Gaara wasn't very pleased about that."

The pair detoured down a side street and stopped in front of Sakura's house. She sighed, hesitating to go up the steps, "Thanks, Kakashi-sensei. If Tsunade-sama needs me to debrief for a mission report I'll stop by her office later. My parents aren't going to be happy I was gone for an extra three days…"

"I don't think you'll need to. Take it easy for now, Sakura."

Before he set out again he could see Sakura fiddling with a key on a lanyard around her neck, *That isn't for her house…* The pink haired girl steeled her nerves and went inside, "I'm home!" and then endured a string of complaints from her irate mother. The woman pounced like a wildcat when Sakura tried to make a break for her bedroom.

Kakashi returned to the main road and was debating whether or not to catch lunch. Asuma caught his eye as he appeared, traveling in the opposite direction. They stopped to greet each other.

"Hey. Where have you been, Kakashi?" His friend wondered.

"All over. First I was in Suna with Sakura and then the Kazekage asked me to help him neutralize a threat in the Land of Waves," He let out a long breath of relief, "I need a day off."

Asuma tossed a spent cigarette butt to the ground and extinguished it, "You're not the only one."

"You too?"

"Nah, I'm fine. It's Gai." He clarified, "He's been very out of it since the Hokage splintered his team."

"She what?"

"It was a huge debacle. I saw him for a minute just before he left for a mission with Lee and Neji. Looks like he aged thirty years in one night…" Asuma sucked in his cheeks to appear gaunt, "Not good. The Hokage's not talking either. She said she'll have a meeting with the Jounin Council after the next report that comes in. Maybe in a few days."

"She removed Tenten without telling Gai?"

"Yeah."

Kakashi stared blankly down the avenue as citizens strolled by, carefree and content. His stomach churned. When Sasuke had detached himself from the team, not too long ago, Kakashi had gotten a very unique feeling after the Retrieval Mission failed. If evisceration had an emotional equivalent, *that's* what it felt like to watch a student disappear.

'O of course, if Tsunade-sama is trying to get a handle of an emergency implicating Gai's team, then she obviously doesn't care how Gai feels about it,' Kakashi supposed, 'I ought to drop by and make her care."

It's what his friend deserved, at the very least. Hokage be damned, Kakashi thought. Students were so much like children to him and his fellow Jounin, and it hurt to be apart from them.

Kakashi thanked Asuma for the warning and then continued. He poked around the plaza for ten minutes and got a sense that Gai had not returned yet. He went home.
When the door of the apartment chunked shut behind him, Kakashi could hear the yawning of his ninken from their bedroom. The clattering of dog nails on the wood floor followed. Pakkun and Biscuit arrived first to welcome him home.

"Hello boys. Is everyone else napping?"

"Yeah. Bull rolled on top of the rest of the pack, so don't expect them to come out here anytime soon." Pakkun reported, "You were gone for longer than you said you'd be, Kakashi."

"Sakura and I got sidetracked. We ended up going to the Land of Waves as Gaara's backup."
Kakashi explained, kneeling down to scratch Biscuit's chin, "I left plenty for you guys to eat, right?"

"We were fine." Pakkun assured him.

"Good. Will you please do me a favor and hang out around the Administration Building? I want you to let me know when Gai gets back. I need to talk to him."

"Sure," Pakkun turned to his floppy-eared companion, "Come on, Bisky." He trotted over to the door and pulled on the rag tied to the handle. It clicked open and the two dogs let themselves out.

Kakashi moved down the hall and stopped at the dogs' room. As expected, Bull was nestled happily on top of his smaller companions on the large, cushioned bed they shared. They were sleeping through it, and maybe being slowly crushed to death. Kakashi smiled happily. His dogs were his other children.

He arrived at his bedroom and unpacked his travel bag, lost in thought. 'Why would the Hokage do something like this? Asuma made it seem like it was a response to some kind of threat…but Tsunade hasn't told the Jounin anything yet.' It perturbed him immensely. For the most part, Kakashi quite liked the Fifth Hokage and agreed with her policies. She had made admirable strides to improve the village. There were also some habits of hers that did not go over well with him. For example: not sending replies or being courteous with low-priority (in her book) clients and communications. Hiding alcohol in the bottom drawer of her desk. Taking her temper out on the shinobi who worked closest to her. And severing teams unexpectedly. He could not give her top-marks for any of that.

After putting clothing and tools away, Kakashi migrated to the bathroom. He took a hasty shower and then redressed. 'Gai probably didn't fight her orders.' It was difficult to speak out against a superior's command, much less the Hokage's, and Gai had never in all his years combatted authority. A good-natured competition was customary, once in a while, but he never outright objected orders. While he may have wanted to speak up, Kakashi knew that Gai had bottled up his concerns instead. He was respectful to a fault.

'And arguing with Tsunade is a Herculean task.' Kakashi noted. The Hokage was very aware of the fact that she was a woman, and that, initially, she had caught flak from stupider members of the village council because of her sex. She didn't put up with it. Well, she didn't put up with any type of argument, truth be told. Her defensive reflex was so inflamed from critics and village crises that Tsunade was quicker to slam a door in someone's face than show even the remotest bit of sympathy.

And he totally understood.

Pakkun barked from outside the front door and Kakashi opened it, letting him and Biscuit inside.

"We just scented 'em. Gai and his team entered the Hokage's tower. You can catch them if you go over there now." Pakkun informed his human.

"I'll find him now. Thanks, boys."
"No prob. We're going to the dog park later for some exercise. Don't wait up."

Kakashi set out again. He passed by his favorite tea house and longed to stop for a pick-me-up, but he walked on dutifully. The aroma of snacks tempted him all the way down the street. As he passed shop windows, the glass reflected the tower-high cumulus clouds suspended in the blue sky. It didn't feel like a tragic day, but Kakashi prepared himself.

When he reached the entrance of the tower Team Gai was leaving. It was a sight to behold. Today, Gai stood behind his students, looking just as defeated as what Asuma described. Wilted. Lee was in front of him, looking far too timid by *Springtime-of-Youth* standards and was supremely aware of Neji, who was at the lead. His anger was razor-sharp and permeating the air. Lee was absorbing it and converting it into grief.

Kakashi wanted to shake his head; reproachful of how they had fallen apart, but instead he waited on the sidewalk as they exited. Neji's stone-faced expression harkened back to his Academy Days. He had become an island again.

Without a single word to the rest of his team, the young man stalked off towards the west side of town, towards the Hyuga Estate. Lee paused on the road; his expression had gone from sad to contemplative. Kakashi could see the boy draw a conclusion, watch how the idea brought him back to life, and then he waved goodbye to his sensei. He ran after Neji.

For once, Gai did not have a spirited greeting for his rival. Kakashi stopped beside him and they observed the foot traffic of the village circulate for a few moments.

"I heard that the Hokage subtracted a student from your team." Kakashi began, "What happened, Gai?"

There was a hard expression on the man's face. A little bit of rage had drifted to the top of the pool he had been drowning in. Gai settled down and exhaled, "From what I understand…the Hokage thinks that we are in danger at the present time. Tenten most of all, it seems. She has forbidden my students from participating on missions outside of the Fire Country. Communicating with Tenten is also prohibited."

"This feels like a reaction to something." Kakashi pointed out.

"A young Jounin from the Hyuga clan was killed recently by a rogue Rock ninja. My team was the original target."

"Hm." He nodded, getting a grasp of the tale, "Did the Hokage have a briefing with you before she made such a major decision?"

"No," Gai's thick eyebrows furrowed, "She blatantly cut me off! The Hokage doesn't trust me. She rendered me powerless before I could do anything to protect my students. Really…it was a shameful thing to do."

"I agree," With his hands in his pockets, Kakashi strolled towards the building, "Let's go give her a hard time about it."

"Don't be a fool, Kakashi."

"I'm serious. You really won't stand up to her order?"

"Tsunade-sama said I can't appeal it. She'll terminate my activity and reassign me if I try."
"She won't bust your chops if I'm around." Kakashi asserted, "Now come on."

And so they went together, as two good friends often do, to a dangerous place.

Kakashi hoped, as they climbed the staircase, that Tsunade would not punish Gai harshly if he personally took credit for the visit. It just didn't seem fair. He got the feeling he could squeeze some information out of her if he held on and pissed her off just enough. That was the Hatake method, Sato would attest.

The door to the Hokage's office was open and so they stepped inside. Kakashi cleared his throat to get Tsunade's attention.

Without looking up from a push-hole ballot, she spoke, "Back again, Gai?"

"Yes ma'am." He uttered her favorite phrase. It was probably a smart idea.

Tsunade regarded Kakashi with a short glance and then went back to voting, "You're overdue, Kakashi. Shut the door."

Kakashi shut it and then approached her desk. Gai worked up enough bravery to do the same.

"What have we here? The dream duo. What can I do for you?" The Hokage quipped.

"I'd like to ask a few questions, Hokage-sama." Kakashi took the reins for the time being.

"Fine. But first, answer mine: How is the Tide Village?"

"Stable. All students accounted for and no casualties. Gaara's paying out of pocket for cosmetic damage to the city, though."

"Delightful. His first lesson in accountability. And Sakura?"

"Outstanding."

"Good." Tsunade looked up from the paper and smiled slyly, "Now what do you want to know?"

"Do you honestly believe...that I would stay silent if you removed a student from my team without a proper explanation?" Boldly, Kakashi added, "And how could you expect Gai to do so? If it's serious, a Jounin has the right and level clearance to be told what you know. Just send the Genin away."

The irritation she had been concealing inched back into her features, "Are you telling me how to do my job?"

"No. Those were questions."

Her eyes fell on Gai, "I already explained that I won't hear your objections to my order."

"I haven't objected, Tsunade-sama. Kakashi has."

She gritted her teeth, "You two!"

"Though I do believe Kakashi is right...you should not have denied me information." Gai worked up a backbone.

"YOU are too close to your students. You would have tried to prepare them for the worst. Am I
wrong? If I had told you beforehand: *I am removing Tenten from your team*, would you or would you not have braced your students for the change?"

Frowning, he admitted, "I would have."

"That's why I couldn't disclose much right away, Gai." She folded her hands on her desk, "Please try to understand...I didn't *want* to do that to you. I just knew *I had to.*"

Kakashi was slightly surprised that he saw her point.

"As an apology, let me tell you what I know now." Tsunade offered, "Since I have the both of you here, I might as well keep you in the loop."

Finally, some cooperation. They listened.

"This kind of attack fits a pattern that has existed for nearly 30 years. Targets are taunted in various ways, but it isn't unusual to see friends or loved ones killed should they step outside of the village. Then these rogues work their way in," She took a steadying breath, "I'm not sure how they do it. Nukenin like this should not have an intimate knowledge of Konoha...but I am starting to get the impression they have contacts on the inside." Tsunade lowered her voice, "But you didn't hear that from me. I don't have the evidence I need yet."

"Is this the same group that killed Takaharu?" Kakashi had a hunch.

The Hokage folded her arms, "I have no illusions about that. It must be so. Jiraiya has warned me to be wary of this faction's movements."

"And this blood feud involves my student?" Gai was distressed. He could draw a connection between Tenten and her father.

"It does. That was why I had her relocated. Forgive me for not explaining it to you sooner, Gai."

"Keeping her hidden will not work for long. Everyone of that blood line who sought refuge here was killed." Kakashi had to express the facts, even if they were morose, "The sooner the Jounin Council knows about this, the better. We don't need anyone else getting caught in an ambush."

"Leave that to me, Kakashi." Tsunade's voice became gentler, "I trust that you won't reveal this information to your students, Gai. They can't be involved in this matter presently, but in the future I know I will have to depend on them to counter this menace. Take care of them for now. I know it hasn't been easy."

Some of Gai's fire returned, "Understood, Hokage-sama. I don't want them going soft on me at a time like this..."

The Hokage fiddled with the ballots on her desk and then organized them into a pile, "There are a few other Jounin I want to speak to about these disquieting circumstances. I think they may know just as much about this enemy as you do, Kakashi. The two of you are free to go," The men looked relieved up until she continued, "But I have a D-Rank mission I want you to complete together."

"Tsunade-sama...I just returned from a mission." Gai pointed out. Moreover, such a low-level task was not befitting of a pair of Jounin.

"I know. Kakashi, I realize you meant well by coming to Gai's defense...but that condescending tone of yours was not conducive."
He smiled, thankful that it was not a cruel punishment, "Sorry. I couldn't help myself this time."

"Thank you for your candor, gentlemen. I'm glad we had this talk." Tsunade smiled, "Go scrub the bathroom on the first floor. There's a utility closet down there you can use. I feel that is a fair trade-off for your heckling."

The very first friend Lee had ever had in the Academy had been a boy in his class named Ageru. Lee, young and impressionable as he was, was truly ecstatic to have a friend. They attended class together and shared lunches. Though they were not part of the popular crowd, their social standing while together sustained them in the child-hierarchy of the school.

Ageru was by all accounts as average as they came. He was a dark haired fellow and the only child of two well-meaning, non-shinobi parents. He had been a friendly and welcoming boy.

Even while it became increasingly clear that Lee was falling behind with each course in basic Ninjutsu, Ageru encouraged him and always chided, "Don't worry!" He had thought Lee would catch up. They sat through History and Strategy class together in the beginning. Ageru fended off bullies who had called Lee "talentless" and the two initial years at the Academy were not nearly as awful as they could have been.

The day that Lee found out that his only friend had left the program was sudden. That solitary day of class, transitioning into "singlehood" made him feel terribly uncertain. More uncertain than Lee had felt about his own obvious lack of ninja gifts, or that he did not receive letters from his parents anymore while they were abroad. His only confidant was gone. Lee had sought Ageru out at the lobby of his father's business one day and asked why he no longer attended the Academy.

"Your marks were very good! You would have graduated near the top of the class!" Lee, with his long braid thrashing, made clear how upset he was.

"I think I would have been a decent ninja, but I decided that I don't want to grow up and be one."

The boy shrugged, "My Dad says I can take over his business so I need to start learning now. Go make more friends at the Academy, Lee. They'll help you practice."

The average boy proved that even he did not have the time to spend on a below-average friend.

Ageru fell out of touch, and Lee, desperate to survive the days of preliminary training and near failures, completely forgot about him. He forgot what it felt like to have a companion; to hear kind words from children his age.

The relentless bullying reached a fever pitch. His determination was mocked. Teachers went easy on him and lowered their expectations with every test. He was aware of how out-of-place he was in an environment that demanded excellence.

It turned out that being rejected by classmates sometimes worked in his favor. One day in class, a boy denied him a free seat, "Beat it, loser!" and so Lee went to the available chairs in the middle row. It was the first time Tenten had ever spoken to him. He took the seat next to her quietly and set his books down.

"I like your Han braid." She told him just before a lecture began.

"You know what it is?"
"Sure. My mom ties my hair like that sometimes. Our family has those traditions too."

He smiled and then faced front, nervous, fearing that she would make a remark about how he'd lagged at the back of the jogging troupe that morning. He recalled seeing her closer to the front. Not a good sign.

"Look at him." Tenten whispered, indicating a boy in the front row. His right arm was in a cast, "Habara is such a klutz. He promised he would practice shuriken throwing with me today. Now he's weaseling out of it."

"Well...his arm is broken."

"So use the other! I can do it. He told me that he didn't want to try." Tenten scoffed, "If he just tried, he'd probably find out he could do it." She looked at Lee, her pretty eyes questioning, "Will you practice with me later, Lee?"

He accepted the invitation, wagering his aim was quite good compared to his other abilities.

And from that day on, even though Tenten was critical of his throwing technique, she spent every afternoon with him at the target practice yard until her father brought her home. She was not malicious like the other children, Lee theorized, she just disliked nonsense. When he didn't give her nonsense she was actually a pleasant companion. She never said a word about his struggles. He had plenty of people discussing his failing marks already.

Mercifully, at Graduation time, the Chunin Instructor who was organizing Genin cells noticed that Lee (who had against all odds passed) was compatible with the kunoichi who spent afternoons practicing with him. By "compatible", he clarified to his Instructor peers; he meant that Lee would not be wickedly ridiculed every few minutes by this particular trainee. He then paired the oddballs with the student who had graduated at the top of his class and dusted his hands; mission accomplished! A balanced squad: sure to function.

At any rate, it wasn't the school's problem anymore.

Neji was the embodiment of Lee's many Academy torturers compiled into one, compact, snobbish teammate. He did not filter himself. With simplistic, scathing language, Neji frequently knocked Lee down. When words did not suffice, Neji would physically knock him down when they sparred together. It was only natural to prey on Lee's weakness.

Had Gai-sensei not been nearly so enthusiastic with his tough-love training, Lee might've given up. Even Tenten, who was his friend (as they had mutually established over dumplings one morning) could not protect him from Neji's malice. All she could do was distract him by becoming the Hyuga prodigy's dedicated training partner. It reduced the assaults just enough for Lee to thrive under Gai's tutelage.

Lee and Tenten fostered their friendship through their shared heritage. They went out to eat and spent short amounts of time (he was preoccupied with laps) and generally nurtured their bond off of the training field.

By the time Lee had learned Front Lotus, Neji was not exactly a tormenter anymore. He had cooled off.

No one on the team would use words like "nice" or "outgoing" to describe him, even during his improved days, but he had become a trustworthy teammate. It made the missions more workable. It strengthened communication and productivity. After another year of training together, growing up
and surviving close-calls, they had all achieved a balance and become "comrades," as Gai put it with a jubilant laugh.

'And now,' Lee thought as he followed the heir to the Hyuga clan across the village, 'It feels just like old times. Neji is behaving the same way he did when we first became a team…'

Lee was sure that he would be bearing the brunt of Neji's misery. He was mentally fortifying himself for the attacks. What was different this time around, Lee decided, was that he would choose to put himself in harm's way. He had a gut feeling that his teammate would not benefit from being left alone. They had barely functioned as a team on the brief, D-Rank mission they had finished that morning.

'The channel must be left open!' Even if Neji only had negative things to say, at least he had the ability to voice them. After all, Lee had an incredibly clear picture of what was irking his friend the most. If the person who understood his pain walked away from him at a time like this, who in the world would truly be able to listen?

When he passed through the gate of the Hyuga estate, Lee spotted Neji taking his shoes off at the veranda of the Main House. It would stand to reason that he wanted to shut himself indoors and mope. He swiftly slid the door shut behind him.

'What is my next course of action?' Lee cupped his chin while he walked across the courtyard.

He simply wanted to convey the message: *I am here for you!* It seemed straightforward enough, but Neji's disappearing act could silence any and all supportive comments. Neji also wanted to go somewhere he wouldn't be followed. Lee knew better than to waltz into the Main House uninvited.

Staying outside on the gravel path, Lee bypassed the front of the building. While Lee debated how he could gain access to the house, or just storm inside (he knew where Neji's room was) he entered a yard that was green with grass and clover. Just beyond the lawn, a meticulously kept garden was fragrant with gardenia. He blinked. A small red toad with goggles on its head hopped out of the flower patch and towards the porch of the house.

Toads were a telltale herald of Naruto, Lee recalled. He rapidly deduced where the little creature was headed, "Excuse me!"

The toad stopped; surprised that it had been addressed, "Huh? You mean me?"

"Yes, I do. Are you a friend of Naruto's?"

"I am! The name's Kosuke."

"So then perhaps you are delivering something to Hinata-sama?" Lee deduced.

"You're sharp! That's right. She told me she would wait for me in that tea room over there."

"Ah, I see! Maybe she will not mind two visitors?"

Through a door that had been left ajar, Kosuke made a noisy appearance into the sitting room. Hinata was by herself with a stack of books, pressing flowers between pages. She looked up with a small smile, "That was so quick, Kosuke-chan!" She chirped in surprise when Lee appeared at the doorway, "Lee-kun, hello."

"Good morning, Hinata-sama! Do you have some time to spare?"
"I do. Please sit down." She turned to Kosuke and accepted the scroll he offered up, "Thank you," And patted a cushion beside her so the toad could rest. Kosuke made himself comfortable and Hinata regarded her human visitor curiously, "Is everything alright?"

Lee took a spot on the opposite side of the table, "I am not sure. Neji is distraught and I do not know what I can do about it."

"Did something happen?" Her shoulders were rigid. She had known from the start that Lee's presence meant something serious. Typically, it was Tenten who gave her updates.

"Tsunade-sama removed Tenten from our team," Lee announced, his hands gripping his knees tightly, "It is part of an investigation. Gai-sensei and I are upset about it…but Neji is the worst affected."

Hinata stared at him for nearly a full minute. She was working out the problem in her head.

"I know that he has become very close to her. I think…that Neji wanted to be closer to her," Lee figured it was safe to discuss it with Hinata, who was more than likely aware of her cousin's feelings, "He is frustrated that the Hokage has forbidden us from speaking to Tenten."

She nodded slowly, "That is true. I could tell. Did he talk to you at all, Lee-kun?"

"He has not."

Hinata used her Byakugan to check the house and spotted her cousin. She pursed her lips, "He needs someone to talk to."

"Neji might prefer speaking to you more than he would to me." Lee presumed.

Her eyes fell on the scroll that Naruto had sent. She glanced back to Lee, sympathizing with his plight, and then she stood, "Kosuke-chan, will you please wait here for a while? I am going to pay my cousin a visit." The toad was happy to oblige.

"I will try to help him feel better, Lee-kun," She was smiling hopefully, "And then maybe he will be comfortable opening up to you. In the morning I will let you know how he is doing."

Lee thanked her profusely and asked Kosuke to wish Naruto well for him. Lee departed from the house, optimistic that he might have found a way to soften the shell that Neji was retreating into.

The next day, Lee had spoken to Sato, who had heard from Shikamaru (and he from Asuma) that there was some strife between the Hokage and Team Gai.

"More specifically, Neji." Sato announced.

Lee, who had been in great need of some therapy as well, spoke about how they barely even knew how to speak or make eye contact without Tenten around. Shikamaru and Chouji listened from a picnic bench as Lee orated the sad tale to Sato (and Shino too, though he had not solicited the story from his place against an alleyway fence.) Lee got it out of his system. He had even selfishly wondered if he cared more about Tenten's absence because he had been her friend for a longer period of time.

"You can spout blasphemy like that in front of us," Sato comforted him with a pat on the back, "But
Neji might kill you if he heard that. He's got a thing for her, after all.”

Downtrodden, Lee nodded, which was tantamount to confirmation in Shikamaru's opinion.

He held up a finger to halt the conversation, "Hold on a second."

Lee, Sato and Chouji gave him their attention. Shino might have, but behind those glasses who knew?

"Sato just said he has a thing for her."

"Yeah." The Hatake nearly rolled his eyes, "Why do you think he's so pissed?"

"Because they're friends?" Chouji supplied.

"Sorry, but I'm right this time. Even Lee would tell you that's the case." Sato insisted, nodding as if he had some authority on the matter.

Lee felt his friends' gazes shift back to him. "It is possible," he conceded, "But Neji does not possess the emotional vocabulary to articulate such a thing. If he does feel that way, then we may never see evidence of it."

"There's evidence." Shikamaru assured him, "Tenten is the only unattached kunoichi of our group. That's not an accident."

"It's Neji's fault." Sato agreed.

Chouji interjected, "She could just, you know, not want to date anyone."

There was a pause as they considered it.

"Well, whatever the problem is, Neji needs to know that he's welcome to come to us," Shikamaru offered, "It's a huge burden on you, Lee, to put up with him all on your own."

"We'll meet with you whenever you guys want." Sato's affirmation came with a thumbs-up.

Lee was most appreciative of their support. Feeling superbly equipped to deal with his teammate's wretched mood, Lee dropped by the Hyuga compound to see how Hinata had fared.

He found her in the garden he had passed through the day before. She held up her hands apologetically, which were covered in large, dirty work gloves, "It did not go as well as we hoped…"

"Why not, Hinata-sama?"

"Neji-niisan…did not want to discuss it at all. When I pressed him, I think it made him more upset. He told me to leave." Hinata explained, "I'm sorry, Lee-kun. I will try again later today. Maybe he needs a little more time."

"I see. I am grateful that you tried." Some of his confidence ebbed. If Neji wasn't meeting people halfway in terms of feeling better, then Lee couldn't do much for him, even if he was bursting at the seams with support and compassion.

He consulted with Gai at their training field…which was looking woefully empty that day.

"Lee, it is simply a matter of being present." Gai proclaimed, a bit more sedate than usual, "There
was a time when Kakashi was withdrawn…when he too was lamenting the loss of his team.” He folded his arms and continued, "I did the opposite of what others did. When they told me to give him space I tracked him down on every corner. Every street and hole in the wall! He didn't like it…but after a time Kakashi told me that I had helped him."

With wide eyes, Lee was captivated by the advice.

"Yes…Kakashi told me I was a bug up his butt. That I was insufferable. That he hated seeing me. He practically never accepted my invitations out to be with friends. For a time I thought I had done more harm than good…” Gai grinned, "But my dour rival worked his way out of it. When his sadness became more exhausting than my challenges he decided to free himself of it. Kakashi valued my friendship and he told me so."

"Gai-sensei…” Lee covered his eyes with his arm, choked up, "Will I…be able to do that?"

He clapped the boy on the shoulder, "Without a doubt, Lee! It will be painful. It will seem pointless…but you must do this for your teammate. Tenten would want us to."

Lee nodded and let his tears dry up. He was fortified. He and his teacher shared an optimistic hug before spending the rest of the day sparring. Kicks only.

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Shockingly, Neji turned up for training the next morning. Of course, there was a scowl plastered to his face.

Lee frantically tried to summon up the wisdom that Gai had imparted. How to be "present," even if he came across as annoying; he scrambled to extend some form of goodwill that was not overtly youthful.

"Neji! You're joining us today?"

With a hand on his hip, the Hyuga remained mute. His face indicated that it may not have been his idea to participate, but he had showed up nonetheless. Lee had an inkling that Hinata had succeeded.

"Are you feeling better?"

Neji arched an eyebrow at him. No.

Gai would arrive in a few minutes, Lee estimated. He shifted gears, hoping that reinstating the routine, i.e. training might help his friend feel things were like business as usual. When he asked if Neji was interested in sparring he did get a verbal response.

"What else would I be here for?"

Lee was wounded by the comment, but he soldiered through it and took a stance. Neji commenced. He had feinted and spun, coming from Lee's left, and a flat palm shot towards him like a bolt of light. Lee blocked appropriately, anticipated Neji's counter, and then leapt back. His kick was perfectly level with Neji's cheekbone when the Hyuga brought his arm up in time to stop it, buffering the hit. They skidded in the dust where grass no longer grew on the field, escalating the furious close quarters match.

Gai came upon the scene and was surprised to see that his students were early. He was tempted to greet the boys sunnily but stopped himself. Lee had a black eye and a swollen lip. Neji looked nearly
untouched. Gai stood by and watched in silence as Lee, at a plain and stylistic disadvantage, kept up with Neji.

Lee took every blow graciously. The Jyukken was the most painful that Lee had ever recalled experiencing, and while he certainly wasn’t pulling his punches, he could not bring himself to inflict true injury to Neji.

'I am not only listening with my ears…but my heart can hear as well!' He endured for a while, losing track of the time, and had barely noticed that Neji had slowed down and was straining for breath. There were intermittent pauses every twenty minutes or so. The boys used them to uncross their eyes and get the proper amount of oxygen to their brains. Then they dove in again.

After a heated exchange in which Lee took a clean shot to the stomach, he rallied, dropping his elbows down on Neji's forearms. It might've broken a bone and was essentially an illegal move, but Lee could see as Neji retreated, at last injured, that it probably hadn't done serious damage.

Without agreeing to it out loud they took a break.

Gai approached them while soaking a towel with cold water from a bottle. He folded it up and pressed it to Lee's purpling, bruised face, "Well done, Lee..." He turned to Neji, "I'm glad that you came here today, Neji. I'll have you know that I expect you here every day at our regular time, in spite of recent events. I am sure you can manage it." Neji didn't dispute it so Gai added, "For now, I will beg your pardon. The Jounin Council is having a meeting at noon that I must attend."

He reminded them to not kill each other while they trained and then Gai was off.

Lee held the cold cloth to his face and sighed. This was essentially what he had imagined would happen. Just like the old days, Neji would blow off steam and beat him until he was unrecognizable. Lee was feeling a little dizzy and so he took a seat on a fallen log at the side of the field. Neji crossed over and took the spot next to him. He looked much calmer.

The quiet spring day was punctuated by songbirds weaving melodies in the forest.

"This could be our new normal." Neji suggested. He didn't sound happy about it. His voice carried a tone of resignation.

"I hope not." Lee told him, lifting the cloth from his face to reveal his darkening bruise. A tiny flash of humor buzzed on Neji's face, tilting the corners of his mouth up, and then he was sullen again. "I apologize for hurting you." Neji told him. He really did mean it.

"You have been upset. This is not something you would normally do."

"It is something that I used to do." Neji noted.

Lee smiled. He recalled vividly. "Did Hinata-sama speak to you?"

"Last night I heard her out. She was insightful." He conceded, "She wished that I would not take my anger out on anyone who was going through the same trauma that I was. I could only assume she meant you."

"I did ask her to help me." Lee acknowledged.

"I saw you do it," Neji sounded slightly amused, "She even tried to get me to cooperate by using leverage. It was a poor excuse for coercion, though."
Lee's thick eyebrows rose, "She did?"

"Hinata-sama said she would not read Naruto's reply to her until I returned to my team again. I don't think she understands how to properly threaten people."

"Ah, but it worked, did it not?"

Stymied, Neji admitted, "It did."

Lee removed the cloth since it had gotten warm. Deciding to take a risk, Lee thought he should extend an invitation now that Neji appeared receptive. It was one of Gai's methods, which of course boded well. Training wasn't doing either of them a whole world of good, but Lee knew that Shikamaru and his counterparts wanted to console Neji too. It might distract just enough from the fact then Tenten was not hurling weapons at Neji's head, and wouldn't be doing so for a long time.

"Shikamaru asked us to stop by and-"

"No."

Crestfallen, Lee prodded, "You do not want to see our friends?"

"They'll ask questions."

'At the very least Sato will.' Lee thought to himself, "But Neji-!"

"They already know, don't they?"

"Well-"

"You spoke to them."

"I had to speak to someone. I miss Tenten and the Hokage has prevented me from seeing her." Lee elucidated; a bit ruffled, "Being with friends is a natural thing to do at a time like this."

"I would rather see her." Neji tilted his chin up, still protesting the Hokage's mandate, "I planned to find her later today."

Lee felt a headache starting at the very center of his forehead. Neji was out to make trouble again.

"You cannot-"

"The Hokage wouldn't seriously stop me, and there's nowhere she could hide Tenten from me." He stated matter-of-factly.

"You will be punished for it."

"She won't know."

"The Hokage has a way of knowing things! Gai-sensei once said that Sarutobi-sama had a crystal ball that-!"

"Those are just stories. Tsunade is all bark." Neji insisted, "She won't follow through."

"You are not thinking clearly!" Lee chucked the cloth, frustrated, "If you cross the Hokage again she might reassign you, or worse!"
Neji was quiet for a time as he thought it over. Part of him knew that Lee was absolutely right, and that there was always a decent chance someone might rat on him to the village leader. If Tsunade didn't javelin-toss him into the next century in retribution, he very well could get shuffled into a new team. While reflecting on that, he realized that it turned his stomach. Gai and Lee, for all of their silly, hyperemotional passion, were the only teammates he was comfortable with. They were trusted people.

A paradox deep within his mind exploded upon thinking it.

But no, there was no way he was going to learn to put up with new people all over again and try to pretend he liked them. It could permanently transform him into a snooty, hotheaded, and malcontented jerk. The Hyuga clan wouldn't thank him for that reputation. And also, he leveled with himself; he did not want to live his life as that person. Part of him truly desired…dare he say it…to be happy.

He conjured up two plans. The first was that he would stick with Lee and try not to be an asshole. The second plan was to secretly find a way to reach Tenten without risking punishment. Solid.

"You're right." Neji conceded to Lee's point and nearly stopped the boy's heart, "Let's find something to do." He reminded Lee that something to do meant he still didn't want to hang with Shikamaru's group.

And so Lee proposed lunch. At his place.

What followed was by far the strangest and nearly the most eye-opening experience of Neji's young life.

One would hardly bother to remember that at the end of every long day of training, after hundreds of pushups, laps, forms, jump rope hops and other flimflam; that Lee went home to sleep somewhere. What a concept, Neji thought as they arrived at Lee's small, wooden, box-like house downtown. At least he wasn't paying for lunch.

He followed Lee inside to an unfamiliar, three-room living space. He used his Byakugan only for a moment to acquaint himself with the immediate room. Odd, velvet upholstered armchairs were to the right of the room on an oriental rug. On the opposite side was a small table with folding chairs, a teensy kitchenette with a steaming tea kettle, and a cabinet full of porcelain dinnerware. Hung decoratively from the walls were scrolls with characters that Neji could not read. Beside them were red tassels tied to gold medallions and a paper lantern suspended from a string. There was a tall, twist-neck floor lamp in the corner.

Seated in the armchair beside the lamp was a tiny old man. His brow was heavy with age and it folded over his squinted eyes, concealing them under tufted, snowy brows. At first glance he looked bald, but Neji had spied a long white braid on the back of his head, where the rest of his hair had receded. He was wearing a black brocade jacket and matching pants. Motionless in his chair, the old man's lips moved.

And Neji had no idea what he was saying.

Neji stood beside Lee, perplexed beyond measure, as the boy began speaking to the old man in a foreign tongue. He delivered the words with such sublime diction, alien though they were, that was stark-bare proof of his fluency. Lee was bilingual.

Before Neji could start scratching his head and pondering how he had never noticed this trait, Lee turned to him, providing an explanation, "Neji! This is my grandpa, Wong Leung."
Stilted, he managed, "How do you do, sir?"

The old man regarded him blankly, unaffected by his words. Lee parroted the same greeting in the appropriate language and then Wong Leung nodded.

"It's alright." Lee assured him, "Grandpa understands most Nihongo, but not that phrase, I think. He only really likes to speak Hanwen."

"Hanwen?" Neji muttered under his breath.

"Han is where my entire family is from. I am the first generation to live only in the Fire Country." Lee filled him in, motioning for him to move towards the kitchen, "Let us eat." He fetched a basket of dumplings and pickled vegetables resting on the counter and then set it on the table, uncovering it. Lee poured two cups of tea and took a seat across from his friend.

Neji thanked him for the meal and helped himself. The boys tucked into lunch together. Wong stood from his chair and crossed the room with short steps towards the table. The old man's interest had been piqued. He stood about a foot away from them with his arms folded behind his back, and he took stock of Neji’s appearance.

He then turned to Lee, inquiring, Where is she?

Who do you mean, Grandpa? Lee wondered, setting his tea cup down.

Oh! Tenten. She is not with us because of the Hokage's order.

Hmph! She needs to come around more often. She'll make you a good wife. And she understands me when I talk!

Flushing bright red, Lee objected, She is my friend, Grandpa!

Neji, clueless about the exchange, kept eating while they jabbered.

Who is this boy? His eyes are strange. Is he blind? Why is his hair loose like that? Real men tie it back tight so they can fight properly. Tell him that. He frowns too much. What's his problem?

GRANDPA. Lee cut him off, raising his voice slightly; Do not be rude to my friend. His name is Neji.

Neji perked up at the mentioning of his name. He got the gist that maybe Wong was not giving him a rave review.

I thought Tenten was your friend. I like her.

Neji is my friend as well. We are all teammates! He is most upset that Tenten cannot be with us. He does not know what to do without her. That is why I am keeping him company. I want to make sure he is alright.

Wong stared at his grandson, or at least, he was probably staring from beneath that brow. The old man went back to his arm chair. He was out of Lee's hair for the time being.

"You call him Yéye." Neji observed, "Does that mean grandfather?"

Lee nodded cheerily, "That is what it means."
“You used my name. Was he saying something about me?”

“Uh…” He hesitated, "He was interested in you. I told him why you are with me today. He wanted to see Tenten."

“So he has met her?”

“On a few occasions. Grandpa likes that she can understand him.”

"Does she speak Hanwen too?” Neji had to stop eating. The news was rushing in so fast he wouldn’t be able to swallow safely.

"Tenten does not speak it well. She understands whatever we say, but she does not practice conversation as much as she should." Lee rated her ability, "She has ancestors from Han. I know that her parents spoke it very well, whenever they came to the Academy training yard."

Neji was floored.

"Would you like some more tea?"

"No," Neji waved the teapot away, a touch affronted, "Why didn't you mention any of this?"

"I…did not think that it would matter.” Lee replied sincerely, "We had to focus on training! No one ever asked about Grandpa before. Not even Gai-sensei."

Gradually comprehending it all, Neji finished his last dumpling. He could feel Wong watching him from behind.

"So is he a shinobi?” Neji asked, "What made your family come to the Leaf Village?"

"Our people immigrated here a long time ago. Merchants found better business in these lands, taking care of services that ninja could not," Lee explained, "Grandpa is not a shinobi…but he is a master."

"Of what?"

Lee stole a peek at his grandfather who had busied himself with a newspaper. He whispered, "We should…discuss that outside…it is a sensitive topic in this house."

Lee cleaned up the table and thanked his grandfather for cooking the food. Wong did not look up, almost as if he had not heard Lee's acknowledgment. As he and Neji went outside, Neji asked about it.

"Does he ignore you often?"

"Han grandparents are like that. Grandpa is strict with me." Lee divulged, "Ever since I was young, Grandpa reserved his caring comments for two times during the year. My birthday and the New Year."

"You're…serious?"

"Yes. Even you have a greater frequency of kindness than him."

It was both flattering and disconcerting. Neji knew without people having to tell him that he was no peach. Lee had most likely built a thick skin because scornful comments were typical in his daily life. 'It's no wonder why he worships Gai…’ Their sensei was far and away the most sanguine creature in the village.
They stopped underneath an oak tree on the side of the property. Its long limbs shaded the house and sidewalk.

"So what is he a master of?" Neji repeated.

"Grandpa, long ago, was a master of Wushu. Those are the martial arts practiced in Han. He owned two schools as a young man and trained many students. He told me that he retired and came here with his son to help with business. That was my father." Lee summed it up, "When my parents…did not come home…Grandpa raised me and sent me to the Academy here. He wanted me to learn Ninja Arts."

"Why didn't he train you in your family's techniques?"

"He said I was unworthy."

Neji glanced over his shoulder back at the house. He was indignant for Lee. The last thing he needed was to live with a person who belittled him.

"It is alright, Neji."

"Surely he believes that you are worthy now. Has he seen your Taijutsu?"

"Grandpa says Taijutsu is heathen Wushu."

"Why would he encourage you to learn heathen arts?" Neji growled, "He should be proud that you are a shinobi."

"Grandpa thinks that warriors of this country are more barbaric than in his homeland. He used to say that he only intended for me to learn to defend myself and work hard." Lee smiled, "But I know that he cares about me. He just longs for his former life."

It was not entirely unlike Neji's situation. He wanted things to be the way they once were…and at times he would lash out. He killed the thought. Neji was no foreign grandfather; he was a young shinobi forging his career. And at the very least he would give Lee a bit more credit. His Taijutsu was something to be proud of.

The two boys jumped in surprise when Wong cleared his throat behind them.

Grandpa! When did you get out here? When Neji heard Lee speak he only heard frenetic, indecipherable, multi-tone phrases.

You two are gossiping about me. My nose was itching.

Neji wanted to know about my life.

What's it to him? Why does he care?

Some fiery youth trickled into Lee when he replied, Grandpa…when I talk to him it makes him feel better. He cares about Tenten and he does not want to be apart from her. I need to keep him company. I do not want Neji to turn back into what he once was…someone who was lost. And unhappy. As his friend, it is my duty to stand by him and prove that his feelings matter!

Good. Wong said, folding his arms behind him. He strode forward and then eyed Neji up and down again.

While observing the confused, frowning Hyuga, Wong sidelong asked Lee, What does he do? Can
he fight?

He is the heir of the Hyuga clan. Neji uses Jyukken.

Fuh! The old man laughed, amused, *What a watered down technique that is...those oafs. Tickling each other! It used to be the Not-So-Gentle-Fist style at its inception! I remember it. Make him fight me. I'll teach him.*

Grandpa...

Lee, Wong's eyes were tiny crescents on his face, commanding, *I will teach both of you. It is time I taught you what I know.*

*What?* He cried, shocked.

Tell him what I am about to tell you. I want you to understand. You silly ninja almost never grasp such important lessons...

Lee turned to Neji, "Grandpa wants to teach us."

"Why the sudden change of heart?" Neji grimaced, "Perhaps I do not want to learn his contemptuous ways."

*I KNOW what he's saying! That conceited mousefart!*

Lee quickly did damage control, "Neji, please listen. He wants to tell us something."

Reluctantly, Neji gave them his attention.

As I was saying...I will teach you now. Why have I not done so already? It is because you were unworthy. I watched you pathetically stoop and flap in that confounded Academy. You tried to become what they are. A ninja. You were desperate! All you could think about for the longest time was yourself! Your failures! I was disgraced.

Lee's face dropped, abashed.

Go on and tell the mousefart that. Go on!

"Grandpa says...that he did not want to teach me because I was desperate. All I cared about for so long was becoming a ninja." The words did not come easily, "I thought of nothing else."

Lee gave his grandfather an inquiring look, *Why am I worthy now?*

You are not thinking of yourself anymore. You are protecting your friend. Whenever you begged me to teach you my techniques, you only had your own interests at heart. Now that you are caring and protecting others selflessly...I would be honored to teach you our family's prestigious style.

"He says that I am worthy now because I am thinking of others."

Neji still did not buy that the old man had a nice bone in his body. He was wary. He nodded to show that he understood.

Lee...your father was obsessed with his own betterment. He used my Wushu to act despicably and pursue his interests. He found a woman who was just as self-absorbed as he was! Then the pair of them shamed my house. And when they left you behind...I vowed that I would raise you to be a worldly person. No matter what, I would not let your heart become black like his. Your precious
people are the greatest fortune you will ever know. There is no other treasure worth chasing.

Grandpa… His eyes moistened at the proclamation. Lee had always suspected that his parents, who he had nearly no memory of, did not have respectable professions. He could agonize about how they had not looked back so much as to blink at him when they ran away, but Lee never could have asked for a better caretaker than his grandfather.

"What did he say?" Neji asked.

Lee shook his head, "I will tell you…some other time…"

Hmph! Wong flicked his braid over his shoulder and bustled across the quiet road. Now tell your friend to come along. The two of you hurry up!

The boys followed him to the narrow river that cut through the upper quadrant of the Leaf Village. Lee frequented the river's edge on sunny days, sometimes to do handstands. After walking upstream to a more private patch of grass, Wong faced them expectantly.

I will test you later to see which style you are best suited for, Lee. For now, let's see what this milk-eyed child can do. I bet he hits like a newborn kitten! "Gentle Fist". That's what these shinobi call it nowadays. In our land it is called Baguazhang; the way of the Eight Trigrams and the canon of the old religion. Sifu Dong taught me for eight years, and I taught my disciples for another sixteen…

"Neji, Grandpa wants to see you use Jyukken."

He was incredulous, "And when I am held liable for hurting a seventy-year-old man-?"

"Seventy-nine."

"Whatever. I'll be imprisoned. I know better."

Wong sensed his hesitancy. He bent his knees, his stance lighter than air, and positioned his hands with dignified purpose. His palms were relaxed and facing outward. Neji recognized it as a Gentle Fist stance of some kind but it totally lacked energy. There was no tension in his upper body. His arms too loose. With his guard lowered so, Neji felt that it would be a crime to attack an elderly man's chakra points.

I dare this mousefart to try to hit me.

Grandpa, he is hailed as the genius of my generation...

You know what else is genius? Toilet paper. And I wipe my butt with that.

Lee balked and then grinned. He took a few steps back so that Neji was directly facing his grandfather. Perhaps he was not as frail as his short stature made him seem.

"I do not think you will hurt him, Neji. He is too proud to report you to police anyway." Lee encouraged.

It was not a good reason, but Neji fell into a stance. He'd give it a go. He might need to explain to Hiashi why there was a warrant out for his arrest later, but he was curious to see if Wong did indeed have something to teach him. He swooped forward for a traditional Jyukken slap, Byakugan and all, with a side of guilt.

The old man treaded as if there was a floor mat guiding his steps, offsetting Neji's movements. They
had the look of a spinning, lazy-wheel on a dinner table. Neji would strike and Wong would step, rotating away with the perfect ease of pollen in wind. Wong circled, without attacking or defending. Neji could hardly believe the nimbleness of the grandfather. He was goaded into keener attacks.

*Like a kitten.* Wong assessed.

He moved faster as Neji picked up speed, whirling, watching the chakra points revealed by his Kekkei Genkai *dance away from him* as he drew near. It was maddening. He was striking as if Tenten was about to run a sword through his throat; as if Kakashi would lobotomize him with *Raikiri*. It was the most effective and vicious Jyukken he could muster against *anyone* who might possibly kill him. Thankfully that was not Wong's intention, but his predictive motions made a mockery of his Taijutsu.

Certain that he was prison-bound, Neji rushed in for a Sixty-Four Palm strike. Lee's grandfather seemed to recognize his goal, slid his hand cleanly along Neji's arm, below the elbow and up to his chest, avoiding the boy's lunge for his chakra points. Swiveling his hips, Wong's feet followed beautifully, completing the stride, and folded Neji's arm up like a letter to dear mama. Wong directed Neji's *other arm* up, useless; his face was aghast like a schoolchild's, and then pushed the boy down like a plaything. All in one breezy motion.

While Neji recovered safely in the grass, trying to replay the exchange in his head, Wong gave his comments to Lee.

*Does he not feel Chi?*

*He can see it, Grandpa.*

*Well you'd never know, with how aggressively he attacks! He's blinding himself. He obviously doesn't understand how a body moves. This kitten wasn't countering me; he was watching my Chi flow! What good does that do? I can project my energy and trick him. I know how to move around silly children…what to expect… Gracious, these clans don't know a thing about fighting…*

Neji rose to his feet and dusted blades of grass from his backside, "Is he done criticizing me, Lee?"

"Almost."

*If he wants to learn the true way…I will have to put a lot of work into him. He's as stiff as a wooden plank. And he doesn't really see. He needs to see with more than just his eyeballs!*

*Do you wish to tutor him?*

*If he is a willing learner, I certainly can. But one ought not to compete in a shit-throwing contest with a monkey. There's no winning that.*

*Right… He addressed his teammate, "Neji, Grandpa says that he would like to help you refine your technique."

"That's not all he said." He pointed out archly.

Wong came up beside Neji and hooked his foot around the young man's ankle, pulling it back half a pace. Neji shifted his weight, disgruntled by the geezer's method. Wong rearranged Neji from his feet up to his chin (his arms were pretty good) and then poked him roughly in the back between his shoulder blades; *Lee, make him relax."

"He says you need to relax."
Neji tried.

*Melt like butter. Sink down into your stance, softly. Be as soft as the mochi people stuff their faces with around here!*

"Be soft like mochi!"

He didn't get it.

But for the rest of the day, Lee shouted bizarre translations while his grandfather puppeteered Neji's body into a classical style of martial arts long forgotten in shinobi nations.

At the same time as Neji's Baguazhang lesson, across the village, Ino was having her morale boosted in the Yamanaka flower shop by her cherished teammates.

Five simultaneous flower orders: about 60 blooms each. Three orders were from the same customer. Those were going to the Hyuga estate. If she remembered what the invoice said, they *all were.*

"When is this going to *stop*?" She was seething, "Hinata had one free week and now those middle-aged men have lined up again! That clan is turning into a circus; putting her on a pedestal like some sacred savior or whatever! Just leave the girl alone!"

"Chill, Ino." Chouji advised while tying ribbon to a flower basket, "You're doing a nice thing. It's like you're sending flowers to your friend…"

"In the hands of creepy men, I am."

"You should know…" Shikamaru chimed in from the far end of the prep-table, glancing at a clipboard, "That those two other orders we haven't filled yet…those are condolences for the Jounin that died."

"Oh." Ino fluttered her lashes, taken aback, "Let me start those now. Thanks for helping me, guys."

Chouji smiled, completing a bow, "No problem!"

Ino scurried to the greenhouse and then returned with two armfuls of uncut flowers. She set them down on the table and then retied her apron, focusing on the order that *really* mattered.

"Chouji told you what happened to Team Gai, right?"

Ino nodded, "Yeah, he said you spoke to Lee. I have no clue why that happened…I feel so bad for them."

"It has something to do with Hikune's death. The Hokage is looking into it," Shikamaru lowered his voice, "She removed Tenten from the team as a precaution and then Neji lost it. Lee was having a nervous breakdown when he found us."

Chouji agreed, "Neji was stressing him *out.*"

"Well did you help him?" Her voice rose in pitch, "When Neji stresses people out, sometimes they wind up in the hospital!"

"We offered. They can come to us anytime. Sato was cool with it. Shino and Kiba probably won't
"Good, because we kunoichi won't do much good consoling him. He'll just be reminded of her." Ino tapped her chin in thought, "Actually, Sakura and I should talk to Tenten. She's probably not doing any better."

"Have you seen her?" Shikamaru asked.

"No. Not for a few days."

"Jeez."

"We're pretty lucky, when you think about it," Chouji mused, "We form the Ino-Shika-Cho trio. The Hokage couldn't find a good enough excuse to divide us even if something bad happened."

Ino smiled faintly at the idea, "There are other ways…we could lose each other…"

"Stop." Shikamaru said crossly, "You go straight to the macabre these days, Ino."

"It's not because I regularly think about any one of us dying, it's because…" She fumbled over the words, "I-I'm grateful, for the two of you. I love you both so much."

The boys wore deer-in-the-headlights expressions while she resumed flower arrangements.

After a minute Chouji skirted the tall table and along the way he pushed Shikamaru, who was seated on a rolling stool, towards Ino. The three collided gently and immediately stretched out their arms for a wordless hug.

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**Meanwhile, in Sato's apartment:**

The silver haired teen was looking out the wide-open window of his living room, bent slightly to peer down at the units below his own. He and many of his friends were concerned for his neighbor downstairs. His teammates had joined him for a mini-meeting and fresh cinnamon buns.

"She hasn't stepped outside in days! I bet she's started decomposing." Sato wagered.

"Sato-kun!" Hinata screeched, "That is not funny. Do not say things like that!" Hinata only displayed two types of ire: Byakugan-fueled rage and scarlet-cheeked, adorable anger. Today it was adorable.

"One of my insects detected her alive a few minutes ago." Shino reported, "There is no need to worry."

She was not pleased that Shino had interpreted Sato's statement literally.

"You both know that Tenten-neesan is alive." Hinata reprimanded quietly, "But this is a sad time. I know that she is just as upset as Neji-niisan. I was watching her earlier and she looks terrible…"

"I heard from Lee that Neji is unraveling. And we wanna help the poor man, of course, but you know…he's got to promise not to knock our heads off. I guess Lee will bring him around when he's ready."

"Lee-kun is doing his best." Hinata agreed.
"So…is it wrong to spy like this?" Sato wondered.

Shino had the answer, "It isn't if the objective is to determine whether or not the target is deceased."

"Shino-kun!" Hinata peeped.

A Kikaichu insect floated in through the window and landed on Shino's cheek. He relayed its report, "Someone is visiting her now."

Surprised, Sato suspended himself out the window again and Hinata shamelessly used her Byakugan.

A caller was knocking at Tenten's door.

And about fifteen minutes later, after a stalemate of one person knocking and the other refusing to answer…the deadbolt lock was turned with a loud clack and the door thrust open. Tenten stood in the entryway, her eyes frenzied, frustrated with the visitor.

"How rude…" Hayate told her.

"Not answering the door of my home? That's rude? I think it's rude when you can't take a hint!"

"Your father didn't raise you to keep a guest waiting at the door."

"He's dead." Tenten said dryly.

"Oof. Tsunade-sama said you'd be petulant. It's been two days. You need to stop being such a crybaby and rejoin the world of the living." Hayate admonished her, "Worse can happen to you than simply being removed from a team."

"You're wrong. They are everything to me." She hissed in disagreement. She slammed the door shut.

Tenten turned and leaned back against the heavy wood, exhaling deeply. Some wrath seeped out of her. The rest of her anger quickly turned into shock when she laid eyes on Hayate standing in her kitchen, fixing himself a glass of peach juice at the refrigerator.

He glanced over his shoulder at her, "Are you going to keep yelling at that Shadow Clone? You sure do know how to waste time."

Unwilling to surrender her privacy, Tenten stomped into the dining area and seized a chair roughly. She thought about hurling it at him. She insisted, "You need to leave!"

Hayate held her gaze while he sipped his beverage, then he spoke, "The Hokage had a talk with me. About you…and your situation."

"Wonderful. Get out."

"You don't have the luxury of dismissing someone who was assigned by the Hokage to train you." He informed her unflappably, "If it really is a point of contention, Tenten, then you can take it up with Tsunade."

She eased up on the chair a little, realizing his visit had a purpose beyond merely antagonizing her.
"I am not here because I personally feel I need to be. I was ordered to be here." He took another sip, "Hm. The Hokage wants you to be able to protect yourself from assassins. Training with a melee combat team just isn't going to cut it for you. You need to learn from someone who's dealt with them before."

"And you were at the top of Tsunade-sama's list?"

"Yeah. No one else can teach you the techniques your father knew, because he's dead," He repeated the dismissive phrase she had used before, "So Tsunade-sama picked his student. It makes sense, doesn't it? If you want half a chance of surviving an ambush by a notorious crime group, you should take the time to learn jutsu that your family used." Hayate set the empty cup down on the table, "Quit your bitching."

Tenten settled down. It was completely reasonable. At any rate, if she could not be with her teammates until the Hokage approved it, she ought to do something constructive with her time.

Hayate took stock of her disheveled clothes and hair and then regarded to the clock on the wall. He sighed, "So when do you want to get started?"

"You mean now?"

"I've got nothing better to do. The Hokage froze my mission activity because of you." He grumbled, "At least it's paid leave…"

Tenten smiled to herself, "I wonder if she'll compensate me for my relocation?"

"She might if you pester her about it. That's what I did. Anyway," Hayate gave her a critical look, "You should clean up and change. You look like hell."

"Thanks."

"I'm just saying that if you go outdoors you might want to look like you belong there."

"Fine! Just sit down. I'd offer you something to drink but…" She pointed to the glass he had procured, "You're all set." Tenten moved on and down the hallway, picking up fresh clothes from her bedroom and then ventured to the bathroom attached to it. She was sure that leaving Hayate alone with the last of the fruit juice would do no harm.

She rinsed herself off and then washed her hair (which had been neglected for a while) and got herself back to her previous standard of care. Tenten had wallowed for a few days without eating, devastated that the village leader she so adored had wrenched her away from her team. She had cried once, much like the singular, loud, and teary tantrum she'd had after the Third Hokage had sent her home with the news of her parents' murder.

As a girl who cried once a year, Tenten knew she always saved it for the appropriate occasion. Being separated from her close friends felt marginally worse than the loss of her mother and father. Tenten supposed that was because she had replaced her parents with her teammates, focusing all of her energy and love on them. While the substitution was not complete and certainly not equal, it sufficed, bringing her happiness and purpose.

Tenten lathered up.

'Now look at me.' She mentally sneered, 'I never tried to be on my own. I can't handle it. I need Lee and Neji. This is the first time I have been away from them and I am not the picture of composure anymore…'
She had been whittled down, she conceded. Hikune's death had emotionally weakened her, but losing her team had tossed Tenten from the 'bridge of security' into the 'waters of the unknown.'

'What do I even do by myself?' She wondered while scrubbing.

Well, she took showers alone. She also ran the forge and shop on her own. Sometimes dinner was a lonely affair.

But nearly every other activity involved a friend, and more often than that, her team.

She rinsed once more and then shut the tap off. She towel-dried quickly. 'The last person I need right now is Hayate. He's coarse and indifferent. He was cooler when he was younger...now he's a rock.' She remembered when her father had trained him how he had been sprightly and even friendly, but in the years since he had seen things as a Jounin. 'He never would have shown his face if Tsunade-sama hadn't told him to! He barely checked in even after Mom and Dad died!'

Alas, they were stuck together now. Tenten threw her clothes on and tied up her damp hair.

She was startled to find him rooting around her parents' bedroom (now her bedroom) and examining the wall-arsenal they had proudly assembled. Tenten put her hands on her hips, miffed, "Are you looking for something?"

"Yeah." He took two, dusty Ninjutsu scrolls from the top shelf and tucked them under his arm, "Have you seen your dad's black scroll?"

"What?"

"The one that stays in your family? The contract? He must've told you about it."

"No." She then admitted, "I don't know where it is...but I know he wanted me to have it."

"Come on, you've got to help me out with this junk. I'm not in charge of your life and well-being. I'm just a supplement." He lifted her mother's famous Han sword, Hok, from its display, "Get looking dammit."

"I did look! I've turned this place inside-out three times! Then the forge twice!"

Hayate walked up to her and dumped the items he had collected into her arms, ignoring her indignant bark. He got down on his knees and checked under the bed, cursing, and then opened every drawer in the dresser, "Hey! That's for underwear! Beat it!" And then with a grunt he exited the room and stormed down the hallway.

Tenten followed, frowning, "What are you doing?" She located him in her former bedroom. Its use had been discontinued since she passed the Graduation Exam.

Hayate was standing on her bed from her childhood, messing up its pristine, untouched innocence. The pink-duvet was mucked up. She shrieked. Then she noticed that he was ransacking an old, forgotten shelf of children's stories, dust blowing everywhere, until finally he stopped. He withdrew a seemingly ordinary scroll, most definitely black, from a nook nestled in with the literature. Hayate brushed it off and then hopped down from the bed. He handed it to her, "You need to think more like your dad. Where is he going to put something important for his little girl? In her room."

"O-Oh...thank you."

The man brushed dust from his shirt and vest as he proceeded into the corridor again. He stopped,
declaring, "Here's what we're going to do, Ms. Can't Cope. Clean up that sword. You'll be using it from now on. Then you're coming with me to my training spot and I'm going to help you learn those jutsu. The black scroll is absolutely last."

Tenten held up the Ninjutsu scrolls, supposing that's what he meant.

"Yeah, those." He turned, hoping to get another glass of juice, "They're classics."

Following Neji's enlightening introduction to Lee's grandfather, the whole afternoon had been spent on Baguazhang lessons. As the sun set it was supper time at the Hyuga house, and so Lee and Neji parted.

He made sure to thank Lee for his determination. It had helped. It had also showed him the glaring weaknesses of modern Jyukken. At the very least, Neji knew that he was not alone and that Lee was a very good listener.

At the evening meal with family, Hinata was positively overjoyed to hear that Neji had spent the day with Lee. When she asked if he would be spending more time with him he confirmed it. Neji then went on to recount Lee's heritage and his immigrant grandfather.

Hanabi had quickly labeled foreigners "weird" and proclaimed "I can barely understand them!"

Hiashi had been intrigued, "His grandfather tried to teach you Han Arts?"

"He claimed it was the origin of Jyukken."

The clan Head raised his eyebrows while finishing a bite of fish, "Well then…by all means learn it. Their kingdom predates ancient shinobi ancestors by nearly two thousand years. I would be surprised if there wasn't some similarity between our Taijutsu and an antiquated forme."

With his uncle's blessing, Neji became even more interested in learning what Wong Leung had to offer. Hinata and Hanabi then chimed in, requesting lessons at a later date.

Night fell and the Main family scattered after dinner. Neji killed time in his room, intending to wait until late before sneaking off to begin his secondary plan. He picked up the novel The First Shinobi from his desk, thinking that perhaps he would like to continue with it. He recalled the plucky protagonist, Tian Tian, and imagined that she looked much like Tenten. When a feeling of deep irritation overcame him, tightening his chest, he set the book down again. It was difficult to find any object that did not remind him of her.

He went through the porch door of his room to the deserted patch of grass outside. While the moon rose higher, he practiced the forms that Wong had showed him.

Neji sort of understood what Lee's (his grandfather's) remark about being soft like mochi meant. He had swapped tension for lightness. He stepped in elegant circles and prevented his body from moving or responding as it would with traditional Gentle Fist. He was mindful but free.

Some Jyukken forms, according to Wong Leung, were completely wrong. He had watched Neji and shook his head in great distaste. They probably only work for people who can see Chi, the old man asserted, referencing the Byakugan, Those that cannot see the body's energy flow…they learn the true way and can feel it through motion, through air, through intuition…
He was truly very impressed. The man had a mouth on him (Neji could tell even though Lee edited the comments) and he was the scrutinizing sort, but he was obviously wise. It was not every day a near-octogenarian beat the pants off of him.

After a couple of hours he went inside for tea, enjoyed it, ignored the novel on his desk that was beckoning him, and then went to his closet. He shed any costume-evidence that would link him to the Hyuga clan. Neji redressed in all black, including ninja tabi that were rare but still circulated footwear in his generation, and concealed his face with a tall-necked sweater that stopped at the bridge of his nose. Once he was disguised he set out into the dark.

Neji supposed, as he slinked southeast through low-traffic alleyways, that Tenten may not be expecting him…least of all suspiciously dressed head to toe in black. It might startle her. Or she might just comment on it sarcastically. No matter how she reacted, he was sure that they would both be happy to see each other after the initial shock wore off.

He took a hard left into the business district and avoided the street lamps. He leapt up an awning and to the roof of a building, deciding that he would not be noticed if he skirted along carefully. Neji crossed over the top of the forge and then leaped, catching a sturdy, horizontal flag pole protruding from the adjacent structure. He hoisted himself up in silence and scaled the brick face of an apartment building. Two blocks away, the next building was the one Tenten lived in. Not too far away. He wasn't sure which floor she dwelled on, but he was confident he could weed her out among the other residents with his blood limit.

It was at the top of the first high-rise that Neji felt a pair of eyes on him. He had been cautious. He slipped behind a metal air duct and used his Byakugan to confirm if he had been spotted. His instinct had been correct. On the next building over, a Black Ops agent was perched in a crouch on top of a billboard. Red neon on the advertisement glowed beneath him, illuminating a cat mask. Neji's Kekkei Genkai, from that distance, could make out the indistinct features of a male face beneath the guise. The agent was waiting patiently, most likely expecting him to 'pop' back up again so he could be tailed.

So the Hokage had been sincere.

Neji smiled to himself, gratified that a member of the ANBU Black Ops had been tasked with stalking him. Any other rookie might have shrugged and gone home after realizing such an elite ninja was watching…but Neji was delighted. What an electrifying challenge.

If he was going to be chased, he wanted to make it tremendously difficult for the pursuer. The Hyuga heir took off like a shot.

Watching his back with the Byakugan, Neji could see the agent spring from his position, hurrying after him. Blood surging, he dove off the stone trimming of the building and caught a rainspout, his hair whipping in the wind, and slid down the pipe until he was level with a telephone wire. He ran across it like a shadow. Agile and well-acquainted with his surroundings, Neji soared over obstacles of the patchwork city.

The agent was slower but was keeping him in his sights.

He was starting to forget what he wanted to say to Tenten. Neji supposed he would remember once he had the chance to see her. He needed to shake the masked shinobi off his trail.

Coming in from his right Neji spied what he could only assume was a clone. The duplicate of the Black Ops ninja was engaging a standard pincer-movement, hoping to drive him closer to his hunter. It nearly worked. Neji raced across a tin and tile overhang, jumping to safety, avoiding the clone, and
was confronted on the next roof by the annoyed ANBU agent.

"Hyuga Neji, you are disobeying a direct order from the Fifth Hokage." The shinobi warned him, standing tall on the building's ledge, "If you do not comply and return home immediately I have been instructed to take necessary action."

Neji got a clear, frontal view of the man's face beneath the mask, studying him with the Byakugan. He looked tired. The man had bags under his eyes, but there was not a trace of malevolence on his face. He simply looked like a person trying to do his job. Neji would have felt sorry for giving him a hard time, but then he reminded himself that he never felt sorry about giving people a hard time. It was one thing he and Tsunade had in common, strangely enough.

Thanks to his spherical field of vision, Neji could see the clone inching forward carefully from behind. He also saw the ANBU agent in front of him folding his arms, exasperated, giving Neji his rights and whatnot. Then there was Tenten's apartment building diagonally ahead: a healthy, 12-foot leap away from the rooftop they had all gathered on. The wide open window into a stranger's apartment, handily enough, was home to a man who was trying to air out the smoke caused by his burning bag of popcorn. He was fanning a towel to disperse the smoke while in his kitchen. With the Byakugan relaying all of this tactical information, Neji had almost instantly mapped out his escape route. He took flight suddenly.

Tenzo immediately got an upset stomach when Neji bolted, doing the unthinkable; a true taboo of society's good manners…Neji leapt into the window of a random person's home. 'That brat!' The ANBU veteran hurled himself after Neji, realizing that he had already escaped the stranger's apartment through the front door, carrying on into the building and was most certainly headed upstairs to the next floor.

A confused, "Hello?" sounded from the kitchen as Tenzo rushed after the reckless Genin, extremely embarrassed he had no alternative route to choose. He ran out the door of the apartment, slid on the corridor's linoleum and then threw himself forward, afraid that he was going to actually lose the rascal.

Rather than taking the stairs, as the rookie had done, Tenzo leapt up and used his blood limit, melding with the ceiling as he simplified his cells with the Mokuton's power, and he passed through to the next level into the third-floor hallway, cutting Neji off from Tenten's home at the end.

Genuinely surprised, Neji skidded to a halt when he arrived at the top of the stairs. He regarded Tenzo interestedly.

Tenzo heaved a sigh, "Well now…you clearly have no regard for the trouble you are causing residents!" He was like a disapproving parent, clucking his tongue.

"No one noticed me. That man probably saw you, though." Neji replied, stepping forward guardedly. Tenten was close. He needed only to get around the Black Ops agent. Second to last door on the left. She would hear him if he shouted. She'd come to the door. She'd stop all this nonsense!

"He did," The masked man was ashamed he had been spotted, "For a moment…but the point is that no one would need to see anything if you would just do what you were told. The consequences will be greater than you expect, if you continue this."

"This is the worst consequence."

"Children can be so dramatic." Tenzo observed, almost as if he had to recall a time when youngsters horsed around.
"I'm not a child."

"You most certainly are," He put a hand on his hip, "No adult would behave like this."

"Some would."

"Those that do," Tenzo told him pointedly, "Are the ones I put in jail."

"If that makes me an adult...then just try it." Neji taunted. He was riding a wave of pride that he had not known since shortly before his fight with Naruto at the Chunin Exam.

The Black Ops shinobi stamped his foot, shouting in frustration, "The Hokage was right about you!"

Neji was giving him shit. Tsunade had predicted it.

And Neji dove ahead, ignoring the fact that his opponent had a sword, and circled around the masked man who swatted at him. Taking Wong Leung's lesson to heart, Neji stepped around the veteran like a spore in the breeze and made a break for it. The doorway was in his sights...the walls were transparent with his superior vision and he could see the outline of...

Something wrapped around his leg.

Neji tripped, catching himself like a cat on the floor, and saw that the hunter's arm had shifted into what could only be a tree branch. It had ensnared his ankle and stopped him from going any further.

"Just knock it off already!" Tenzo hollered, "Do you really want me to-?"

The door to his immediate right opened and a hunch-backed old woman marched out of her apartment. Her glasses, which hung from a chain around her neck, were fitted to her beady eyes so that she could see what raucous had erupted in the hallway.

"What the devil is going on out here? You boys shout at all hours of the night!" Her voice was scratched with age, "Are you fighting out here, young man? I bet it was you!" She lifted her cane and began to whack Tenzo viciously.

"Ma'am! Please!" The ANBU agent struggled to shield himself. She had taken aim at his mask and proceeded to flog him with all the might a grandma could muster.

Taking advantage of the distraction, Neji tore himself free with a spike of Jyukken. He slipped his legs beneath him like a starting track-runner and then launched himself into a final sprint. Behind him, Tenzo was begging for the old woman to "Return indoors" so that he could complete "the apprehension of a juvenile delinquent." Since he was doing all of the shouting, however, the old lady insisted he was the problem. Folks just wanted to sleep!

The door. Neji could see her within, still awake and seated at the table, polishing a sabre. Tenten didn't seem to hear the calamity outside yet. Neji reached out, thinking that maybe he wouldn't knock and just blow the door down at this point, and was cut off by another Mokuton branch. At the opposite end of the hallway nearby, a window beside the fire escape had provided entry for the Wood Clone. It caught Neji around the middle and squeezed the air out of him, silencing his cry before he could make it. Then it reeled him in and they plunged from the window together.

They ricocheted painfully off of the metal of the escape ladder and fell into the leafy treetop of an oak, snagged in the fork of a topmost branch. Neji writhed furiously, knowing that this time he was caught.
From above, Neji could see Tenzo leaving the third floor of the building through the same exit. The old woman was tossing things at him through the window. A few moments later a door slam was heard.

Panting from the exertion, Tenzo and his clone hefted Neji from the canopy and to the ground again. The clone melded with the tree trunk and kept him secure in a binding of wood. Tenzo bent over and gave him a scolding look from behind his dented cat mask.

He shook his head, "You've done it now…"

Neji gave him an even stare. He wasn't scared.

Tenzo tugged his captive to his feet, secure in a ring of timber, and pulled him along the street beyond the earshot of any residents. They sat down on a bench that overlooked a memorial fountain. Tenzo caught his breath and leaned back to stretch. Then he sat with his hands on his knees, trying to relax before giving Neji any explanation of how he was to be processed.

"I read your file. You're the heir of the Hyuga clan. How can you act so irresponsibly?" The ANBU ninja asked reprovingly, "A whole clan depends on you, Neji. As a servant of the village, the least you can do is respect the orders of the Hokage."

"There are other people who need me." Neji retorted, "Just as I would take risks to protect my clan… my teammates are just as important."

"Your teammate is alright. We've been watching over her."

"I don't care what all of you do."

"You can do it better?" Tenzo smiled, "And why is it that you know best?"

"Because none of you…" He trailed off. Frowning deeply, Neji looked away down the street.

"Because…we don't care like you do."

"You don't." Neji agreed pithily, "You would only fulfill the needs of your mission. Beyond her physical well-being, the Black Ops have no other concerns."

"We are supposed to be detached and unseen. It is our role in this village." Tenzo confirmed.

"That is why I can't depend on you. I should be there for her."

"But you can't, the Hokage forbids it." The veteran reminded him, "You need to be patient. You need to trust someone."

"The Hokage doesn't trust us."

"Yes." Tenzo nodded, "Otherwise you and I would not be sitting here. If you were not an unruly individual, she would not have assigned me to watch you."

"I won't trust someone who does not trust me." Neji vowed.

The masked shinobi chuckled, "There are times when you have no choice. It's called putting your faith in people."

"And what do you know about that?"
"I'm an expert."

Neji puffed in disbelief.

"Contractually, I can't give you my name." The ANBU agent explained, "But I can tell you that I have gone through a crisis much like your own. I was probably the same age as you…"

His eyes were shut and he was glowering, but Neji was still listening. He was inquisitive about the life of an ANBU agent.

"I was raised in the Root organization since I was very young. It was not the most hospitable environment." Tenzo glanced at his captive, "Do you know what Root is?"

"It is the 'foundation' that my uncle mentions from time to time. They are ANBU not controlled by the Hokage."

"Yes, they answer to another senior officer. Root performs different duties to protect the village." The veteran went on, "Anyway…when I was a kid, I met someone named Hatake Kakashi."

Neji's eyes flew open in astonishment.

"He was dealing with his own troubles. His teammate had left Hidden Leaf after an argument…and his sensei passed away after battling the Nine-Tailed Fox. Kakashi had dedicated himself to work for the Third Hokage as a member of the ANBU," Tenzo recounted, "He was very unhappy then. When I was a small child and met him for the first time…I saw how gloomy he was."

He continued, "When we met again, years later, he was healthy. It seemed as if he had discovered something new to live for. I was a bit jealous that he was doing so well. I wasn't." Tenzo sighed, "Within Root, I had no real friendships. I had no idea how to enjoy life. Though he and I…clashed initially…in the end I decided that I preferred the way he lived life. I left the foundation and enjoyed the friendships I found as a servant of the Hokage."

He poked Neji's shoulder, "But what I'm getting at is that we do care, Neji. We of the ANBU Black Ops definitely care! We cherish our friendships and bonds. We are not heartless or cruel people simply because we are anonymous. The Root is another matter…"

"Then I suppose…you are capable." Neji muttered.

"Just try to believe that." Tenzo encouraged. He stood up and adjusted his arm guards, "Let's see now…typically I would bring you before the Hokage to answer for your defiance. Or I would knock you unconscious and bring you to the ANBU detainment center…"

"Hn." Neji was unflappable. At least at the ANBU HQ he could scope it out and consider future career prospects. As for the other option, Tsunade would spout the same doctrine she had before, if a tad more angrily now. He wanted to get knocked out. Maybe the agent would give him a choice?

Tenzo exhaled and released Neji from his Mokuton snare, "But…I will let you go with a warning, this time. You really shouldn't tarnish your record, Neji. Please go home and leave the rest to us."

Wide-eyed, Neji regarded the beleaguered veteran who was apparently a kind-hearted ninja, despite his profession.

"All I ask is that you do not defy Tsunade-sama's orders. I won't mention any of this if you don't cause trouble." Tenzo promised, "I understand how you feel. I see no point in punishing you."
"Even after you were-?"

"Forget about that." Tenzo added tersely, thinking of the old lady, "I plan to."

"Thank you." Neji said sincerely, "I will not forget what you told me."

The ANBU agent nodded. Neji used his Byakugan again and memorized the man's face before they went their separate ways. If they met again, he hoped that the anonymous ninja's compassion could be repaid in person.

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The next morning, when the sun rose over Mount Myoboku, Naruto was not at the Toad Oil Pool.

He had slept in.

Jiraiya had mentioned the night before that "One day off never set anyone back that much! Sometimes it actually gets you ahead…"

Naruto had taken the advice and was still nestled beneath a blanket as the valley's sounds of woken toads commenced. After lazing about for a long while, half-conscious, the boy got to his feet and dressed. He discovered Shima and Fukasaku at the table in the dining room. He wished them a sleepy "Good morning!" before taking a seat and helping himself to some bugs.

"Ah! Are you well rested, Naruto?" Fukasaku greeted him, "Jiraiya-boy mentioned that he wanted you to take it easy today."

"Yeah! Where's Ero-sensei?"

"He said he would be waiting for you at the lily pond. It's just beyond the hill," Shima instructed, "Why don't you join him? Pa and I were reminiscing and making fun of what a silly child he once was."

"I don't know…I don't want to miss that."

"You can join us later for round two." Fukasaku offered.

Naruto liked the idea. After a protein-packed breakfast he set off through the toad encampment and up an incline dotted with mushrooms and ferns. The morning air was a bit muggy, heralding the warmth that the mountain would experience later in the day. He made it down the opposite side of the hill and arrived at a lake that was at the foot of a charming waterfall.

Out on the water, several gargantuan lily pads floated beyond the rumbling crash of the waterfall's base. Jiraiya was seated in the curve of an enormous lotus petal, where the behemoth, magenta flower was emerging between the huge green disks. The man was comfortably scribbling notes for his draft; his arm adequately healed.

"You're looking like a fairytale princess over there, Ero-sensei!" Naruto called out to him from the shore.

The lotus bobbed slightly when Jiraiya turned to look at his student, "Well thank you. It smells just like a princess in here too…it put me in the mood…to write."

"You're gross." Naruto reminded him casually.
"Take a dip! The water's great. I was trying out my arm earlier and I actually stayed afloat." He stated proudly, "Watch out for the bottom of the toad-pads, though. They're prickly."

Removing his shirt, and not concerned with the state of his shorts, Naruto dove into the clear end of the pool. It was still tinged with cold, but Naruto decided that it was warm enough. He paddled around, grateful that he wasn't sitting still for hours on end and getting sores on his rump. Naruto stopped beneath the crashing falls and let it pound on his head and shoulders. It was heavenly.

He let a loud, heartfelt sound of relaxation escape him before submerging again. Naruto surfaced around the lily pads, taking care not to get stuck on the spines beneath them. He slipped up onto the waxy, smooth top of a pad adjacent to his master. Naruto folded his arms behind his head and laid back contentedly. They floated silently in paradise as clouds rolled past and dragonflies flitted around. His thoughts roamed.

Naruto turned inward, curious as to what the Fox was up to. He stole a peek at it, getting a glimpse of the Biju snoring gently behind his bars. 'He's asleep!' Naruto regarded the peaceful giant for a moment more before quickly retreating. 'I guess he can't be awake and crabby all the time. Huh. Maybe he overheard that I was taking the day off and so he's sleeping in too?' It was possible. The Fox wasn't on alert for a chance to escape or to defend Naruto's (and his own) life for any reason.

The Nine-Tails presented a perplexing issue, Naruto thought. Now that he planned to master Senjutsu, he had anticipated a complete dissociation from the Fox. If he didn't use Kyuubi chakra, then Naruto ran no risk of being overwhelmed or injuring others. Though the Fox had called it a waste and predicted that the Akatsuki would force Naruto's hand at some point, Naruto also felt that it was a missed opportunity; it was not the chakra he was concerned with.

There was another being inside of him, and it was clearly unhappy.

'He tries to act tough and he hates everyone...but he's smart. And he's strong. And he's saved my butt before...' Naruto was conflicted, 'Even though he hurt Ero-sensei...I still want to do something for him. If I can't get him to lighten up, then I at least want to find a way to let him out.'

The rational half of his brain leapt at this supposition, clarifying that his wish to be free of the Fox was selfish on an entirely different level. It would free him of the Akatsuki's torment, of course, as well as the Fox's acts of wickedness, but as the Nine-Tails lumbered away on the horizon, more than likely to be captured anyway, Naruto could tell that the Leaf Village wouldn't be supportive of handing over a powerful force to a criminal organization.

In other words, even if he did find a way to undo his seal safely, it was ethically incorrect to let the Fox go. After all, he had not sealed the Biju inside of him. He could not be blamed for their circumstances. Naruto had never given much thought to his village's military standing and so forth, but now Tsunade would probably shake his hand and say, "Thank you. Thank you from the bottom of my heart for seeing it from my point of view! You're so responsible, Naruto!"

'Sheesh.'

He was stuck. He and the Fox were stuck. 'I am damned if I do and damned if I don't...' Naruto kept his eyes shut and twitched his nose, 'I want to do something. But it's like the only thing I can really do besides train is...try to be nice to him.'

That one topped the list of "crazy tasks" he had been compiling.

Did the Fox even deserve compassion?
'He's an ass! He's a liar and he would rather kill people than busy himself with *talking to them*.'

They made a pretty good team sometimes.

'*He made me hurt Ero-sensei!*'

Kyuubi chakra had won him several critical battles and even saved lives as a result.

'*He treats me like garbage!*'

Gaara was also a jinchuriki, and more than likely had to contend with his cranky guest as well.

'*Gaara!* Naruto's eyes snapped open, 'I've got to ask him what he thinks! I mean, I know he's got to do something so that the One-Tail keeps cool...he'll probably give me some suggestions!'

He didn't want to get his hopes up. When Gaara had previously asked Naruto for a suggestion with regards to being a Kage, he had not provided Gaara with a single stitch of advice. He deliberately did not reply; his reason being that he was somewhat fearful of answering. That didn't sit well with his friend. If Gaara was the spiteful sort Naruto remembered him being, he was probably going to tell him to *eat shit* and *deal with it*.

'*Nah! He'll probably have an idea or two.*' He was cautiously optimistic, 'And I wonder if he's...if he's ever...'

His thought process came to a grinding halt. A question arose that Naruto would definitely include in his next letter.

'*Did he tell Sakura that he's a jinchuriki?*’ That would be a game-changer. If Gaara *had*, it was not an unequivocal essential that he have *that talk* with Hinata.

Was it?

Naruto peered at Jiraiya from the corner of his eye. The man had dozed off in the flower petal and his notebook was tucked in his lap. Naruto felt like he needed several opinions on this.

'*If Sakura was okay with Gaara talking about it...Hinata should be okay with me telling her.*' He presumed, '*Hinata understands me so well now! We write to each other daily! It's awesome.*'

Even from afar, they had bonded on a deep emotional level. She had become a unique type of best friend that had romantically enchanted him. It was a complex feeling. Naruto wanted to believe that Hinata could handle any admission he put before her, but a large part of him was absolutely petrified that he would be rejected if she learned of his secret.

He had invested far too much of his time, love and faith in that remarkable girl only to be labeled a monster...and have his whole world come crashing down. It would ruin him for life. He would never again trust a woman, or really anyone, who claimed to love him without knowing his identity as a jinchuriki. Just as the Kyuubi posed a risk to his physical well-being, so too did Hinata jeopardize his carefully reconstructed spirit and humanity. To think she could save him as a young girl and then destroy him effortlessly as an adult!

Naruto shuddered.

'*I don't *think* that's what would happen...that she'd leave me...or hate me.*' Again, he leaned towards the positive side of things, '*But that's not something I'd write home about. As if I could just slip it in there: Hey Hinata, I have the Nine-Tails inside me. Don't worry! You are perfectly safe!*' He rolled
face down on the lily pad, anguished, 'Psh! If only I could promise her that!'

No, he probably wouldn't bring it up that way.

A crane fly paused on top of his head and Naruto brushed it away in annoyance. He shifted again to his back and looked at the sky, taking a deep breath. 'Hinata might not mind.' He ventured.

There was a decent chance that his position as the container of Kyuubi would not weigh on her thoughts at all. Part of it could be contributed to the fact that she may not fully comprehend the gravity of his burden, or Hinata might simply not see it as a major influence on the way he treated her, etcetera. The bottom line he reached was that her love for him could be unconditional.

The hot rush of elation shot down from his head to his toes and back up. His brain went on a tangent after having the thought.

Well, a component of his psyche, orbiting around the ego, acknowledged the prospect of unconditional love, That IS something special! Your whole life won't be perfect, but it'll get pretty close, won't it?

Naruto imagined he would wake jovially each day after the declaration. He would sit up in bed and smile. He would be humbled and happy to be alive. She would probably be curled up beside him. He tilted his head back in ecstasy. The teenager's mind could clearly visualize himself kissing her without holding back, envision himself making love to her at every opportunity, accompanying her to any significant or insignificant event that demanded her time, bragging to friends, kissing her again, living overcome with that rapturous feeling of acceptance…a gaggle of children with their hues of hair and eyes…

"Naruto, you okay over there?"

He jolted out of his daydream and nearly flipped off of the lily pad. Jiraiya got a good laugh out of startling Naruto.

"Ha! I caught you. Those must've been some dirty thoughts you were having!"

"No way you Perv! Shut up!" Naruto was red-faced, "I…thought you were asleep."

"Yeah, but I woke up! I took a look at you and I thought, well…" Jiraiya shook his head understandingly, "You'd need some privacy…or maybe an interruption. It's not surprising a young man's thoughts would get carried away out here in this bliss!"

"I wasn't-!"

"Sure you were! You've got a boner for crying out loud!"

Naruto rolled off of the pad and sunk into the water to hide.

"Come on, kid. It's cool. I'm not judging you, honest." Jiraiya told him, nodding self-assuredly, "I am a hundred times worse than you."

Naruto blinked at him, intimidated for an entire two seconds. Jiraiya was right. This kind of thing didn't even phase him. Naruto swam over to the gigantic lotus flower, lost his erection and then climbed out of the water. He settled on a petal nearby his teacher and sighed, relieving some stress.

Jiraiya nodded, "There you go. You don't need to freak out about that stuff."
"Sorry, Ero-sensei."

"It's fine. Just don't try to lie about it to me, Naruto…I know. I always know." He chuckled.

"Right."

"So what's on your mind?" The man amended, "That isn't M-Rated? I don't need to hear any of that."

Naruto stayed quiet for a time. Birds and insects sang, with the occasional solo crooned by a toad.

"I was wondering if…I'd be allowed…" He hesitated, "Ero-sensei…do you think I can marry Hinata?"

"Uh," Jiraiya scratched his upper lip, stewing on the question, "You're a little young to be considering that sort of thing, no?"

"I won't be forever. I was thinking about it."

"That is true."

"I was worried that…that I won't have the chance. I'll never have a family. All those things down the road that people assume they'll have…I can't just expect that I will. I can get rejected at almost any time! What am I supposed to do about that?" Naruto postulated, a bit frantic, "And kids! I realized that I want more than one! Can jinchuriki even have kids?" He made a quizzical face, "Am I like, chemically balanced? Or has the Fox-?"

"Okay! I'm gonna stop you there," Jiraiya announced, "Take it easy, Naruto. Those are all good questions. A little out of the blue, sure…" He paused, "Actually, I think I know what you were imagining before, so this isn't that strange."

The blonde boy grunted, hoping he'd drop the subject.

"Let's see…well first of all, jinchuriki absolutely can and do have children. Remember our history lesson? The First Hokage and his wife? She was a jinchuriki of our village and those two had a million kids!" Jiraiya cupped his chin, "Well it was more like three…I guess. But it's true! Uzumaki Mito certainly could do it," He smiled, "And other containers of the Nine-Tails have also had children. I know that for a fact. I daresay they have some of the strongest and most impressive kids that a parent can make…"

He exhaled, feeling better about it.

"On the other hand, I don't know how kindly Hyuga Hiashi will take to you marrying his daughter. I mean, you've got your work cut out for you there…winning him over."

Naruto gave Jiraiya an alarmed look, "Does he know the truth about me?"

Jiraiya nodded, "He certainly does, but you know what, Naruto? I don't think he cares so much about that. I think he is more concerned about Hinata being taken care of, and if you can keep her safe. Things of that sort…"

"I will." He was determined to do so.

"Yup. You just need to convince him."

"So how do I-?"
"You have just reached the question that occurs to so many men in your position, dear boy!" Jiraiya interrupted teasingly in the voice of a game show host, "The question is: How do I get her Dad to like me?"

Naruto nodded feebly, losing his resolve.

"I have no fucking clue." Jiraiya admitted, "Look at me. I'm over fifty and still single. You sure as hell don't want to ask me that…"

Later that same day, Tenten had appeared in town in a slightly different style of dress.

She had exchanged her typical pink frog-clasp top for a black cheongsam with blue nemophila designs down the front. Slim, black pants stopped mid-calf, a bit tight (her mother had been a petite woman,) the heeled shoes fit well, and she had her standard weapons holsters with her. Tenten had left her large scroll at home. Hayate said it was unnecessary for the time being. The sword called Hok was fitted in a baldric and slung across her back.

It had taken Sakura a few moments to fully recognize her as she proceeded down the street, supposing Tenten would get lunch before training with Hayate.

With thrusters set to good-friend-mode, Sakura rushed into the bakery, signaled for Tama to follow her, and then made a dash for the barbeque restaurant on the adjacent street. She flagged down Ino who was about to enter the establishment with her teammates, "Sorry boys! Go ahead without me!" And Ino met her pink haired friend without hearing a single groan of annoyance from either Shikamaru or Chouji.

The three girls followed Tenten down the road from a distance. The bun-haired kunoichi was debating on which eatery suited her.

Tama turned to her teammate, "Sakura, are you sure that Hinata will find us? I haven't seen her all day."

"Oh she'll find us! Her little toad friend is her spy today," Sakura elaborated, "I just saw him going to report to her."

"She's kind of an evil genius." Ino assessed, "The nicest one you've ever met, anyway. Now keep up! We don't want to miss this chance!"

Tenten was about to ask the greeter at the door of a café to be seated when a cacophony of delightful greetings sounded behind her. She turned slowly; feeling cornered at first, but then guessed that human interaction would do her good. "Wow! What are you all doing here?" Tenten asked, feigning some social propriety.

"You probably don't feel comfortable right now. That's okay." Ino told her up front, seeing through the façade, "Just let us have lunch with you and if it sucks you never have to do it again, Tenten."

She raised her eyebrows and then smiled, "For the first time in a week…someone has actually given me that option."

"You're welcome."

Tama revised the seating arrangement, "A table for five, please!"
"Five?" Tenten was puzzled, "Please realize that I was ordered not to-

"We know. No boys. None of your boys, is more like it." Ino agreed, "We're saving a spot for Hinata."

"Oh." Tenten was fine with that.

They went inside and were led to a round table in the corner. The restaurant was for the most part empty, and so the waitress was thrilled to hand out menus to the herd of kunoichi. Tenten politely stowed her sword beneath her seat. Tama complimented the handsome weapon.

"Thank you! It belonged to my mom." Tenten replied proudly, "Hayate has been teaching me sword techniques."

"I wanted to ask you about that," Sakura piggy-backed on the subject, "How is your training going? What's Hayate like?"

"It's…fine. He and I don't get along that well. I can tolerate him, though."

"Correct me if I'm wrong, but I was under the impression that you already knew how to use a sword." Ino tacked on, "And just about everything else that's sharp…"

"I thought I knew how." Tenten conceded and then shook her head, "But I'm learning a lot. Hayate learned from my father…and I never had the chance to."

"He learned from your dad?" Ino was enlightened.

"Yes! He would spend a few days away from his Genin team so that he could learn swordsmanship from Dad, as his apprentice. Kind of like what Sakura is doing with Tsunade-sama."

"Ah." Sakura understood, "That's awesome. It's good that he's teaching you."

"I'm appreciative." Tenten pouted, "I just wish he wouldn't remind me of how he used to babysit me when I was a kid. He constantly complains of what I pain I am!"

"Sometimes, that's the only way men can make conversation." Ino observed, "They complain."

The girls nodded and sipped their complimentary glasses of water.

"You must miss your teammates." Tama approached the subject in a gentle voice, "Do you want to talk about it?"

Tenten's eyebrows waggled as she fought the urge to make a sad face. Just thinking about Neji and Lee caused excruciation.

"I don't know if I can talk about it yet." She yielded.

"That's okay." Tama soothed her, "Do you want us to stay in touch with them and relay information to you? That doesn't contradict the Hokage's order; at least I don't think it does…"

"Please."

"Whoa. How come I didn't think of that?" Ino was surprised, "It's good that you have an in with Lee, Tama."

"Then maybe Hinata can also-" Sakura stopped herself when she saw the aforementioned girl
peeking into the café, "Hey Hinata-chan! We're over here!"

"Ah!" Hinata had Kosuke secured in her arms. She released him after an affectionate squeeze and then scurried inside, "Hello everyone!"

She took a seat beside Tenten and gave her a quick side-hug, "You look beautiful, Onee-san!"

"Thank you, Hinata." She laughed quietly.

"Kosuke-chan showed me the way. Thank you for waiting for me!" Hinata turned to the pink haired girl, "Sakura, this arrived while I was in the Hokage's tower. Tsunade-sama said it was for you."

Tenten could not help but follow with her eyes as Hinata passed off the scroll to Sakura. Without a doubt it was from Gaara. The jubilant look on Sakura's face confirmed it. A pang of jealousy gripped Tenten as the waitress returned to take their orders. 'It must be nice to have a guy devoted to you like that...' She hid her face with a menu, concealing her discomfort, 'Everyone at this table is lucky. Their boyfriends would do anything for them.' She paused, considering that Tama was the least fortunate of the gathered kunoichi, with a fiancée who had only recently, she had heard, learned how to kiss. 'It still beats what I've got.'

A whole lot of nothing.

On two occasions Tenten had daydreamed that Lee or Neji, maybe even the two of them, would have made an effort to reach her. Knowing how stubborn the boys could be, she half expected them to defy the Hokage and meet with her secretly.

'Nope. Nothing. I stay up late at night thinking that they might show up...I'm so stupid.' It was a puerile wish. And it was difficult to ignore how her heart had longed for Neji to appear, somehow, if only for a single second, to prove that he thought of her.

Tenten ordered rolled rice noodles and tea. While her companions chatted amicably, she dwelled in her thoughts and scolded her own foolishness.

She shouldn't expect them to go against the Fifth. She certainly had not tried to, as she did possess a healthy fear of the village leader. Tenten longed for high-quality companionship, because Hayate was not cutting it, and the resounding ache of loneliness subjected her to more silly-girl fantasies in three days than she had ever humored in her life.

"Hey Tenten, do you think those crullers will be good or should I get something else?"

She was snapped out of her contemplation, giving her attention to Sakura, "Oh. You ordered the Zhaliang?"

"They looked good." Sakura felt comfortable trying out Han food in Tenten's presence. The girl always pointed her in the right direction.

"They're amazing." Tenten assured her, "Make sure you share!"

They were served their tea and the girls twittered excitedly. A small smile tugged at Tenten's lips. It then occurred to her that the high-quality companionship she was craving was available to her after all. It was the expertise of her fellow kunoichi.
At the very same time, across town, Kiba had finally finished the doctor-ordered reduced activity he’d been slapped with. No missions or anything entertaining, Tsunade had warned him. Donating bone marrow to his father had taken a lot out of him. He had required nearly two weeks of rest to build his strength back up. Kakashi had visited him a few times at his family homestead, but Kiba had been irked that his friends were all too busy to pay him a visit.

'Well, Sakura visited…' But Tama had not. And that was really upsetting him.

Sakura had also seemed to drop some hints that, quite possibly, Sato was now romantically reciprocating Tama's advances. If that was true, Kiba thought, he'd need to brush up on some assassination techniques. Kakashi probably wouldn't object.

He dropped by the Hokage's office and Tsunade quickly looked him over, "Excellent! You are at the peak of health again, Kiba. By the way, your team has a mission tomorrow."

"Finally! Thanks, Hokage-sama."

"Huh. Thank you," She replied, "You're the first person who's thanked me in a long time…"

Kiba didn't understand. At the time, he still had no idea that Tsunade had been driving his peers nuts.

Kiba left the administration building with the intention of picking up his father's favorite dessert from the bakery, but was sidetracked when he noticed Fujita bustling up the street. He had not seen his young friend in a while. Kiba altered his course, accompanied by Akamaru, and followed the small boy uptown.

After a long walk, Kiba began to doubt that Fujita would be interested in idle chit-chat. They had arrived at a guarded cemetery for shinobi.

He approached and then stopped, waiting alongside his dog near a fence as Fujita arrived at a grave. The boy dusted some soil from the epitaph and then stuck a red and orange pinwheel in the grass. He crouched down and spoke softly in a voice that Kiba could not make out.

Ten minutes passed before Fujita stood again, his conversation with the departed over. Kiba gave him a small wave as he advanced, "Hey kid."

"Hello, Kiba-kun…" His eyes were sad.

"If you're not done visiting I can catch you later-"

"It's fine! I was leaving anyway. Hikune-niisan probably wouldn't like it if I wasted the day here."

Kiba was baffled, "Your brother-?"

"Yes." His small shoulders drooped when he sighed, "He died on a mission." Fujita's lip quivered, "It was sudden…every day that I wake up I wish I had dreamed it all."

"I'm so sorry, kid."

"Thank you."

"Do you have any plans today?" Kiba inquired. Akamaru had pushed his head beneath Fujita's hand, soliciting a head-pat.

"Well…Sensei is going to be at the Medical Lab until two 'o clock, but he promised we could train later."
"What do you say we hang out until then? My Mom made a ton of food," Kiba suggested, looking at his hound, "Right, Akamaru? You would have demolished that whole spread on the table if the three of us didn't tackle you."

The dog wagged his tail.

Fujita smiled faintly, "I would like that, Kiba-kun. If I'm welcome-"

"Of course you're welcome! I invited you, kid!" He steered the small boy away from the gravesite, "We just need to stop for chocolate cake first. My Dad has been praying for it."

"Okay!"

And he and the young boy got to talking about life's twists and turns. Kiba had revealed that he never had expected his father to re-enter his life, much less save the man's life when he had the chance. Fujita understood. He commented on how Hikune had always marveled at the whimsy and luck of ninja who lived to achieve old age. He had predicted that he would not last long, and Fujita was disheartened to remember the prognostication. Hikune had made it in jest, but he had turned out to be right.

"The one thing you should always remember is that your brother loved you." Kiba advised him, "Not everyone has that."

"You're right. That always did make me happy."

What Kiba didn't elaborate on was that he could not stop thinking about Sasuke's parallel predicament. He too had lost an older brother...though "lost" acting as a very figurative word. Perhaps he would have preferred Itachi dying suddenly at a young age than him becoming a murderer for no reason, continuing his life as a criminal. He'd have to ask him, next time.

Like his mother always said: youth is wasted on the young. They live too fast and mess it all up! They forget to enjoy what they have... Tsume would laugh and add, And shinobi are just asking for a tragic end, so we might as well go out with a shit-eating grin!

Kiba brought his new friend home so they could stuff their faces and forget their sorrow for a while.
The Replacement!

Chapter Soundtrack: “Thousand Knives” by Ryuichi Sakamoto

Gaara was dreaming. He was partially aware that the images in his mind were fictional, subconscious nonsense. He rolled over in bed, still unable to wake up from the peculiar visions.

He knew where he was. With surprisingly precise detail, Gaara recalled where he was standing, as he had visited the spot once in reality: the Star Notojiso Resort within the Tide Village. He was outside of the hotel on its vacant beachfront. The sand felt warm and smooth under his bare feet, quite unlike the blistering heat of desert sand. Gaara had no idea where the swim trunks came from, why he was wearing them, or why on earth they were pastel pink. He didn’t swim.

No matter. It was a beautiful day with clear skies over the rolling whitecaps. It was a good decision to get involved in the Land of Waves, he concluded.

The sounds of laughter and play drifted into his ears. Gaara turned and looked down the stretch of beach far to the east, where he spotted his loved ones and friends romping happily. ‘As it should be.’

He wondered if he had put them up in the ritzy hotel behind him, but his rational mind noted that he probably couldn’t afford it. Repairs to the Tide Village’s main avenue had cost him a small fortune.

When he looked over the inlet water again Gaara recognized a red and white cloud pattern on black. The uniform of the Akatsuki registered for a moment before his visitors rushed at him. They struck with speed, pinning him flat on his back, and Gaara realized he had no faculties. His near-psychic manipulation of sand was absent; his muscles unresponsive. He was paralyzed as he stared up at several indistinct assailants, crushing his windpipe in a hellish grip. He had once thought himself fortified and ready to deal with this looming threat.

Tears welled in his eyes as he asphyxiated. Familiar screams of onlookers at the far end of the beach rattled in the salty air. Gaara knew they were too late to help, but as darkness swallowed him he was grateful at least to hear them clamoring for him. He may be defenseless, but he was never alone. It was a small comfort.

Gaara jerked awake.

His panicked eyes settled on an alarm clock on the bedside table. The digital readout indicated it was 5:45 in the morning. He adjusted to reality and then his taut muscles relaxed. He was fifteen minutes early, but Gaara elected not to go back to sleep. It wouldn’t be restful.

The blanket slipped back as he sat up slowly. Gaara lingered in bed and rubbed the crust from the corners of his eyes. What an ill-mannered dream, he thought. Gaara had hoped that his worries would have the decency to stay in his conscious mind and let his dreams be. After several sleepless years and intermittent bouts of insomnia, Gaara had more than earned his right to slumber security. Nightmares ought to know that his unconscious mind was not fair game, but there was no helping it. His stress levels had been alarmingly high as of late.

Gaara rose from the bed and neatened it. He dressed himself at his wardrobe while watching the window across the room, not yet illuminated by the soon-to-rise sun, but he knew the dawn was hastening. It gave him an odd feeling. Usually his routine began in the light, not in the dark.

He left his room and switched on a hallway light before proceeding down the corridor. The silence of the mansion was dense. The only other occupant of the house at the time was Temari, and she was
still comfortably asleep. Gaara entered the bathroom and waded back into the contents of his dream as he began to wash his face.

‘I’ve never really given much thought to...how I might be killed.’ He mused. His sand-shield had always been just enough to safeguard him for most of his life. Yet if Jiraiya’s warnings proved true, the brute force of the Akatsuki would probably wriggle past his wit, strength and defenses and go straight for the jugular. He had heard Tsunade’s talk about the Akatsuki members who had a chance encounter with Kakashi’s team and the Star students. He also plainly recalled staring down Uchiha Itachi when Naruto had been confronted on the rooftops in Tanzaku Quarter.

‘Jiraiya said that once the Akatsuki removes the Biju from its host, death is certain.’ And Gaara had learned from collected intelligence that other villages had already confirmed this, by losing their jinchuriki. ‘I don’t expect anyone to protect me. The council here once presented a contingency plan for a strike by the Akatsuki, but there was no justifying the creation of those teams as a counterforce. My efforts need to be for the sake of others while I am Kazekage, and not for self-preservation.’ He thought of the Tide Village, which he had deemed a much better investment than his sole well-being, ‘I should take responsibility for my own safety.’

Brushing his teeth was next. ‘I ought to take some time to train.’ Gaara conceded, ‘As I am...it’d be foolish to think I would survive a pair of those criminals...and heaven help me if there are more.’ He knew his limits. He knew that Naruto and Haku were no slouches, wherever they were in the world; they were honing their skills. Gaara had not had a terrible amount of time to focus on advancing his techniques in-between his duties.

His dream underscored that it would not do to wait.

He spat out the last bit of toothpaste and rinsed. He went downstairs and had noticed stirring in Temari’s bedroom as she had begun her daily preparations as well. At the kitchen, Gaara put on a kettle for tea.

‘Yugito of Kumogakure had offered to help me whenever I send for her.’ He recalled, thinking of how the Raikage, who had since sent two trade agreements (both approved) had tried to be friendly, ‘I may need to consult with her.’ She had showed him fundamental techniques during her visit: how to contact the One-Tail inside of him, how to erect mental blocks when needed, and a few pointers on how to ‘bargain’ for chakra.

“Sometimes,” She had said, “The Biju within you can be persuaded. There are times when your enemy is their enemy too. It never hurts to ask.”

Gaara sliced an orange into wedges and fixed himself oatmeal. He sat alone at the table and contemplated how he would squeeze in this potentially life-saving training into his hectic schedule. The Tide Village, and soon the Chunin Exam too, were going to siphon away his time and resources whether he liked it or not.

Kankuro was still in Tide, busy smoothing things over with Tazuna and completing the Stage One training program. Matsuri had returned to Sand with Gaara after the Shin clan circus, at his request, to take a few missions (and also to keep her away from her new Sound ninja pet.) Gaara had not directly addressed it with her, but he was worried about his student getting involved with a Sound nin whose ilk, in the past, had only represented misery and deceit. Well. That was his opinion. Kankuro had advocated favorably on the young musician’s behalf.

‘But Kankuro also let the center of the city get blown apart and I had to pay for it.’

Points off. He finished his meal, tossed the orange peel and then decided to take the garbage out. It
was not a task above his position, least of all in an empty house. When Gaara returned, his sister had arrived and helped herself to some tea.

“Good morning,” Temari wore a curious smile, “You’re up early, baby brother.”

“Good morning.” He sat down across from her and accepted the tea cup she had poured for him, “It’s not that early.”

“I heard you moving around in the dark. Couldn’t sleep?”

“No.” He took a sip and then said, “Dreams.”

“Not the good variety, I take it?”

Gaara shook his head in the negative.

“Well, you’ve been juggling so many balls in the air lately; the stress is bound to get to you…no matter how cool and collected you look.”

“I can’t deny that.” He agreed.

“I heard you screamed at Kankuro in front of a congregation of people.” Temari added airily, “Does that make me your favorite sibling for now?”

“At least until you screw up, it does.”

“Oh, but you know I won’t.”

“Don’t get overconfident, Temari. The Tide Village will challenge you.”

She rested her chin on her hand, with red-manicured nails glimmering, “Kankuro broke them in. They have their fundamental skills down and I get to choose who among them is ready for advanced training. My job is easier. I evaluate them and then set them up with the Special Ops divisions,” After a thoughtful sip of tea, she added, “What was the name of that Resort again?”

“Star Notojiso. Chiyo and Ebizo are there.”

“I want to stay there too.”

“I can’t afford that.”

“I will. I’ve got my vacation money set aside. Relax!” Temari chuckled, “I guess Sand can’t pay for anything anymore, huh? How was your verbal boxing-match with the council yesterday?”

“Peachy.”

“Did they approve the money for repairs?”

“They did.” Gaara confirmed, frowning at the memory, “But they took it as an opportunity to tell me how stupid I was. They claimed that my compassion for a fledgling village was a pointless effort from the start. I shouldn’t expect them to vote in favor of my ‘pursuits’ for quite some time, I was warned.”

“They’re all old people who have never tried putting themselves in your shoes!” She dismissed the criticism.
“Some of the Jounin and Clan Heads aren’t that old…and they came down on me just as hard.”

“There’s nothing stupid about fortifying inter-village bonds! Our village needs that kind of support the most! You’re doing better than Dad did. He sided with the Sound Village when it first debuted, and we all saw how that worked out.”

“A good argument,” Her brother conceded, “But money talks. I promised them a finite budget at the start of all this. When the city came under attack I could no longer keep that promise. They have a right to be unhappy about it.”

“What right? It was an incident beyond your control! Fuck them.”

“If I said that…” Gaara paused and laughed quietly to himself, “I wish I could have said that… without getting indicted or replaced.”

“They wouldn’t dare. I hate how they treat you; as if your age constitutes their right to condescend and piss and moan!” Temari put her teacup down with a sharp clack, “You’re the Kazekage. They need to respect you, whether it costs Suna 100 million ryo or their pride, they owe their allegiance!”

He smiled gratefully, “Thank you.”

“You are very fucking welcome. Invite me to the next council meeting.”

After a moment of deliberation Gaara said, “I’ll add a seat for you. You may need to sit beside Chiyo, though.”

“Perfect. Then the two of us will set the record straight.”

“If you can keep her awake…”

The sun had risen and was gleaming through the windows and portholes of the house. In her anger, Temari had downed another cup of tea and a sweet roll.

“So…how are we coming up with the money?”

“Raising taxes; with the Wind daimyo’s approval. Two internal programs had their funding slashed…but I wouldn’t let them touch the Medical Corps.” Gaara elaborated, “Sakura won’t let the Medical program get any cheaper here. She said it was pathetic and I am taking that assessment seriously.”

“Huh. Who knew that girl would be affecting foreign policy at this stage?”

“If I let her run the village unchallenged she would probably get it into utopian condition.” He speculated, “I will be the first to admit that she is much, much smarter than me.”

Smiling again, Temari declared, “She’s a keeper.”

A large shadow passed over the kitchen window, making the morning light blink, and the siblings turned to look at the suspicious activity outside. Gaara crossed over to the window and lifted up the screen before poking his head out. On the immediately adjacent rooftop he beheld Pua, who was seated happily on top of Gamakichi’s head. The toad was now enormous: roughly the size of a small cottage.

The summon creature waved at Gaara pleasantly, “Hope it’s not too early, Kazekage-sama! Me and my little buddy wanted to drop off some mail for ya!”
"Hm." Gaara’s surprise faded, “Now is a fine time. I don’t know if there is any entrance big enough for you—"

“Nah, don’t worry about it. I’ll just hang out here if that’s okay.” Gamakichi lifted the small white rabbit up towards the mansion window, where she effortlessly hopped inside, “Pua’s got my delivery with her. It seemed like Naruto really wanted to talk to you.”

Gaara thanked the toad and estimated he could get a reply ready by the evening. Inside, Pua was on the kitchen table untucking three scrolls from her bandana. She left them in front of Gaara and then approached the fruit bowl interestingly.

He inspected the mail: one message from Naruto and two were from Haku. ‘That’s different.’ Gaara opened both of Haku’s scrolls and quickly discerned their purpose, ‘This one was intended for Temari.’ He resisted the urge to examine it and comb it over for anything inappropriate. He set it on the table and then took a seat to read his own message.

“Why do you have three?” Temari was inquisitive, “Does your sensei write to you as well?”

“Sometimes he does, but this time he hasn’t.” He gestured to the scroll he had set aside, “That was meant for you.”

She frowned. It could only mean one thing.

“You don’t have to read it.” Gaara reminded her, “It’s yours to do with it what you will.”

Pua had absconded with a pear and settled in front of Temari. The rabbit nibbled on the fruit while Temari looked down at her, mentally debating whether or not Haku’s message would amount to anything more than a steaming pile of shit. She began to stroke Pua’s plush soft fur while keeping her eyes trained on the offending scroll, conflicted over what to do with it.

Gaara dove into his correspondence:

Gaara,

If Temari refuses my letter I completely understand. I thought I might take you up on your offer. I have also thought about your warning. If you deem the search for my clan futile, I should expect to see a team of Sand shinobi whose purpose will be to reclaim me. I don’t know if you and I have an analogous definition of ‘futility.’ I am willing to look for as long as it takes, but you expressed that my homecoming should be within the next year or less. I can honestly say I have no idea how long this search will last, but I promise that if a Retrieval Team arrives and asks for my cooperation, they will have it. I also promise to try to shed Zabuza as soon as humanly possible. That may be for the benefit of the retrieval team, as he will not be so inclined to return me.

‘And why not?’ Gaara wondered before he continued.

Zabuza has finally made his intentions clear. He has been training me in preparation of a coup of the Mist Village. I do not know much about his plans at this point, but he expressed that I will be taking part in an ambush on the village leader. Could you imagine? As terrible as the state of Kirigakure is, I would never be so foolish to tread there, much less challenge a Kage. The sooner I can escape Zabuza, the better. My life may depend on it.

On the other hand, he has still refused to share anything he knows about my clan. At this point, I have turned to other sources of information. If his only intention is to share that knowledge with me after a successful coup d’etat, then it’d be best to strike him from my list of counsel. Jiraiya-sensei advised me not to be involved with any criminal activity in these lands, and in view of that, I would
like to try to put a stop to it when possible.

‘Godspeed.’ Gaara thought.

As Naruto aptly put it, there is no way I will ever return in time for the Chunin Exam. It is a sacrifice I am willing to make for now. If I am fortunate enough to find any of my relatives here, then it was time well spent. If not...I have given some serious thought to what I want to do with my life. With Tsunade’s consent, and yours as well, I think I would like to permanently relocate to Sunagakure, when all is said and done. I would very much like to be a personal guard of yours.

Gaara looked up from the message, stunned and excited all at once. Temari gave him a strange look, “What?”

“Nothing.” He lied. Gaara was rather fond of the idea of his friend being local again, at long last. He had a spare room to keep him in, and it sure would be nice to have Haku monopolizing household chores again as he had for many years.

The time is drawing closer to when you and Naruto may need to expect clashes with the Akatsuki, and my training and time away may be best applied in your defense. I asked Jiraiya-sensei what he thought of this, and he recommended that I stay near you as often as possible. He intends to keep watch over Naruto in Konohagakure, at least until he feels it is safe to leave. He instructed that I stay with you, and if I desire to visit home I should get used to commuting between Sand and Leaf. Should this arrangement be precluded, I will stay in Leaf and help however I can. I don’t want to be inaccessible to my friends anymore.

But until then, I have a few puzzles here to work out. I had the strange fortune of meeting another Swordsman’s apprentice named Ranmaru. He is being trained by Kurosuki Raiga…one of Zabuza’s least favorite people. This boy is a lot like me in many respects. He is quite amicable and has a natural healing talent…and a Kekkei Genkai as well. I have never seen a Doujutsu as unique as his before, and it would be wise to conduct some research on it. Its physical characteristics are drastically different from the Sharingan and Byakugan. Aside from that, I have been tutoring him in some jutsu while avoiding his mentor at all costs. Raiga has tried to kill me once before.

Gaara snickered.

Ranmaru may serve us as a valuable ally. He is already well-acquainted with Team Gai and he looks forward to seeing them again.

The look of humor on Gaara’s face morphed into bafflement.

I was surprised to hear that too. He has expressed interest in helping me search for my clan, and so that may help speed this process along. With respect to Zabuza’s demands…I will do my best to avoid the conflict between Mist loyalists and rebels, as well as any suicidal coup on the Mizukage. I doubt he has any information valuable enough to risk that catastrophe. I sincerely will try not to take too long, and forgive me if I do; you know that I don’t want to stay away from you and Naruto. I am tired of this journey that has scarcely begun, and I feel it would be better to return to my team.

Stay well, Gaara, and please consider instating me as one of your Black Ops. I have no intention of disappointing you.

Genuinely,

Haku

He looked up from the parchment to see that Pua had devoured most of the pear, twitching her white
whiskered nose. Haku sure did know how to persuasively pitch an idea or two. Gaara was about ready to endorse the position appointment before he stopped himself, carefully reading between the lines.

‘I believe Haku when he says that he wants to stay here and guard me from a criminal organization.’ Gaara then thought acidly, ‘But I don’t believe that is his only reason for being here.’ His eyes flicked over to his older sister, who had not noticed his glance, ‘Haku is too nice to be a scoundrel...but he’s still a scoundrel. He’d come here for Temari. Then I would have to break his legs...what good would he do on a Black Ops team after that?’

He thought that maybe he and Tsunade would need to roll a dice on it. Whoever rolls highest keeps Haku! It would be a perfectly reasonable decision-making method for Kage who were evenly matched in terms of irritability. Leaving it to chance might minimize any resentment (on Haku’s part) that Gaara was indeed, and always would be, cock-blocking for the sake of his older sister. At least if Haku was based in Leaf, Gaara wouldn’t have to worry every waking minute if Temari’s honor had been compromised. If he was a resident of Sand, well...it’d be more difficult to keep track of him. It was a nightmare waiting to happen.

“Tsunade should take him.” Gaara muttered.

“What?” Temari looked over her shoulder from the sink as she washed a bowl, “Did you say something, Gaara?”

“Just thinking out loud.”

“That sounded more like plotting out loud.”

He gave her the ‘drop it’ look and Temari shrugged, reaching for a towel to dry her bowl. Gaara checked the clock on the wall to see he had another ten minutes to kill, and so he looked over Naruto’s letter as well.

Hey Gaara,

I heard that you’ve been pretty busy in the Land of Waves! Ero-sensei keeps talking about how important it is that you support Tazuna and the Tide Village, and I keep thinking about how I can’t wait to get back there. I bet it is looking way better. I want to walk across my namesake bridge and check out what Tide ninja are like! But seriously, if there was ever a good way to start off your career as a Kage, helping the Land of Waves has to be it.

‘I am glad you think so, Naruto. Not everyone would agree...’ Gaara thought wryly.

So Senjutsu training is going about the same. There’s a lot of sitting and concentrating...it really makes your butt go numb. I get that it’s supposed to be worth it once you’ve mastered Natural Energy, but this is hands-down the most monotonous training in the world. It’s driving me nuts! All the other techniques I’ve learned barely scratch the surface of the time and energy I put in at the Toad Oil Pool. It isn’t easy to concentrate either when I’ve got so much on my mind. Half of the time, the reason I can’t concentrate is because you or Haku or Hinata pop into my head...and other things too...

Like the Nine-Tailed Fox. He was a supreme dick-bag when we first came here to Mount Myoboku, but for now we’ve been leaving each other alone. I was wondering about what I’m supposed to do with him now that I don’t technically need to rely on his chakra. Well, when Sage Training is done, I won’t need to. I can’t let him go even if I found a way to. Then it’s like a practical guarantee that he’ll wind up in the wrong hands...and then Baa-chan will turn me into a doughnut by shoving my
head up my ass. On the other hand, I can’t really trust the Fox ever again. If I use his chakra I will always be paranoid that he’ll hurt someone again.

The One-Tail has hurt you before. I remember when we first met and traveled to Konoha you were too afraid to sleep. Then, when you lost control during the Chunin Exam and we had to chase you… I realize now that I did not understand how important it was that you didn’t transform in that stadium. A lot of people might have died. Did you feel yourself slipping? Could you tell it was going to happen? I guess what I really want to know is…what do you do these days to stay in control? Is there something you can do or say to the Ichibi that helps? You’ve got to tell me if you have a suggestion, because I am about ready to pull my hair out. I can’t keep arguing with this Fox!

Sorry, I am just assuming that you’ve got your situation under control. If you’re having just as hard a time as me with your Biju…then we should probably start a focus group or something. There are other Jinchuriki out there and we need to talk to them!

‘Way ahead of you…’ Gaara noted, ‘But no…I am not suffering as acutely as you, Naruto. You have my sympathy.’

While I’m on the subject…it goes without saying that your brother and sister know, and Haku and I know…but does anyone else know that you’re a jinchuriki?

Gaara shut his eyes and inhaled softly. This was a more sensitive area.

Did you tell Sakura?

He looked up and stared blankly at the window. Sunshine was spilling inside with the full-force of morning. The sounds of shop-opening activity could be heard outdoors. Pua was following Temari around the kitchen as she put clean dishes away.

He most certainly had thought about it. Maybe if there had been more time during Sakura’s last visit…and maybe if the Tide Village hadn’t been rough-housed by the Shin clan, Gaara would have broached that topic with his girlfriend. Gaara was a very up-front kind of person, and as such, he had every intention of telling Sakura the truth.

Curiously, timing was a fickle, fleeting thing. What seemed like a fine moment to confess and discuss his identity would instantly seem inappropriate a second later. He was a busy man who had all the time in the world to take care of his official duties…but not so much to spend on matters of the heart. It definitely was a concern of his, but Gaara was hopeful that he would find a free pocket of time to calmly speak to Sakura…maybe over a decadent dinner and entertaining night out. No one said he couldn’t employ some enticement.

Truthfully, Gaara was expecting that she would let it roll off of her shoulders. ‘I could be wrong.’ He conceded privately, ‘But I don’t think I will be.’ He had been given an encouraging clue.

While he, Kakashi and Sakura had made haste to the Tide Village from Suna some days ago, they had taken a few breaks for water and rest. Teacher and pupil had shared some anecdotes from their adventure to the Hidden Star Village, and one such heartening tale was told by Sakura, who had studied the origins of Chakra and Biju while in the Hoshikage’s library.

“It was fascinating!” She gushed.

Gaara was surprised that such a text existed. He was less surprised that his girlfriend had read it cover to cover in less than a day. She had held her hands about a foot apart, estimating the thickness of the tome, “It was about this big, I’d say. I think that was because the print type was so large…”
And she went on and on about the First Sage, his wily, chakra-greedy mother, the Sage’s determined and gifted brother, their children and descendants, etcetera, etcetera. Gaara’s eyes had glazed over as she relayed the details…but he woke up when she explained the creation of the nine Tailed-Beasts.

“The Sage of the Six Paths was their parent. At the end of his life, the chakra inside of him was born into the world as living beings with thoughts and feelings, although…I’m not sure how that’s possible.” Sakura explained, “He named them all! Just like his children. It said in the book that they loved and respected him,” She smiled cleverly, “That makes them seem a little less frightening, doesn’t it? They started out small too…and grew into these huge beings that we no longer understand. It’s a shame people have forgotten.”

He had agreed with her quietly.

Gaara was now rather confident that Sakura might even be enthusiastic about his role as a jinchuriki. Her highly-educated mind could probably make sense of it, or at least, not hate him for it. He needed only to find a proper time to have that conversation.

“Did you finish?” Temari asked, snapping him out of his memory.

“Oh. Not yet. I was just thinking.”

If you did, please tell me that she took it well! I was kind of debating whether or not I should tell Hinata. I probably have to. It’d be selfish not to say anything about it and then start a life with her in Leaf…and then let the Akatsuki crash my party. She deserves piece of mind. I know I owe her complete honesty…I just wish I wasn’t so damn scared to talk about it. I don’t know if there will ever be a right time to do it, but if you’ve got any good advice I am begging for it.

Gaara smiled and thought to himself, ‘Eat shit.’

Naruto would figure it out. Hinata and Sakura were much too different to even try finding a one-size-fits-all solution to their problem. Gaara was sure his friend was going to recognize it soon enough.

I’ll try calming down now. I got pretty worked up on my day off! If I just keep cool and meditate maybe I’ll master Natural Energy by tomorrow. Who knows? I’m pretty sure I’ll be able to kick your ass the next time I see you, so don’t get comfortable! The Kazekage shouldn’t be losing to a guy like me, right? Take care of yourself and thanks in advance for any advice!

Naruto

“Pft.” Gaara wanted to laugh. Losing to Naruto seemed like a truly implausible scenario, but as he set the scroll down and stood up from his seat, he felt heaviness on his shoulders. The lethargy reminded him of his unsettling dream and that, indeed, he should worry of whether or not he was a match for Naruto. Naruto was being trained specifically to deal with the Akatsuki, a common threat of theirs. It was no laughing matter. He let the idea settle in the back of his mind, alongside confessing to Sakura and wondering if it was true that the Tailed Beasts could love someone. He would return to these musings after his daily drudgery was out of the way.

“I’m off, now.” Gaara informed his sister while gathering up his correspondence, “Be prepared to go to the Tide Village this afternoon. Matsuri should be back from her mission by then…and she implored me to let her go with you.”

“No problem. I like travelling with her.”

“Also,” Gaara stopped at the door, “If you want to reply to Haku, feel free to send Pua ahead. I can always wait or send something with Gamakichi.”
An intense look lit her teal eyes but the young woman nodded, still uncertain what she was going to do with the message. As her younger brother ventured to find a pair of shoes, Temari silently tucked the scroll into her sash.

A short time later, Gaara switched on the light in his office and then cracked open a window behind his desk. He took a seat and then rolled his shoulders, preparing himself for the day’s tedium. He eyed several reports that had been left in the incoming communication bin, noted the empty outgoing bin and sighed happily that his desk was, more or less, clear today. Other reports would arrive throughout the day, but he was hopeful that he would not be exceptionally busy.

He reached into the inbox and examined the memos, ‘This one is from the Council…lovely. We have officially scheduled a meeting with the Wind Daimyo and it is our wish that you personally attend the rendezvous…to thank him for his generosity and his ongoing resolution not to favor the Land of Fire’s services as he has in the past…Suna cannot afford to displease-’ He crumpled up the paper and tossed it in a trash can, ‘Pandering bureaucrats.’

Gaara understood the context of this entreaty and did not make light of it. Sunagakure’s darkest times were fueled by the village’s inability to curry favor with the Wind Daimyo. As Kankuro and Temari had once explained, the daimyo had chosen to outsource missions to the Fire Country, chiefly the Leaf Village, to avoid the brittleness of local Sand ninja, who had declined in strength a decade or two ago. Desperate, Rasa, the Fourth Kazekage, initialized his plan to seal the Ichibi into a host and above all fortify the military of the Sand Village. It had not gone very well.

It was only up until recently, upon Gaara’s debut and Sand’s newfound might that the Wind Daimyo had started to shun outside help and call upon the aid of Sunagakure. The council was terrified of the prospect of another economic downturn, should they lose missions and revenue to other villages again. These days they regularly prostrated and catered to the wealthy lord’s whims, hoping he would never again abandon them.

Gaara did try to point out that Sand’s alliances and popularity had now garnered mission requests on an international scale, chiefly from the Fire Country, the Land of Waves, the Lightning Country, and, on a superbly rare occasion, the Land of Earth as well. Suna had come into its own and didn’t need to worry as much about what the daimyo thought, but of course old habits die hard, and the council would forever tread lightly.

He marked the date of the meeting down on a calendar and moved on. Another memo was a mission request from a business owner in Hidden Sand, down the road, by the look of it: Lord Kazekage, do you have any Genin teams to spare? A desert owl got loose in the shop’s attic and I need some quick kids who can catch it and set it free! Also, could they repaint the walls while they’re at it? Thanks!

“In fact I do…” Gaara said, half to himself. He set the request aside and then went to the last memos in the bin, which were typical blotter and not very urgent. He filled out a brief questionnaire about water quality and then dropped it in the outgoing box. Gaara glanced over his calendar, which had notes scrawled on several week days, and saw which task required his attention next.

He got up, taking the mission request with him, and then went downstairs to the administration building’s lobby. There were two Chunin attendants waiting for him at the panel table, and Gaara took a seat between them, sighing quietly.

“Good morning, Kazekage-sama!” The pair chirped.

“Good morning.”
One of the Chunin, a young man with pierced ears, accepted the request scroll Gaara handed him, “Oh! Is this one open to Genin teams, Gaara-sama?”

“It’s perfectly suitable in my opinion. When will the teams start arriving?”

“In about ten minutes. You’re early today!”

“I know.”

A new crop of freshly graduated Genin who had just been assigned to their respective Jounin Sensei would be arriving for their first mission assignment. The whole stack of requests on the table consisted of local D-Rank activities. They had more than enough to supply the fifteen new teams who would be storming the lobby in due time.

It was a long-winded affair. In the first hour, six teams trickled in, two of which took their sweet time with questions and other time-wasting banter. The kunoichi of the first team had given Gaara a serious, analytical look and asked, “Can you tell me what a tree looks like, Kazekage-sama?”

He gave her an even look, “I can.” Gaara gave a small smile to the girl’s abashed Jounin sensei, “I wonder why you ask that, Tae.”

“I’ve never seen one. No one in my class has! Kino said you could tell me because you lived in the Hidden Leaf Village for a while.” Her teammate made a face, not wishing to be referenced.

“Words will fail.” Gaara stated plainly, but sand crept from his gourd and created a very convincing replica of a tree, despite the off color and texture, “I think this is accurate. A tree.”

The girl was silent while she reflected on it like a museum art piece. Tae’s sensei described her as the “investigative type” and that she was inclined towards information gathering.

“She will have a future in reconnaissance, then.” Gaara wagered, “But I suggest you read more. Any person in this land could have learned about trees from literature.”

“Tae hates books.” Kino added emphasis by nodding simultaneously with his other teammate.

“Perhaps photography.” The Kazekage suggested, “Dismissed.”

The following two teams did not dawdle, but the most recent team of three boys was jubilant and chatty. One trainee in particular, who seemed to be the ringleader, fancied himself a comedian.

“Hey, Gaara-sama! What do you have when a Rock shinobi is buried up to his neck in sand?” The boy joked.

Gaara frowned and attempted to figure it out. The Chunin beside him were also stumped.

“Not enough sand!” The boy roared. His teammates guffawed with him while their master told them the gag was in bad taste. Iwagakure was the butt of a lot of children’s jokes; though they ought not to be so quick to look down on Rock ninja should they meet in battle.

“I have one for you.” Gaara told the boy, “How can you study the fossil record of Sunagakure?”

“Oh…” The child blinked, taken aback.

“Watch Chiyo.”

Both Chunin snickered while the Genin boys laughed happily, nodding to themselves as if they
planned to adopt the witticism. Their sensei only slapped his forehead in disappointment, knowing he would be hearing dumb jokes for quite a while. Gaara asked them to be on their way after they were assigned a mission.

After all of the teams had been given something to do for the day, Gaara dropped by his office and discovered several new messages waiting for him. He sat down and replied to a few pieces of mail until a female Jounin arrived with a new scroll in hand.

She was a beauty with a sharply angled, narrow face, made more intense by how her white-blond hair that was cut short against the scalp, “Hello, Kazekage-sama.”

“Zeriko.”

“You may want to take a look at this.” She seemed perplexed, “It arrived twenty minutes ago and is addressed to you, from Tazuna.”

Gaara shut his eyes tight and dropped his pen. The news was a psychological attack. He dearly hoped it wasn’t another fee for damages, because he would not be able to squeeze one single ryo out of the council at this point.

“Thank you, Zeriko.” He accepted the message when she handed it to him.

“My lord, I don’t think this is a serious issue.” Zeriko cautioned him, “At the very least, it has nothing to do with money. Forgive me for checking.”

“Forgiven.” Gaara’s eyes widened with a thought, “Is Kankuro-?”

“Your brother was not mentioned at all. Everything appears to be stable…though it seems your friend Tazuna made a strange discovery.” She bowed and then took her leave.

Gaara opened the correspondence and read the hasty communiqué:

Gaara,

It’s Tazuna. I need to bounce something off of you. No, relax; you’ve paid for all the supplies we could possibly use down here to rebuild. Thanks.

Fill me in on this shinobi-hierarchy bullshit: we have trained Genin, Chunin, some Medical and Sensory Corps…and your sister will be rotating down here any day now to begin the training of the Jounin and the Special Ops. I get all of that. The Tide Village is currently under the control of a civil council, but any ninja who makes a bid for power as “Village Leader” is stipulated by our laws to be democratically selected by all citizens. Progressive, huh?

Well, some retired Mist ninja in Tide suburbia told me there’s a component I’ve never heard of before. What the hell is a jinchuriki? And why do these people whisper that we HAVE one here already? That doesn’t make a lick of sense. My ninja neighbors described a jinchuriki as a monster-like shinobi person, and that they can serve as an ultimate line of defense for a village. I say to hell with it because it’s probably expensive. But seriously, what is it? And do I really have one hidden under my nose? Help me investigate.

Tazuna

Gaara tossed the parchment onto his desk and groaned. He leaned back in his chair and held his head, feeling neurons and synapses in his brain squealing like tire wheels in an attempt to understand. This had to be a mistake. A misunderstanding. A dirty, dirty lie. There was no way a military trump
card could have accidentally ended up in the Tide Village’s cradle.

“Unless…it wasn’t an accident.” Gaara was wary not to dismiss the idea too fast.

If a jinchuriki had been suffering mistreatment in their home village (which was a reality Gaara could grasp) there was, at least, substantial plausibility for said sufferer to settle in a nontoxic, more comfortable village. The prosperity of the Tide Village would be appealing. Everything was so new and healthy, and ancient prejudices were almost entirely absent in the Land of Waves. It would be a good place, theoretically speaking, for a jinchuriki to nest.

‘And the resident Mist ninja have caught on to this new occupant,’ Gaara noted, ‘There could be truth to it. I’ll need to advise Temari to keep her eyes and ears open, in the event they cross paths.’

He was curious about this incident. He might even make a cordial, personal visit to meet this mysterious Tide inhabitant. Gaara would by no means encourage Tazuna to think the jinchuriki was Tide’s property, or any backwards thinking like that, but he would reassure Tide citizens that their esteemed guest should be treated no differently than anyone else: for better or worse. A normal life and a peaceful home is probably all that a wayward Sacrifice could ask for.

‘Naruto…I think I know where we can start that focus group you spoke of.’

Gaara wrapped up his paperwork and then checked the clock on the wall: a few minutes until noon. He left the administration building and crossed the street to a small diner for lunch. He had the usual: salted, grilled gizzards and rice. Hot sauce on the side. Only in the absence of Naruto and Haku could he enjoy his favorite, albeit unattractive, meal.

Today, Gaara got away with paying for his meal, but only because the first-day-on-the-job waitress did not know any better. On his way out, Gaara overheard the young lady’s manager chastising the new recruit about “courtesies we always extend to the Kazekage.” And sometimes, people with empty wallets.

Back at the office, he had a short meeting with a Jounin and his sidekick/best-friend Chunin companion, and got a patrol update. After their appointment, Matsuri bounced into the room with a grin on her face.

“Gaara-sensei! Is Temari-sama ready to go?”

“I think so,” He added in annoyance, “Won’t you say hello to me first?”

“Sorry! Hello, Sensei! My mission went well!”

“That’s more like it. Where is Maki? She should be here for the debriefing.”

“She went to the ladies room. I ran all the way back here so we didn’t stop for a bathroom break…”

“Please,” Gaara rubbed his forehead, noticing a faint ache still lingered, “Do not let your enthusiasm for the Tide Village…or any particular person…prevent your teammates from using the lavatory. It’s impolite.”

“Sorry, Sensei…” Matsuri was apologetic, winding down from the excitement of her next mission assignment.

When Maki, a Jounin level Seal-Master who had accompanied Matsuri to a desert outpost, returned from the bathroom, she smiled wearily at Gaara and gave him her report. Nothing at all interesting. She had high praise for Matsuri, though, “She is so energetic! You have a fantastic student, Gaara-
Maki left for home without having any idea that Matsuri’s energy was motivated by a boy. That might have influenced her opinion a tad differently.

After chatting with his cheerful student for fifteen minutes, Temari finally arrived. Matsuri noted out loud how the woman’s manicure matched her blood-red dress, “And can I get an armor breastplate too?” Matsuri turned to her teacher curiously, seeing the practical and fashionable use of such outerwear.

“Sure. Return after two more successful missions, and then you can get fitted for one at the armory.” Gaara told the girl, “And of course, follow every order that Temari gives you.”

“I will!”

“Gaara, I’ll send a message to you after we reach the Tide Village.” The blonde woman established, “Kankuro will give me his updates and connect me with other officials.” She smiled, “I bet Tazuna will be happy to see me.”

“Let’s hope so…”

“Take it easy.” Temari advised smugly, “I’ll have everything under control.”

He nodded, anxious that she might just be right about that. He bade his sister and student farewell and then they were off. Gaara completed any remaining paperwork and then sat in silence, staring catatonically at the wall of his office.

Maybe now was a good time to write reply messages to Naruto and Haku?

‘I don’t feel like it.’

Maybe he could take an hour break and try that Biju-chakra training he ought to get around to?

‘I don’t feel like doing that either…’

But he knew what he did feel like doing for an hour.

Gaara rose from his seat and exited the office, heading to the narrow, emergency-exit staircase to the roof of the building. And there beneath the unyielding desert sun, suspended between two radio antenna poles, was his trusty nap hammock. It was one thing he was still grateful to Kankuro for.

He got comfortable in the hammock and then folded his hands on his chest. Sand crept up in a small half-dome to provide some shade for the young man, and Gaara allowed himself to drift.

His muscles gradually relaxed. In his pre-sleep minutes, slipping away from consciousness, Gaara thought of the letters his friends had sent him.

‘If I do allow Haku to stay here as one of my Black Ops…I am going to keep him on a short leash. A tight regimen. I’ll make sure he’s so exhausted after every mission that he won’t have the energy to utter Temari’s name…’ The thought made him feel better, even if he was pretty sure he would fail to enforce the strategy.

‘And Naruto is still troubled by the Nine-Tailed Fox.’ He wasn’t exactly sure how to relate. Gaara hardly ever paid much attention to Shukaku, and when he did meditate he purposefully avoided
contact with the Biju. For curiosity’s sake, Gaara felt that now was as good a time as any to visit the giant, grumbling tanuki that dwelled within.

Behind closed eyelids, he came to see the huge chamber that housed his sandy resident. An enormous, wooden cube of bars kept the tanuki imprisoned, with not even a smidge of space for the creature to unfurl its long tail. Surrounding the cage was a shallow plane of water, only a few inches deep. Ripples raced as Gaara walked up to the prison, calm and inquisitive.

**What are you doing here?** Feral, golden eyes shifted to look down at the visitor, surprised.

“I had time to stop by.”

**How very considerate of you.**

“I’m trying.” Gaara folded his arms, and after several moments of staring at the beast, he spoke again, “I don’t have much reason to talk to you at all. I dislike you. The beginning of my life was a travesty because of your manipulation.”

*I had to pass the time somehow. Besides, your improved seal has hardly given you reason to complain these past few years.* The tanuki scowled, *Today, you are my manipulator. Two wrongs don’t make a right, or so they say. Now I am the one abused!*

“And you feel that you don’t deserve it?”

*I NEVER HAVE!* The biju roared, *Never, in my whole life, did I do something to deserve this! Getting locked up! Treated like property! The Sand Village made me what I am when they threw me in a dungeon never to see the light of day. The only company I’ve kept were the miserable shinobi they used as sacrifices, and they too were treated worse than cattle…*

Gaara blinked, latching on to the detail, “You can sympathize with your jailors?”

*It was easier to sympathize with them than with anyone else. Most of them were fools…but the priest wasn’t so bad.*

“A priest?”

*Bunpuku, the old one. He took the time to get to know me, at least.*

“I suppose by comparison I’m dreadful.”

Waggling its tail to get comfortable, the biju sat to face Gaara while they conversed, *Not dreadful. Just young. Young and foolish.*

Gaara’s smirk was comprised of shock and appreciation.

**What are you smiling about?**

“You’re not as bad as I remember.”

*Are you sure? I would still kill every man, woman and child in this village if I had the chance! They’ve had it coming. It’s the pound of flesh I demand for how I was treated!*

“Punishing people now will not be proper retribution for those who have wronged you in the past.” Gaara pointed out, “The only person who really wanted to use you was my father. The council and
all of the other villagers…would prefer not to wield you as weapon. Doing so has never improved the condition of Suna, and none of us expect it to.”

The tanuki was amused; *Maybe you aren’t so foolish after all. But truly, what am I supposed to do? How am I supposed to feel? Someone’s head needs to roll for what was done to me!*

“You need a better outlet than senseless killing.” Gaara recommended.

*You enjoy killing people too, Gaara.*

“You made it pleasurable. It was tempting. But often…I would only try to kill those who threatened innocent people.”

*If I don’t kill…then what in the world do you expect me to do? Shukaku growled, It’s all I’ve ever been used for. That’s all I know.*

Gaara conceded with folded arms, “That’s a good question.”

*Indeed it is.*

“Well then,” The young man postulated, “I should not be the one to tell you how to live. But if you could choose anything that would not harm another…what would you want to do with your time? If I set you free right now on oath not to kill, what seems right to you?”

The biju did not answer. It stared at Gaara incredulously, as if he had been asked an impossible math question.

‘*Perhaps I overwhelmed him?’* Gaara wondered.

*I would…* The tanuki hesitated, closing his eyes in an expression of authentic nostalgia, *I would go home.*

“Where is your home?”

*I used to live in a nest on the side of Mount Daisen, near the sand dunes…and sometimes Kokuo would visit me. We were good friends, once.*

“Kokuo?”

*The tailed beast, Kokuo, you nincompoop! The Five-Tailed, you would say. Odd looking fellow, but very smart.*

It was Gaara’s turn to stare in dumbfoundment. The tanuki began to laugh merrily at the sight of Gaara’s face.

“And so…when you are referred to as Shukaku…that is your name? Your *given* name?” Gaara verified.

*The name I was given at birth! It has been tossed around so carelessly that people forgot to address me by name! They treated it like a title! Clueless pups. It was synonymous with ‘monster’ after a while, but that’s just what my father called me.*

Gaara scrambled to recollect what Sakura had shared about her investigation in the Star Village, “Your father…the Sage of the Six Paths.” At least, that’s what he recalled his girlfriend saying.
Yes. So you aren’t stupid after all. How did you learn about him?

“Sakura.”

Shukaku grinned, I will thank her.

“You will do no such thing.” Gaara warned.

But she already knows about me! We should be introduced.

“So…if you were all given names at birth…what is the Nine-Tailed Fox called?” Gaara asked, curious about Naruto’s inhabitant.

Shukaku sneered, That arrogant, overinflated, vulpine sack of shit is named Kurama! And I definitely need to kill him.

Gaara was intrigued, “Why is that?”

I hate him! He acts like he’s the strongest and always puts me down for my single tail. If I blew his head off then he wouldn’t be so quick to patronize!

Gaara came closer to the prison, his nose a hair’s breadth away from the wooden bars. It had never occurred to him that the One-Tailed tanuki could have relationships with its biju brethren, or have any type of complexity at all. It was the first time that his proximity to Shukaku was not dangerous. The pot-bellied tanuki regarded him without an ounce of contempt; rather, he just continued to complain about how intolerable the Nine-Tailed Fox was.

And with his full attention Gaara listened, nodding from time to time.

At one point, Shukaku snapped out of his moody rant and looked up, finally noticing that Gaara had gotten comfortable on top of the wooden cage, Huh…when did you get up there?

“At about the part where you were insisting you could prove all Biju have the same potential power.”

Ah, that’s right. Well that’s what I think, for whatever my opinion is worth. So what if Kurama has eight more tails than me? Give me a clean shot! I’ll win.

“Have you ever met in battle before?”

No. Tragically.

“Would you like to?” Gaara teased.

Sure I would! But when is that ever going to happen?

“Naruto is the jinchuriki of the Nine-Tailed Fox, and I highly doubt he would turn down a contest of strength if I challenged him.” The young Kazekage mused, cross-legged above the biju, “That might be a suitable opportunity for you. I’d like to see if your theory is correct.”

Quick! Invite that kid over here!

“I have some projects to finish for now, but you can trust that I have every intention of testing myself against him.” Gaara assured the beast, “However…I often wonder if I’d be a match. I’ve been quite lax…and Naruto has not stopped training since he left Konoha. He might make a fool out of me with
his jutsu.”

*Is that so?* A rumbling growl shook the cage; *You really believe that twerp and Kurama would win?*

“If I am fighting on my own, I don’t expect to.” He clarified, “With your help, I at least stand a chance.”

The tanuki furrowed its brow up at his visitor, suspicious, *You’re only trying to bait me…you just want my chakra.*

“I want to be able to rely on you, just as I hope you will try to rely on me.”

**What do I need your help for?**

Gaara shut his eyes for a moment, “I think…maybe the time is nearing for you to go home. If the Akatsuki are stopped…and when my life is over…there is no reason for you to be held captive in Suna. I promise to let you return to your former life.”

Shukaku blinked in surprise, *Do you mean that?*

“I do.” He nodded, “And I apologize…I had no idea that you had a place to call your own and live in peace. There seems to be a general lack of education when it comes to Tailed Beasts…and it’s regrettable. As Kazekage, I want to do as much good as possible…and there is no reason for me to not extend that resolution to you as well, provided that you aren’t trampling us all.”

**Well, I’ve thought about it.** Shukaku admitted, *But maybe I need to forget it.* He then added, *Though that doesn’t make up for how shitty I feel! I hope you know!*

“I know.”

*And your plan won’t mean a damn thing if the Akatsuki are still around…they’ll just be waiting at my doorstep.*

“They are an issue that many nations are trying to deal with. Believe me; I would not, in good conscience, send you anywhere knowing they would have an opportunity to take you.”

**Hmm.** The tanuki mulled it over for a few beats, *In that case…thanks.*

Gaara shrugged, “It’s what any decent person would do.”

*If that’s true then I haven’t met many.* Shukaku supposed, *But you…are like Bunpuku. But you’re free! You’re lucky they don’t keep you locked up. You have a much better chance of making changes.*

“Thanks, I think.”

*Now about that fight with the Fox and his wee little container…* Shukaku smiled devilishly again, *You have a point. That boy might whip you good if you’ve been slacking like you say, but we can count on one thing…*

“What’s that?”

*That Kurama won’t help him! Count on it. He is prideful and reluctant to help anyone but*
himself! There’s the key. The crafty tanuki spun his plan, rubbing his paws together, He won’t expect to meet you in battle and watch you flood with every last drop of my chakra! I’ll light you on fire! I won’t hold back and I won’t regret watching that rotten Fox’s face as he gets pulverized. He’ll never see it coming!

Stupefied, Gaara looked down at the excited, cheering beast below, “What…are you talking about? I’m not sure I-”

Do I need to spell it out for you? I’ll give you all of my strength! Ha ha! Kurama might think I’m too proud to do it, but dammit I will!

“All of it?” He was actually a little frightened by the proposition, “That might be excessive.”

Exactly. It’s excessive. You’ll win in a heartbeat! He laughed again before acknowledging, But it might be rough. You will need to practice, Gaara. Harnessing my full power won’t be easy.

“It was on my to-do list.”

Put it at the top! You need to work hard! I’m no cake-walk. Shukaku warned, But…I think I can trust you. I think I might even like you.

“I’m flattered.”

You should be. I don’t like a lot of people, but I probably like more people than Kurama does. A stingy jerk like him is far too set in his ways…and if I see that you end up sucking or acting like an idiot, He rattled his cage, I’ll rue having had this conversation with you. I will stick it to you if you let me down, mark my words!

“Marked.”

Ha! Good. The tanuki folded his thick arms and nodded, I feel…kind of happy. How strange is that? It’s been so long. Usually I only get excited while torturing or eating souls.

“It’s not that strange. Bonds are supposed to feel good.”

That must explain why you go to such lengths to make friends and all that junk.

“You have solved the riddle.” Gaara commended him.

Sometimes I can figure those out. Oh! I can’t wait to rearrange that damn Fox’s face… He looked up at Gaara again, And getting to go home…that’ll be glorious. I really hope you mean it. I hope this isn’t lip-service just to get me on your side.

“It really isn’t.” The young man guaranteed, “Whatever is necessary: classes, legislation, meet-and-greets…I will see it done.”

What is: meet-and-greet?

“Introducing people to you at public meetings. They need to see that the only reason they are afraid is because they don’t understand.”

How am I supposed to meet a bunch of teeny humans?
“I’ll let you out and you can take over.” Gaara was casual about it, “You’ve done it before.”

Yeah, but that was when I was laying waste to your beloved Leaf Village.

“Do you think I would keep my promise if you did something like that again?”

Of course not.

“Right. Then you simply need to sit still. Talk to them if you want.” He laughed quietly to himself, “You are surprisingly talkative.”

The only time the other biju took me seriously was when I argued with them. I had to get good at it.

“I understand that feeling.” Gaara agreed, thinking of the village council.

Hey, do you know how long you’ve been asleep for?

“I’m asleep?” Gaara was baffled.

You are. Our link is always stronger when you’re asleep. It’s been two hours. You’re late!

With a lunge, Gaara dove straight from his rendezvous with Shukaku back into the conscious world. He got tangled in the hammock and flipped, falling face-first onto the warm stone roof of the building. Somewhere in the back of his mind he could hear the internal laughter of the tailed beast observing his graceful awakening. The conversation had exceeded his one-hour break from office work and was probably creating a traffic-jam of appointments downstairs.

Gaara stood up and brushed himself off irritably, ‘Thanks for the warning…’

You’re welcome. Get to work, you slouch.

The following day in the early afternoon, Temari and her rallied group of veteran ninja were making good time towards the Land of Waves. Matsuri was unstoppably chipper the whole time.

They had cut through the southern portion of the Land of Rivers by way of a new trade road. By the end of the next day, Temari estimated her unit would be crossing the Great Naruto Bridge from the mainland to the island. ‘I still can’t believe that’s what it’s called.’

The Sand coalition stopped for lunch at the top of a forested cliff near the crest of a waterfall. Every shinobi hunkered down in the grass and on logs to unpack their meals. While Matsuri passed out water rations to older ninja (except for one Black Ops representative, who was her age) Temari stole away to a grove of pine trees for some peace and quiet.

‘Alright. There’s probably no harm in reading this. It’s just ink and paper. Meaningless.’ The woman told herself as she inspected her correspondence, ‘And when I’m done I can toss it over that waterfall…’

She got comfortable on the smooth face of a boulder and nibbled at her lunch, letting her eyes scan over the message:

Temari,

Please do not feel obligated to reply back to this, and after reading please do not feel obligated to
think of me any differently than you have for the last year.

I hardly know where to begin.

Currently, I am sitting in the tea house of the man who saved my life when I was a small child. Hiroshi was the merchant who implored Jiraiya-sensei to bring me, Naruto, and Gaara to the safety of the Leaf Village. I pass the time here in-between training with Momochi Zabuza and searching for my clan. Unfortunately, it’s more of the former than the latter. At the moment, I have not come across much evidence that could point me towards the clan I am descended of.

More and more, everything you last said to me has proven true. My chances of successfully locating others with the Hyoton are much slimmer than I had originally thought. I am alone with a barbarian who obsesses over the recapturing of Kirigakure. And I have also gravely hurt the people who have the only right in the world to be called my family. You told me so, and you probably are not thrilled for me to acknowledge it now. My failure and isolation is deserved.

I know that I should be protecting Gaara and Naruto. It should be my highest priority. Even when I know what is important, I somehow find a way to defer these things in favor of selfish pursuits. The same way I left you that day, I knew that it was you who was substantially more precious than any clan or relative I might meet. I left anyway, foolishly thinking I could make it a short trip, and yet more foolish than that; believing that I could still be loved after your abandonment. It only makes sense that I be shed and forgotten, because I did not give you what was so plainly owed. Your hatred is justified, and what’s more, I would have reacted no differently if I had been in your place.

What a wretched and sickening character flaw; in which I have so many people that I love, and that I consistently and unfailingly distance myself from them. Would I be any stronger, wiser, or worldlier had I stayed by your side as opposed to training here? Would it matter? I truly doubt I’ve chosen the best option. While I reflect on it, I can only conclude that no matter how much you or Gaara may resent me, it can never compare to how much I hate myself.

I left you in pain. I was stupid to think that you would recover the way Naruto and Gaara did. That you would be able to manage. My friends were well prepared for our separation, but you were anticipating the opposite. It was a cruel and thoughtless thing to do to you, Temari.

And what I did may not deserve to be forgiven. How could I believe that there was ever a reason good enough to leave behind the people I love? In the same way that I helped our Retrieval Team try to deter Sasuke, I too should have been stopped. I likely would have seen the error of my ways the next day if you had all tackled me. But there’s no use in speculation now.

I want to be someone better than I am. On the surface I might seem pleasant and sincere, but I have hidden jealousy, hopelessness, selfishness and hate. All of these feelings have been intensified in me while I have stayed here, making me even more certain that I can improve when I stand by my friends once again.

If Gaara allows it, I will stay with him as a guard in Sunagakure, when all of this foolishness is behind me. And there need be nothing more than that. We shouldn’t speak, and I will stay out of sight whenever you are near. All the respect that you deserved from me I will pay many times over, and if it can only be from the shadows, I will always be devoted to your happiness in life. To tell you that I am sorry scarcely approaches the magnitude of what I really mean, but it will have to do.

I love you.

Haku
After reaching the end Temari popped a rice-and-mackerel roll in her mouth, chewing ferociously. The scroll slipped from her hand, bounced off her leg and then dropped into the wild forest grass. It had not been what she was expecting. She stood and stared thoughtlessly into the tangle of conifers ahead of her, and for a second wondered if what she had read could be erased from her mind. Her chin dropped and she helped herself to another roll.

To her great consternation, Temari noticed the tears that had welled in her eyes and left two warm trails down her cheeks as she ate. Nearly nothing and no one could evoke such a reaction from her.

Temari swallowed the last of her lunch and then let out a sound of profound discomfort. She picked up the scroll and shut it, stowing it away again in her belt. Perhaps words truly were the greatest weapon of all, she supposed.

Leaving her stone seat, Temari traipsed slowly through the forest grass until she entered a wider clearing. She believed there was no point in cleaving the pines apart during her next order of business. She reached for her fan, poised to snap it open, and then hesitated when she was prepared to toss her correspondence into the air and shred it. Temari held the scroll firmly, frowning. She wanted to destroy it. She wanted to not believe what she had read.

Cursing her inability to cut the heart-sundering message apart, Temari jogged over to the cliff-edge of the mountain, where the river they had camped near cascaded down into clear falls. She could hurl it with all of her might and then regret no more. She pulled her arm back and then stopped again. With wide, anguished eyes, Temari began to accept that even if she did dispose of Haku’s letter; his meaning had successfully reached her. It could not be undone.

She wanted to see something fly off of the ledge, so she kicked a pinecone down to its doom.

Temari stowed the letter back into her belt with a sigh and returned to where she had left her lunchbox. It was an exercise in futility. She had been foolish enough to read it, and so, logically, she ought to expect consequences.

‘What does he want me to do? Forgive him? Forget him? Kick his ass?’ She debated furiously, ‘The only thing that he really got across by writing all of that...was saying that I was right.’ Temari slowly smirked in satisfaction, ‘I. Was. Right.’ The validation did kind of feel good, but her smile faded and she began to cry quietly again. She used to weep into her mother’s lap as a small girl, overwhelmed with childish worries, but after Karura’s death Temari had hardened.

Now her heart had learned to ache again. Haku’s admission couldn’t reverse their suffering. All it did was acknowledge it.

"Temari-sama?"

The woman jumped a little and wiped her face, turning to find Matsuri. The young kunoichi pushed past the skirt-like pine branches in her way and then touched Temari’s back, immediately empathetic, “Are you feeling alright?”

She chuckled, recovering, “Now I am.”

“You look like you’ve been crying!”

Temari cleared her throat, “Herm! Well...sometimes you have to cry. You don’t have to let anyone see, but I was taught to feel how I feel and not deny it. I just want to keep my dignity.”

“I see. Did someone say something to you?” Matsuri was curious as they returned to the riverside camp.
“Don’t worry about it,” Temari have her companion a small smile, “I’m going to be fine.” She looked ahead with a sigh, “As soon as I get to that beach…I will be totally fine…"

After another day of traveling, Temari and her company of Sand shinobi had crossed from the mainland into the Land of Waves. The Great Naruto Bridge was a bit congested that morning: two groups of tourists had blocked the center of the causeway for photographs. They were eventually herded aside.

From the corner of her eye, Temari noticed Matsuri quaking beside her as they approached the Sand Training Program barracks. The girl was fit to burst from excitement. The woman smiled to herself, pleased that the younger kunoichi had something to look forward to. Matsuri’s happiness was slowly drawing her out of her own melancholic funk.

When they rounded the corner past the perimeter fence they found themselves a skip and a jump away from Kankuro. He was having an animated discussion with teenage Tide students in the yard outside of the Jounin Station. Temari noticed that his face paint was looking particularly tribal. He noticed their presence and glanced over his shoulder with a grin, “Well aren’t you a sight for sore eyes!”

“And a sore ass, because I know Gaara kicked yours.” She snarked.

“He did,” Kankuro confirmed as he walked up to them, “But I guess that just means that you’re next, Big Sis.”

“Keep dreaming.” Temari put a hand on her hip, “I plan on running a tight ship around here.”

“You do that,” He turned to the young shinobi with him, “Everyone, this is my sister, Temari. She is going to be the Jounin in charge after I leave. Please, do not piss her off.” Kankuro added, “Temari, these are the top students from the training program. Most of them are projected to test at Chunin level or higher.”

She raised her eyebrows, “Not too shabby.”

Matsuri quickly skimmed the dozen of students circled around Kankuro but could find neither hide nor hair of Menma. She did not see Inari either, but she was less surprised about that.

While Temari was giving orders to the arriving coalition behind her, Matsuri stole a moment to speak to Kankuro, “Kankuro-sama! I hope you’re doing well.”

“I’m better now. How are you, kid?”

“I’m fine.” Her smile proved it, “Do you know where Menma is?”

“I do, actually. He works a day job until 4:00. He joins the practice drills in the evening,” Kankuro smirked, “But he doesn’t really have to. He’s also considered the top of the class, if not the top, but technically he isn’t from Tide. Tazuna said he wants him to be an official shinobi of this village.”

“Really?” She squeaked, “That’s amazing!”

“Yeah, I bet that makes you happy.”

“So…he’s working right now?”

“He should be. That kid’s dirt poor and he told me he’s trying to afford his own place.” Kankuro
shrugged, “I told Tazuna about his situation and I think they’re going to arrange something for him.”

“Good! Where can I find him this afternoon?”

“Hm…I think it’s a shop on the Main Avenue, but I’m not sure. We’ll find out later.” He motioned for her to follow as Temari and the Sand veterans moved towards the common area for an assembly, “Let’s get Temari set up for now. It’ll be nice to have Tazuna breathing down someone else’s neck for a change.”

There was an hour and a half long session held by Kankuro and other program advisors to get the new Sand group up to speed. They covered important topics, security measures and goals before meeting up with Inari, who was once again the certified tour guide for the Tide Village. He walked them through the important parts of the (rebuilt) village and pointed out training fields and facilities they could use later.

Matsuri fell in step beside the boy as he shepherded the Sand ninja along.

“Does your grandpa pay you for this job?” She teased.

“Minimum wage.” He grumbled, “It’s okay though. Grandpa says being this up-close-and-personal with experienced ninja is a good way to learn.”

“He’s right. You’re the first person they’ll be talking to.”

“So how did your missions go? I heard Gaara told you to go home to get work done too.”

“I finished them quickly,” Matsuri had to substitute a word for light speed, because she had been hell-bent on getting back to Tide, “I try to make Sensei proud.”

“I can tell that you do. I’m trying really hard to make my grandpa proud.” Inari brightened as they marched closer to the Academy, “Menma has been my tutor since the whole Shin clan thing, and I think my jutsu are way better now. He said he’ll even teach me Sound Ninjutsu, maybe sometime next week!”

Matsuri was beaming, “He’s so generous.”

“Yeah, and you know…” Inari smiled mischievously, “He’s always talking about you.”

She blushed.

“He said he couldn’t wait for you to come back! Menma swears up and down that you turned his whole life around! Heh heh! That guy’s a pushover!”

“I wanted to see him too.” Matsuri conceded quietly.

“That’s obvious. You weren’t gone for very long…” He folded his arms behind his head, “So are you two, like, in love or something?”

“I…I…” She blinked rapidly, trying to wrap her head around it, “I don’t know.”

“Well Menma really likes you. I’m a dude, so I can tell just by how he acts and talks.” Inari stated matter-of-factly, “He’s in love and he goes to all of the romantic cafés and pagodas and stuff to get ideas…I’ve seen him do it.”

“Really?”
“Sure have!”

She risked a hopeful smile, “I like him a lot too…and I am so happy that Menma has a home now. I hope that I’ll have more opportunities to visit this place.”

“Sunagakure isn’t very far away. You can probably come by if Gaara lets you.”

“I think he tries to stall me from doing so, but I’ve been keeping up with my assignments.” Matsuri observed happily, “Sensei will get used to it.”

“Yup. Hey, check this out!” Inari gestured to the Academy yard they were passing through, “Kids always want to play here now because they know there was a ninja battle here!”

“Who knew that would bring good publicity?”

“Only because no one died, I figure.” He supposed, “And the best students are idolized these days! Menma is the most popular. Lots of girls give him presents and stuff.”

“Oh?” Her face dropped.

“Don’t worry! You’re his angel,” Inari teased, “I don’t think he cares about all of them. He works pretty hard and I think he’s a cool guy. I like him as much as I liked Naruto’s team.”

“Gaara-sensei’s teammates.” She nodded in understanding, “I look forward to meeting them someday. He’s very fond of them.”

Shouting interrupted their conversation. The pair stopped at the target practice lawn and the crowd of touring Sand veterans behind them halted as well. They watched as Tazuna got into a verbal altercation with one of the newer student tutors: the visiting Mist ninja named Utakata. Matsuri remembered the handsome man from when he had assisted her and Menma in Ongakure’s takedown.

Tazuna was seething in a low voice, “Now you listen up! If I catch you berating another student I’ll-!”

Utakata’s expression was skeptical, “You’ll what?”

“I’ll fire you.” The old man hissed, “Who’s gonna hire a jerk like you around here? I’m the only crazy person who thought it was worth a try! You can forget about living in the Tide Village if you don’t have any money!”

“Oooh, I am terrified.” He rolled his eyes, “And I wasn’t berating anyone.”

“I just caught you yelling at a student. We’ve warned you several times to go easy on them! This isn’t like that shit-hole Mist Village that you knew.”

“Of course it isn’t, but why aren’t students held to the same standard? How many times do I have to tell them not to refer to me as their sensei? That child wasn’t getting the message.”

“That’s all he did?”

“I find the term offensive.” Utakata clarified.

Inari shared a puzzled glance with Matsuri.

“You…” Tazuna shook with outrage, “You are a goddamn basket-case! It’s just a word! A respectful one! He called you sensei by mistake; so what? See that kid over there?” He pointed to a
spiky-haired student in a hoodie, “He tells me I’m an ugly old man, but do I let that offend me?”

Utakata silently stared at Tazuna, frowning as he listened.

“No! It’s because he’s a stupid little turd! Kids say things that are gonna piss us off sometimes and you need to shrug it off, man. If you have Mommy-issues, Daddy-issues or Sensei-issues then check ‘em at the door. I already paid you so you better do your job, dammit!”

The innocent Sand ninja congregation stood at the edge of the yard and watched as the Mist ninja huffed, folding his arms.

“I will,” Utakata lowered his voice, “But you tell them not to call me that…or I’m as good as gone.”

“I won’t cry about it.” Tazuna growled.

Utakata stalked over to a screened porch and the bright-eyed Academy bunch with him followed. They were hoping to learn how to use Water Clones before the Mist shinobi lost patience with them. The tutors always taught better techniques than Academy teachers.

Tazuna turned around and heaved a cleansing sigh. He then motioned for the Sand ninja to approach, “Sorry about that…I’ve got a new pain in the ass to argue with.”

“It’s okay, Grandpa.” Inari assured him, “He’ll come around.”

“I’m not holding my breath for that, kiddo, but it’s good to see fresh faces.” He cracked a smile, “I see Matsuri is back with some mature-looking folks!”

Matsuri gave Tazuna a friendly wave before slinking away with Inari. Kankuro stepped forward with his sister and introduced her to Tazuna. They chatted cordially before bringing Tazuna into the fold of veteran ninja who were glancing around curiously. Tazuna gawked at the 13-year-old Black Ops lieutenant who bowed politely to him. While the adults mingled, Inari and Matsuri hit the road again.

“I don’t have class today! Want to stop at the beach?” The boy suggested.

“Maybe not yet…I’m a little tired from traveling.”

“Let’s go to my house, then. Mom will make us something to eat and then you can nap or whatever.”

She warmed up to the idea, “I’d like that.”

And after an early-afternoon meal with Tsunami, as she fawned over Matsuri and told nostalgic stories, the Sand kunoichi relaxed. She would report back to Temari by evening, so she allowed herself to get cozy on a lounge chair and dozed off on maritime pillows while Inari and his mother hung laundry to dry. The family dog, Chokaro, romped and sniffed around the yard.

Matsuri awoke a few hours later, unsure if she had dreamed or not. She was feeling refreshed. She popped into the sitting room and found Inari and Tsunami practicing calligraphy together.

“Thank you so much for the meal, Tsunami-san. And for letting me sleep on your couch…”

“Not at all, dear! Is it time for you to go?”

“Yes. I wanted to find Menma before I check in with Temari-sama.”

“Tell him I say Hi!” Inari grinned.
Nodding jovially, she was off again. The sun was sinking in the sky as Matsuri wound her way off of a suburban road to the Main Avenue of the city. The street was long and still had some scaffolding from rebuilding projects. She had many places to check before she might find Menma’s workplace. Matsuri began the tedious poke-ins and questioning of employees.

Most people didn’t even know who she was talking about, but she found she had more luck with the youngsters.

“Menma? Yeah, he’s my favorite tutor at school!” An orange-haired boy insisted at a book shop, “He’ll be on the left side of the street at the Bubble Tea Café! I hope you find him!”

“Thank you!” Matsuri pressed on quickly descended upon the eatery. The bustle of customers was somewhat distracting and so she decided to sit down and be approached by the wait staff.

A pretty girl in an apron came up to her with a notepad, “Good afternoon! What can I get for you?”

“I might order something in a few minutes. I’m actually looking for someone who works here.”

“Oh! You’re a shinobi!” The waitress deduced by spying her hitai-ate, “Who can I find for you?”

“I wanted to speak to Menma. Can you tell me if he’s here?”

“Sure I can tell you! He’s my boyfriend after all!” The girl tittered, “He left work already and was going home. I’ll find him for you tomorrow if you want. Was this for official Tide Village business?”

Matsuri’s mouth hung open in horror.

“Um…are you okay, Miss Kunoichi?”

“I…I have to go.” She stood up in a fog and scuttled off, “T-Thank you.”

The waitress didn’t have a moment to reply before the shop’s door shut with a bell jingle.

The world around her swirled; the details of buildings and townspeople blurred together and burned with color like an expressionist painting. Matsuri struggled to keep calm as she hustled towards the Suna Training Program barracks. Luckily, as she passed through the vestibule into the Jounin Station lobby, Temari’s sharp eyes caught her.

“Hey, Matsuri! Where have you been? I wanted to-” The woman paused, “What happened?”

Matsuri tried to speak but an ‘eep’ sound passed her lips. Her eyes watered and she covered her face with her hands, shaken up. Temari looped an arm around her shoulders and directed her to a break room where Kankuro and Baki were having tea. She gently sat the girl down in an empty chair.

“What happened, Matsuri?” Temari asked again.

The girl lacked the ability to speak and wept quietly.

Kankuro and Baki looked at the small kunoichi with great concern. Kankuro crossed over to her and with a rare amount of compassion, patted her head, “What’s the matter, kid? Is it an emergency? I can get to Gaara if-”

She shook her head ‘no’ vigorously.

“Okay…” He held his chin in his hand, trying to devise a solution, “You’re upset. Let’s play
charades if it’s too hard to talk. Temari’s pretty good at guessing.”

The blonde woman gave him an irritated look.

“Come on! We need to figure it out.” Kankuro demanded.

Exhaling, Temari put a hand on Matsuri’s shoulder, “You can just nod ‘yes’ or ‘no’ and we’ll ask you about it. First, did someone injure you?”

Matsuri indicated no.

“Did someone get injured?” Temari ventured.

No again.

“Did someone say something to you?” Kankuro asked.

She nodded yes.

“Did it criticize you?” Temari added.

No.

“Was it about someone else?” Kankuro wondered.

Matsuri nodded yes.

“Who?” The brother and sister asked.

With great effort, Matsuri moved her hands from her face and pantomimed an instrument near her lips.

“Menma!” Kankuro immediately understood, clarifying off-handedly to Temari, “He’s a former shinobi from the Shin clan who plays music. Tazuna employs him now and Matsuri likes him a lot.”

“Got it.” The woman noted.

“What happened? Is he okay?” Kankuro asked, “I just saw him this morning!”

“He’s…alright…” Matsuri attempted to speak, “But he…he has…”

“He has a what?” Kankuro pressed.

“A girlfriend.” Temari guessed.

Matsuri broke down into sobs again.

Kankuro gave a dubious look to his sister while Baki shook his head from the table.

“No way!” The puppeteer roared, “I’ll kill that kid! He was a total puppy around you…so then he goes and finds another girl? Gaara will-!”

Temari silenced him with a glare and Kankuro stopped. She lifted Matsuri up, steadying her on her feet, and then spoke softly, “Come with me. You can tell me more about it before I go to the next meeting.”

Matsuri nodded weakly.
Turning to Kankuro, Temari whispered, “You already know how timid and emotional this girl is. You can’t rub it in, you dope! I’ll look after her and then get back to the committee when I can. You and Baki should return to Suna.”

“But what about-?”

“Don’t. Do not tell Gaara.” Temari warned him, “That’s just another lawsuit waiting to happen…”

That same Spring evening, within the secure forests of the Leaf Village, Tenten walked towards a training area that Hayate had designated. The girl recollected a pleasant visit to Hayate and Yugao’s home earlier that day.

At the time, Hayate had stepped out to drop something off at the Jounin Standby Station, thus leaving Tenten alone with the ANBU veteran.

Yugao smiled at Tenten from across a low table, “Is my husband bothering you yet?”

“Yes.” Tenten deadpanned, “I can’t believe you married him.”

“We planned to get married for a while. He acts differently around me.” She explained, “But I know how he is around other people. He tends to be short and direct.”

“Oh. I would call it uncaring.”

Yugao laughed as she arranged flowers in a vase and nodded, “You could say that.”

“I remember that he wasn’t always like this. He used to be a lot nicer when Dad was alive.”

“He misses his Master very much. I recall what Hayate was like back then…” The woman agreed, “That’s when I fell in love with him, while he was still training to become a Jounin. I was already with the Black Ops. He was a Kenjutsu instructor I visited often. He stopped me one night at the footbridge and said he heard a rumor that I liked him.”

Tenten chuckled, “Huh. So he listened to those?”

“Once. I told him it was true…” Yugao grinned, “And then he confessed that it wasn’t a rumor. He said he just wanted to find out before risking his heart. Of course, I had been teasing him for days beforehand…and then we dated after that.”

Tenten blew a strand of hair out of her face, disenchanted with the story.

“Don’t you have a romantic bone in your body, young lady?” Yugao chided.

“If I did, they’re all broken these days.” Tenten supposed.

“How awful.”

“How does a nice woman like you get into the ANBU?” She wondered, genuinely perplexed.

Unabashed, Yugao explained, “I was invited by the Third. I used my talent to assassinate people since I was your age. I may be nice, but I was very good at what I did. I take great pride in serving the Hokage.”

That declaration made Tenten smile, “I like you twice as much now.”
“I like you too, Tenten. If Hayate ever wears you out, please stop by and visit me on my days off. We can talk about whatever you want. I’ll also braid your hair and do your nails.”

“Are you serious?” It was a glittering offer.

“As a heart attack.”

Tenten laughed quietly to herself. The upside to training with Hayate would most assuredly be spending time with Yugao. She wouldn’t tell him that and risk ruining it, though.

She had been disappointed that Hayate told her she would be training at night. It wasn’t quite sunset, for now, but Tenten was a bit apprehensive of the possibility of being ambushed in the dark. She had noticed that Hayate dueled unfairly at times. He liked to jump out of blind spots and see if she could parry his sword, and if she didn’t, he would hold it an inch above her face to mock her.

‘He wouldn’t catch me off-guard if Neji was watching my back!’ She thought bitterly.

Just about the only thing she appreciated so far, of the dozens of lessons he had imparted so far, was a subtle difference in sword types she had never noticed. He had talked about it as soon as she arrived at the glade. His introduction to Shadow Clones and fortifying her chakra reserves, in the days past, had left Tenten looking like a dopey child. Sword theory was less of a struggle.

“What kind of swords do ninja use?” Hayate asked her.

She frowned in confusion, “Um…all kinds?”

“What a brilliant answer.” He scoffed, “No. Forget about the exotic. Forget about zanbato. I am talking basic sword. What kind of a sword do most ninja use?”

“Well…the standard issue straight blades.” Tenten yielded in annoyance.

“There. You got it. Chokuto, commonly called Ninjato: a straight sword that’s typically 48cm, give or take.” Hayate told her in a textbook-reading voice, “Now tell me, what sword do you have there?”

Quizzical, Tenten unsheathed the sword Hok at her back and examined it. Straight, well-maintained, with an ornate brass hilt and red tassel. It looked like a standard straight sword, but she figured that wasn’t the correct answer judging by how impatient Hayate was getting.

“It’s straight. And it’s probably 48cm, maybe less,” She groused, estimating the length, “You obviously don’t want me to say it’s Ninjato. What do you want me to call it Hayate? My grandmother?”

“The sword you’re holding is the grandmother of all modern swords. It’s called jian. It’s the prototype that shinobi received as an import from the Kingdom of Han, but that was a damn long time ago,” Hayate expounded, “Jian aren’t quite the same as what ninja use. They are smaller and faster. Rare these days…”

“Why does it matter?” Tenten ground out, “Are you going to teach me something or not? The sword that you use is standard Ninjato, so why point out the difference?”

“Because…what you have there is much better suited for your dad’s techniques. Your mother and father used jian because it’s been passed down in that clan since…” He shrugged, “Shishou also used dao, which you won’t be taught.”

“That’s a curved blade.” She recognized the sword type, “And why not? I’m good at just about
“You are good at everything, but now you need to get amazing at just a few techniques. Specialization will protect you. Trust me.” He retorted, “Dao are heavy and only have one sharp edge. They’re good for chopping. Your dad used them to counter jian, but like I said, you don’t seem ‘em much anymore.”

“‘I get it.”

“Good.” Hayate walked over to the open grass, away from the training posts, “Hok is a great sword. It has a good reputation. It’ll work for the Dance of the Crescent Moon.”

“So that explains why I’ve been working on Shadow Clones.” She observed, aware of her father’s specialty, “But why can’t I use any weapon I want? It’s my jutsu. I should do it my way.”

“Don’t ruin a good thing.” He warned her, “That technique needs you to move fast. To be accurate. Not every weapon affords you that. The whole point of it is to stab your enemy and bring them down before they can find a way to counter you.” He strolled near a large pond, “So before we get into technical positioning and how you’re supposed to attack…let’s go over Shadow Clones again.”

“You’ve been killing me this week. I feel like I’ve got no chakra left.”

“That is complete exaggeration. You’ve got plenty. You’re just feeling the burn as you build up reserves.”

With a reluctant hand sign Tenten produced two Shadow Clones. They stood on either side of her and did not look very enthusiastic.

“Your chakra control is spot-on,” Hayate praised her, “That’s a relief. That means we’re getting somewhere.”

“Are you teaching me yet?” She prodded.

Hayate drew his sword and in the same motion, as he leapt to be silhouetted by the setting sun, two of his own clones materialized and dove down with him. The afterimages that accompanied them made her eyes untrustworthy. Taken by surprise, Tenten defended herself from a sword strike and hollered in rage when her clones were cleaved apart. Hayate and his replications stopped and he pointed out what had occurred, “I’m teaching you. You just saw me produce clones while I was attacking you. Think you can do that?”

“I don’t know how.”

“Let’s review.” He came closer and showed her the hand sign for the technique, “When we mold the correct amount of chakra with the appropriate seal…we often let go and let the jutsu commence. Your Shadow Clones appear just as soon as you spend your chakra, no?”

“Yes, but that’s how jutsu work!”

“No. That’s not how they work. You can control the timing with channeling. With some focus, you can halt that clone from materializing so that you’re in position with a sword, and then let it join you when you move in.” Hayate explained, “There’s no time to form seals when your hands are full. It’s critical that you get the timing right, otherwise you’re not fooling anyone.”

“Huh. Now it’s making more sense,” She conceded, “So I need to work on delaying my jutsu like you do?”
“Yes. You can get it with a bit of practice…but the Dance you’ll find much harder.”

Tenten smirked, “Then I’ll feel really good when I put people down with it. Gai-sensei said that hard work makes victory sweeter.”

“He’s not wrong about that.”

“Show me that channeling crap one more time! I can do it!” She leaned in to watch Hayate form the seal. He leapt away to show off, his hands free, and then two Shadow Clones ‘popped’ into being beside him several seconds later.

“That will really be useful…” She muttered.

Hayate dismissed his replications with a serious expression, “Then let’s get to it.”

Lee and Neji had an atypical week together.

For the sake of bettering their skills, as well as finding a way to pass the time (Tsunade had reduced mission activity by 70 percent), they had divided their training hours between Gai and Wong Leung. Gai had been very understanding. As a matter of fact, he had been positively enthralled to hear that Lee and Neji were endeavoring under the same master. Gai and Lee had only cried excitedly about it for a few minutes before Neji insisted they get back to work.

And it was work. It was terrible work. Wong Leung had saddled the both of them with identical Wushu training regimens. Lee had anticipated it would be strenuous, for he had heard stories about how Wushu exercises were often synonymous with torture. It was a prerequisite Wong had demanded before they begin the specifics of Baguazhang, and in Lee’s case, an appropriate introduction to Drunken Boxing.

At about noon, when the two boys had parted from Gai at their training field, they met Wong near Lee’s house and were immediately told to run around the perimeter of the Hidden Leaf Village. Lee was accustomed to such a request, but Neji dragged a few paces behind while they jogged. Upon meeting with Wong again at the end of the run, the old man snorted and told them to run again in the opposite direction.

Slightly troubled, Lee agreed and relayed the message to Neji. The Hyuga heir cursed under his breath and they took off again.

With the completion of the second lap, starved for air, the boys stopped in front of Wong once again. The grandfather had four 15-gallon pails filled to the brim with water. He instructed them to stand in the grassy field by the stream and hold the buckets up until he returned for them.

As they outstretched their arms, desperately trying not to fold from the excruciating weight, Neji thought about why he was willing to participate in this hogwash. ‘Lee has done exercises like these occasionally at Gai’s request.’ He felt it would unnecessarily damage his pride if he too did not make the attempt to survive silly training tactics, ‘But this is still utter foolishness…’

About an hour or more later, Lee had puffed through labored breaths that maybe his grandfather was a tad malicious. Neji glared in response.

Wong Leung dropped by with a newspaper tucked under his arm and clucked his tongue at them, \textit{Lift those arms up! You too, Lee! Do you want me to make you start over?}

\textit{No!} Lee hollered.
Good. Ten more minutes with those arms straight. Then we'll move on. He took a seat on an overturned milk crate and began reading his newspaper.

It was a long ten minutes until they were permitted to set down the pails and rest their quaking arms. Wong dove directly into the next exercise, marching downstream with them towards the local distillery. A long brick wall lined the back of the brewing plant and they halted, listening as Wong explained, Shinobi are stiff. They are also bad listeners. Wushu requires flexibility and awareness. I am only putting you through what is expected of eight-year-olds in our homeland.

Is that true, Grandpa? Lee was dubious.

From the beginning of their education and into adulthood, disciples of Wushu will train this way. It fortifies values over strength, not strength over values…like how you ninja prioritize…the balance of mind and body is never quite right in these lands. Wong stood in front of Neji, meeting his eyes; My masters told me that limitations, much like desire, grow within the mind. This training will release them. It will unburden you.

“Grandpa says that limitations exist only in the mind. This training will unburden us, and that all Wushu disciples are taught to balance the mind and body.” Lee recapped to Neji.

“The balance of physical and mental energy is a fundamental principal of Ninjutsu. We know this already.” Neji retorted.

Wong understood what the Hyuga heir had said, Ninjutsu is a product of Ninshu: the way that shinobi understand themselves, others and Chi. In my homeland all of these things were conceptualized by Tao. Virtue comes before all else. You will learn, Kitten.

Grandpa, his name is Neji.

I know. The old man replied with a small smile. Then he turned to the wall of the distillery in a near hand-stand and balanced on the crown of his head, hands at his sides, leaning the heels of his feet on the brick above. He spoke to Lee who was blinking in shock at him, I have seen you walk on your hands around this village, Lee. Your head must be as strong. I am confident you can do this. Your mousefart friend probably can too…

With an inaudible growl, Neji got the gist of what was next. He and Lee mimicked the precarious balancing stunt and held still. Wong rolled to his feet easily and dusted his jacket off, adding; Stay like that for three hours.

Three hours?!

This is basic, Lee! No complaints! What I teach is no joke, surely you know. I will fetch you for supper afterwards.

Wong walked off and left them to test their endurance.

“How long will this take?” Neji asked with a hint of concern. The blood was rushing to his head in a distressing manner.

“Three hours.”

“Charming man…” His sarcasm had barbed-wire attitude in it.

This regimen repeated for several days. A few additional exercises were included periodically, such as: slapping basins of water with their bare hands for hours, balancing on their heads in a variety of
positions, sweeping sidewalks, balancing on *each other*, and Neji’s favorite…four hours on top of
Tsunade’s likeness at the Hokage monument. He and Lee were made to stand on the stone head,
crouched in a seated squat on one foot with hands folded in prayer. He conceded that the view of the
village was so pristine it was nearly worth it. Lee agreed.

Wong was happy to prepare meals for them and watch as the chopsticks slipped from their hands.
Water-slapping was an ancient way to build stamina, and he had thought it wise to task them with it
each day. The pain had made eating food a terrible challenge, but the old man let the boys take their
time.

Gai was a little disturbed by the methods employed by Lee’s grandfather, but when Lee assured him
the results would be worth it the man relaxed. The training hours with their sensei were *by far* much
easier, and the rare D-Ranked mission provided welcome distraction.

One morning late in the week, Lee had reported to Gai that Neji had taken the morning to train at the
Hyuga compound. Naturally, Gai was fine with the request. He confided in Lee that he was feeling
much better about Tenten’s absence now that he and Neji had become so close.

“Not as close as Neji was to Tenten.” Lee contended, “But I do believe that Neji trusts me more!
What you told me seems to be working, Gai-sensei!”

“Like I said, Lee, all you had to do was be there.” The man grinned, “Neji values the friendships he
has. I knew he could depend on you.”

They practiced wielding nunchaku together after the conversation. To Lee’s happy amazement, Gai
later procured the three-section staff that Tenten had left at the field before her removal. Lee recalled
how she had proudly demonstrated its use to Gai before letting him have it. The boy wiped at his
eyes, realizing he had gotten choked up at the thought of her.

“It’s alright, Lee!” His sensei assured him, “I was glad that she forgot this! It feels like Tenten never
left.”

Lee sniveled, trying to get a grip, “I just worry that she will…she will not-”

“I won’t tolerate negative thoughts from you!” Gai thundered while swinging the sectional staff at his
student and the force could have beheaded the boy.

With a yelp, Lee blocked the strike with his nunchaku, and the two darted around with their
weaponry, imagining what Tenten’s commentary would be.

The Hyuga estate was tranquil early that morning. Neji had discovered an odd thing had occurred
while working on Wushu prerequisites with Lee the day before.

He had accidentally cut a broom in half.

*He and his teammate looked at the wooden debris on the sidewalk in true bewilderment. Shards of
the instrument drifted down from Neji’s hand to the pavement, where the tattered brush head was
splayed.*

*Lee gave him a curious look, “That was not intentional?”*

*“Not at all.” Neji admitted.*

*Lee picked up the top section of the severed tool, “It does not look like you crushed it. Look here! It’s*
a clean split.”

Neji shrugged.

“You were very focused. You have been performing well with our forms today.”

“I was trying not to fall unconscious and take a spill off of the Hokage monument.”

“Well, yes…” His friend noted, “But your chakra cut this broom in half. Remarkable.”

“I wasn’t trying to.”

“Can you do it again?” Lee wondered.

Neji frowned. He had no idea.

The next logical step in understanding his unintentionally destructive skill was to inquire with his clan, Neji decided. He had asked his uncle if there was any reason he should be able to cleave things apart, or if Jyukken was related to this ability.

“Quite a while ago, I had tested you and your cousins with chakra paper. I was curious about your elemental affinities.” Hiashi reminded him, “You are a Wind Type, Neji. That is why you can do these things.”

The boy was wide-eyed.

The clan head continued, “I’m not surprised. Hinata expresses her Water Nature often. I spar with her now and again to check her progress.”

“Hinata-sama developed that skill on her own; however…I am not so sure where to start with my affinity.” Neji acknowledged, “What do you recommend, Uncle?”

“I suggest you learn more with a friend of mine. He is a Wind Type like you. I don’t have much advice to give you, considering that I am a Water Type, like my daughters.” Hiashi explained, “Go to the Pebble Yard near the Branch House and wait a few minutes. I will send Hideyasu.”

Neji’s stomach flipped. The prospect of training with Hikune’s father seemed awkward, in spite of Hideyasu’s forgiving disposition. Yet he did as he was asked and went to a small courtyard filled corner to corner with beige stones.

At the center of the plot was a strange installment. It looked like a clothesline suspended between two poles, almost shoulder-high, but it was only large enough to hang two or three garments at best. Neji assumed it was not for laundry. He examined it more closely.

A spool of thin, braided rope was wound up on a small wheel. It appeared to have been drawn out time and again and fitted to the adjacent pole through a tie-loop, maybe because earlier segments had been cut away. Neji had an inkling of what the purpose of the line was.

Hideyasu greeted him merrily from a nearby porch and strolled out to join him, “Neji! You’ve been out for a week! The Hyuga clan missed you. Welcome back, young man.”

“Good morning, Hideyasu-san.” He was heartened by the man’s unrelenting kindness.

“So! Hiashi-sama reached me with news that you are expressing a Wind Nature,” The veteran ninja smiled, “That is special stuff. Hardly anyone in our clan taps into such internal talent. It takes years of disciplined training…”
“I have had my fill of disciplined training in six days.” Neji announced.

Hideyasu was inquisitive, “Oh? Is that where you’ve been?”

“Training with a Wushu master.” He confirmed.

“Holy smokes…” The man breathed, “That kind of teacher will run you ragged.”

“He has.”

“Your hands look awful.”

“I’m aware.” Neji sighed.

“Well! The silver lining to that training is that it helped you tap into your elemental orientation.” Hideyasu determined, “How about we refine it a bit more?” He pointed to the suspended string, “This is an absorption rope. Its properties are similar to chakra paper but it’s a bit less sensitive. Focus chakra into this and it will assist you in expressing your elemental Nature.”

“I suspected as much.” Neji stood in front of the line and grasped it in a closed fist. He plunged chakra into it, flooding the whole length of the cable. It remained inert. He back away in confusion. Maybe that had been too much.

“Nature Transformation is a whimsical thing.” Hideyasu mused, placing two fingers on the rope, “We all have one elemental type that comes naturally to us…and yet we are all equally capable of mastering the five elemental natures. At times, it is easier to learn a new jutsu than it is to ‘feel’ our own latent Nature. You might pick up the Fireball Jutsu faster than you would feel the Wind in your veins…but who knows?”

The rope snapped. Hideyasu chuckled, “A little bit can go a long way. Balance is of dire importance here. Though you told me you’re getting a hard lesson in balance through Wushu.”

“Indeed.”

“Try again. Breathe slowly.” The man added, “It might help if you try to sense your energy flow directly from tenketsu and outward, moving through your coils. The Hyuga have an advantage with respect to monitoring chakra, while others frequently focus it in their hands to feel it.” Hideyasu pulled a new piece of rope free and secured it, “Go ahead, Neji.”

It was a stunningly simple piece of advice. With his eyes closed, Neji calmly laid two fingers on the rope, detecting the miniscule rush that faintly echoed in his own chakra. The subtlety of his own Nature had become more and more apparent to him. It was a sensation he had recalled experiencing earlier during moments of Wong Leung’s ridiculous training.

“Well done!” Hideyasu laughed.

Neji blinked at his accomplishment. He had snapped the rope.

“Phew! Not bad at all for a genius…” The man praised him, re-stringing the absorption rope, “Try once more and I’ll see if you’ve really got it.”

With two hands and serene focus, Neji immediately snapped the string at both ends.

“That answers that question.” Hideyasu conceded.

“I know the feeling now.” Neji shared his take on it, “And I know that I have felt this several times
before, but I never understood.”

He was clapped on the back when Hideyasu spoke, “You are naturally intuitive. It’s amazing. Truly, the only thing that bars you from many of your intrinsic abilities is probably that you don’t know what they are yet,” The man chuckled, “Very good, Neji. Even Hikune needed a week before he could express his Lightning Nature in that rope.”

The Hyuga heir wilted, still mildly discouraged by his older cousin’s death.

“How, now, don’t fret. My son did his best and he always made me proud,” He took a few steps away from the Nature detection tool, “I don’t hold anything against you, Neji. I don’t hold you accountable in any way for what happened. The honest fact is…I believe you are a worthy choice as a successor of the Hyuga…far more worthy than me or my children. Hiashi chose well.”

“Thank you, Hideyasu-san.” He answered quietly.

“And I miss Hizashi just about every time I look at you.” Hideyasu went on, “I knew that he never deserved the Branch. No one does…but I had wished that he and Hiashi had both belonged to the Main House. He had such good taste in food…and he never gave up. He was the quintessential shinobi who shined with honor.” He shut his eyes and relived a memory, “He would have had a fit if he got to see how talented you are now, Neji. Whenever he was happy he would raise his voice and—”

Neji made a sweeping motion with his hands, remembering how his father could get excited.

“Exactly!” Hideyasu nodded, “That’s what he did. He would just flap and run his mouth! Very excitable…” He hitched the string up again.

Neji chuckled, amused by the description. For quite a while, it had been difficult to remember his father and feel happy. It was getting easier.

“Hm…maybe we should have an application of Nature Transformation. What do you say?” Hideyasu volunteered, taking a Jyukken stance, “I bet you’ll get this too.”

Neji took a pace back and beheld as the man dashed forward for a traditional Gentle Fist strike, combining his Wind affinity as the chakra exited his palm and then, in an odd instance, slashed at the two poles. It cut everything to smithereens. He had not expected it either.

“Damn.” Hideyasu reached down and lifted the scarred rope-wheel from the gravel, “We’ll need to replace it again. Technically we don’t use combined techniques on this tool because…well…it’s too much. I knew better so it’s on my wallet.”

“I should take aim at something that won’t be missed,” Neji gathered.

“Right. That is a courtesy. You and I could hack our house apart if we horsed around with Wind Transformation…”

They left the devastated absorption rope behind and ventured towards a thicket of woods behind the building. Hideyasu surmised that Hiashi probably wouldn’t care if they wrecked things beyond the well-manicured grounds. It took about a dozen earnest attempts before Neji had the proper feel for combining Wind Nature with a Jyukken slap, but when he did get it right he had leveled a sizeable oak.

While Hideyasu commended him and dawdled in the background, Neji was poised to strike again at the yawning, shady woods. He had worked on his Air Palm while Tenten had been away, and since
it was a functioning technique at last he was sorely tempted to flood it with his elemental affinity. He should have warned Hideyasu first.

Neji lunged, skidded over twigs and grass, and then let the customary ‘canon’ of chakra barrel free from his hands, dripping the Wind Transformation into it like a meddlesome scientist, and watched in fright as the flying bolt of energy (now beyond his control) swirled into an unstoppable gust…and cut everything.

Hideyasu swallowed a howl of bewilderment as the dense woodland was decimated and reduced to woodchips.

“That…was not advisable.” The man said after a minute of staring, “It’s all compost now. Imagine if that was the house…oh my…”

“I apologize. I didn’t think that…” Neji frowned, “That would be the result.”

“Now that you know, you mustn’t aim such a technique at anyone you care about…or anyone you might be incarcerated for chopping to bits.” The man warned, “There’s no way to stop it. You’re wielding more power than you realize, young man.”

And so, at Hideyasu’s behest, he promptly removed himself from the Hyuga grounds for safety purposes.

Lee and Gai were impressed with Neji’s Nature Transformation, but after seeing a demonstration of it they both opted to stand as far back as possible. Gai also suggested that Neji give fair warning when his Wind Release was going to be used and, of course, “Not to bring such cataclysm down on your comrades.” Neji promised he wouldn’t.

When noon rolled around and training with Gai was wrapping up, the man pulled Neji aside, “Ah, Neji, I need to ask a favor of you.”

He gave his mentor his full attention.

“I had intended to make this request of Tenten; however that is no longer possible.” Gai went on, “Lee has been excelling with melee weapons but cannot tote a repertoire of them on missions…as you already know,” He gently cited Lee’s inability to use Ninjutsu, “I wished to ask Tenten to seal his preferred tools in a scroll on Lee’s behalf, but I expect that you can accomplish this.”

“I can.” Neji volunteered. It was a skill he very sparingly used (since Tenten had that base covered) but he understood that Gai wanted to afford Lee every opportunity to be a successful shinobi, even if that mean relying on teammates for certain things.

Gai thanked him and handed over a few types of nunchaku as well as the three-section staff. Neji dropped the items off at the Hyuga estate before joining Lee and his grandfather for training.

They were instructed to begin balancing on the Hokage monument and then run three laps around the village. Once that is done, Wong Leung said to Lee, We will approach our family’s style of Drunken Boxing.

It was something to look forward to, Lee figured. He gave Neji fair warning, fully aware that if the consumption of alcohol was involved, there was the possibility of mayhem.

The boys completed their assigned tasks with less difficulty than days past, and then met with Wong again. The old man strolled with his arms behind his back and had them follow him downtown.
They arrived at the ethnic quarter of the Leaf Village, which had ostensive Han dominance with regards to shops, eateries and services.

Wong pointed to a bench and intoned to Neji, *Have a seat.*

Neji didn’t need to know what Wong had said to get that he was out of the picture for now. The Hyuga sat down and watched as the old man circled his grandson expectantly. Without warning, he reached up and pinched Lee’s earlobe in a vice-like grip. Howling with pain, Lee bent backwards as Wong pulled and then abruptly released him.

*You have excellent flexibility.* Wong commented.

Lee protested while rubbing his ear, *Grandpa, I would have done that if you had asked me to.*

*Some things cannot be demanded with words. Your honest reaction is the only truth I will concern myself with.* The old man retorted, *Zui Chuan has been taught in our family for hundreds of years, passed down from my mother’s side. Drunken Boxing is an advanced style of Wushu that requires you to be soft and heavy. You are naturally acrobatic, Lee, and so I always knew that you could obtain this ability.*

*I will not need to drink anything, will I?* Lee asked, stealing a glance at Neji, *Neji and Tenten have had to stop me from-*

*Zui Chuan is best used when sober. I am sure your skills manifest quickly when your inhibitions are lower, dear boy, but make no mistake! This style is an imitation of a drunkard’s movements, and its complexity is lost when the user is inebriated. The results are pitiful! I’ve seen it. You will not imbibe on my watch while you are still underage. I have respect for our laws.*

Lee privately found that tidbit surprising. Wong was okay with crushing their heads and hands, but would corroborate that he was a law-abiding citizen. Lee wasn’t about to argue with him.

Neji was essentially tuned out of the conversation as he observed Wong Leung exhibit fundamental forms of Drunken Boxing to Lee. The movements were outlandish and absurd: staggering steps from side to side, hobbling, flopping limbs, bending and splits with the occasional somersault. He could admit that he would never have the ability to perform such stunts the way Lee could, but he certainly didn’t want to. He was appreciative that Lee wasn’t stinking drunk while attempting the exercises. It would have escalated the danger level.

But mixed in with frivolous movements were strikes with truly horrifying momentum and tenacity. Wong dislodged a towering power pole from the ground with a flapping-knuckle strike and then replaced it with a swing of his foot, secure in the ground again, and rolled around bizarrely as he did so. Lee seemed to have the hang of it from the get-go, but was getting the formalities from his grandfather.

Wong appeared to have gotten into how to manipulate the environment and use common objects offensively. A shop owner simply smiled without complaint as Wong borrowed a wok from a sale stand and showed how it could be used as a shield…or a blunt force object to incapacitate someone. Lee took many mental notes.

Two hours passed as they perused the ethnic quarter of town and practiced with Neji as a spectator. Two or three times Wong Leung asked Neji to attack Lee to test his evasion. Neji had barely skimmed his teammate with a Jyukken strike, but wasn’t shocked that Lee was capable of avoiding him. When Wong was satisfied he pointed to a picnic table and made Neji sit out again.
As the afternoon wore on, nosy patrons of the local shops lingered to watch Lee and his grandfather shillyshally about. Their reactions were mostly positive. Neji was even offered some tea (no charge) while he waited at a table but he politely declined. Another store owner began speaking to him in Hanwen, presuming he was privy like Wong Leung and Lee were, but again, Neji respectfully clarified that he couldn’t understand.

“Oh? That’s fine. Sorry that I just assumed!” The mustached man was contrite, “Why don’t you invite your friend and the Master for lunch? My diner is serving a crab special today!”

And so Neji relayed the message to Lee who parlayed with Wong and then got a confirming nod of the head that they would love to drop by. Shortly thereafter, the consensus was that lunch was delicious…and that woks were just weapons in disguise.

Another week passed and the training intensified on those warm spring days.

Wong divided up his attention between Neji and Lee evenly, and the boys kept pace as the demands of their training changed. Wong had eventually necessitated that they wear short-sleeved shirts and martial arts slippers he provided (with correct sizes) because he felt that their “shinobi appearances” distracted him too much. Neji reluctantly complied and Lee enthusiastically obliged. Lee refused when Wong asked if he would grow his hair out in a braid again. There were just some things that couldn’t be negotiated.

Early one morning at the team training field, Gai apologized for being required on a two-man cell with Kakashi. The boys had no complaints about it, and a short time later reported to the Hokage’s office after Gai stated that they had been summoned.

Tsunade regarded their outfits with an interested gaze, “Working hard, gentlemen?”

Neji grunted and Lee nodded fervently, “Yes, Hokage-sama! My grandfather’s lessons are grueling!”

“Superb.” She smiled, “I have a C-Rank mission set aside for the two of you. This will be the first one I’ve assigned you beyond Leaf Village limits, with regards to the investigation, but it is extremely simple. You’re more than capable.”

“What does it entail, Tsunade-sama?” Neji made an effort to extend an olive branch.

“All it requires is that you-” She fumbled over her words as she looked at the open doorway. An older man with a cane stood there in silence before Tsunade acknowledged him, “Good morning, Danzo.”

“Good morning, my lady.” He entered and Neji and Lee stepped aside dutifully, “May I interject?”

She had bristled for half a second but remained calm, “I suppose. I can continue this mission briefing after you tell me how I can help you.”

“No need. As it so happens, I am here on behalf of these two Genin. This regards the hold put on the students of Team 13 and a policy about three-man cells. I wish to discuss it with you now. Their presence is permissible.”

Lee inclined his head very slightly towards Neji, and their eyes reflected the same question as to what relevance this newcomer had. They listened in silence as Tsunade tried to steer the situation.

“Then let’s discuss it.” She invited, “It is my opinion that these two young shinobi have more than
enough combined skill, intelligence, and fortitude to handle the mission I’ve selected. As Hokage, I personally vouch that two team members is all that will be required.” Tsunade folded her arms, “And I would like to know what concern it is of yours what Hyuga Neji and Rock Lee are doing in the next 72 hours.”

“It is of direct concern. You have tasked my division, as you have several other Black Ops platoons, with increased security measures. A two-man cell comprised of ninja below Jounin level is contradictory to a mandate you authorized twelve days ago. To make an exception would be inexcusable and jeopardize young Leaf ninja.” Danzo countered, “To resolve this matter, I will cover the disparity on Team 13 with one of my own shinobi. It will assure that this team is in compliance with mission standards.”

Her eyes were sharp, “Don’t trouble yourself. I will summon one of their peers to join them.”

“A summons isn’t necessary. For the sake of saving time, let me take this opportunity to introduce you to my subordinate. He’s waiting outside.” Danzo added respectfully, and on cue, a pale young man stepped into the office, “This is Sai. His age and skill level will be sufficient in balancing this team.”

Neji and Lee took stock of the shinobi who had been presented. He was ghostly white with dark hair and eyes, and his outfit was well-tailored save for the crop top that exposed a chiseled midriff. It was off-putting, at least in Neji’s opinion. Lee didn’t seem to find it obnoxious and Neji read the small, nonverbal signals coming from his teammate. He had learned to interpret Lee in a whole new way.

Sai bowed, “Please allow me to join this team for now, Hokage-sama. I will do my best.”

Tsunade arched a blonde eyebrow critically, “I would expect no less.” Her eyes fell on Neji and Lee, “In this case… I should abide by compliance regulations. I apologize for not having foresight on this matter, however.” She smiled, “Please know that I have the utmost confidence in you, Neji and Lee.” Turning to Sai, she added, “And I imagine that Sai won’t hinder you in completing your mission objective.”

Neji found it reassuring that the Hokage was so vocal about her support of them. He had four-fifths of the way forgiven her for sundering his team, and was, for the most part, content with the Hokage again.

Danzo waited on the side of the room as Tsunade provided the three boys with mission details and expectations. She then whisked them along so they could leave immediately.

After the team had exited her office, Tsunade frowned at the old man, “Your timing is impeccable.”

“For good reason. You nearly sent two ‘watch-listed’ Genin into gray area territory, where there is still no confirmation that Dintei Bihokokuni’s servants are not hiding in wait. Until the ANBU Black Ops complete monitoring of those regions, it is foolish to put those boys in harm’s way, and moreover, at such a disadvantage.” Danzo criticized, “The Hokage should know this.”

Tsunade’s hands fistend in her lap, “They are by no means disadvantaged.” She cocked her head angrily, “And as the administrator of the Root organization, that danger you just described to me… that is exactly what your association should be diffusing on a daily basis. My ANBU are working exceptionally hard. From what I gather, the Root should have snuffed out Bi’s faction long ago.” The Hokage added icily, “It’s been ten years of hunting and you have nothing to show for it, Danzo.”

“Root ANBU have perished at Bihokokuni’s hands as many have…ten years of loss can cause
setbacks.” Danzo replied evenly, “That man is one of the craftiest ninja outside of the Fire Country. Underestimating our village’s plight will not do.”

“I have not underestimated anything.”

“That is a relief to hear. So tell me, have you submitted a framework for the next Chunin Selection Exam to the council? I wish to be sure that security standards are satisfactory.” The old man inquired.

Grudgingly, she replied, “I have not yet done so.”

“I have submitted one already. You can review a copy if you wish and determine if you would like to adopt it or make changes.” Danzo offered, “Your advisors have agreed with me that it is in the best interest of the village if the next selection process is not conducted as a bi-annual exam.”

“Why in the world not?” Tsunade asked, appalled, “It affords many trainees their chance to advance!”

“Put simply, a bi-annual exam is what threatened our village previously. It was discovered that Orochimaru infiltrated the Leaf Village and learned of weaknesses during the first exam, making sure to strike those weak points and attack during the second exam.” Danzo explained, “The council will value eliminating this possibility, aware that both Orochimaru and Bihokokuni seek to subvert Konohagakure whenever possible. A singular exam will remedy this conundrum.”

“I don’t want to deny any Genin their chance to be promoted.” She reminded him.

“I will bring you a copy of the framework. Make your changes, Hokage-sama. But please, for the safety of the village, let us prevent our enemies from repeating their strategy.”

Tsunade thought to herself that it would explain how Orochimaru and his Sound and Sand compatriots had entered undetected during the Chunin Exam Invasion. He had more than likely stalked the first exam so that he could pounce on the second one, aware of the bi-annual tradition.

“Very well.” She submitted to the stipulation, “One exam it is, then. However, I would like to add a new feature. I will present it to you and the council at the next committee meeting.”

“Of course.”

“Now that all of that is settled,” Tsunade sighed softly, “Is there anything else we should catch up on?”

“One small matter.” Danzo acknowledged, “With your blessing, I would like to interview Takaharu’s child.”

“What is the purpose of such an interview?”

“She is called Tenten, no? I examined the file. She can make a potentially excellent addition to the Root organization.”

Tsunade smiled, “No. A hundred times no.” She added, “Will that be all?”

“That is all, Hokage-sama.”

“Lovely. Please shut the door behind you.”

Even after Danzo had taken his leave, the hair on the back of Tsunade’s neck was on end. It was unfathomable how her sensei had ever put up with such a spider of a man.
She only had about a half an hour to herself, stamping documents and reading memos, before the
door of her office blew open forcibly. Shouting was coming from the hallway. Tsunade beheld in
hushed confusion as Inuzuka Tsume stormed inside.

The woman marched up to the desk and slammed a scroll down on the Hokage’s desk with a clawed
hand. Her chest was puffing, probably because she had run out of air from screaming in fury.
Tsunade blinked at her rapidly. The women regarded each other before the Hokage asked, “Tsume?
Are you well?”

“No. I’m not.” She gnashed her teeth, “I just wanted you to have a look at that scroll so you could
see why I am about to commit murder!”

“Oh.” Tsunade picked it up amicably, “Let’s have a look.”

Kiba and Sakura ran into the office a moment later, having hoped to stop Tsume from destroying
doors and sections of walls. The administrative building was in need of a tune-up anyway. The
teammates hovered anxiously while Tsunade skimmed over the message. She determined that it was
from Nichiyo, Tsume’s husband.

The gist was that he was apologizing and that he was leaving once again. He had known of his
condition prior to returning to Konoha, and had been seeking a matching donor for months. He was
overjoyed that his son was compatible. He was glad he could catch up with his daughter, and was
more or less unaffected by his time with Tsume. Nichiyo explained that he could not stay because he
already had a new wife in the Tea Country and had to take care of their 14-month old child…

“Oh.” Tsunade said.

“With your leave, I will now go and track him. I’m debating where to sink my teeth in to make him
bleed the most.” Tsume growled, “That man stole Kiba’s health! He took advantage to save his own
life! He took advantage of my son and I am going to make him pay for it!”

Tsunade held up a hand, remaining the rational figure, “Take a moment, please. Before I allow you
to go anywhere, I will assign you a team. And recall: Nichiyo only had that transplant a few weeks
ago…but bone marrow recipients typically need 100 days or more to recover properly. Wherever he
went he may have collapsed on the way. You ought to check local hospitals because I imagine you
might find him travelling clinic to clinic. He’s not fit enough to escape.”

“Get me that team. Pronto.” Tsume said lowly. She stalked away to find more things she could crush
with her hands.

“My goodness.” Tsunade sighed, turning to Sakura and Kiba, “I must be a therapist or something.
Oh and, Kiba,” She was empathetic, “I’m sorry about this.”

“I’m coping.” He said with a weary smile, “Mom definitely took it worse than I did. I’m sorry that
she was so rude.”

“I’ll overlook it. This is a terrible offense.” Tsunade remarked to her apprentice, “Sakura, go with
Kiba and make sure that woman doesn’t take off. I need to throw a team together on short notice…”

“Yes, Shishou!” The pink haired girl was energetic.

After dismissal she and Kiba walked down the hallway quietly as Akamaru led them along Tsume’s
scent trail. Sakura patted Kiba’s back in silence.

“It’s okay, Sakura.”
“Is it? He did a horrible thing to you and your family.”

“I know he did, but…” He shrugged, “I won’t miss him. Not this time. I have you and Tama and Kakashi-sensei.” Kiba smiled slightly, “And I know all of you aren’t going anywhere.”

With an hour break to collect travel supplies, Neji made sure to seal the weapons Gai had donated for Lee into a summoning scroll. He would rather be over-prepared than to regret. He then arrived at the village gate to wait for Lee, and five minutes after Lee turned up, Sai hopped down from a rooftop to meet with them.

“So your name is Sai?” Lee verified, “I overheard it in the office.”

“That is my codename.” Sai nodded, “In Root we do not have real names.”

“You’re from Root?” Neji asked. He simpered and looked away. It was just their luck that a culture-less sociopath ninja would be assigned as Tenten’s replacement.

“Yes. And you are…” Sai pursed his lips slightly as he assessed Neji’s appearance, “You are Ladyhair.”

Neji took offense. He gave an extra-strength scowl to the blithering idiot who wanted to incorporate nicknames into this sad mix.

“And you should be…” Sai made a strange effort to smile, “Superbrows.”

“Actually,” Lee corrected innocently, “My name is Rock Lee! And this is my teammate, Hyuga Neji.”

“Nicknames are a good way to solidify friendships.” Sai repeated what sounded like a tutorial quote, “I know your real names, but I will refer to you by nickname.”

“It is in your best interest not to use nicknames, and do not expect any friendships to begin on this mission. You’ve gone about it the wrong way.” Neji advised.

They had set out down the road leading away from the village.

“You need only be open-minded, Ladyhair.” Sai chided.

That was when Neji knew for certain that Sai was a victim of the precise malady that the Mokuton Black Ops shinobi had described. Root was not a wholesome environment and Neji had been warned. Sai was a product of a dysfunctional organization. Neji could grasp Sai’s unfortunate upbringing, but he still hated him. Unequivocally.

With the hope of easing tension, Lee suggested, “If you insist on using nicknames, perhaps we should give one to you?”

“Imbecile suits him.” Neji proposed.

Lee backtracked, realizing where it was headed, “Um…well then…how about no nicknames? Sai-san, please make a conscious effort to refer to us by our given names.”

“Okay, Superbrows.”

There were deaf ears and then there were socially deaf ears. Sai had a set of the latter.
Lee valiantly began the politest argument in the history of the world as Neji recapped the mission’s parameters in his head, tuning the chatter out.

Tsunade had given Neji a map with up-to-date cartography of the Fire Country. She had instructed them to take it to a cabin outpost used by Leaf ninja where they would find a second identical map tacked up on a cork board. If they laid their map over the wall-map, a special ink would seep through the paper and mark points of interest. The data could not be transferred or seen in any way other than map to map contact. That way the Hokage could have recent intel and leave the original atlas where her scouts could mark it while out on the range.

That was about all she was willing to share. Neji didn’t know exactly how important the marked geographical locations were or what their significance was, but he had a gut feeling that Jounin and Black Ops shinobi were probably using it to track the movements of a “target of interest.” Or it was just Tsunade’s sneaky way of pinpointing new gambling houses. Both were viable.

The cabin was about 41 miles away due east from Konoha. If Sai continued being a nuisance, Neji imagined that it could take a day or two to complete their task.

They circumvented the village limits through the forest and then took to the treetops on an easterly route. Neji stayed at the front and for brief intervals used his Byakugan to be sure the way was clear. At one point while he faced forward, Neji glimpsed Sai giving him a most unsettling look. It was a stare of contemplation aimed at the back of his head. As if Sai desired to slice into his neck with that tanto on his back…

Neji halted. The moment he turned around to address the menacing expression, Sai had slipped back into character. He smiled blithely while talking to Lee, who was too friendly to detect wickedness at times.

“Why did we stop?” Lee asked him.

“We didn’t arrange a bathroom break. Take one now before we move farther out.” Neji suggested conveniently.

Sai had no need to go, and so Neji and Lee moved several yards away to find denser underbrush. With his back to his teammate, Neji said quietly, “I don’t trust this person.”

“Sai?” Lee asked over his shoulder.

“My impression of him…leads me to believe that he knows more about us than we think. He may even know the location we are going to.”

“That is merely conjecture.” Lee reminded him, “It is far too early for us to be suspicious of him.”

“It isn’t too early.” Neji disagreed, “Watch him closely, Lee.”

Lee’s face revealed that he fully believed Neji and had taken the caution to heart. He nodded, finished his business and then they returned to the thicket Sai was waiting in.

They moved on and set a fast pace with Neji at the lead. Lee was mindful of Neji’s warning, but he asked Sai questions while they traveled.

“I do not know much about this foundation called Root. What is it for?” Lee wondered.

“It is a subdivision of Black Ops shinobi under the command of Danzo-sama. Our first duty is to protect the Leaf Village no matter the cost.” Sai revealed, “We do not participate on missions the
way most ninja do, and Danzo-sama requires us to meet strict criteria.”

“Of what sort?”

Sai smiled, “Can’t say.”

“Ah.” Lee accepted the answer, “What is your rank in that organization?”

“Quite low. Root has different rankings than the ninja of the standard forces.” He added, “I imagine I am close in skill level to you and Ladyhair.”

“If you say that name again,” Neji called over his shoulder back to them, “I will make you incapable of speech.”

Sai kept smiling but he was beginning to get it. Neji was the no-nonsense type and would probably make good on his threats.

“Do you have a specialization? Neji and I are most skilled with Taijutsu.” Lee continued.

“Ninjutsu.” Sai answered simply.

“Hm, that is good…” The boy was thinking about it, “Maybe after our mission you might be interested in sparring with us? Springtime is an excellent season for new challenges!”

“Maybe we should.”

“Can you also wield weaponry?” Lee inquired, citing the small sword at Sai’s back.

“Just tanto. It’s enough.”

“Our teammate Tenten can handle any weapon with tremendous skill.” Lee announced proudly, “I imagine you would have difficulty dueling her with a dagger…”

Sai smirked, “I would, but I rely more on my Super Beast Scroll. She would have difficulty with me.”

“I have serious doubts about that.” Lee replied innocuously.

“So do I.”

Neji’s ear was honed in on the conversation but he said nothing.

Lee went on, “I am certain that Tenten has gotten stronger while she has been away from us. She is one of my most hardworking friends!”

“Why isn’t she with your team now? It’s no good to slack off.”

“The Hokage had her removed for safety purposes. An ongoing investigation has required that we be apart.” He explained.

“If she were stronger maybe you wouldn’t have to worry so much.” Sai prodded.

“What a foolish thing to say…” Lee frowned, “You know, Sai-san…strength does not win every fight.”

Neji felt vindicated by Lee’s profound rebuttal and defense of Tenten, but it wasn’t quite enough. He
felt compelled to gouge Sai’s eyes out and claim it was an honest accident. His willpower helped him maintain his course as Sai vexed Lee with injurious comments for the rest of the day.

By the dark of evening they stopped, having covered three quarters of the distance to their destination. They shared the responsibilities of making camp and a fire before settling down to eat packed meals. Lee had migrated back to Neji for conversation. He had grown weary of Sai’s badgering and insensitive remarks.

“I know that it has been difficult for these two weeks, but…” Lee sighed quietly, “I miss Tenten so much now. I wish she was here. This replacement is abominable.”

“Sai is not a replacement.” Neji bit back sharply, “There could never be a replacement for her.”

“True. There never could.” Lee granted, “It seems as time wears on and she is not here…I will…just feel more and more sad.”

Neji did not reply as he chewed a mouthful of rice. He was experiencing a feeling like that but far more intense. He wasn’t sure how to talk about it.

Within a clearing between tall sycamores, Sai was settled farther away from the fire, propped up comfortably on a tree trunk. He was doodling contentedly in a sketchbook. He was also entirely unconcerned with Lee and Neji, for the time being.

“I am sure that you miss her.” Lee wagered.

“I do.”

“Did you ever…have that opportunity to see her?” Lee wondered, “I know I told you not to do it… but it would have been good for the both of you.”

“I was unsuccessful.” Neji admitted, “A member of the ANBU stopped me.”

“Really?” Lee chirped.

“Yes. He was on assignment to prevent me from disobeying Tsunade. He chased me through town and the apartment building before subduing me,” He reported with a hint of pride, “But for now I will heed his warning. He set me free without punishment.”

“How unusual!”

“He was kind.” Neji assured him, “I too found it unusual.”

“Even if you had been caught later…would you have been happy to see Tenten?” Lee asked curiously.

“I would have.”

“I know it would have made her happy as well.” Lee nodded, finishing his dinner.

Neji stared at the fire and tried to let his mind go blank. It wasn’t going so well. Mentioning Tenten had sparked memories of her that flashed through his mind like an old film reel. There was an acute ache somewhere in his ribcage, but Neji had felt it spread into his limbs and even manifest as a headache. Gradually, emotional suffering was starting to convert into physical suffering. How could the absence of one person do such a thing?
“Tenten has been my good friend since I was ten years old.” Lee began anecdotally, “She was never cruel to me, as far as I can remember. Not always encouraging…but she understood me in ways that few others did.”

Neji listened sidelong to his teammate in silence. Tenten had also understood him in ways that no one did. Lee had that privilege first.

“I was so relieved that she trained with you when we first became a team. It was frustrating to try to stand up to you.” Lee chuckled softly, “And it was always preferable to work with Gai-sensei, no matter how tough the training was! You were worse.”

“I apologize.”

“There is no point in apologizing now, Neji.” Lee told him, “You have changed.”

“Sometimes I wonder if I have, or if it’s all been in my head.”

“You have changed.” Lee insisted, “For the better.”

“I didn’t treat her well.” Neji acknowledged.

“Tenten understood. She told me that she knew you were struggling even though you never said so. She has a way of collecting and interpreting subtle signals…”

“She does.”

“At times, she needed to go above and beyond to help you, even if it hurt her.” Lee added, “And on rare occasions, I had to do the same.”

Neji knew it to be true but could not vocally confirm it. There were some things he was ashamed of and most of those things had to do with how wretched he was to his teammates in the past.

“But you can see all that she has done for you.” Lee supposed.

Neji set his lunchbox down and nodded. Confiding in Lee was a strange but surprisingly safe thing to do. He was willing to let it happen so long as he didn’t come across as ridiculously vulnerable.

“Recently…I noticed how you reached out to Tenten more often.” His teammate ventured, “I was under the impression that you were not doing it as a friend.”

That comment jostled him and Neji frowned, taking it as a jibe. These days he was a somewhat decent friend and he didn’t want to hear otherwise.

Lee quickly amended, “What I mean is, I know how I talked to Tenten as a friend…but you approached things much differently. You hardly ever had boundaries like the ones she and I respect. These past few months you have been reducing them and I started to wonder…”

“Wonder what?” Neji rumbled.

“I wondered what it meant.”

“What could it mean?” He said with a hint of acerbity, “That I improve as a person when Tenten is present. That’s it. When she isn’t around I become a certifiable desperado who aggravates the Hokage and everyone close to him. What indeed does it mean…”

“You could be in love.”
For the first time in a while, Neji made eye contact with Lee. His initial intent was to demonstrate his typical irritation and maybe some denial, but he had likely slipped. There was that pesky vulnerability again, and even if Lee wasn’t attacking it or capitalizing on it, Neji was very uncomfortable with it. The two had stopped speaking after that. Lee did not want to force the issue. Neji’s disconsolate facial expression said enough.

A short time later, Lee somehow managed to fall asleep in a sleeping bag. Haunted, Neji stayed awake and stared; sometimes at the fire and sometimes at the vast dark in the surrounding woods. Late in the night, Sai stood up and crossed over to be close to the fire. It had gotten cold. He resumed his inkbrush sketches in the book.

“You’re an artist.” Neji observed.

“It’s a hobby.” Sai acknowledged after a moment, “Well…it is more of a way of life.”

“Your techniques involve drawing.” Neji guessed.

“They do. You are a clever one.” Sai nodded.

Neji stole a glance down at the sketchbook and noted the cartoonish depiction of a young man, “Is that someone you know?”

“My brother.” Sai told him, “I draw him so I can remember him.”

“I wish I had better ways to remember the people I care about.”

The new teammate blinked at him, making some rapid deductions before he said, “I didn’t hear very much earlier…but I can tell that you miss the kunoichi of your team very much. You and Superbrows both do.”

“We do. We no longer feel as strong or as formidable as we had been as a complete team.” Neji tried to inject a lesson in human emotion into Sai, “Separate, we are much weaker. We are the best of friends made most powerful by our bonds.”

“That is…” Sai trailed off in a faint voice, “Very impressive.”

“It is to be envied. But our apparent strength is also our weakness,” He drew inspiration from Wong’s lessons, “That is how we can be sure that we are balanced.”

Genuinely astonished, Sai looked at him as if he had experienced a eureka moment, “In Root…we are made to kill our emotions…but…” He shut his sketchbook, “Once I did…I always felt weaker on the inside.”

“Your instincts don’t lie. Shinobi cannot be an impartial force, no matter how hard they try. Our emotions are the most important guide that comes naturally to us.” Neji concluded, “They can never be cut away.”

Neji settled down to sleep and Sai stayed awake as a watch for the night. He would not have gotten any rest anyway. Everything he knew, at least from Neji and Lee’s perspective, was utter horseshit. All along, the emotion-reduction training Sai had underwent in Root, that he had oft suspected of hampering him in some ways…it was most definitely not improving him.

A recovering grouch had confirmed that.
In the first rays of morning light, Neji awoke and saw that Lee was still asleep. The fire had burned down to cinders and Sai was missing. He used his Kekkei Genkai to get a grasp of the forest and spotted the Root ninja a few dozen yards away. Neji silently got to his feet and prowled out into the forest, keeping the Byakugan focused on his suspicious teammate.

He witnessed from afar as Sai crouched down and painted on a scroll, applying chakra, and his drawing of a rat came to life. It hopped off of the paper and squeaked up at its creator. Sai spoke quietly to it and then the rodent was off, scurrying into the twigs and bramble never to be seen again. Sai stood and stowed his tools.

“What were you doing?” Neji asked, coming up from behind him.

Sai smiled, “Just a restroom stop. I’m glad you didn’t arrive any earlier.”

“Hn.” Neji did not call him out on the lie. He returned with Sai to the camp as Lee was stirring. After a hasty morning meal and chugging (in Lee’s case) a canteen of water, the group replenished water stores at a nearby stream and took off once again.

Lee shared more anecdotes with Sai on the way, and by late morning they had arrived at an abandoned quartz quarry. Moss and trees were growing over old divots and tunnels, and at the top of the hill was a wooden cabin encompassed by flowering rhododendron. They chose their footing carefully. Neji reported that the ground beneath their feet had scores of hollowed and collapsed tunnels from the mine. Some areas were unstable and he could pick the safest route with the Byakugan.

After a silly, winding trek they climbed the hilltop and cautiously peeked into the cabin. It was uninhabited and had a table and chairs, a bed, a sink and pantry, and of course, the cork board that Tsunade had described. The map was pinned up as expected. Lee and Neji entered while Sai hesitated at the doorway.

“I’ll keep watch.” Sai volunteered, “You take care of that, Ladyhair.”

Neji slammed the door shut in his face.

He turned on his heel and approached the wall, pulling the rolled-up map from his satchel. Lee took down the pinned map and laid it flat on the table. The boys aligned the paper charts and waited as deep blue marks began to bleed into the top map. After ten minutes no changes occurred and the ink had dried. Neji rolled up Tsunade’s copy and Lee replaced the scout map on the wall, as featureless as it had seemed earlier.

“Maybe we should take a rest?” Lee asked, “We will not see shelter again for at least a day.”

“Never mind shelter. We should be going.” Neji advised.

When he and Lee stepped outside there was a distinct quiet, save for the chirping of crickets and the sparrows nesting in the rhododendron. Wary of the fact that there was no sign of Sai, Neji used his blood limit to survey the area.

“We are not alone here.” Neji reported.

“No? Where is Sai?”

Neji pointed at the excavated ground below, “In that tunnel. I can see him speaking to someone.”

“Perhaps a hermit?” Lee offered.
“No. A correspondent.” Neji determined, “I watched him send his *Beast Imitation* rat into the woods this morning. He has been communicating with someone and I do not know what for,” He turned to Lee gravely, “But he didn’t want us to know about it. He lied to my face.”

Lee was concerned, “I see…”

“I was right to suspect him.”

“Suspect him of what? What crime can he commit, Neji? You have no evidence!” Lee pointed out.

“The stranger in that mine may want the information we collected.”

“Then why not ambush us for our map sooner and then copy the cabin atlas for himself?” Lee suggested.

“Lee, you have to accept that even if I can’t prove it right now…” He exhaled grimly, “Sai is attempting to sabotage us.”

“If that is so then what do we do next?” Lee asked, “Do we leave him?”

“We confront him.” Neji decided.

Down below in the mine, old portholes and cracks allowed sunlight to pass through and illuminate the tunnel. Sai had followed the main vent all the way to its crossroads with another path and found a man waiting there. He had an impatient look about him. He was dressed in dark grays and wearing a thick flak vest. While he lacked a headband he was most assuredly a shinobi.

“Well?” The man growled.

“Yasuya-san, I didn’t expect you to be here so early.” Sai commented, “Danzo-sama said that you were in the North.”

“I had another tipoff of when to arrive. You’re not the only one in touch with me.” Yasuya sniffed, “Bihokokuni-sama sent me as soon as he learned of this opportunity. Koinyu reported on it as well.”

“I had no idea everyone was so well informed…”

“Because you, Sai, are low on the totem pole.” Yasuya reminded him, “You’re just the delivery boy. Now where are those brats? We need some good bait and we heard that these two will serve nicely.”

“I left them in the cabin.”

“You’re *supposed to* lure them down here immediately.”

“I sent a lure. An ink beast is on its way to tell them I’m in distress. Neji has the Byakugan, and so he will see that I am not alone down here. He probably already knows what I have been doing. It won’t be long.”

“That’s no good.” Yasuya noted, “I don’t need that kid to be onto us.”

“Even if he is, he is the type who will absolutely confront this situation.” Sai predicted, “We should wait.”

“No. That’s not what I was told to do. If they’re up there, then *that’s* where I’m going. I smash their heads together and then take them to my master.” Yasuya took a step forward and Sai tensed,
“What? Am I speeding things up a bit too much?” He added darkly, “Are you…trying to buy them
time?”

“You could blow everything if you leave now.” Sai warned, “Be patient.”

“Fuck that.” The Rock nukenin snarled, “I won’t blow anything except for when I’m ripping organs
out of bodies. No one wastes my time; not even my master. We of his elite guard complete every task
early.”

“If someone told me that I might have accommodated you.” Sai countered.

Yasuya smiled and summoned a weapon from a tool scroll, procuring a menacing halberd with a
freshly sharpened blade, “I see through you, Sai. I don’t know why…but you’ve flipped. None of
Danzo’s pets stall or make excuses to us…but I’ll make sure you’re the last one that does.”

Sai reached for the tanto on his back, “You have no reason to mistrust me. I’ve done exactly what I
was told!”

“Maybe you did, but…” Yasuya grinned, “Your face says that you care…and Root isn’t supposed to
care.”

While in the tunnel Neji navigated the quickest route with the Byakugan. Lee flanked him closely on
the right. After rounding a bend nearly halfway through, an ink beast dog trotted up to them. The
boys stopped and evaluated it.

“Maybe…he wants to trick us?” Lee wondered, believing that Neji’s theory was right, “He wants us
to go to him!”

“Either way he knows that we will.” Neji observed, “What would be the point of sending this?”

The dog spontaneously sloshed back into a murky puddle. Neji and Lee watched in surprise as the
ink spelled out a message on the slate floor:

Get away from here. This man wants to capture you and I will have no part in it.

“Neji!” Lee hollered, “He is a comrade! He warned us of an ambush!”

“He still tried to bait us into one in the first place.”

“He changed his mind!” Lee protested.

“Sai is the one instructing us to leave. We should leave.” Neji retorted, “We have no idea what kind
of an enemy we would be up against.”

“But then Sai might-!”

The ringing of metal against metal echoed in the caverns. Lee exchanged another pleading look with
his teammate before Neji grunted in frustration. The Hyuga heir then led the way into the dark of the
mine.
Chapter Soundtrack: "Seven Swords/Battle of Wits" by Kenji Kawai

Neji had taken a hard left off of the main tunnel and Lee followed, shouting his inquiry, "Why are we going this way? Sai must be-!"

"That passage is blocked off. His correspondent used an Earth Jutsu." Neji's Byakugan had noticed the obstacle in advance, "We can detour towards him through this channel."

The boys ran pell-mell through the dusky passageway, up and over a loading dock with empty carts and then exited through a narrow, wooden-framed doorway. The path let out into an enormous cavern with a high ceiling, where all of the tracks for the pushcarts converged.

At the center of the echoing space was Sai, hopping frantically over the rails with his scroll and brush in hand. Ink Beast after Ink Beast was cleaved apart by the double-crossed nukenin, Yasuya, expertly thrusting his halberd. The man had noticed Neji's incoming Air Palm from the corner of his eye and leaped back to avoid it. Sai had his chance to retreat as his teammates arrived.

"So they're gluttons for punishment?" Yasuya sniffed, "I thought you wanted to get them out…but they probably thought they could save your sorry ass." The man laughed in deranged delight, "Three stupid teenagers…it's like my birthday came early!"

Sai hissed at Neji, "I thought you'd be smart enough to read that message. I can't help you at this point!"

"Lee and I are literate." Neji assured him, "But we make our own decisions. If you were left here by yourself your chances of escape would be slim."

Lee had his eyes trained on Yasuya as he stabbed his deadly spear into the ground, freeing his hands for sealing, "He is about to attack!"

Another Earth Jutsu rattled the mine, dislodging sections of the ceiling and walls. Stone slabs careened down over the Leaf ninjas' heads and, unfortunately, had landed with a dusty crash at each of the four exits of the cavern. With every doorway blocked, Neji had to concoct an alternative means of escape while he and Lee dove at Yasuya, keeping him away from Sai. The Root ninja maintained his distance and covered them with Ink Beasts; lion-like, fanged entities that swiped at Yasuya until he split their heads apart with the halberd's steel edge.

Lee was effectively avoiding the spear that was spinning in the nukenin's hands, but Neji found that getting in close for Jyukken would be easier said than done. His opponent quickly interpreted his movements and then swiped with the halberd, countering his efforts. The tip sliced open his right cheek and Neji backed off, figuring he too needed to provide ranged attacks. Lee remained handily untouchable, but could not safely land a physical blow on the opponent.

Sai had relocated quickly, trying to come up from behind Yasuya as he dealt with Neji and Lee's furious combination-battering. He sent out an ink-viper that lunged and successfully wrapped itself around the mighty halberd. Yasuya about-faced and locked his eyes with Sai. The Root ninja understood that his intention was to kill him for his betrayal and hinder the soon-to-be-prisoners from escaping.
Plunging chakra into the halberd, Yasuya made it spring to life. Neji warned Lee to back away as the weapon manifested an unmistakable Fire Nature Transformation. The Ink Beast coiled around the shaft disintegrated in the flames and the nukenin, impervious to the fiery aura, swung the spear and set free a turbulent wave of fire that crashed over Sai. It burned the length of scroll in his hands and knocked it loose, lighting up everything flammable. Sai tumbled into the cave gravel and rolled, putting himself out.

He noted the position of his burned Super Beast Scroll on the floor and then dashed to avoid another flamethrower, drawing his tanto in defense as he sprinted to safety.

Neji was recalculating and giving his thoughts to Lee, "We need to remove that weapon from this battle. We won't be able to deal with it."

"What do you suggest?"

"I'm arming you," Neji informed him whilst summoning a set of nunchaku from the tool scroll, "Disarm him. When he's unguarded I'll attack."

Lee caught the threshing-chain that was tossed to him and he took off with the speed of the Second Gate, opened for some added swiftness. Sai dove in with him and was quickly scared off by the wheel of fire, and Lee had to dodge with ludicrous bends and leaps to avoid Yasuya's assaults. He could smell his hair and clothes beginning to crisp.

"You wanna go Caterpillar Face?" Yasuya roared; clashing his weapon against Lee's with a resounding ring.

Sai remarked from Neji's left, "I did not think of that one…"

Neji threatened to drown him for the comment and then launched a distant, nature-less Air Palm at Yasuya as Lee somersaulted away from a jousting thrust of the spear. Lee was too close for Neji to risk Wind Release, knowing that it would mince Lee like an onion if he was hit with it. The blast of chakra landed, knocking the man back, but he had weathered the blow with unusual sturdiness as he skidded on his feet, growling in annoyance. Neji was hastily deducing that this man had stamina and reserves that dwarfed an average shinobi's.

Lee's skin was red from the opening of the Third Gate and he rushed around Yasuya like a gymnast, the sound of the nunchaku clanging against the enemy halberd resonated sharply off the walls. An eruption of fire forced him to retreat, and Lee put enough distance between himself and the hulking nukenin so he could concentrate on his next Inner Gate.

Neji took a more assertive role, hazarding the blasts of fire and rotated to avoid the smoldering assaults. In-between Yasuya's strikes Neji employed Baguazhang, defending himself in small circles as a spearhead was prodded at him. With the Byakugan, Neji could see that both Lee and Sai were a safe distance away, and so a burst attack could cripple the enemy in that moment.

He rotated again, combining his chakra with his Wind Nature, and let the horrific, ripping twister of energy sweep over Yasuya as if he were a hapless tumbleweed. But the man roared with laughter, countering with his weapon and then let his Fire Nature halberd absorb the Wind Nature. Abruptly, Neji's technique drained and he had a single second to evacuate as the tidal wave of empowered flames coursed up to the height of the ceiling and down again, filling the cavern.

Neji witnessed Sai retreat into the adjacent ditch as Neji had to fling himself into a crevasse to avoid incineration. Lee, far off in a high corner of the cave on a stone pillar, had boosted himself to Five Gates. Then, in a flash, he had deserted the perch.
He exploded up from beneath Yasuya's chin, skirting his guard entirely, and his uppercut impacted the nukenin's jaw, hurling him vertically into an iron support beam above. Oddly, the destructive attack only dizzied him, and before Neji could believe his lying eyes (as he climbed from shelter) Yasuya was trying once again to fry Lee. He was by then much too slow to catch him, but Lee's nunchaku whirled defensively until another opening cropped up.

The threshing chain snagged the pole of the spear in the brief absence of heat, and Lee heaved, wrenching the halberd free with his nunchaku as both weapons soared through the cave, fell, and then stuck into the ground. With a cry, Lee wrought Taijutsu fury on his unarmed opponent the likes of which Sai had never beheld. Neji positioned himself to assist in the finisher.

Glowing green, Lee burst into the air with his bellowing enemy; using blows that he was certain had been made stronger by his grandfather's lessons. At the zenith of the climb, Lee lashed down with a comet-kick that sent Yasuya to meet the earth…straight into Neji's whirling Wind Release Rotation below.

The man was cut apart. His severed left arm plopped down beside the Root ninja. Half of a foot landed elsewhere. Sai couldn't help a disgusted gasp from where he was salvaging his charred scroll, observing as Neji was splattered with blood from head to toe. Lee had landed with his Gates safely shut, and was catching his breath on the rail cart tracks.

Yasuya's body was akimbo on the floor. The three Leaf ninja breathed in the echoing quiet of the cave, relieved that the ordeal had come to an end. Sai had carefully unwound the last bit of parchment in the Super Beat Scroll. There was precious little space he could work with; maybe one last drawing if necessary. He would need to replace it after returning home, and then maybe consider carrying spares for the future.

A grunt of pain startled all of the recovering shinobi.

Mostly intact but lacerated beyond mortal coping, Yasuya pushed himself up to his knees, shaking with rage.

"You think I'd let…amateurs like you…humiliate me?" The man snarled.

Meters away from the near-corpse, Lee sat paralyzed in terror. His body was still struggling to fight through the pain of the Inner Gates recoil. Yasuya was between him and his teammates, and the nukenin had eyed him like prey as soon as he had staggered to his feet. What was worse…the halberd was a few steps away from Yasuya's reach.

Panicked, Sai elected to let his last drawing be an ink-bird. Escape was the wisest choice at that point, he thought with a pounding heart.

Neji watched in stunned amazement as Yasuya breathed fire, cauterizing his wounds and stubbed arm. He was unconcerned with the pain. Neji found it difficult to comprehend what kind of unstoppable resistance the enemy possessed. He had determined that the Fire Nature Transformation they had fought against was not contained in the spear; it had been inside the nukenin all along. He had funneled it through his weapon, as Neji realized all too late.

Yasuya charged while picking the halberd up along the way, and pounced on Lee who cried out, commanding his body to dodge. The metal spear tip came down and Lee rolled, avoiding a fatal stab, but had the back of his left hip sliced. His body was too shocked to allow him to stand. Lee somersaulted again, avoiding another jab, and then was pinned in the upper arm when Yasuya's blade caught up with him. A fraction of a second before fire could be employed; Neji's timely Air Palm blasted the nukenin from behind.
Yasuya soared into the nearest wall front-first with a rock-crunching smash. Neji rushed over to his teammate and hoisted him up, "Are you alright?"

"Yes, but how is he moving?" Lee was aghast, "Anyone else would be dead!"

Neji had figured that part out. He assisted Lee in hobbling towards Sai, who was waiting with a Beast Imitation eagle. He handed the wounded young man off to the Root ninja, who compliantly pushed him onto the back of the bird. Yasuya was stirring with a hell-raising roar in the background.

"It's time to leave. I'll fly us out of here." Sai offered, adding glumly, "But I had no idea that this person would be so stubborn…"

"There's a lot that you don't know, Sai. You don't know your comrades and you are an even poorer judge of your adversaries." Neji hissed, "You should pay dearly for this. For putting Lee in jeopardy…I should kill you." He turned and looked up at the stone ceiling, "But I will spare you this time. You need to get him out."

Bending at the knees and taking aim, Neji shot a robust Air Palm at the roof, shattering a hole in the top of the cavern. A placid blue sky shone through the circular opening and Sai took the hint. He joined Lee on the back of the eagle and then the ink-bird took flight.

Worried, Lee called, "You should be leaving too, Neji! Why must-?"

"I will be just behind you." Radiant with angry resolve, Neji faced the nukenin who was upright again, "This one needs to learn that I am no amateur."

Lee's shout of protest faded as he and Sai rose higher, away from the confrontation. Neji stared at the battle-scarred man who was entirely consumed with fury at that point.

"I'll just tell my master that I couldn't help killing you all. Accidents happen." Yasuya sneered, "Your bodies might fetch a price with your hag Hokage if we can't make a living purchase!"

Neji dashed towards him and came as close as he dared. Yasuya was clumsier with his weapon now that is was being brandished with one hand, and the Hyuga heir's evasion, which had been honed non-stop for weeks, frustrated the nukenin to the point of profanity. Eventually, one Jyukken strike connected and Yasuya seemed to absorb it, much like he had earlier blows.

Unrelenting, he swung the halberd down at Neji and cut his hair tie. In a splay of hair, Neji whirled, balanced, his center of gravity low, and effectively avoided the weapon. Fire began to filter into the surrounding air.

Boldly, Neji caught the spear with two hands in an attempt to wrestle it free. Yasuya spat in his face, called him a superlative pussy, and then promptly received a close quarters Wushu high-kick in the face that Neji had never been flexible enough for, save for that instance. Reeling, Yasuya's grip loosened. A cloud of fire had enveloped the two of them, but Neji had taken control of the halberd as it slipped from Yasuya's hand.

He plunged his Wind Nature into the weapon not with the intention of channeling it; Neji overloaded the spear and hacked it into pieces with his cutting chakra. It fell to the floor in segments and he stepped backwards gracefully as Yasuya took a swing at his face with his remaining fist. Neji dodged as if he had turned into dandelion tufts, waltzing in wind.

Changing his strategy, Yasuya backed up and inhaled deeply. He planned to exhale a plume of fiery chaos that could disgrace the Grand Fireball Jutsu. But the twerp of a clan prince who he had mockingly likened to genitalia was stooped low, his arms held diagonally to measure his field of
Neji launched into Yasuya, assaulting tenketsu like a hurricane. Reaching his defensive limit, Yasuya's body could take no more, and the man was finally affected. With a burp, Yasuya's Fire Transformation puttered away without exiting his mouth, and he turned into moldable dough as Neji struck. Without hope of countering, the nukenin was subjected to 64 closed chakra points within two blinks, but the young Leaf ninja hadn't stopped there.

He shut 128 points and then took a step back, narrowing his eyes, and then shot a point-blank Wind Release: Air Palm at the flailing man. Yasuya was hurtled back and lost his legs and head during the attack. His disassembled parts scattered over the rail cart tracks.

The force of the technique had knocked Neji off his own feet, and he landed in the gravel on his backside. Tired, he fell flat on his back and looked up at the hole in the ceiling. He took a few slow and deep breaths, finally detecting how his muscles were screaming for oxygen. He had not noticed it earlier. All that had mattered was stopping the nukenin from pursuing his team. His hands trembled slightly while he rested on the ground. A bit of adrenalin was still taking effect.

After a long silence, a voice echoed down from the escape hatch, "Neji?" It was Lee.

"I finished it, Lee." He called back up, exhausted.

"Thank goodness! Do you need assistance?"

Neji snorted. He did need a bit of help getting out of the godforsaken; blood-and-limb peppered mine they had been trapped in.

"Yes. Tell that imbecile to send his bird down here."

The flight home was awkward. *Beast Imitation* birds, they had learned, only comfortably seated two people. Three was a bit of a squeeze. Yet all had agreed they were too exhausted to make the trip by foot, and so they had made due.

While coasting over tree tops, Neji slathered some of his cousin's healing ointment on Lee's wounds. Sai had a cut or two on him, but Neji refused to share with the traitor. He was in a very bad mood. He had dried blood all over his skin and clothes, even in his hair. The battle with their would-be kidnapper had been horrific and violent. What was supposed to be a simple mission had turned into a fiasco and Neji was not about to forgive Sai, even if he had prevented a worse fate for them.

Lee asked Neji if he had remembered to pick up the nunchaku that had been discarded on the cave floor. Neji assured him that he had retrieved it. They shared the last of their water stores and sat soundlessly for a while. Just a little paranoid, Neji checked their surroundings with the Byakugan every ten minutes or so. It looked to be clear.

"I made a mistake." Sai noted softly.

"Everyone makes mistakes." Lee consoled him.

"No. I should have handed you over. I never should have wavered." Sai concluded, "I failed my mission."

"Do you realize I could push you?" Neji said through gritted teeth, "I can no longer come up with a
reason not to snap your neck."

"Neither of you can see the big picture. Your capture would have been in exchange for a truce. It would have offered Konoha protection." Sai elaborated.

Lee frowned, "Truly? Why was the Hokage not informed?"

"Danzo-sama says the Hokage is too weak to make such a decision. Village Leaders always fall short when it comes to securing the safety of their people. They always fail."

"In case you have forgotten, Lee and I are people of Hidden Leaf." Neji retorted.

"Sacrifices are sometimes needed. The well-being of the majority is always more important than that of the few." Sai quoted a Root lesson.

"Be that as it may, you are just as much of a failure as the Hokage, then, with respect to protecting Konoha. You couldn't go through with it." Neji snarled, "You are an embarrassment to your organization and also to our village. You too lack the ability to defend the lives of everyone in Leaf. Sacrifice is never justified."

Sai was silent.

"What I do not understand is…why did you falter?" Lee asked, "What made you warn us of the ambush?"

"I..." Sai trailed off, "I...for a brief time...forgot about the greater good." He shut his eyes, "I was tempted by your stories. The way you were close to each other...it was like me and my brother. I should not have given in."

"Your sense of the Greater Good is completely warped." The Hyuga scolded.

"I am sorry about your brother." Lee was still too compassionate to be angry, "Was he in Root as well?"

"He was."

"The Hokage values lives; all of our lives. Seeing that your senior officer did not respect ours speaks volumes for his intentions in this village. If he could justify it, he would probably sacrifice every life in Konohagakure if he found a good enough reason. Someone who is given an inch sees fit to take a mile." Neji warned, "Sai...if you want to believe that a successful trade would have helped Leaf...you would only be lying to yourself."

"Part of me...accepts that fact." His voice was small, "But it was a command. As a shinobi I must obey."

"We do not always obey." Lee remarked, glancing sidelong to Neji.

Neji grunted at him.

"Shinobi who cannot follow orders are failures. They dishonor everything they stand for."

"On occasion..." Neji looked ahead at the unending forest, "Doing the opposite of what you are told...is the only way to honor what you stand for."

Lee nodded and Sai did not speak. The conversation lulled after that and there was the singular
sound of the rushing wind as they flew over the wilds of the Fire Country.

Neji could feel the cut on his cheek beginning to scab. He ignored it and tried to relax while he was pressed shoulder to shoulder with Lee. Late afternoon was hastening.

Within a few miles of the Leaf Village, Sai finally verbalized, "I'm sorry."

"Good. You owed us that." Neji rumbled.

"I had to think more. Putting aside how I feel, which is much more than I should be able to..." Sai observed, "The village would have been less safe if you had been removed from it. Regarding the overall picture and not my orders...I may have done the right thing."

Lee smiled, "Thank you, Sai."

"Don't thank me. No one should." His shoulders sagged, "I must still take responsibility for botching the truce exchange. I will be disciplined."

"How does Root punish insubordination?" Neji asked.

Sai said nothing.

"If it is a severe consequence then we should inform the Hokage. Tsunade-sama will be able to help you." Lee speculated.

"No. I already told you," Sai shook his head, "The Hokage can never protect everyone; someone in my position least of all."

The next day at exactly 1:05 in the afternoon, Neji was walking to a hang-out. He had promised Lee that he would. While he made his way down an unpopulated side street, Neji could not help but remember what had happened after they had landed in Leaf after their mission.

Sai had been eerily quiet. Neji could tell that the young man was steeling himself for some kind of torture or beating as penance for his actions. The three had entered the administrative building together and on the landing of the third floor Gai greeted them in a booming voice. He and Lee traded pleasantries and then roped Neji closer, commenting that a change of clothes was in order. The blood was unfashionable.

When Neji turned around Sai was gone. It was a hair-raising moment as he and Lee gazed at the empty space near the stairwell, both guessing that Sai had been retrieved by Root counterparts. Gai asked them what the matter was and they couldn't properly reply.

In the office, Neji handed Tsunade her map and she jubilantly thanked him. She blinked in confusion and asked where their third-wheel had gone.

"He may have been reclaimed by the Foundation." Lee supposed.

"They jumped the gun with that." Tsunade stated, apparently not hung up about it.

She debriefed with Neji and Lee while Gai waited in the hallway. Neji had carefully recapped details about the fight in the mine, stressing that Sai had orders to hand them off. In tense silence, Tsunade pressed her lips to her folded hands, considering the treachery and what motivated it. Of course
Danzo would gladly exchange Genin for the promise of an armistice with Leaf’s enemies, and of course he wouldn’t give her a head’s up about it.

She wanted to schedule a flogging for the old man, but Neji snapped her out of her fantasy.

"Sai may be in danger." Neji reiterated, "He suggested that his disobedience won’t be received well. Is there anything you can do about it, Hokage-sama?"

Tsunade’s ears picked up on the fact that Neji sounded genuinely concerned.

"I don’t know." She admitted, "The most stalwart subsidiary in the history of this village has him and can legally do with Sai as they see fit." Tsunade added with a tiny smirk, "I have an idea though."

Lee and Neji looked at her expectantly and she frowned at them, "Enough. The ball is in my court now, boys. You need to stay out of it." As an afterthought she added, "And I am relieved that you were not needlessly dropped into the hands of the enemy. That would have ruined my whole week."

Lee seemed pleased with the announcement until he realized she planned to grieve for about seven days. Tsunade asked Lee how his wounds were on a scale of one to ten. He gave them a two (thanks to the ointment) and she nodded. "Go home now and rest, please. I will do what I can." She assuaged them.

They did just that.

The very next morning, Lee had gotten an invitation from their cohort to spend some time. He had contended that Neji was mentally fortified to visit friends now. They told Gai of their intentions to take the day off, which he lauded, and then the pair dropped by Lee’s house.

Wong Leung forbade a day off…at least in entirety. They would complete their training before doing anything for diversion. Reluctantly, they agreed and took a few laps around the village.

The routine was switched up a little. When they returned Wong had them follow in a line behind him doing high-kicks while traversing stone steps near a garden. It wasn’t making their rundown legs or muscles feel great. Immediately after the kicking-march, he had them doing splits in the grass while the sun rose. Once or twice Wong pushed down on Neji’s shoulders, and the Hyuga heir refused to acknowledge how his groin muscles had possibly ripped apart. A bead of sweat rolled down the side of his face.

Then, instead of doing any incredible feats of balance as they typically did, Wong stood in the yard and took a stance.

"We’re going to do forms together, just like how I drilled my students back at home. Lee, make sure he keeps up. Do exactly as I do."

"Yes, Grandpa!" Lee turned to his teammate, "We will copy his forms now."

Without complaint, they mimicked the old man's movements which were sharp and precise. When either of them occasionally lagged Wong would stop and slap them, usually on the back of the head. Then he would resume. He threatened to bring out a switch he kept in his closet if they didn't get it right.

And then they were free shortly after noon. Lee and Neji cleaned up but did not change out of their Wong-designated uniforms. Thus, by 1:00, Neji was making his way to the meeting place.

While he had never been there before, Lee had described a picnicking area beneath cherry trees as
the location they would meet with friends. Neji could navigate. After rounding the corner and (through a window) ignoring Kakashi looting the shelves of a bookshop for new volumes, Neji spotted Lee near the blooming grove. He was seated at a table beside Chouji and Shikamaru. Across from them, Sato was holding a photo up to Shino’s face and critiquing it.

He came within a few feet before the group hooted and welcomed him. Well, Shino said nothing, but that was to be expected. Sato moved over to give him a spot, smiling widely, "Hey! We weren't sure if you would really show up!"

Neji took a seat, "I had no excuse."

"Apart from being antisocial." Sato reminded him.

"Apart from that." He sniffed.

Sitting next to Sato could potentially turn this into a button-pushing extravaganza. If all else failed he could pinch a nerve in the Hatake's neck and put him to sleep.

"We heard that you and Lee had a crazy mission." Chouji offered a more suitable subject, "He just started talking about it, actually."

"Yes! We had a substitute join us." Lee announced, "His name was Sai."

With his head propped up on a hand, Shikamaru inquired, "That was probably weird. What was he like?"

"Artistic." Lee supplied.

"Ignorant. Sociopathic." Neji added.

Lee then recalled, "Oh! And obnoxious, traitorous, and very rude."

The boys stared at them in hushed shock.

"Cool." Chouji said at length.

"Tenten may have been preferable." Shikamaru gathered.

"Right, five thousand times more preferable." Lee agreed. Neji nodded in gloomy silence.

"Tama visited her the other day. She said that Tenten's working hard and…dressing more mature…” Sato had gotten the attention of the subject's teammates, "All of the girls are doing that these days. They're becoming magnetic."

"By that do you mean…the kunoichi are expressing magnetic fields?" Lee furrowed his thick brows, prepared to be astonished.

"No, Lee," Shikamaru sighed, "He means that our women are becoming more attractive."

Shino finally spoke, "The term 'our women' is an objectification of our intellectual and physical equals. Correct yourself."

"Jeez, excuse me…” The Nara flashed his eyes sarcastically, "I meant our esteemed female colleagues." He added just for annoyance, "They're hot."

"He meant it in a fond, non-offensive way." Chouji defended his friend, "But Shino's still right."
"Alright already. I got it."

"It's fine. After all, we're the ones dating them. I'm sure they refer to us as their menfolk." Sato postulated.

"Well, only you and Shikamaru are dating anyone." Chouji pointed out, "Naruto's team are the guys in relationships, mostly."

"Oh yeah." Sato conceded sunnily. His face resembled the thousand-yard stare of a Shiba Inu, unaware and pettable.

"To be honest, Sato barely qualifies. You should only count me." Shikamaru recommended, "He's engaged. That's a different situation."

"Is it? I take Tama out and get to know her and all that!" Sato puffed up, "You're the one who's too comfy on his ass to take Ino on a date."

"We have indoor dates."

"We all know what that means." Sato responded with an eye roll.

"Yeah? What does it mean?"

Mercifully, Lee had covered Chouji's ears so he wouldn't be subjected to any unwanted visuals or facts.

The Hatake slammed his hand on the table, his expression deadly serious, "It's something only men in my position should consider. Not even!" He gestured to his teammate, "Shino, tell him."

Disassociating, Neji sat and imagined that he had achieved a higher level of consciousness, completely forsaking the boyfriend banter.

"Intimacy should be reserved for marriage." Shino supplied, "That is what Father says."

"Is it safe yet?" Chouji asked, still deaf.

Lee held the Akimichi's head and shook it 'no' indicating he could not yet be set free.

"Maybe so, but it's not like we can turn back time. Ino solicits me more than I solicit her."

"That's a dirty lie." Sato insisted.

"No. You just wish it was." Shikamaru jabbed, "You wouldn't know the first thing about it, Sato. You've never had the thrill of the chase. Never will."

Sato stood, pushing back the bench, "You wanna go there, huh? I bet your chase is like how flowers get it on. You need a go-between, you lazy polyp!"

"Do not slander the precious pollinators of nature." Shino warned, "You are perverting their reputation."

"That is quite enough." Lee cut in, "We shall now talk about something else." He freed Chouji who was happily clueless about the current topic.

Lee turned to his teammate, "Neji?"
The Hyuga gradually slipped back from enlightenment, "What?"

"You have not said anything."

"Should I have? The subject matter is terribly lacking so far."

"What were we talking about?" Shikamaru quizzed him.

"Magnetism." Neji guessed.

"That's about as far as I got." Chouji concurred.

Sato grinned, "You can't pretend like you're above all of this, Neji..."

Lee mouthed to the Hatake, No, please don't.

"Even you think about women and their charms at times." Sato pressed on.

"I have better things to think about."

"As men, we all do. You can't deny it!"

"I can't deny something that doesn't occur."

"You have the Byakugan!" Sato brought his fists down on the table, "You get to look for free!"

Turning his face to scowl at the silver haired boy, Neji replied, "Try to imagine someone who has seen and manipulated countless bodies in various stages of disrobe, particularly during battle." He then said, "Now try to imagine that person is me. Did that help you?"

"You're a bastard." Sato accused him, "There's no use in pretending! We know that you want Tenten and-"

Everyone at the table jumped up in alarm when Neji poked a pressure point in Sato's neck and the boy cascaded down to the ground, unconscious.

There was a full thirty seconds of wordless concern before they all sat down again. Shino had positioned Sato to be comfortable and completely supine in the grass.

"That is better." Shikamaru acknowledged.

"Where does everyone want to go to lunch?" Chouji asked.

No one really had a preference and so they agreed that Yakiniku Q would do fine. Moments later, Kiba had stopped in between two flowering cherry blossom trees, taking in the sight of the gathering. Confusion glanced across his face upon spotting Sato, but then he shrugged and approached his friends. Akamaru stopped beside Sato and sniffed him.

"Kiba! You showed up just in time! Want to go to lunch with us?" Chouji extended the invitation.

"Uh, sure." The wild-haired nin asked, "What about Doofus down there?"

"That's up to Shino." Shikamaru declared.

All eyes went to the hooded Aburame, who deliberated briefly, "We can leave him. Neji's maneuver should allow him to wake up within an hour."
"Great." Kiba was pleased.

"There's no way that we couldn't have found out, and sorry to bring it up, but," Shikamaru gave a sympathetic look to the Inuzuka, "Sorry about what happened to you. I won't pretend to know how you feel."

All gathered gave their sympathy and Kiba waved it off, "It's fine. I know I should be traumatized or something like that…but I'm adjusted. It won't kill me. There's a tracking team looking for my dad now." He patted Akamaru's head, "So…are we going to lunch or what?"

And they happily left Sato beneath a picnic bench.

A few hours later at the Hyuga estate, Hinata was hanging potted plants from rafters on the porch of the house. Ino and Sakura were assisting, holding a footstool steady and handing the next suspension respectively. Springtime called for festive decorations and Hiashi had not objected.

While chatting and cooperating, the girls had been able to complete the entire surrounding walk of the estate. Ino jumped in surprise a few times when Hinata willed jets of water up from a watering can and into the suspended flowers.

"You scare me when you do that!"

"I-I'm sorry!"

"No, its fine, I just…" Ino flipped her hair out of her eyes, "Would appreciate a little warning…"

"I think it's brilliant." Sakura grinned.

"It is brilliant, but she can shoot it right past my face!"

"I will warn you next time, Ino-chan."

"How did you learn how to do that, Hinata?" Sakura wondered.

"I've been practicing for a long time. I was able to manipulate water since shortly after the last Chunin Exam." She explained, fastening a hook, "The Hyuga clan has tools that help us learn about our Nature Transformations. Father is quite good at it."

"Runs in the family." Ino noted.

"It does. Though…I am not good at adding my Nature to other techniques yet. Father is still trying to encourage me to use Eight Trigrams Air Palm…but it's very tricky."

"You'll get the hang of it! You still have plenty of time before the Exam." Sakura bolstered her.

"Thank you, Sakura-chan."

"Asuma-sensei said we won't get into learning about Chakra Natures until after we're Chunin." Ino grumbled, positioning the stool for the next beam, "It was a letdown."

Sakura nodded, "Yeah, Kakashi-sensei said the same thing…only Tama expresses her Nature easily so he spoke to her about it. He suggested that it would take too long to demonstrate it to me and Kiba."
"They play favorites, I tell you!"

"It is hard work and it takes hours of practice." Hinata reminded them, "To harness that ability quickly someone would have to be a…"

Footsteps sounded over the gravel beside the porch. The girls turned and observed as Neji passed by, eyeing the fresh, decorative flowers that had been hung. There was an infinitesimal smile on his face as he approached them.

He came to a halt near his cousin and her friends, "Our grounds look exponentially better, Hinata-sama."

"Niisan! I am glad you think so!"

He acknowledged the other kunoichi, "Sakura. Ino."

"That's some outfit you have on there." Ino marked, taken aback by the black, collared clasp-tie, sleeveless shirt. She could not award points for the simple black pants, but the Han slippers were a daring, unconventional choice. Her fashion meter settled on an eight. Eight-and-a-half, really, because both of his arms were wrapped in tape up to elbow. It looked like Neji could kill someone with his pinky.

"It is attire that Lee's grandfather makes us wear."

Hinata giggled quietly, aware of the arrangement.

"Yeah, I saw Lee the other day wearing clothes like that." Sakura recalled, "Are you two getting along okay?"

"We're fine. We finished lunch a short while ago."

She smiled, "Good! I know it can't be easy for you and Lee."

Ino handed another potted plant to Hinata, who was still going about her task.

"You all...spend time with Tenten?" Neji inquired.

A small, excited jolt shot through the girls simultaneously.

"Almost every day." Ino claimed.

"How is she?" His voice had a near imperceptible edge of desperation in it.

"She's fun. I try to hang out with her whenever Shishou sets me free!" Sakura was jovial, "Ino and Hinata keep an eye open for her so we can catch her before training."

Neji's ears perked up at the word training. Before he could ask, Ino completed the thought, "She is learning jutsu from Gekko Hayate. He was an apprentice to her dad a long time ago. They don't like each other very much."

Neji closed his mouth and nodded, digesting the news.

"One other thing," Ino added, "She's miserable."

Hinata and Sakura gave the blonde girl unappreciative looks. That information wasn't going to make Neji feel like this was a worthwhile conversation. At least, that's what they feared.
Neji was listening.

"We're looking after her and that probably helps a bit. When we talk about you and Lee sometimes she gets antsy." She smiled, "She'll hold on. Just keep thinking about her."

In a deep and sincere voice he thanked Ino for her honesty. Neji continued on after a curt farewell and, unknown to them, contemplated another forbidden trip downtown soon. If the ANBU agent was still on the prowl after two weeks, Neji thought, he deserved a medal for his service. He highly doubted it.

When he had entered the Main House the girls picked their conversation up again.


"He's tough enough. I just got the feeling he would prefer the truth." Ino shrugged, "If anything, knowing that Tenten is unhappy will motivate him to do something about it."

Hinata smiled uncertainly, "Neji-niisan could get in trouble for it."

"I know! That's the point." Ino brushed loose petals from her skirt, "It'll make for a great story later when your Dad bails him out of jail, or when I can take credit for the ensuing, whirlwind romance."

Sakura warned, "You are entering delusional territory."

"Let me stay there. I'm not hurting anyone."

"Not yet." The pink haired girl folded her hands and chuckled, "But did you see the size of those arms?"

"Niisan works hard so his heart aches less." Hinata provided her evaluation.

"I've got to admit, they are above satisfactory." Ino nodded thoughtfully, "But how do they compare, Sakura? Can Gaara's arms bust measuring tape too?"

"I don't know. He wears long sleeves." She grinned mischievously, "I'll get back to you on that."

Hinata was blushing, pointedly trying not to bring up Naruto's arms. She imagined they would be perfect for embracing her, but she would only let her thoughts go so far. Her friends assisted her with putting up the last plant before they were greeted by other members of the Hyuga clan.

Fujita and his mother poked their heads out of a ground-level window, catching Hinata's attention, "Good work, Son! You found her. Hinata-sama, my sweet. Come here please."

Hinata hopped down from the stool and joined them at the open window, "Kayato-san! Fujita-kun! Will you join us for dinner tonight?"

Fujita's mother was sprightly and beautiful; her black hair was streaked with gray on the sides. She was holding her son's shoulders affectionately while she spoke. Fujita complied happily.

"I'm afraid we can't, dear. I wanted to share some news with you, before any of the older generation do." Kayato warned, lowering her voice, "Another suitor will be stopping by tomorrow to call on you. I will prepare you a kimono. I asked Hide-chan if there's an end in sight and he believes that no one else will come by to bother you after this."

"Finally!" Ino breathed, "If I fill one more flower order I'll have to start denying service."
As the sun sank lower in the sky that day, across the wastes and fields and gnarled woods beyond the Fire Country, there was stirring in the gloom. Concealed by illusions and seals, a battered storm door on the forest floor was only accessible to adherents of Orochimaru.

Knowing that he wasn't the snake Sennin's favorite person at the moment, Koinyu entered cautiously.

He had only followed half the length of the torch-lined hallway before a voice came from behind him, "That's far enough."

The man turned slowly, supposing that Orochimaru had slipped through a crack in the wall to startle him…or he had just exited a known restroom on the right. Either way, the white-faced man looked peeved.

"Orochimaru-sama. Bi-sama sends his regards."

"Delightful. I suppose I should give condolences for your fallen brother-in-arms, but I hardly knew him. I've heard he's resting in pieces."

Koinyu shut his eyes and smiled, liking the dark humor.

"You did not turn much of a profit for me, other than filling empty cells in the hold." Orochimaru considered, "And I am not going to thank you for tagging Haku-kun. It quite obviously didn't work."

"That just goes to show what a crafty young man you'll inhabit in the future."

The snake smiled, "Maybe it does. He'll be a better investment in a few more years, I expect. But for now, I imagine you are here to learn how to enter Konohagakure."

"Precisely."

Orochimaru turned in the opposite direction and began walking. Koinyu followed as the sennin explained, "This will be my last effort in helping you. Should you or your master need further assistance," His slitted eyes were intense, "I expect substantial compensation."

The violet haired man nodded coolly.

"There are three entrances particularly good for avoiding the village barrier that the Sensory Corps uses to detect intruders." He was smug, "I made them myself. I am sure at least one of them has been tapped and is watched by Black Ops, but the other two…are undiscovered."

Orochimaru gave details about the secret routes Koinyu had been waiting for. He was also informed that Danzo used these passages from time to time and that it would be wise to either involve Root in their machinations (so there would be no surprise encounters) or avoid the organization altogether. Danzo had a habit of conveniently flip-flopping sides when a cause was deemed "in the village's best interest." Bi's commune might find that front to be a crapshoot.

The two rabbled on as men are wont to do when scheming, and some time went by before Koinyu passed Sasuke silently in the hallway, travelling in the opposite direction. A red haired girl was
"Karin." Orochimaru called out to the kunoichi, "I'd like to have a word with you."

Koinyu and Sasuke had disappeared into darkness on opposite sides of the corridor. The redhead girl frowned but compliantly went to Orochimaru's side near an open doorway.

"Yes, Orochimaru-sama?"

"Are you pestering Sasuke-kun again?"

"Why, of course not," She smiled, "We were having a discussion."

"About what?"

"His tastes." Karin jested.

"Hm." The snake sennin tucked his hand under his chin, "An intriguing topic. I didn't hear much input coming from him."

The girl just kept smiling.

"I want you to be aware that you'll be transferring to the Southern Hideout. My previous warden there was a disappointment…and I expect that you can keep prisoners and experiments on schedule." He dropped a bomb on her, ignoring her shocked expression, "You will be assigned there permanently."

"I..." Karin gaped like a fish before getting a hold of herself, "I see."

"You leave tomorrow." Orochimaru added sweetly.

Karin did have an unhealthy, vast respect of the Snake Sennin, and though she wanted to, she would not object to such an order. She had almost always been treated fairly while in Orochimaru's care, and she was not about to squander his good graces.

"I will, Sir. I will contact you when I arrive there and get things in order."

"Excellent." He carried on down the hall after Sasuke. It would deter the girl from following.

At the top of the stairs within an atrium, Orochimaru set free a small white snake, commanding, "Keep an eye on that boy."

He had attempted to pass by the experimentation lab without being noticed, but Sasuke could hear Suigetsu's voice calling after him.

"Don't be a dick! Come over here and talk to me!"

On a whim, he turned back to waste time in the lab. Sasuke came to a stop in front of a holding tank. The white haired young man was partially liquefied and suspended in water. His face remained visible and cheeky while his trunk and limbs were transparent.

"Well now, thank you for stopping by!"
"What do you want?" Sasuke's tone lacked amusement.

"I've seen you pass this place a lot lately, probably on your way down to the rest quarters, huh?" Suigetsu observed, "You know what else I see going that way?"

"What?"

Suigetsu grinned, "Kitties."

He arched an eyebrow, "Your point?"

"I don't think it's coincidence that those ninja cats are gathering here more often… when there are much better places to be than this dump." He held his chin with a partially dissolved hand, "You, sir, are collecting information."

"Why would that matter to you?"

"Heh! I get bored! I notice shit! Who are you getting dirt on?" Suigetsu smiled, "Need to off someone? Maybe one or two?"

With folded arms, Sasuke turned and walked back towards the lab entrance.

Suigetsu's voice warned him, "Don't think he won't notice. I won't tell Orochimaru…but you don't take great care in hiding your intentions, Sasuke."

He looked over his shoulder, "Suigetsu."

"Yeah?"

"They never let you out of that tank, do they?"

"Never." He bared his sharp teeth, "Assholes."

"So you're swimming in your own waste?"

"Pretty much." He confirmed, "It's quite cruel. This water only gets flushed twice a day." He added longingly, "I can't wait to kill those attendants when I get out of here."

And without further ado Sasuke departed, continuing his journey down the dim corridor.

It turned out that Suigetsu was one-hundred-percent correct in his assessment. The ninja cats belonged to a weapon and accessory supplier of the late Uchiha clan, an old hermit woman named Nekobaa. As a favor to Sasuke, the speech-capable felines Denka and Hina had been discreetly doing reconnaissance in the Wind Country…for several months.

Sasuke had not wanted to believe what Kiba had told him during their escapade in the Lightning Country. Likewise, he dreaded any confirmation of it. Sure enough, Orochimaru had one day sniggered at the thought of Gaara becoming the Fifth Kazekage (proving Kiba's statement true), and, consequently, Sasuke's silent, spiraling rage had splintered his goal into two new objectives.

'Become strong enough to kill Itachi' was still at the forefront of his mind, but Sasuke had added Gaara's inexplicable and quiet demise to the list as well. And, to the surprise of his two cooperating cat friends, he planned to murder the Kazekage first. He was confident it could be done.

He already had three solid months of intelligence.
This rendezvous with Denka and Hina served only as a check-in that Gaara was still in Hidden Sand and would be staying put. Recently, Gaara had made an unexpected trip to the Tide Village when a crisis with the Shin clan erupted, Hina reported. The same Shin clan Sasuke had decimated before their flight from the Rice Country. 'Go figure.'

He met with the cats in a lounge with rectangular sofas. They meowed happily when he arrived.

"Sasuke-kun! Did you bring us treats?"

"Yeah! Did ya?"

"No." With a frown he admitted, "But in the north wing kitchen someone left jerky out."

"Woo!" The cats were thrilled.

"Now tell me," Sasuke's eyes were narrow, "When's the best time?"

"Tonight is perfect. That redhead napper is taking it easy at home! He sent his sister to work on his Training Program." Denka conveyed the state of affairs, "He works hard and it tires him out."

"Typical bed time of target is 10:50pm." Hina added, "Asleep by 11:02pm."

He didn't ask how the cat had determined that statistic, "He doesn't have to be asleep. He just needs to be alone."

Together, Denka and Hina assured, "He is alone."

The cats leapt off of the couch and onto the stone floor, trotting out to find the kitchen.

Hina turned back to give one last instruction, "His friends and family are away on missions. He's a sleepy fellow. Strike by dark and leave quietly, Sasuke. Like it was all a dream..."

And as the striped she-cat sprang away nimbly, Sasuke felt a rush of expectation and even marginal excitement. If the circumstances were so plainly in his favor, maybe this night was fated to be Gaara's last.

Without alerting the Sound community or its leader, Sasuke had snuck off. He made a hasty exit from the bogs near the hideout and pushed out into the farmlands and paddies of the Rice Country. To avoid detection from any of the local farmers stooped over harvesting in the dying light, Sasuke had employed Genjutsu to disappear, passing by residents without hassle.

In the early dark of the evening, he had left the country border and entered the northwestern quadrant of the Fire Country. When running lost its appeal, Sasuke took advantage of his Cursed Seal form and leapt from a sheer drop on the leeward side of a mountain. He could glide on the gentle winds of the valley with ease.

It did cross his mind that Orochimaru may notice a twinge of suspicious activity while he used the Heaven Seal, but he didn't care. He had covered enough distance to disregard that possibility. He could explain his actions to the snake later when he had fresh blood on his hands.

Late in the night, he had avoided any and all suspicion of Fire Country patrols. He had maintained considerable altitude before descending a bit over the crags and falls of the River Country. The unsettling, moon-less dark of the witching hour was wholly appropriate for his landing in the Wind
Sasuke touched down and shed his Cursed Seal form. The air was frigid and still over the dunes. He had purposefully put himself just out of range of a perimeter watch nearly six miles away from Sunagakure. He moved swiftly in the brisk climate, passing over sand like a wraith.

In his mind's eye he focused on the quaint, thatch-fenced entrance Denka and Hina had told him of. It was a small back door of an exporting station at the village's surrounding wall, and it was almost never properly guarded. The cats had encouraged him to sneak in that way and carefully approach the administrative district. He could get to the mansion, locate the third floor; last window on the left side, Hina had stressed. Always open. Always quiet.

The lack of light pollution enabled a swatch of clustered stars to shine down on the desert. With his eyes trained forward, Sasuke slipped out of his mental instructions and back into his weak justification of this whole operation. Kiba had made it clear that if anything happened to Gaara that Sakura would be devastated. Kiba had accurately claimed that Sasuke did not want to bring the young woman unhappiness, surely not after their awful parting…

But inside, his emotions and their equivalent rationales were out of sorts. Like a jigsaw puzzle with sections partially assembled, the loose pieces could sometimes fit in the incorrect spot. It would dislodge the other 'intended' pieces, of course, but that was just how it worked.

Even if he killed this young, worthless "Kazekage" that Sakura loved, certainly he could restore her. He could be everything that comprised her joyful world…because she truly was his motivation, in that respect. It was possible. Even Sasuke, as damaged as he awarely was, could attest that any heartbroken person can rediscover love.

Rather than focus on the pain he would be inflicting, he would be concentrating on the happiness he could bring Sakura later. She needed only to have patience.

In fact, all of his close people should respect that he didn't want to stay gone after he had settled his business with Itachi. They should wait. They should understand! He frowned at the idea; they should condone it! Few others could comprehend his need to settle the score and avenge his kin. His team ought to. Kiba had indicated that he did, and that was an incredibly precious admission.

Yet also…on a raw, undeniable level…killing Gaara was not going to settle any score or avenge any relative. It was an impulsive desire. The aloof rival he had passive-aggressively squared off with in his youth, and to his revulsion, had been rescued by during Itachi's previous visit…in supreme honesty…Gaara's expiration would feel good. It would bring simple satisfaction. It would illuminate the fruits of his training and, if Sasuke wasn't caught as the perpetrator, he could get away with the dark deed as so many hedonists like him did in this world. Fixating on the positive would undoubtedly lead to the positive, some life-coaches might preach.

In the turmoil of his mind, somewhere, the quest for happiness marched on. On and on down all the wrong roads and turns…

A tremor shook the ground. Sasuke stopped and listened attentively to his surroundings. Meters ahead of him the dunes split apart, the sand parted like the sea, and a gargantuan, silver serpent reared up; ten stories tall. Motionless, Sasuke stared up at it in frustration. The snake bent down and opened its mouth, unfurling a pink, forked tongue, and Orochimaru strolled down as if it were a runway. He stepped out onto the sand and folded his arms, clearly angered.

"This is no place for a young man to be so late at night..." He chastised in a mocking tone, "And for such...reckless purposes..."
"I would be back by morning." Sasuke snipped.

"Really?" Orochimaru narrowed his eyes, "How do you expect this task of yours to end? Think it'll go off without a hitch? Gaara-kun is the Kazekage for a reason."

Frustrated, Sasuke saved his comments for himself as Orochimaru went on, "Those cats of yours didn't mind telling me of your intentions after I fed them jerky. You silly child! It isn't difficult to decipher what you've been festering about for three months!" He simpered, "Don't you...have someone more important to eliminate?"

He gritted his teeth, "In the near future..."

"Don't give me that..." The sennin huffed, "You are a capricious vigilante and I am in no mood to humor your boyish whims...particularly when they can jeopardize my plans." He scowled, "I won't prod at Sunagakure. I won't beg for their attention when Sand has so happily distracted itself with its new satellite in the Land of Waves. Things are just as I need them to be right now, and I won't tolerate your trifling enterprises. You've already risked far too much exposure..."

"I'll make a deal with you."

"No." Orochimaru's eyes widened furiously, "Did I not make myself clear? I'm not entertaining any bribes or bargains. You have no sense of risk assessment." He turned back to his giant serpent and beckoned for it to come close, adding to Sasuke, "But now...I think it's best to put your energy towards something constructive."

"Like what?"

"Like someone who is really worth hunting..." He smiled darkly, "I have an informant...yes...one who is curiously stupid..."

"Tobi?" Sasuke figured, appalled at the mentioning of such an insignificant pawn.

"He was rescued from a near fatality, long ago...and suffered extensive physical and mental damage..." Orochimaru explained, "But lately...I suspect my dopey friend to be engaging in activities worse than that of a double agent..."

Surprised that his attention had been essentially high-jacked, Sasuke listened with raised eyebrows.

"He is funneling information into Konoha." He announced harshly, "And I seriously doubt that what he reports is being sent to Danzo of Root. He has been in contact with Tsunade or Jiraiya. I know it." Orochimaru patted the giant snake's snout, "That is why Leaf has been much too alert for my liking. The Black Ops couldn't have learned so much in so little time..."

Sasuke stared in disbelief, "A triple-agent?"

Orochimaru was glowering at the horizon, "Not for long. Leaf has no business knowing what I know...and I intend to keep it that way." He turned back to Sasuke, "Don't bother returning to Sound. I am sending you directly to the north through the Land of Earth. I want you to do a sweep of the suburbs...the small valleys and hamlets tucked away near the coast."

"And then what?"

"You keep vigil." Orochimaru smiled, "Those are his haunts. Watch Tobi. Learn his routes: His stops. His friends. His home. And if you see any indication that he is meeting with a sympathizer of Konoha..." He tapped the serpent's nose and it opened its jaws, "Kill him."
Sasuke stood in silence, taken aback by the task. He had not expected to be redirected so.

"Take your time. I can send friends to check up on you...or you may send updates my way whenever you wish." Orochimaru offered, "I'm sure this is an undertaking perfectly suited for you, Sasuke. See that it gets settled. If Tobi isn't guilty as charged, then leave him be," He chortled, "But his association is rather obvious now."

He returned to the maw of the silver giant and then the beast burrowed underground again. In the minute after Orochimaru had casually departed, squashing Sasuke's efforts, the young Uchiha blinked at the nearby Sand Village. By all accounts, it would be predictable for him to go ahead with his murderous plan anyway. His steps toward Suna were halting, conflicted, until finally he about-faced. Orochimaru had only expressed that now was not the best time. He had never said he had a problem with Gaara's assassination.

Resetting his priorities, Sasuke darted northbound in the dark.

The following day, the sun shone brightly over Nanakusa. The picturesque town was perhaps the most underrated, overlooked spit of land in the Water Country. And that was something two groups of people had capitalized on: nukenin and retirees.

On this day in history, in this exact location, Zabuza only wasted four minutes arguing with Haku about whether or not he would be joining the Demon of Hidden Mist for a mission assigned by a lucrative mob-boss. Haku had declined nineteen times in a row all while preparing a morning meal, and he shoved the food in front of the brute's face to shut him up. It was working.

"You need to sharpen your skills. That's reason enough to come along." He added between mouthfuls.

"I'll train here."

"There ain't shit to do here."

Haku frowned, "I told you I'm not going. Jiraiya-sensei warned me not to."

"What's he going to do about it? Send a toad down here to spank you?" Zabuza taunted, "Who gives an actual fuck?"

"Go without me. If I need money then I will consider assignments in the future..."

"Suit yourself. You don't make much doing that waitressing job of yours."

"It's not called 'waitressing' if you're a man, you know."

Zabuza cleaned his plate, "It is if you're deceiving customers with long hair and a china-doll face. Get over it."

Haku puffed in annoyance but was relieved when Zabuza quickly vacated after that. He ate a light breakfast before heading out into town; wary of whom he might meet. Ranmaru and Raiga had settled down in the area as well, and the two apprentices were careful not to cross paths with an "opposing master" or be caught together. It would spark an all-out brawl. So far, their caution had prevented such incidents and their companions were none the wiser.
Occasionally, Ranmaru had a late start. He was most likely still trying to find a good enough excuse to shake Raiga from his side. As soon as the boy had finished cooking and/or his supplemental training and began talking about **boring things**, like shopping or chatting with townsfolk, Raiga checked out and defaulted to naps. Haku found this practice oddly similar to Zabuza's lifestyle. Today was one such day in which Ranmaru needed extra time. He had not yet appeared at the tea shop or out on the roadside.

Since Haku was not scheduled to work, he followed a dirt trail out of Nanakusa and into the surrounding cedar forest. It was bursting with springtime bustle and the chirping of paired animals expecting their young. When Haku found a quiet patch to work in he relaxed, taking a deep breath.

Whenever he had time alone, Haku poured most of his effort and concentration into refining his Ice Release techniques. In recent weeks, he had developed a tremendous version of his Crystal Ice Mirrors. It had four levels of reflective panels and enough space to encircle a sizable battalion, but of course, it would be too much for him alone to strike from every surface. So far, four shadow clones had been sufficient. With compatible chakra, they could flash, warp and dive through the same surfaces he could.

It was a curious talent. Haku had taken a few days to ponder and experiment with **what exactly** was on the opposite side of an ice mirror. Once inside and **not** facing out at the shinobi world, eye to eye with an adversary... he would stare at an entirely white and blank space. It was, as best as he could describe, a three-dimensional, oxygenated zone, and after walking deeper into it (during one terrifying episode) he had determined that it went on infinitely. Or at least, he wasn't sure if it was worth searching for the end.

'It's another dimension.' He thought, perplexed, *'How can I explain that to others? Is there really such a thing?*’ Never before had he given it thought about what he was technically doing when he performed the jutsu.

He was grasping at straws while trying to describe what the functionality and physics were. Haku's capable brain had drawn up one justification in that, with enough chakra, he could create an **innumerable** amount of ice mirrors if he so desired, thus explaining all of the wide, white, chilly terrain available to open "gateways" between. He scratched his head while working on it. In addition to that, he knew at least **one** thing for certain. The chakra necessary for an ice mirror was directly proportional to its size, shape, and composition in the "shinobi realm." On the rare occasions he had used less chakra, focused on fulfilling what was **just enough** for a mirror the size of his hand...

It was almost effortless. Rudimentary, even. Maybe he had just gotten used to creating them, but Haku had learned that a small mirror had just as much application as full-sized crystals did.

While toying around with 25cm mirror suspended in the air, Haku had reached into it all the way up to his shoulder, positing scientific explanations. Since he had not yet **found** anyone to explain who he was and what he could do, he needed to discover it for himself.

"Haku-kun!"

He peeked over his shoulder to see his violet-haired friend scurrying through the ferns, "I'm sorry I'm late!"

"It's fine. You do what you need to do to avoid suspicion." Haku smiled reassuringly.

Ranmaru's small chest heaved a sigh, "Sometimes Raiga makes it hard work..." He brightened, "Oh! Are you using your Kekkei Genkai right now?" He was looking at the mirror.
"Yes. Though this isn't much…"

Ranmaru poked it with his finger, only contacting a solid surface, "It's cold."

"The Hyoton creates ice for a wide array of jutsu."

"Hm." He blinked thoughtfully, "But you said that you…don't know about your clan either."

"I don't." Haku admitted.

"So we need to work hard to learn about our abilities." Ranmaru was determined, "No one can teach me what to do, but at least you know what I'm going through!"

He chuckled, "I do."

"Can we go back to Hiroshi's shop and work on the Palm Healing Technique?"

"You're already very good at it."

"As good as a medic-nin?"

"Well…no," Haku conceded, "Neither of us are that good. I never had the chance to apprentice under an expert."

The tiny boy's hands fisted when he had an idea, "We should find one."

"You know that Zabuza and Raiga won't approve. We're already teetering on the edge of being discovered." Haku admonished, "We shouldn't push our luck, Ranmaru."

But just to make his wee friend happy, they ventured back into the village and stopped in Hiroshi's tea shop. They were welcome for a short while before the establishment became busy, and the Hiroshi kindly shooed them out to make room for customers. They went down the street and ended up under an awning near Tomo's street-side stand. Haku had voluntarily cut the back of his hand (to her aversion) and the woman watched as Ranmaru quickly mended it with a glowing, green light

"You know…" She said while tapping her chin, "I've seen that before."

"What do you mean, Tomo-san?" Haku asked.

"That light. That jutsu or whatever you call it…" She turned and pointed down the road, "Uptown there is an old man who can do just what Ranmaru did. I've seen him use it on travelers sometimes."

The boys perked up, eyes wide, "Really?"

"Yeah," Tomo smiled with her hands on her hips, "He's not the most sociable old man around…but he's always nice to Hiroshi. Maybe you two should meet him?"

"Yes! What's his name?" Ranmaru inquired.

"He's Eto Migawari, and he's from out of town." She explained, "He's lived here for a few years now in that stylish house on the corner."

Haku thanked the young mother for her input before going after Ranmaru as he sped towards the specified house.

Ranmaru had uncovered a strange feature of the building with his talented eyes. Even before opening
the door, he had seen that the front of the large house was converted into a doctor's office. It even had an "open" sign in the door-side window and a plaque conveying Migawari's education and qualifications. Haku followed his friend inside to an empty lobby. Soft music was playing on a radio.

"This suggests that he is the village doctor." Haku presumed, "But Tomo-san thinks she saw him use a jutsu."

"Maybe he did."

Haku frowned, "Where is everybody?" He glanced at a receptionist's station that was unoccupied. The office seemed entirely unattended.

"Ranmaru, can you see-?"

"He's back here." The small boy tottered towards an open doorway and then followed a corridor lined with examination rooms to its end.

After a sharp right into an actual, residential sitting room, they found an elderly, bespectacled man asleep at a low table. He was supported by a tall-backed floor chair and had his legs tucked under the blanket of a kotatsu. Haku didn't think the warming table was seasonally appropriate, but he wouldn't question the needs of the elderly.

"Um, excuse me, Eto-san..." Ranmaru kneeled beside the table, "Is your office not open?"

The old man gradually regained consciousness and wiped his lip. Blinking his tiny, black eyes, Migawari pushed his spectacles up the bridge of his nose. His lips were in a calculating pout when he beheld Ranmaru and Haku.

"What do you youngsters need, eh?"

"Is the office closed?"

"It sure is closed! What are you doing in my house?"

"If it's closed... then maybe you should lock the door and change the sign." Haku recommended, "We came back here to make sure you were alright."

"I'm fine! And if I locked the door then how could I take walk-in appointments?" The old man warbled, confusing them.

"That would mean you aren't closed." Ranmaru assessed.

"Then we'll call it like it is: I'm on duty when I'm not napping. I am retired, you know." Migawari rubbed the side of his nose, "Well... I was. I had to come out of retirement and make some cash. I incurred a bit of debt when I came to Nanakusa." His eyes snapped back to them, "So what's the matter? Ya sick?"

"No." Haku took a seat beside Ranmaru, "We were told that you can use Medical Jutsu."

With wary eyes, Migawari looked them up and down, "And who said that?"

"Tomo-san."

"She's a lovely girl." The old man nodded, "Hmph! Don't look so surprised! Medic-nin retire here all the time! When I left my clinic in my daughter Sarincha's hands, I had an amazing pension from Kusagakure, so I had my pick of real estate down here!" He smiled happily, "Tomo's right. Now and
again I use my skills for supplemental income."

"Grass ninja really do retire here?" Haku was astonished, "I thought those were just stories."

"Ha! Stories. Well it's no fairytale. I blew through my savings much faster than I thought…" He added in a fearful whisper, "Please don't tell my daughter."

Ranmaru assured, "We don't know your daughter…"

"Phew! I always worry that she's watching me. She'd have a conniption if she knew I was still taking patients…after I gave her that sob-story about not being able to manage the hospital. Hee hee!"

Migawari wobbled to his feet and peeked out the blinds of a window, "Now that job is keeping her busy, and that husband of her's is too…"

"That doesn't seem fair." Haku muttered to his friend.

Migawari had sharp ears, "Huh? Not fair? She's got youth on her side! It wouldn't be fair to let an old dog like me suffer for a paycheck until my dying breath! You know how many people I've saved during my career?" He bent over to scold Haku, "A war's worth of wounded. I did my job!"

"Why are you still working, Eto-san?" Ranmaru asked.

"I…" He sighed, "I've…got an expensive passion."

Ranmaru and Haku blinked in bewilderment as Migawari lifted a heavy wooden chest from a display case. He set it down on the kotatsu and flipped the lid back, allowing them to peer inside.

Decks of cards, sets of dice, cups, game boards and pieces, spinners, a coin purse and what looked like a tiny boxing ring for insect-fighting or something like it. The old man grinned proudly at his collection.

Clueless, Ranmaru supposed, "You like to play."

"You bet I do, kid!"

"No. You're a gambler." Haku understood the issue, "Which would put any retiree at the mercy of chance and risk losing their livelihood! To think we were going to ask you to teach us healing techniques…" Disgusted, he stood to leave, "Come on, Ranmaru. We can learn from someone else."

With a sad nod, the violet haired boy stood as well.

Affronted, Migawari gaped at them, "What am I? A criminal? It's just a bit of fun! I'm not going to let a pair of brats judge me like I'm a piece of trash."

"You're insulting your daughter who imagines you having a peaceful retirement while she has inherited your duties." Haku said in a low voice, "If I had a daughter I would never dishonor her like that…"

The old man gasped, "Cut me to the quick, why don't you? You boys are ninja, huh? Want to learn Medical Jutsu, is that right? You don't hear that request everyday…" He acknowledged, "I have cut back and keep to a budget, you snoots. I'm not a waste of time. I'm a master of what I do and I won't take any guff from kids."

"What makes you a better choice than any other shinobi specialized in healing?" Ranmaru wondered.
"We might do better to learn from your daughter." Haku added, driving the point home.

"Alright! Enough with those wisecracks!" The old man's frown lines were pronounced, "I've gotten around quite a bit! Gambling can connect you to all kinds of people! And you wanna know something else? I have a famous arch-enemy who I have never lost to." Migawari cackled, "Have you heard of...Tsunade-hime?"

Haku's train of thought was ransacked and he instantly surrendered his attention.

"Yes that's right! Who doesn't know about Tsunade, the current Hokage of the Leaf Village?" Migawari laughed, "She and I have clashed in many games in countless gambling houses...and I have whooped her every single time."

"Haku is from the Leaf Village!" Ranmaru blurted out.

"Are you now?" The old man wrinkled his forehead, gloating, "Bet you couldn't get an apprenticeship under her, huh? She's always passed out drunk or busy yelling at people! Rest easy, because you've found someone who can go toe to toe with her! I'm just not famous."

"You could be making all of this up." Haku noted keenly.

"Yeah?" Migawari reached for the top cabinet of the display case and pulled out a woven basket filled with books and scrolls, "See these? These are my most precious winnings." He licked his thumb and paged through a small journal, "Forbidden Jutsu."

Ranmaru and Haku leaned forward, fascinated, but Migawari pulled the basket back, "Uh-uh! I got these from defeating my arrogant shinobi opponents who thought they could best my lucky streak!" He retrieved a medium sized scroll and waved it proudly, "I even won Tsunade's most prized technique when she bet it in a high-stakes game! Heh! I never bothered with the Yin Seal...so it's just sitting here gathering dust."

An urgent need to defend Leaf's secrets overcame Haku. What was supposed to be a jealously guarded secret known only to the Fifth Hokage was sitting in the trophy case of a senior citizen's house. He took a seat again and fixed his gray eyes on Migawari, serious, "If you don't plan on studying that jutsu...then maybe you'd be willing to bet it?"

Ranmaru gave a sidelong, astounded look to his friend.

Migawari got settled by the kotatsu again, sighing, "I don't know if I should. Many of these techniques don't need to fall into frivolous hands."

"I'd like to return that scroll to Tsunade-sama when I get back to Leaf." Haku explained, "Something like that shouldn't be adrift in the world."

"Hm." Migawari scratched his chin, "You're Hiroshi's boy...the one he sent off with Gama-sennin, he said. Heh! A Leaf ninja in my house! Maybe it's at least worth a game of chance to see if you can regain the princess' secret jutsu. Some items change hands all the way back to their intended owner..." He frowned, "And just as often...they'll end up with the wrong crowd."

"I'll challenge you to any game."

"Hold your horses! We haven't set any stakes," Migawari notified him, glancing to Ranmaru, "Will you be trying your luck too?"

"I guess so." Ranmaru sat down and folded his hands in his lap.
"So... you want this?" The old man asked, lifting up the scroll, "Well you can have it if you win! But what do I get if you lose?"

Ranmaru lit up with an idea, "A free lunch!"

"..."

"You'd want something of value?" Haku asked.

"Depends. What have you got?"

Worriedly, Haku tried to come up with an offering. He had been saving money, but it would not be prudent to bet all of it in a high-risk game. He had jutsu he could exchange, and maybe, if Migawari was the bounty-seeking type, he'd accept Zabuza as payment; unconscious, of course.

"I can trade the Shadow Clone jutsu." He offered.

"Pff. I don't want jutsu! I'm done with all of that!"

"Two free lunches." Ranmaru had put his hands flat on the table, now playing hardball.

"No, kid! I don't need food!"

"100,000 ryo." Haku ventured.

"Cheapskate." Migawari smiled, "I'm to the point where you'd really have to shine my shoes with an offering of cash."

Haku's internal budgeting system would not allow him to put down any more.

"Then what will you accept that the two of us can offer?" Haku folded his arms, "We might as well walk out the door and give up."

"Ho now! There is something two young-bloods could give me," Migawari assured him, "How about this? We'll play a game of dice. You and Shorty each get a cup with one die, and I'll have a cup with two dice. Shake 'em and then roll 'em! If you roll a combined number higher than mine I'll give you Tsunade's jutsu...if not..." He shut his eyes and smirked, "The two of you will become unpaid receptionists in my office four days a week! Until I've had enough of ya!"

Ranmaru, knowing that his stay in Nanakusa was not guaranteed to be long-term, considered the stakes. He could always bail and ask for Raiga's intervention if he was unable to bear the working conditions. He looked to Haku who nodded gravely, and then the match was set.

Migawari gave them two ordinary dice, which they inspected, and then tall, opaque cups to use for the game. He prepared his own dice and leaned over the table, smiling deviously, "Are you sure you want to do this? You might win this scroll, but if I win I get your time. That's something you can never get back!"

Haku smiled, "Let's begin."

"Alright then! Roll!" The old man hooted happily.

And the three of them spastically shook their cups and clacked them down on the table top, lifting them up slowly to reveal the results. Haku had gotten a five and Ranmaru had gotten a three. They looked over to see Migawari's outcome...a six and a five.
Wide-eyed, the two friends felt a shadow of devastation fall across them like a veil. The old man chortled and then clapped his hands, "How about that? That's just how the chips fall!"

He cleaned up the table and then hobbled out of the sitting room into the office. Haku and Ranmaru followed reluctantly until they came to the receptionist's station. Two desks were on opposite walls, tucked amongst filing cabinets and potted plants.

The old man rubbed his hands together, "Have a seat! So you silly boys, what're your names? I'll put them on the board."

"Haku."

"Ranmaru."

"Hmm! I see! Welcome aboard, suckers." Migawari was positively jolly, "We'll work out your schedules to be however flexible you need them to be…but I need you to know the ropes of admitting patients. I'll even show you how to treat them…just so I don't have to."

"Oh! So you will show us Medical techniques?" Ranmaru was pleasantly surprised.

"Why not? I'll reduce my workload. But for a practice session I need to see what you can patch up with the Palm Healing jutsu. I want to know what I'm working with!" He put his hands on his hips, stern, "And now…I'll be breaking your fingers for the demo! Who's first?"

Within the Leaf Village, the day arrived at the Hyuga compound when the last suitor would have a chance of currying favor with the Clan Head's eldest daughter. It was a busy morning of preparation.

As promised, Fujita's mother Kayato, the master seamstress, had taken great pains and care to fold, wrap, pat, and tie an elaborate furisode onto Hinata. The fabric was a midnight blue at the shoulder and chest, fading down into lighter shades; a metaphor of night becoming day. White flecks scattered across the dark blue resembled stars and flower petals. The obi was silver with violet and lavender ornaments. Kayato had stressed that this was one of the most priceless kimono the Hyuga clan owned, and there was a reason she was expected to wear it.

The final guest was a prince of the Taketori clan, one of the closest friends clan-wise to the Hyuga. They resided in a humble palace within the Fire Country and visited the Leaf Village from time to time for diplomatic reasons. Likewise, ambassadors of the Hyuga paid visits to the Taketori as well. It was a small wonder how they had gotten an appointment after inquiring with Hyuga clan elders. It would have been an insult to decline.

Kayato had tied Hinata's hair into an attractive up-do with a white lily. All the while, the young woman sat in silence and tried not to scream.

The spectacle and efforts that were being made to impress a man (and a stranger) were grinding her self-esteem to bits. If she had been given the chance to say "no thank you," Hinata truly would have been delighted. Her heart was tender and longing for Naruto to be the visitor, receiving all of the consideration that her family could muster. She would die of happiness if her boyfriend could be treated to such a welcome.

But that hope was dashed. It was her understanding that this entire affair had started because the elders were aware of her romance with a young shinobi who, for some reason, repelled them.
"Just be yourself. You don't have to do or say anything to beguile this guest, you know." Kayato reminded her, "If you don't want a husband, least of all one that is appointed to you…then just break that fact gently to Taketori-sama. This will all be over soon." She was a woman of tremendous understanding…not unlike her empathetic and peppy husband.

She was allowed to have a light breakfast of pears and oatmeal accompanied with tea. Then she was instructed to wait in a tea room on the east side of the house until the company arrived. It was tricky business to sit properly in a long, elaborate kimono like the one she had been cloaked in. When an hour dragged by and her legs had gone numb, Hinata stood up and peeked at her surroundings. Her attendants had migrated to the front of the house, anxiously awaiting the Taketori to show up.

She exited through a sliding door and stepped onto the polished wood of the porch. Wisteria trees were bursting with fragrant flowers on every vine. She watched them sway in the breeze as her mind wandered.

'Naruto-kun…I never had the heart to tell you about all of this. I was always afraid that it would hurt your feelings or discourage you.' Her eyebrows knitted in worry, 'But…it has been a burden to keep this to myself. Bottling this up has been one of the most painful experiences…and I need your reassurance so that I might feel relief. Though…I…I couldn't. To tell you about how I feel and what has been happening…may hurt you in a way that is not equal to how upset I am now.' She was determined to keep it to herself, especially if this was due to be her last trial.

It stung that the idea of her ever wanting a husband in the future, more specifically, one of her choosing, could plunge her through this process all over again. As she understood Hyuga tradition, a candidate of her choice had to be introduced and approved by her father first. Then, in what was a common standard among many clans in Leaf, the "selection" was to be naturalized and made to live among the Hyuga for an extended period of time.

It was a compatibility test. Sometimes, significant others ran screaming when they found the Hyuga too prickly to put up with. Others weathered the stone-faced storm well for the sake of their loved one and often married successfully, receiving the Hyuga name. Hinata was aware there were other odds and ends that needed to be respected, depending on if the newcomer was a man or woman. Unfortunately, the majority of success stories were marriages within the Branch family, one such free-will choice being Neji's father finding and courting his mother.

Her own parents had been members of the Main Branch. Serendipitously, Hiashi had fallen madly in love with his intended (who was indeed an eligible woman) and had enjoyed his marriage up until becoming a widower. Raising two daughters without the direction of his wife was not something he excelled at. He tried.

If things continued down the winding and painful course that the elders were paving, they would probably betroth her to Fujita. Or worse.

She shuddered violently.

'I may need to seek asylum in Sunagakure.' She considered seriously, 'They won't need me if they have Neji-niisan…and I refuse to be with anyone but Naruto!' She could probably find someplace to hide safely until they left her alone or surrendered to her demands. Adulthood wasn't supposed to be something to dread, but her clan could not make life easy for her. Hinata was preparing to deal with that reality.

She blinked in surprise when an unknown young man walked by on the path beneath the wisteria branches. He was in quite the hurry; looking over his shoulder to be sure he had no pursuers.
The young man stopped beneath a tree and hid amongst the vines. Then, curiously, Hinata watched as he flapped his arms in an "I give up" gesture. He relaxed after a minute and then admired the blooming trees.

'He must've realized that even if he hides…anyone with the Byakugan can find him.' She supposed.

His mouth was drawn in a small frown of disdain. He was pale with dust-brown hair pulled into a regal ponytail, with eyes of tourmaline yellow. Judging from how sportingly he was dressed in black and pearl-grey kimono and hakama, Hinata's best assumption was that he was someone from the Taketori clan. And he wasn't enjoying his visit.

She was contemplating her return indoors in the same second the young man looked up. Their eyes met and they simultaneously jumped in surprise. Hinata stayed where she was and opted for a friendly smile, hoping that her clansmen had not frightened him away from the front of the grounds.

Appreciative, the Taketori visitor scurried over to her and bowed quickly, "Excuse me, I'm a-

"An honored guest from the Taketori clan. Welcome!" She observed keenly, "Have you gotten lost? I can take you to my father."

"Ah, no thank you…I just…” He sighed quietly, "I needed a break. The greeting was so stuffy and formal…” The visitor added, "Oh! My name's Kitano. I'm sorry; I should have properly introduced myself."

"That's quite alright. I know how stressful these official visits can be." Hinata replied understandingly, "I am Hyuga Hinata."

Kitano stared at her for a moment, bewildered, and then looked away shyly, "It's a pleasure to meet you, milady."

The surreal instance of the tables turning dawned on Hinata. She was now far more outgoing than the days of her youth. She had also inadvertently happened upon another shy person. Hinata noticed that he had glanced over his shoulder again nervously, but he was attempting to play cool.

"Would you like to come into the tea room, Kitano-san? You can join me there until other guests arrive." She offered.

"Yes! Thank you…” He was plainly relieved, "Hinata-sama."

Kitano followed her inside quietly and took a seat across from her. He smiled uncertainly, "You are much nicer than the greeters at the gate…"

"I can't help it. Just like they can't help being rigid." She deduced, "Are you an attendant?"

"Well, no…” He was reluctant to answer, "I know that I probably shouldn't have snuck off. Members of the Hyuga clan can find me in no time…”

"Why did you leave the entry party?"

"I…I was…feeling a bit overwhelmed." Kitano admitted, "This is my first time in the Leaf Village. It's a little far from home."

She smiled, "I see."

"I asked my father if maybe we could cancel this appointment, but he insisted that we visit our
associate-clan to meet the Lady of the House." He added somberly, "I was uncomfortable with all of
this…but," Kitano grinned, "You're nothing like what I imagined!"

"W-What?" Hinata blinked, rapidly grasping what he meant. She had judged him as a hand servant
or caretaker, maybe even a young ward, but the man in front of her was the prospective fiancé the
elders had invited! At least fifteen years younger than the average caller, to boot. She had not
expected it.

"You're the-?"

"My father is the Head of the Taketori clan," Kitano elucidated, "And you are the daughter of the
Head of the Hyuga clan. You're so young!"

"So are you!"

He was shocked, "Has this happened to you before? The set-ups?"

"Yes! And you?"

"Maybe fifteen people! Mostly clan spinsters…" Kitano wailed, "I've had enough, but Father was
frustrated with me. He promised that this-"

"Would be the last visit?" She finished his thought.

He nodded, bright with happiness, "Yeah."

Hinata felt like laughing at the coincidence. Somehow, a person had come along who could relate
to her agitation with forced courtship. What a beautiful way to cap the wooing trials off, she thought.

Moments later, the door off of the hallway opened and Ko appeared, looking a bit ruffled. He
stepped aside and let Hiashi enter with a tall, sandy-haired man. His hair was pulled back in the same
style as Kitano's; dressed lavishly in red kimono beneath black and silver armor.

Hiashi regarded his daughter's company curiously, "Hm. Ko noticed that the young master slipped
away. I did not expect you to retrieve him, Hinata."

"Nor did I." She admitted.

Hiashi turned to introduce his companion, "This is Magan-sama, the leader of the Taketori clan and
an esteemed comrade of the Hyuga. He is Kitano-sama's father."

"It's wonderful to meet you, Magan-sama." Hinata's pleasantries were almost automatic.

"Oh, the pleasure is mine, young lady." He smiled genuinely, "Kitano was chafed the whole way
here…but he seems much more relaxed now."

"Dad…" The boy muttered under his breath.

They were all whisked away to a strictly timed meal by Ko and his Taketori acquaintance. Lunch
was served in a formal dining room and the caretakers were excused, leaving Hiashi and Hinata
seated side-by-side on one end of the table, and Kitano and Magan on the other. Most of the banter
was the same, Hinata noted. Magan pitched his family's breeding, relationship with the Hyuga, and
proximity to Leaf as the great motivators of a match. Previous visitors had come up with convincing
arguments too, but this one was a cut above the rest. For once, Hiashi was listening intently.

This stirred Hinata somewhat as she listened and answered questions politely, but for the most part,
Magan and Hiashi did the talking while their children ate, participating when necessary.

Towards the end of the meal, Hiashi became pushy. He was only humoring the elders' selection because Magan was a friend, but if he was even going to consider offering his daughter's hand in marriage he had several demands. His stipulations included:

A) Hinata's position as a shinobi of Konoha could not be compromised, and the Taketori must allow her to resume her career, unless she should choose otherwise. They must also accommodate her commute.

B) If her well-being is assessed to be neglected in any form, upon inspection by Main House overseers and family, Hinata may dissolve her marriage without penalty and return to the Hyuga.

C) If any of her demands were not met, Hinata could bring issue against her husband or the Taketori as a whole.

D) If in the exceptional but not impossible event that Hinata is selected as a candidate for Hokage in the future, the Taketori must support the appointment and send her spouse and family to Konoha for accommodations. (Magan only nodded in amazement at this.)

E) Her dowry could not be negotiated and must be accepted upon its first bid.

And other matters pertaining to her Kekkei Genkai, in text, were handed to Magan who raised his eyebrows at the complexity of the young woman's circumstances. Hiashi briefly explained that her Blood Limit was highly evolved and could possibly be passed down to children. The Hyuga clan elders would have strict rules about evaluations and the Taketori's maintenance of gifted progeny. Hiashi also gently added that it was a load of codswallop and not worth worrying about.

After that, Magan and Hiashi elected to speak privately and sent the children off for a walk on the estate property. They were asked to "get to know each other." Hinata was astounded that the discussion had made it so far. Often, Hiashi dismissed prospective grooms halfway through lunch. She was beginning to fear that he really would try to cement a deal.

Hinata and Kitano walked in silence for a while, chins drooping, wondering if the matter was out of their hands officially.

"I am worried that…our parents might find this favorable." Kitano said softly, "And I mean that as no offense to you."

"None taken."

"I don't want to get married." He said bluntly, "Not yet. I want to find someone I like when I'm older. My clan never gave me the chance to explore the world. They won't let me make my own decisions."

She looked at the boy sadly, knowing how he felt. They walked along a garden path that wound around the building, stewing over the predicament.

"How old are you, Kitano-sama?"

"Sixteen."

"I'll be sixteen at the end of this year."

"Do you know how old your parents were when they got married?"
"I think my father was eighteen. I am not sure how old my mother was…"

"My father had all the time in the world before he married, and he got to choose someone he loved." Kitano frowned, "I thought he'd understand that I want the same. I didn't think he'd put me through all of this."

"I didn't think so either. But…the friendship between our families could dictate a match like this." Hinata observed, "It's problematic that…we're compatible."

"I know. I couldn't even try to hate you. You're beautiful and you're a talented shinobi. You're father said he anticipates you to become Hokage!" Kitano laughed, "How could my Dad resist that? How am I supposed to?"

Her shoulders sagged, "Please try to."

"I promise I will."

"Are you a shinobi?"

"I'm a Chunin, but I don't expect to be much more than that. We're only trained so that we can defend clan secrets. The Takerori don't take very many missions."

"Ah, I see. I will be participating in the upcoming Chunin Exam."

"Good luck to you," He shook his head and smiled, "But you probably won't need it."

As they passed by a vacant lot behind the house, Hinata paused. She could have sworn there was a patch of woodland here before. It was now a vast pile of chips and sprigs, and she couldn't figure out how it had gotten there.

"This doesn't seem to fit with the landscape." Kitano commented.

"There used to be forest here."

"Huh. What happened to it?"

"I'm not sure." She said as she kept walking, "Neji-niisan might know."

"Who's that?"

"My cousin. He's like a big brother to me." Hinata explained, "He is now the heir of the Hyuga clan. He will succeed my father in leadership when he decides to step down."

"Wow. That's odd. Why wouldn't your father choose you as an heir when he was going on about how powerful you are?"

"I was the heir, once." She admitted, "But…I think I always preferred Neji-niisan assuming that responsibility. I know I could if I had to…but he worked hard to be recognized, just as I did. Things are just as they need to be."

"Yeah and when you're Hokage you don't want to be too busy! It'd be a load off your shoulders if you aren't in charge of the Hyuga." He imagined, folding his arms, "But…if you married me…you might still be a little busy."

She pursed her lips, "We would be very unhappy together."
"Why? I promise I would abide by everything your dad said and I know we can get along! I'm not a bad person-
"

"It has nothing to do with that." Hinata assured him, "I am already in love with someone."

"Oh." He had a moment to think about it and then smiled, "Of course. He's very lucky."

She shook her head in embarrassment.

"Do you want to marry him?" Kitano wondered.

She nodded and he chuckled in amusement.

"It's alright. He must be special. I don't want to get in the way of that, you know." He stopped and looked at her with strange, honest eyes, "How about…we just put this off? If you're still available ten years down the line…I'm interested. If not, don't worry. I refuse to agree to anything until I'm ready."

Hinata nodded, "I…think that's a good idea. I know I'm not ready either."

Kitano seemed very pleased that they had come to an agreement while they closed the circuit of the walk. While they were passing by the front of the house, Hiashi and Magan had stepped outside together. The two men approached their mingling children and were vaguely content.

"So!" Magan smiled at them, "What do you think, kids? Hiashi-sama and I know how we feel, but we'd like to hear your opinions first."

Hinata and Kitano exchanged a glance.

"For now, we don't want to go for it." The young man responded. His father appeared shocked by the words.

"We don't feel prepared." Hinata added, "Kitano-sama said he won't consider this arrangement until ten years have passed."

Hiashi gave a scathing look to the boy, initially insulted, but gradually began to sense the wisdom of the reply. He had always been against Hinata's mandated courtship from the council of elders because his daughter had been, in his eyes, much too young for marriage and what came with it. Luckily, Magan's child had been prudent enough not to say "no" but rather had chosen "later."

"A lot can change in ten years." Magan reminded them.

"That's the point." His son chuckled.

Hiashi closed his eyes and sighed, "Do you wish to postpone any agreements with the Taketori clan, Hinata?"

"Yes, Father."

"Very well." He turned to his companion, "Then this matter is settled. It is an auspicious match…and it is undesired presently."

Magan shook his head, amused, "I won't start an argument. I'll admit, I was enthusiastic about this get-together…but I want Kitano's wishes to be respected."

"Thank you, Dad." He slipped, and then amended, "F-Father."
Hiashi inclined his head towards attendants waiting patiently across the yard. They noticed the gesture and briskly made their way over.

"This is farewell for now, Magan, but I will stay in touch with you. We have a conference scheduled in one month, irrespective of this decision." He gave a short, professional bow to the father and son, "I appreciate your consideration, Kitano-sama. You've had more regard for my daughter's future than any other suitor, and I will not forget that."

The boy returned the bow and then uttered a hushed goodbye to Hinata. He and his father were ushered along by their caretakers with somber looks, as they had presumed the young master's meeting to be a failure, not knowing it had all been well-met.

Hiashi walked alongside his daughter slowly as they returned to the house.

"Father?" She gave him a concerned, sidelong look, "You don't mind that I turned him away?"

He continued gazing straight ahead, "I don't. And I never will, no matter who the guest is."

She chanced a small smile.

"He was an ideal match for you, but I will try to downplay that fact when I report to our elders this evening." Hiashi mused, "They could very well harangue me no matter how you interacted with Kitano. This invitation to the Taketori was their most sincere effort."

"I…I hope they don't."

"I'm accustomed to it." He opened a door and extended a hand to help her step up so that she wouldn't trip over the length of her kimono, "It will not get any easier after this. I did not expect it to."

She quietly thanked him and blinked as he steered her towards Kayato's dressing room. Hinata wore a questioning expression as her father remained nonchalant.

"I'll send Kayato to help you undress. Change out of that gaudy thing…and then go do something you really care about."

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Three days later, Tsunade was finishing up a memorandum for Jiraiya. It was mostly an update about how her ANBU agents were putting in some serious overtime. She had eyes everywhere on her causes for alarm.

It was not only her Black Ops keeping busy, though. She had her "priority" generation of Genin attending to nearly every mission that was available. Tsunade had increased their workload as a preamble to the Chunin Exam (not yet verified by the council) to be sure that they could handle more serious tasks. Their overall performance was optimal or outstanding, which boded well.

Tsunade put down her pen and exhaled deeply, setting the message aside.

The day before, she had sent Shino to the Tea Country with Ino, Chouji, and Sato to intercept a black market caravan. At the same time, a request had come in demanding a group with a similar skill set. Knowing she would prefer to send her Genin than "otherwise preoccupied Chunin," she pulled together a special group, beginning with Shikamaru.
He had been informed to round up Kiba, Neji, and Lee before reporting to her office, which was handily achieved.

"I'm glad you all made it," The Hokage smiled, turning to the team leader, "I apologize for the short notice, Shikamaru. You were unreachable at your clan's research facility for a few days, and I would have preferred sending you to the Tea Country, but the timing didn't pan out. I'll have you working on this C-Rank mission, if you don't mind."

He shrugged with his facial expression, "I guess I don't."

"This assignment is relatively standard, however it will require much of your time and attention. Perhaps a week or so..." She began, "I was contacted by retainers of the Oga clan, who reside on the southern gulf coast of the Fire Country. In preparation for a wedding, the clan is seeking supplemental security for their grounds and attendees," Tsunade leaned back in her chair, "More specifically, the bride and groom. Your group will be equal parts detection and brute-force peacekeeping, as they itemized."

"The Oga clan can't defend itself from...wedding crashers?" Shikamaru was trying to interpret the data.

"Beats me. They're a bunch of wimps. Their clan head made an attempt to marry into the Hyuga recently, I've heard." She replied, noticing that Neji had bristled at the memory of when 34-year-old Moritsune had showed up with a boatload of flowers for Hinata.

Tsunade continued, "I'm sure they could use some help. They have no shinobi background and solicit Konoha for aid frequently. The leader's younger brother, Sanomune, is getting married. The event has garnered an unusual amount of attention for whatever reason."

Lee raised his hand.

"Yes, Lee." The Hokage acknowledged him.

"Tsunade-sama, does this suggest that we are invited to a wedding?"

"Hm. I suppose it does."

"Then perhaps we should bring formalwear?"

Her eye twitched, "Lee...I don't advise that any of you weigh yourselves down with fancy attire. Of course, don't show up looking like slobs, but don't stress over glamor. Just go as shinobi. That's what they called for and so that's what they get."

He nodded in understanding.

"No plus ones, I guess?" Kiba joked.

She smiled slyly, "There are four of you. Decide amongst yourselves how you will pair off."
Chapter Soundtrack: "Black Sheep" by Metric

The trip south was pleasant, particularly for Neji and Lee, who were grateful to have trusted comrades on the team. Though they had wondered what became of Sai, their Root acquaintance had caused too much anxiety and mayhem for them to ever request him as a teammate again.

After a two day's journey they reached the magnificent residence of the Oga. It was an ostentatious castle within an ishibei: a tall, stacked-stone perimeter wall. The fortress was tucked in and among ancient trees and topiary plants on a hill that overlooked the sea.

The Leaf team was stopped at the outer gate by two armed guards, and after providing their identification, they were propelled into an inner wall where they were met again by a grounds warden. They were greeted warmly enough and brought into the main palace yards.

Shikamaru listened with half a mind as servants lead them on towards the lord's favorite pond. He had tuned out Akamaru's heavy panting beside Kiba, as well as Lee's curious comments to Neji. His mind had honed in on one alarming detail about the castle.

It was enormous. If any hooligans planned to crash the party, Shikamaru suspected that they had probably already found a place to hide. He would need to do a sweep with Neji's eyes and Kiba's nose to be sure no undesirables were lurking.

"Ah! Hello."

"Hm?" Shikamaru snapped back to his present environment.

"You are the team leader, correct?"

"Yeah," His eyes went from the uniformed attendant to the man seated regally beside a pond, "The Hokage sent us to supervise the upcoming nuptial."

The man stood from a bench and smiled weakly, "Thank you for coming early. I was hoping I could go over my security concerns with you."

"Are you the groom?" Shikamaru asked.

He shook his head, "No, I'm Moritsune. My younger brother Sanomune is getting married." He looked left and right before adding, "He should be here to be properly introduced to you good Leaf ninja…but I suppose I'll be managing things again."

Moritsune indicated for them to follow him into the towering house after removing their shoes. He led them along a hallway lined endlessly with traditional rooms. A servant had briefly fussed about Akamaru's indoor visit but Moritsune immediately gave his consent and sent the bellyacher away. Shikamaru mentally mapped the layout of the house as they proceeded. He then divined the reason for Sanomune's absence.

'Ritzy place. Bet I can call what kind of a situation we've got going on here…’ The Nara watched the back of Moritsune's head as he followed, thinking, 'This is a prototypical big brother who caters to a younger brother. Probably bends over backwards to take care of his needs…and Moritsune's the leader of this clan too, which means he's been busy to begin with. All that caretaking has resulted in this gentleman having no time to find a respectable wife and marry, thus affording his pampered
brother every opportunity to meet eligible women.'

Shikamaru clucked his tongue and Kiba gave him an odd look.

"I'll give you the lowdown later." Shikamaru told him in a quiet voice.

"About what?"

"How sad this is."

"What's sad? We're in a gorgeous house full of rich people who are about to have a huge wedding," Kiba remarked.

"It's sad because all of that pomp isn't for the guy in front of us. And he's not getting any younger."

Kiba nodded sagely, seeing the valid point.

Lee got in on the evaluation in a whisper, "I see! Neji, is Moritsune not the same man who visited-?"

"Don't bring that up." Neji said shortly.

"Ah. Very well."

They were brought to a garden-viewing room with tatami mats and asked to sit and relax. Moritsune quietly asked a servant to locate his brother before joining them on floor cushions.

"I'm terribly sorry. He should be with us shortly. I apologize for not asking your names when you already know who I am." Moritsune was contrite, "Please tell me about this team."

Shikamaru leaned back on his arms and recited the usual spiel, "Nara Shikamaru. I'll be coordinating your event security." He turned to indicate his companions, "Inuzuka Kiba: tracking and detection. Hyuga Neji: detection and attitude. Rock Lee: perfect manners and muscle."

Neji gave Shikamaru a mildly annoyed look, but couldn't argue with the description. Kiba and Lee found their introductions reasonable.

"What a capable group!"

"You've got that right. So, I suppose you don't want us on active lookout only on the wedding day?" Shikamaru continued.

"Right. I'd like you to get acquainted with the manor and be sure no one can sneak in. Servants have a bad habit of leaving doors and windows ajar. We've had…unwelcome visitors in the past."

Moritsune waved his hand, "Not to worry! I have a feeling you can do this. I've already warned staff repeatedly to seal entrances for the rehearsal tomorrow. The wedding is the day after, so you'll have some time to prepare."

"Where should we position ourselves during the ceremony?" Shikamaru wanted particulars, "Should we stay out of sight?"

"I would recommend that you don't show yourselves. I don't want guests to be alarmed. Though…my brother has shinobi friends who will be allowed out in the open…We should discuss it with him and see what his preferences are."

The Nara added, "Any areas of concern?"
"The roof."

The boys gave the man a strange look.

Moritsune clarified, "Well…that's how they enter. Some intruders have climbed the surrounding trees to get over the outer wall. Our top level is not very well guarded and some have managed to sneak in that way."

Shikamaru made note of it, "Alright. We'll stake out the top floor at night and set humane traps during the day."

"I appreciate it."

"If we capture a trespasser, do you expect us to turn them out of this estate immediately or should they be detained?" Neji asked.

Moritsune was debating it, "If you toss them out they might just sneak in again…you can tie them up, I guess."

Lee interrupted politely, "Forgive my asking, Moritsune-sama, but why would someone try to disrupt the ceremony?"

"I'm not sure. My brother was worried about it and asked for guards." The man replied, "But as soon as he shows himself we can find out more."

"He's taking his sweet time," Shikamaru commented, peeved, "We can find him for you, if you like."

"Really?"

"Yeah; Neji can spot him without leaving this room." He inclined his head towards Neji, "Do you mind?"

He shrugged and activated his Byakugan.

Moritsune advised, "He looks like me but his hair is shorter. I think his robes were violet today…"

"Located." Neji frowned, "We won't be having a discussion with him anytime soon."

"Why not?"

He phrased it considerately, "He is...occupied with his intended."

While most of the gathered men blanched at the announcement of Neji's discovery, Kiba merely laughed, "Ha! Some guys just can't wait."

The day passed as they took a tour of the castle and its central tower, and Akamaru sniffed scents to identify typical visitors to each section of the building. Moritsune answered Shikamaru's questions to the best of his ability all the while.

They rounded a corner past a communal bath towards a residential wing and stopped. Moritsune greeted a servant with mild surprise.

"Kim! I didn't know you were back." He told the girl, "My brother said you had left on-

"A wilderness sabbatical." Her monotone voice was unsettling. She was a short thing with bobbed,
orange hair and a permanent frown. Her uniform and apron were a bit untidy.

"Oh. How was it?"

"Not satisfying."

"You'll be managing the first floor again?"

"Yeah." Her sharp eyes settled on the shinobi behind him, "One, two, three, four…what do they want?"

"Can you show them to our guest quarters? These are the Leaf ninja who'll be part of the wedding security force."

Her tangible hatred was making Kiba's skin crawl and he shrank behind Lee. Neji and Shikamaru were impervious to the odious aura.

"Fine." She turned on her heel and began walking.

Moritsune didn't seem phased by her rudeness and explained, "She's our best worker, but also a misanthrope."

"How does that balance out?" Shikamaru wondered.

"She detests my brother but she accommodates me well enough. Ask her for whatever you need. I'll tell Sanomune to quit loafing around so he can meet your group."

And they split off from the Clan Head to follow the cynical maid. They were taken down a long hallway with lacquered wood floors and, after sliding open a rice paper door, Kim frowned and gestured with her thumb. Lee peeked into the space.

It was an exorbitantly large room with wide, southward-facing windows. They entered and beheld the rustic artwork, porcelain vases and lamps; as well as the low, antique table and a stack of futons on the side of the room beside a folding screen. Shikamaru turned to the servant, "Thanks."

She had sensed a kindred spirit in the Nara, "Do you ever…think about death and get sad and stuff?"

"Uh…like once a month." He estimated. Then he went inside and shut the door, proclaiming to his subordinates, "She is one freaky bitch. We'll probably have to keep our eyes on the staff too."

"Is that freaky behavior?" Lee asked as he set his travel bag down, "She reminded me of Neji."

"By comparison, I'm an optimist." Neji disagreed, "And I can change the tone of my voice."

Shikamaru got comfortable on the floor mats, "He has a point."

Akamaru trotted around the room, nose-first, becoming acquainted with the smells of their surroundings. Kiba collapsed to the floor opposite Shikamaru and breathed a sigh of relaxation, "Gotta love neurotic, wealthy clans…" Neji's nostrils flared and he added, "I don't mean yours, promise!"

Lee took a seat beside Neji and complied when the white dog nudged him to be pet.

"So did you really catch that guy doing it?" Kiba continued the conversation.

"It's hard to mistake." Unabashed, Neji added, "I have seen worse things unintentionally."
"Hopefully it was the woman he planned to marry." Shikamaru mused, folding his arms beneath his head, "I never sign up for drama like that..."

Distraught, Lee gasped at the suggestion of infidelity.

"What, Lee? It's something that does happen."

"To trample on the institution of marriage-!" Lee's eyes watered.

"At least as far as I could tell, Sanomune and that woman were not strangers." Neji reported, "Don't get worked up about it."

"Yeah, I'd like to see someone beat my dad's track record," Kiba said mordantly, propped up on a single elbow, "He's an institution-demolitionist."

The height of Neji's eyebrows belied a bit of sympathy, "Has he been caught yet?"

"It's got to be soon. A tracking squad went after him and he walks at about the speed of molasses." He supposed, "Unless he can vanish into thin air, he is so dead when my mom finds him."

"And I thought my mom was scary." Shikamaru snickered.

"What about you guys?" Kiba asked, turning to Lee and Neji, "I bet you've got tough mothers."

"We are parentless." Neji deadpanned.

Shikamaru shifted his eyes to Kiba in a "shit, why did you say that?" expression while the Inuzuka gasped at the conversational faux pas.

Lee's sympathetic remark rescued the discussion, "That is why we are close to the rest of our families. My grandfather has raised me all my life, so I have never felt lonesome."

"Oh yeah, you said he was training you these days." Kiba recalled.

Shikamaru added, "Ino told me she saw you both doing splits in the park with some old dude."

"Really? She didn't stop by to say hello." Neji snipped sarcastically. He was not a fan of splits.

"Nah. She was afraid if she did that he'd make her join in."

"Grandpa is considerate of ladies. Unless she was a student, I do not think she would have been asked to participate..."

"I've never tried doing one of those." Kiba noted.

"Allow me to demonstrate!" Lee offered and executed a perfect pose on the floor. He nudged Neji's shoulder so that he'd join the exhibition.

"No." He said flatly.

Shikamaru frowned, "No way you could get me to do that. That's a woman-exclusive skill."

"You have a tendency to be semi-sexist, Shikamaru." Kiba observed, carefully positioning himself on the mats, "And you know that statement is a load of shit because Lee can do it. I think maybe I can..."
"Good luck. And I'm not sexist."

Neji snorted in amusement at the assertion.

"What, Neji? You beg to differ?" Shikamaru grumbled, "Even you've shared that perspective a few times in your life, I'm sure."

"I am not sexist." Neji snarked, "I am equally critical of everyone."

"Completely true." Kiba agreed, "Hey! I got it!" He had miraculously done a front split, balancing his arms on either side of his body on the floor, "This is a small accomplishment…"

Akamaru laid down beside him and stretched out, trying to mimic the maneuver.

Shikamaru was further irked when Neji rather easily performed the stunt beside Lee, maintaining his bored expression. "Seriously, why do you all have to do that?" He growled.

"Solidarity." Neji replied evenly, "This is not a feminine skill."

"Jeez, I already said that I'm not sexist."

"What he means to say is…" Lee had decrypted the source Shikamaru's off-color comments, "Shikamaru is lazy and does not want to try. That is why he claimed it could not be done."

Kiba and Neji seconded and thirded the opinion and their team leader was quickly incensed. Total mutiny. Even Neji, who was frequently disinterested in participating in silly tiffs, had went ahead and made an example of him.

Though he kept it to himself, Shikamaru understood that Neji's firm belief in the power of women was reflective of his personal experiences. Tenten and Hinata had made a lasting impression on him. 'And now Lee, who can bend his body like a pipe-cleaner, is corrupting Neji's once unshakeable aloofness. I don't have anything against women. I don't.' He frowned to himself, 'I am just terrified of my mother.' Hopefully they couldn't tell.

Without any preemptive knock, the door of the room slid open. The boys simultaneously looked up at the visitor, still in their respective splits.

Shikamaru smirked, 'Now I am so glad I did not attempt it.'

There stood a shabbily dressed look-alike of Moritsune. He was a bit shorter with curly, dirty blonde hair. Neji quickly recognized the visitor as the man he had accidentally spied on earlier, albeit with some clothes on. Well. A T-shirt and brown pants. Tremendously odd.

"Well, uh…" He batted his lips together uncertainly, "Cool! Splits? Are you guys the entertainment or something?"

Cross-legged and arms folded, Shikamaru set the record straight, "No. We're your security team. That is, if you're Oga Sanomune?"

"That's me." He nodded with a friendly smile, "And if you were the entertainment troupe I'd be impressed."

"Don't be. We were getting bored waiting for you to show up." Shikamaru added.

Neji, Lee, and Kiba returned to seated positions and gave reserved looks to Sanomune…who was giving off a vibe similar to that of the eccentric maid's. That and his outfit was not befitting of a
young clan lord. 'But what do I know? I don't dress to impress.' Shikamaru thought.

"Sorry! Thanks for coming. You made it before everyone else. I'm still waiting on the rapper I hired. Ramo-chan enjoys his music."

Shikamaru was deciphering the babble. He assumed that Ramo-chan was the bride, but it just as likely could have been a pet parrot.

"What's a rapper?" Neji breathed quietly.

"If you don't already know..." Kiba told him in a hushed voice, "There's no way we can explain it, Neji."

"Come with me!" Sanomune led the way out of the guest room, "So I'm Sanomune. Hi. You already know my big bro...and you guys-?"

Shikamaru repeated the same introduction he had given earlier.

"Oh. Nice." He enjoyed the descriptions, "You guys have totally got this."

Lee whispered to his teammates a half-step ahead of him, "He seems very enthusiastic."

In a low voice, Shikamaru assessed, "It could just be the drinking water here. On that note, I expect all of you to boil yours first. I'm not letting any of you go on a trip to crazytown."

They took an incredibly steep and narrow staircase to the upper level of the castle. The top floor was rather bare; a wide open space of polished wood floors and support timbers. Many of the windows were open.

"Not this again..." Sanomune growled, "They're compelled to leave these open, but I'm telling you that's how clowns get in here." He turned to Shikamaru, "Would you mind keeping an eye open for intruders up here? It might be a handful. Some servants don't shut-"

He fell silent as Kim materialized behind him. With a terrified squeal Sanomune hopped back and listened as the maid explicated, "Some servants dust your house. Then they air out rooms. In your house."

"R-Right! I only meant that these w-windows don't get shut...now and again."

"Not my fault. Not my problem. I'm back from my vacation, if you couldn't already tell. And I've got some bad news." The maid reported.

"What's that?"

"I hate you."

Shikamaru was grateful they were a few paces safely away from the hair-trigger servant.

Sanomune thought on it, "But Kim...you hate everyone."

"You're part of everyone." Her eyes skimmed over to the team of Leaf ninja, acknowledging Yes, you too, before she picked up a rag and a broom and stalked away.

Kiba broke the silence, "Can't you just fire her, man? She's horrifying."

"One time I tried that and then my entire staff rebelled." Sanomune explained, "I've got to live with
"What'd you do?" Shikamaru inquired.

"She and I were once..." He trailed off, but the Leaf team got the gist of it, "And then I met..." Sanomune shrugged, "You know. Time marches on."

The young lord stood by and watched as Shikamaru directed his team to stake out portions of the roof and all portals of entry. Neji had devised some particularly nefarious and inescapable traps that earned a thumb's up from Shikamaru. They set plenty of trip-wire; a butt-ton of it, Kiba had estimated. Akamaru sniffed around the exit hatch of a dumbwaiter before trotting back to his master's side. After securing the level they moved down to the second floor again, following Sanomune to each zone of concern.

"This water closet." Minutes later they stopped again, "This cupboard," And meters away, again, "This coat rack is suspicious!"

"No one can hide in that." Shikamaru said glumly.

"Just put a trap close to it, then. I'll give you extra."

"Sure." Shikamaru sighed, muttering, "You're nuts."

Staff were kindly warned of the hazards and asked to be alert. They passed the afternoon in a fog of stupidity and paranoia, and were finally deposited back in their guest quarters. Ever the ditz, Sanomune had completely neglected to ask them if they needed anything or desired a meal. He strolled off to find his bride, as far as Neji's Byakugan could tell, watching the man bustle towards a woman in a craft room.

"Yay for us." Kiba fell back on the floor mats, "We're getting paid extra because he's paranoid, but we've got to starve in the meantime."

"I am famished." Lee agreed.

"We're ninja. We could steal that oaf's entire kitchen stock and he'd never realize it." Shikamaru observed, "I am not going hungry."

"That would be disrespectful of Moritsune. This is his property, not his brother's." Neji argued.

Shikamaru flattened himself on the floor, groaning, "We need to eat."

"Be patient."

A knock at the door. It slid aside partially and a dark haired male servant poked his face in, "Supper, courtesy of Lord Moritsune. Is now an appropriate time?"

Shikamaru looked to Neji, "You saw that coming."

"I did."

"You could've just told us. We were on the verge of losing it."

Kiba invited the servant in who expertly set out a spread of food and baskets of treats on the table. After leaving cups, flatware, and a huge pot of tea the retainer hurried out, wishing them well. The boys gathered 'round and gladly helped themselves. Akamaru sat politely behind Kiba and was promptly gifted a basket of roasted duck and vegetables.
And it was decided over dinner that Neji would take the first watch of the third floor that night. It was because he had given the team leader the most *sass*.

The crescent moon was low in the sky when Neji made himself comfortable on the vast tile roof of the castle. He had found a nook beside the enormous, golden *shachihoko* motif where he could keep out of sight if, heaven forbid, a party crasher snuck by.

He noted that the mythical *shachi*, a tiger-headed fish beast, was an ornament often placed on roofs to protect them from fire. Purely superstition. Castles still burned to the ground, regardless. *They'd be better off with a fire-extinguishing seal.* He thought, but that was a tool that ninja employed, not aristocrat families. *Shachi* ornaments came in pairs. On the left side of the building where Neji was seated, the male beast would be installed; and on the right side, the female.

He stared across the sloping rooftop towards the distant, complimentary sculpture. He thought that Tenten might settle herself there if she had been a part of this mission. She was always a perfect counterbalance.

Neji exhaled through his nose harshly into the chilled, spring air. These days she had become an apparition; a figment of his imagination. With his eyes alert and body paused in a comfortable crouch, he allowed his mind to wander a little.

She was definitely getting stronger. He had been told that she was training with Gekko Hayate. Neji smiled a little at the thought of how her personality was clashing with her new mentor's. That was the girl he knew. Unyielding. Tenten would take heed of her lessons and spin them into deadly techniques. Maybe, someday, he would have the pleasure of seeing those results for himself if he was permitted to train with her.

Neji's slight smile faltered and then disappeared. She might never again be on a team with him or Lee. Tsunade's investigation and defensive efforts were highly ambiguous with no end date in sight. She may feel the need to put Tenten elsewhere…where she could very well adapt and grow and shine; befriend a new team and balance them as she so effortlessly did theirs.

The ease and security he felt when she was near…it would be gone for good. It would be stationed on another team *with other people*. The idea sunk into him like a hook into fish flesh.

Neji conceded that, in spite of the circumstances, Lee had found a way to balance him through alternative means, and proven himself an irreplaceable friend. Yet, it was not the same as the days Tenten had stood by his side. He was uncomfortable with the seismic change. It also soothed him, if by way of distraction.

It had not occurred to Neji at all that, in the *old* days, he spent most of his waking minutes with Tenten. By choice. After she had gone, Neji had finally noticed a shift in the company he kept. Lee had gradually introduced him to the companionship that their friend group offered. In particular: the young men he had often thought himself superior to.

He was quickly realizing that his contemporaries had quite a lot to share with him. Even more to teach him! It was enjoyable at times. In other words, he knew he would get used to it.

A flock of bats flittered through a beam of moonlight and then roosted in a tall tree. The flock's soft squeaking was a sweet tune in the night.

But underneath this newfound strength and comradery was a misery unlike any he had ever felt before. The death of his father had acuity like it, but that loss was dulled due to time. It made every...
other obligation in his life; whether to friends, or his clan, or Lee's relentless grandfather, seem like cotton candy in the hand. Air-light and fluffy and gone in a nip. More or less.

The yearning he felt was a cinder block of lead on his chest that never let up. Day or night. Training or dreaming. It pressed. It reminded.

It was unbearable to be apart from her.

Something crossed the lax path of his eyes and Neji blinked. A striped, gray cat stalked across the rooftop and along a gutter on silent paws. He watched as it crouched, zeroed-in on an unsuspecting mouse near a pantry window, and then it burst forward with stretched claws. The mouse scuttled to the safety of the cracked window, but the cat did not give up. It dove over roof timber and into an inactive stove vent, infiltrating the house, and then resumed the chase indoors.

"Hm." He was mildly impressed.

Neji watched the cat's hunting path in the castle with the Byakugan for a short while before growing bored. He continued his vigil until, some hours later; Shikamaru turned up to relieve him of the watch. They had agreed that Kiba and Lee would alternate and stand guard the following night, thus affording them an entire night's rest.

"See anything interesting?" Shikamaru asked.

"Wildlife. No activity, otherwise."

"Alright. Get some sleep. I'll watch until morning to make sure no one tries to squeeze behind Sanomune's coat rack…"

In the morning, Shikamaru had to avoid hustling servants in the halls after descending from his post. He returned to the room, opened the door, shut it behind him, stepped over Neji and Lee, asleep, and then fell face-first onto the futon beside Kiba. Akamaru perked up for a second at the disturbance, but then curled up again.

Nothing at all. Silence all night, except for local bats and insects.

'Stupid.' Shikamaru thought. Then he went to sleep. At least they were being paid handsomely.

Some dozens of minutes later, Lee stirred. He allowed a servant inside and thanked him for dropping off a morning meal and tea. Kiba and Neji arose at the smell of food, but even that wasn't enough for their team leader. They left Shikamaru where he was so that he could catch up on rest.

"Today is the rehearsal." Lee announced with a pointed finger, "This means that we may experience more serious attempts from party crashers."

"I doubt it." Kiba yawned, "Neji and Shikamaru didn't see anything last night. Why would they bother now when they know more eyes will be peeled?"

"The entire third floor will detain any trespasser for quite some time." Neji added while pouring tea, "They've missed their chance."

"Maybe." Lee relented, helping himself to some food.

Shikamaru slept the whole morning away. Neji took over and led his teammates towards Moritsune's sitting room on the first floor. The lord of the Oga clan was contrite, "Forgive me. I was not able to
check on you last night. I've been scrambling to keep in contact with a caterer and a no-show musician."

"You mean the rapper?" Neji assumed.

"Yes. But I have no idea what that is." Moritsune admitted.

Kiba shook his head at them.

"Did Sanomune cooperate?" The lord asked.

"He did." Lee confirmed.

"He's a little paranoid." Kiba pointed out, "What's up with that?"

"I've asked him several times, but he always tells me not to worry." Moritsune rubbed his chin, thinking, "He's put his mischief-making days behind him...but even now he still acts so jumpy!"

"What did he used to do?" Neji inquired, figuring it could provide a key detail.

"I don't know. He would leave the castle for days on end. He never spoke of his adventures." The man frowned, "But he always had this gratified look on his face when he returned! I worried that he was a moonlighting bandit or prankster..."

"We should ask him." Lee ventured, "If he was an aspiring graffiti-artist in his youth, then it will not do to have vandalized property owners take vengeance on him!"

"Of all the things he could do at night," Kiba sniffed, "I bet that wasn't it."

"I have my suspicions." Neji affirmed, "But it wouldn't be appropriate to voice them in front of his honorable older brother."

"Thank you. I fear I don't have the constitution for it."

Kiba turned around, "Let's find that guy. It could save us a whole lot of trouble."

They returned to the corridor and saw Kim approaching from the right, going after antiques with spray-cleaner. The boys hurriedly moved to the left, funneling down the hallway and around the corner.

Akamaru barked in a panic and leapt backwards.

"What's the matter-?" Kiba's question failed as he felt the unmistakable pull of a string, tugged taught as he took a step forward. Ahead of him, Lee hollered in surprise when he too triggered a trap.

They ducked in cover and Neji, at the back, shot a small Air Palm to knock away a hailstorm of darts, sparing his friends. Unfortunately, his technique sailed down the corridor and snapped the triggers of innumerable, hidden traps which he had noticed after the fact. The team gasped together in stupefaction and watched as wary servants ran for their lives, ducking and rolling away from swinging blades and clubs, firing projectiles, and other hazards.

"I didn't, I mean, we didn't..." Kiba turned in a small circle, "We didn't set anything up down here! Right? That could've killed someone!"

"Nothing at all!" Lee clamored.
Neji narrowed his eyes, "We're checking the third floor. Now." He bolted off and his companions followed, trusting that the Hyuga's eyes were now carefully scanning for errant traps.

It was a mad rush upstairs as the hysteria in the building spread. Neji halted the party at the narrow staircase for the top floor, scrutinizing it closely with his blood limit.

"Everything has been re-arranged. All of it…reset." He turned his head, getting a precise read on another location, "And Shikamaru is not in the guest room."

"Bathroom?" Kiba asked hopefully.

Neji looked closely in all directions, working through the dense details and woodwork of the house, "He's not anywhere that I can see."

Lee was ferklempt, "How? He would not leave without telling us!"

"He didn't leave." Neji rested his eyes, "He was taken."

Kiba and Lee stared at him with pounding hearts. They were rapidly deducing, just as Neji had, that the party-crashers were by no means ordinary.

Neji resumed slowly, picking a decent route, and then darted out of an open window and along a safe stretch of roof. He reasoned that they would avoid many of the snares that had been mysteriously and inconveniently set. They entered the building again at a balcony, down a landing with steps, and took a sharp right into Sanomune's bedroom; bursting inside unceremoniously.

The man shrieked in shock, startling his fiancé beside him in bed. Upon seeing who his visitors were, Sanomune covered his wife-to-be with the quilt and pulled a robe on. He stepped into the hallway, livid, "You can't just-!"

"I already did." Neji growled, "Our team leader is missing. Your entire castle is littered with traps. It took twenty minutes. Twenty. Minutes. Our attention was occupied with Moritsune-sama and someone was able to turn this fortress into a funhouse."

Helpless, Sanomune looked to Lee and Kiba, who were equally furious.

"Explain." Neji demanded.

"Hey! Keep your voices down!" Sanomune hissed, "I don't want Ramo-chan to hear…"

"Hear what?"

"About what's going on! I want her to feel safe." His shoulders slumped, "I should have mentioned…what was really bothering me…but you ninjas looked so cool and you had it together and I just thought…you'd handle it."

"These aren't party-crashers. They re-rigged our traps. Akamaru didn't scent 'em and Neji didn't see 'em." Kiba huffed, "What's the deal?"

Sanomune hesitated to say, "They're…"

"They are what?" Lee encouraged.

"They're…my…ex-girlfriends."

Neji looked at him blankly.
"Ex-girlfriends. The women I dated...before Ramo-chan." Tears welled in his eyes, "I was afraid they'd get angry if they learned I was getting married. They found out...I don't know how..."

"How are they doing all of this?" Kiba gestured wildly about.

"They're kunoichi."

Neji's handling of the situation collided with a cognitive brick wall. The ubiquitous you-asshole look he gave to Sanomune translated excellently.

Lee's eyebrows sloped in dismay, "All...kunoichi?"

"All of them. They hate me now." He whimpered, "Please help me!"

"Help you? What are they gonna do?" Kiba scoffed, "Kill you?"

"I...don't know. I just don't want them hurting my wife!" Sanomune confessed, "If they get away with killing me, then maybe it's deserved. I suck. Well I used to suck. Please protect Ramo, won't you?"

With folded arms, Neji raised his chin a bit. From the corner of his eye he exchanged a non-verbal idea to Lee, who clearly got the message.

"We'll guard you and the bride." Neji determined, "But first we need to retrieve Shikamaru. To do that you need to share with us as much information as you can."

"Okay."

"How many of them are we up against?"

"Well..." He furrowed his eyebrows, "Excluding Kim?"

"Excluding her. Unless you believe she is a threat as well." Lee clarified.

"That's an even seven."

"It isn't even considering that seven is an odd number." Neji's teeth barely parted when he spoke, aggravated, "I've checked twice, but it's unclear if you brain is fully formed."

"Don't mind him. He's got an attitude," Kiba interrupted, "So there are seven of them?"

"I've only dated eight people. Whoa, hold on. Ramo-chan makes nine...but she wouldn't hurt me." He smiled stupidly, "Just this morning we were-"

"Stop." Kiba commanded, "Before Neji kills you. Before I kill you. That'd make all of this counterproductive."

"Right."

"How skilled are they?" Lee presented a practical question.

"In what respect?" He asked defensively.

"Are they Chunin-level? Jounin?" Kiba threw words at him.

"I don't speak your language."
"You do. Selectively." Neji pointed out.

"Okay! How about this? How quickly could they kill you?" Kiba posed, "And in what way?"

"Hmm…like a second. And…a hundred ways?" Sanomune pursed his lips, "Maybe."

"Highly skilled." Lee determined.

"Seven kunoichi." Kiba sniffed.

Neji looked out a window, brooding, "And an idiot to protect."

Again, Lee was insightful, "Are you sure they came in from the top level?"

"Seventy percent sure." He nodded, "But there's also the servant's quarters, the love tunnel, the dumbwaiter, the supply stack, the stage door, and the basement." He paused and regarded Neji and Kiba who were trembling with anger, "But they came in from the roof last time."

"Maybe…in an evolutionary sense…" Kiba murmured, "He's got it coming."

"We won't get paid if we fail." Neji put it in perspective, "Now to set priorities." He turned to Sanomune, "Hide yourself and your fiancée. Give your brother warning so that he isn't captured and used as leverage. We need to get to Shikamaru."

"Yes!" Lee echoed the sentiment, "Make your staff and family aware. Guests as well."

"Fine…but…" His eyes were wide as saucers, "What about Kim?"

Kiba followed after Neji and Lee as they took off down the corridor, "Tch! Just hope she doesn't point 'em straight at you!"

Meanwhile, in a poorly lit, subterranean room…

Shikamaru's eyes batted openly slowly and he yawned, 'Ah. Not bad. That was some pretty decent sleep after a night's watch…'

He sat up and bashed his head on something. Then, he immediately fell backwards again, supine.

"-the hell is this?" He murmured.

After his eyes focused Shikamaru observed that he was inside a barred, wooden crate. It was a near perfect size to fit him lengthwise, but when he tried to sit upright he would undoubtedly smack his head on the top of the container. His lips were pressed in a thin line of annoyance, 'Which one of those idiots is responsible for this? Is this some kind of practical joke?'

He glanced around without a word, noting his location. He was alone in what he guessed was an underground room, 'Basement of the castle, most likely.' It smelled damp, and the stone-lined walls and dirt floor were kind of a giveaway. Two incandescent bulbs wheezed light tiredly from both sides of the room. Some storage shelves and boxes were stacked around hither and thither. Behind the crate, Shikamaru marked the only entrance: a doorway that fed into an upward staircase. 'Basement.' He asserted.

Maybe this wasn't a joke. Maybe this was something to worry about.

"Pff. Great." He grumbled, rolling flat on his stomach. He rested his chin on the backs of his hands
and took more time to think. There was nothing else to do.

He was probably moved without his team knowing. Shikamaru presumed that Neji or Kiba would have quickly noticed his absence, and, being aware that he was an avid sleeper, would have been surprised by his disappearance. They were probably looking. Or dealing with a problem. Or with the creepy housekeeping and idiot groom.

During his relocation he hadn't noticed a thing, 'I slept right through it.' It had been done carefully and judging by his cage, purposefully.

'So someone doesn't want me around.' Shikamaru smiled to himself, 'Crafty party crashers. They planned to bust in here and make sure that shinobi couldn't interfere. And they didn't hesitate to lock me up in.' He paused to shake the crate, which was padlocked at the top, 'A pretty sturdy box. All the way down here.' He also noted in frustration that if he couldn't stand, he wouldn't have an easy time of Shadow-Binding anyone to unlock his prison. 'I'm gonna have to cook up an alternative, then.'

If he was lucky, Kiba and Akamaru would be able to track his scent…in the event Neji didn't spot him first. But it didn't seem like it was meant to be. He heard the distinct tapping footsteps of a pair of heels descending the steps. Tense, Shikamaru prepared a hand sign in the hope of snatching his visitor in a shadowy strangle-hold.

The lights snapped off and plunged the room into darkness.

He heard a woman's voice, "You're a Nara. A handsome one too." The stranger entered the room and stopped; a black silhouette in the dark…and vaguely voluptuous.

Shikamaru was mildly fascinated the intruder was aware that an absence of shadows would nullify his attempts to use jutsu. It wasn't a good thing, but it was interesting. The woman retrieved several objects from a box, stored them in a hip pouch, and then rounded on the prisoner.

"I checked the idiot's attendance records and saw that a team from Leaf was called in." She chuckled, "It might've been a problem…if I didn't plan for things ahead of time."

"Wedding crasher?" Shikamaru guessed.

"Destroyer." She corrected.

"Ninja?"

"Most definitely." She purred.

"And a jealous bitch." He added shrewdly, "You, like everyone else, have got a problem with Sanomune."

"We all do. I came with backup. How do you think I got you into that tiger crate? It took more than one person."

"This is for holding tigers?"

"I set one loose in the dining hall." She added sadistically, "I love cats."

"Oof. You are making my mission fun."

"Oh? So you like it in there?"

"Not really. I bet your 'backup' is comprised of cats or jilted women."
"Both." She was more visible as she bent down to look at him, "You could say one and the same." A small tabby prowled past the crate and rubbed against the woman's leg, "This is Gidion. He's my angel." She stood up and folded her arms, "And I am Haka. I dig graves and put people in them."

"Like stupid guys?"

"Yes. Like stupid guys who didn't seem stupid in the beginning…but then he just can't help showing it and he leaves you after promising to spend his life with you." She managed it in a single breath, "Then he marries a common woman instead. It stings. It really does. Do you know what I mean?"

Wide-eyed, he admitted, "Nope."

"He was so taken with kunoichi…and then he insults us by settling with some skinny, hair-color-changing nobody!" Her rage shook the small room, "Sano thought he could get away with it! Ha! Of course he did…he'd just hide in his big castle and throw money at his problems…"

"I hear that's how it's done." Shikamaru agreed, eyeing the sword at her hip.

She looked at him critically from over black-rimmed glasses, "Cheeky boy. The best way to deal with problems…is to take them into your own hands. He'll never learn." She scooped up Gidion, "My friends are looking for retribution as well. I trust that you and your team won't get in the way. I don't have beef with you now…but so help you…if you resist or hinder us I will cut your dick off."

He put on a good I'm-not-scared front, "Sure thing, lady. I am not going anywhere. Just leave me and mine be."

"Good." Haka turned around, "Oh, and don't expect your team to find you. I'm keeping them busy." She and her companion cat climbed the stairs, "Do you mind if I keep the lights off?"

"I'd prefer them on."

"Ha! Suck it." And she slammed a door shut on the upper level. The light switch hadn't been flipped.

"Archetypal…" Shikamaru rolled over again, "Nasty…" He kicked the lid of the box with both legs, "Scorned…" And kicked again, "Cow." He got tired and stopped. It was tiger-proof, "Ugh. It smells in here…"

He glanced around, fully accustomed to the dark. 'Ino would've slapped her in the face. Probably would've kicked that cat too…'

Shikamaru felt around the corners and bars of the crate, 'I need to find some hinges…' A rattling explosion shook from upstairs and he watched as dust pittered down from the ceiling. Screams and panic followed as castle-folk ran to safety, 'Keep it together up there, Neji! You know what you're doing.' His hand stopped on the cool metal on the corner opposite of the padlock. 'There we go.'

Poking around, the clever shinobi had thought to locate the pintle of the hinge. Since the tiger or whatever had been thrashing around in the crate so often, the joint of the door was loose. He wouldn't bother with a lock that couldn't be opened.

Shikamaru tapped, mapping the design in his head as he could not see what the outside of the container looked like. He nudged the back of a pintle, which slid easily through the pivot hold and out, plopping with a chime to the floor. Scooting back, Shikamaru worked on the second hinge, which was gummed up. It took quite a while to push the pintle free, but once it came unfastened there was nothing holding the hinge joints together.
He casually pushed up on the lid and it flopped over to the padlocked side of the box. Shikamaru stood up and brushed his clothes off, stepping out of the prison. *I've thought longer and harder for board games than working on this great escape...'*

He leapt up the stairs, flipped on the light switch and was stopped at the door. Locked. *'I could probably get out of this the same way, but...'* Shikamaru crouched down and peeked through the gap between the door and the floor of the first level. As soon as he saw a pair of feet go by, he captured the person with his Shadow Bind.

A screech of terrified confusion was cut short as Shikamaru orchestrated the step towards the door. The old servant reached for the latch, turned it, and then skittered away in fright as the shinobi released his hold. Shikamaru barreled through the door and into the free air again.

Taking in his surroundings, it was clear that the resentful band of kunoichi had unleashed havoc in the palace. Staff and residents were evacuating to the eastern portion of the manor, although Shikamaru suspected it wouldn't be much safer. Traps and flash grenades had been tossed and triggered *ad nauseam* to scare everyone off, *They're probably trying to flush out Sanomune and the missus...'*

In an uncharacteristically swift run, Shikamaru covered the distance of the long hallway. He took a sharp left around a corner and then tripped and fell over Akamaru. The dog barked joyously.

Kiba whipped around in shock, "Holy-! You made it!"

"Yeah," Shikamaru pushed himself up, his face flattened by the floor, "Made it."

"Neji saw that they captured you! We figured we needed to rescue you after dealing with all these bombs and junk."

Shikamaru dusted himself off again, "You were taking a little long."

"There are seven kunoichi after Sanomune!" Kiba brought him up to speed as they moved on, "He and his lady friend are hiding. Not sure where his brother is...and I got separated from Neji and Lee when a wall came down."

"I spoke to one of them: scary lady in heels and glasses. Has a sword and a cat," Shikamaru replied, ducking under a toppled beam, "Let's cut through the courtyard and find-"  

Kiba held out his arm, barring Shikamaru from running headlong into a barrage of senbon needles. They skidded to a stop and traded glares with their assailant. The woman strolled along the railed, second-floor walk above them, flipping chestnut hair off of her shoulder. She was done up extravagantly, maybe for the occasion.

"Back off," She sounded bored, "Haka-sama already warned you not to interfere. You people just can't take direction, can you?"

"It's kind of hard to do when directions are given to me while I'm locked in an animal cage," Shikamaru added sidelong to Kiba, "Long story."

"Luli..."

A shorter, younger woman came to stand beside the brunette: on the husky side with short, blonde pigtails and war paint on her cheeks. She added to her comrade, "They screwed up once so let's just punish them."
The woman droned, "They should do what they're told…" She rolled her neck, "Or we'll just be wasting time and energy, Roxi."

"Men are pussies who don't listen. You know that."

"Say that like we're not standing right here!" Kiba shouted up at them.

"It's true. You all have a serious lack of balls and brain matter. Sano had a major deficiency." The feisty short one bit back, "And Luli's a movie star. She knows how to take direction. You scabs can learn something from her!"

"I've got a direction for you then," Shikamaru snarked, "Stick to movies, doe-eyes! And you!" He indicated the short woman, "Your kindergarten class called. They say they're missing a toddler. Better hurry back."

After grinding her teeth at the insult, Roxi hefted a precariously large, iron-emblazoned mallet, which had initially looked like a cane for walking. Her partner dove gracefully from the walkway and hurled needles down at the Leaf ninja. They dodged in opposite directions, preparing for the inevitable melee.

While a swing of the mighty hammer came at his head, Shikamaru bent backwards, and from the corner of his eye, noticed Lee rocket past the window outside, 'Looks like he's got his own welcoming committee…'

After losing Kiba in the smoke and rubble of a wall collapse, Lee had been promptly kicked in the chest by a screeching woman. The blow had shot him through a window, shattered glass, and the kunoichi dove after him with her twin sister.

When the confusion of the ambush wore off, Neji thought it wise to go outside and help Lee, but was confronted by a third vengeful ex. She seemed to float above the ground before touching down. His skilled eyes noticed that it was in fact a wire trick, and also unnecessarily flamboyant.

"Oh look." The platinum haired, rockstar-esque woman smirked, "You must be the bride."

"No, actually," Neji was sick of jibes directed at the length of his hair, "Security."

"Are you just going to let Kata and Yana kick the shit out of your boyfriend?"

"I am debating putting you through a window. And I don't have a boyfriend."

She grinned and rode a wire back up to the next floor, "Don't worry! There's a someone for everyone. I've even had two at the same time…just make sure they don't find out."

His brain violently expunged the recommendation as he hurtled outside, pinpointing Lee's position with his blood limit. His teammate was making use of his Drunken Boxing Evasion, avoiding brutal assaults as the two kunoichi chased him along the top of a secondary roof. It seemed like they had agreed to aim for his eyebrows: a most prominent feature. They swiped and kicked like cyclones.

The twins had matching outfits, long hair (black and white) in pigtails, and furious war-cries as they attacked in unison. Neji might have called their Taijutsu impressive, but they had not successfully touched Lee once. Therefore, Lee was impressive.

Neji scaled the slope of the roof in a bound. He slipped his arm through Yana's block as Lee took a jab at her. The woman blanched in surprise as her arm lifted and exposed her ribcage plainly. Lee's
timely second jab hit her. Her squeak of pain was rubber-duck like and she slid down a patch of tile. Her sister, Kata, leapt over her and shouted in aggravation. She aimed for Neji in unfair places, but it did afford her twin a moment to recuperate as Lee sprang again.

Both pairs were searching for opportunities to divide the opposing duo. Several times the twins had singled out Lee (or his eyebrows) and used combination assaults. The women swatted and struck with shocking ferocity until Neji's Jyukken strikes had all but crippled Kata. The girl bent double in pain, reached up as she fell, and grabbed a handful of Neji's hair. She tugged, upending his balance, and hurled him down into a courtyard below. Then she rolled up like a pill-bug and tried to recover in the safety of a rain gutter.

Now in a one-on-one brawl, Lee was about consider the Front Lotus as an option until a weighted wire lashed out, looping several times around his neck. He had the sense to bring his hand up and prevent a death-choke. Another wire snared his ankle, tripping him, and Lee looked up to see the rockstar woman as she left her perch, almost levitating. She had thought it prudent to keep the odds in favor of her female colleagues. Yana leapt at the chance, bringing her elbow down in a pile-driving motion. She missed Lee as he rolled down the opposite slope, and gouged a hole in a portion of roof with the blow. Lee stopped at the siding of the house lined with windows, struggling to breathe.

"Hold him still for me, Ingri!" The wrathful twin hollered, taking a stance.

The accomplice held the wire taught from above, and Lee tried to negotiate opening any of his Inner Gates while trying to oxygenate. Neither was working well. Fortunately for him, Neji's long-distance Air Palm had snapped the length of cord between Lee's neck and Ingri, freeing him. He gasped for breath and ducked as Yana's flying kick nearly had him. She soared into the house through an open window with a resounding crash.

Lee coughed and then gave a thumbs-up to his friend who was rushing up rails and timbers, "Thank you, Neji!"

Lee then jumped up the height of the inclined roof, pursuing Ingri as she retreated. The woman squealed in terror when she was cornered near the female Shachihoko motif at the edge of the building.

"Please don't hurt me!" She begged, falling to her knees in front of him, "I have three kids to provide for!"

"You do?" Lee's compassionate heart could not abide the idea of hurting a mother. He stopped.

Ingri promptly swept Lee's legs out from under him with a round kick, "Stupid ass!" He toppled off the edge, "None of us have kids!"

"Good." Neji remarked from beside her.

The lying woman drained of color. Neji had no qualms with folding her like a piece of paper with Jyukken strikes. For good measure, he planted a right hook to Ingri's face and watched as she plummeted an unsafe height down into a water feature.

Neji glimpsed over the sheer ledge of the roof, seeing that the broken length of cable knotted around Lee's leg had caught in a slot between tiles. Lee hung upside down, swinging to and fro gently. Neji reached down and caught his outstretched hand, hoisting him up, and then snapped the wire that had spared his teammate from a terrible fall. Lee appeared devastated.
"What?" Neji rumbled.

"She lied to me!" Lee threw up his arms, at the peak of offense, "My sympathy was preyed upon!"

He nearly rolled his eyes, "And a woman pulled my hair and tossed me off a roof. Those tactics are not above them." He shepherded Lee along, his Byakugan wary for booby-traps as they backtracked, "I can see Shikamaru and Kiba on the first floor. Let's go."

Neji and Lee returned to the skirmish on the first floor just in time to partake in a flashy yet unexpected victory. Kiba and his ninken (transformed) had overwhelmed the movie star; the woman was disheveled and bruised beneath a pile of plaster-and-wood rubble. Shikamaru, on the other hand, had not been faring well against the short, pudgy kunoichi. He already had a broken finger and several welts. She had nimbly avoided his shadow and tricks.

Neji held back and watched what would have been a textbook perfect "Dynamic Entry," but Lee missed. Roxi had anticipated the ambush and grabbed Shikamaru about the shoulders, spun around, and let the signature kick land squarely on Shikamaru's forehead (Forgive meee). In the same motion, the kunoichi had raised her mallet and brought it down over Lee. He rolled, slippery as an eel, and avoided the weapon while continuing his apology.

Shikamaru was out cold for three seconds before he woke up on the floor, sucking wind as he sat up.

"I am concussed." He decided.

Shikamaru blinked twice to make sure he was not imagining the skittish tiger slinking by. It was terrified of its surroundings. He confirmed with Neji in a hasty glance, seeing that the Hyuga had acknowledged the odd element in the room with a face that said: This isn't strange anymore.

While Neji and Kiba moved in to surround Lee's opponent, who was now swinging in circles, Shikamaru got his shit together. He stood up, rubbed his head, and then caught the cowering tiger in his Shadow-Bind, "We're putting you to work, Scardey-Cat!"

He turned on his heel, aiming his technique for Roxi, and Scardey-Cat lunged.

There was an ear-splitting scream as the tiger bore down on the woman, catching her face in its jaws. The mallet slipped from her hand and fell with a heavy thud to the floor. Lee covered his mouth to prevent a revolted gasp as his opponent was mauled.

When Shikamaru thought the brief but violent assault was enough for surrender, he released the tiger. It scampered away in fright and looked for something to hide under. Roxi, incapacitated, was still alive, but lay skewed on the floor. She sputtered curses. The team of Leaf shinobi regrouped.

"There will be more of them." Neji warned Shikamaru, "What is our next action?"

"We should find the idiot and Moritsune. Once we can secure their safety then we'll go to work disarming traps and..." Shikamaru frowned at the state of the castle corridor, "Cleaning all this crap up."

Kiba couldn't tell if he meant the petty kunoichi goons or the debris.

Neji's Byakugan could not spot any of their intended clients in the castle, but for better or worse, he could spot Kim. She appeared unscathed and was even dismantling traps that had not yet been tripped. He relayed this sighting and behavior to Shikamaru.
"I don't know if she's trustworthy." The team leader was hesitant.

"It may be worth inquiring that she is not an enemy, at the very least."

"Alright..." Shikamaru relented.

When they had made it to the eastern hall they caught up with the cranky maid at a castle exit. She looked over her shoulder at the team, disgruntled.

"Aren't you, like, supposed to be stopping death and destruction?" She complained, "I'm trying to keep my staff members alive. It's not my job to take down traps. You guys are shit ninja."

"Thanks." Kiba retorted, "You're a shit maid."

"No. I'm awesome. I'll clean up later. This is a six-person job, and we'll need more dustpans."

"Are you allied with the...ex-girlfriend coalition?" Neji had a hard time arranging the words, "We would like to rule you out as an antagonist."

"I hate everyone, but I would never kill anyone." Kim illuminated, "They're all idiots."

They accepted the answer and sighed in relief. It was nice to have someone on their side. The maid pushed the double doors open and gestured with her head, "Come on. My bookkeeper told me the caterer and entertainment arrived. They'll be waiting."

"Is now an appropriate time to let them in?" Lee wondered.

"Sure. They bothered showing up." She walked ahead of the team briskly, passing through castle yards and into the surrounding fortress.

From a distance they could see Moritsune leading a caterer and chefs (with a wagon of delicacies) towards a decorated building. Kim said it was the Theater Hall, "And that's where we're going."

Once inside they caught up with Moritsune, who had successfully sequestered the heedless chefs to the kitchen. He shut the door and exhaled, laying eyes on Kim and the security team, "Thank God you're all alive! I was scared the servicers would see the house and just leave!"

"I'll clean it. Promise." The maid murmured.

"The intruders were kunoichi." Shikamaru informed Moritsune, "Hence the state of your castle. Sorry. If we had known, we probably could have prevented some of the damage."

"It's alright. It's my brother's fault for not being forthcoming. Speaking of which..." The clan head hustled towards a door at the end of the lobby, "He and Ramo should be here. They already brought the musician inside!"

Kiba corrected, "You mean the rapper."

"Yes! But I don't know what that is." Moritsune repeated, entering the theater ahead of the team.

Beyond the heavy doors was a wide and spacious room, filled with tables and seats fit for a reception or gala. The grand stage was equipped with screens and a perpendicular catwalk that protruded out for ten meters. At the foot of the stage was the table at which Sanomune and his fiancé were seated. In the chair beside them sat the entertainment.

Dark skin with formidable tattoos, white, corn-rowed hair, dark sunglasses, with swords at his
back…the team gradually realized, by indication of a headband, that the man was in fact a Cloud ninja. Kim assessed from beside them, "That's a sick goatee."

Shikamaru frowned at her, "The performer is another shinobi? Am I missing something?"

"He was hired as entertainment, not for security. Don't ask me. Sano's a fan."

Neji fell into step with Moritsune as he went to his brother, hoping to get to the bottom of his shenanigans. Kiba made a motion to follow but stopped. A table away from Sanomune and his company were two, blasé-looking young Cloud ninjas. They were leaned back in their seats while they stared at the ceiling. Akamaru's tail wagged.

Kiba had to stare for a moment with squinted eyes before recalling the kunoichi's name, 'That's Karui…' He wrinkled his nose, 'And her sidekick.'

He followed Lee and Shikamaru ahead towards the soon-to-be-weds, watching the familiar Kumo nin from the corner of his eye. Neither of them budged; wholly unaware of the people popping in and out of the theater.

"Sano!" Moritsune stopped in front of the table, hands on his hips, "Several shinobi infiltrated the house! If you were afraid of a threat like that why didn't you tell me?"

"Totally told you." Sanomune blinked, "And I hired a team. It's cool."

"It is not cool." Neji assured him.

Shikamaru added, "Turns out…the women who are attacking were all-"

Sanomune made a cutting motion against his throat, indicating that nothing be said. Shikamaru fell silent. A magenta haired woman sitting beside Sanomune smiled uncertainly, "Crashers got in the house?"

"Moritsune just likes to worry, you know that." He tried to play it off casually, "Detail-oriented kind of guy. The Leaf team is doing a great job. Check it out: they're all sweaty and stuff."

Ramo regarded them, "Yeah, I guess."

"You know Crash and the Boys are headlining for Killerbee tomorrow?" Sanomune added.

The woman brightened, "For real?"

"Yeah."

"I haven't seen them in ages. You're pretty thoughtful," She kissed his cheek and then turned to the rapper, "Do you mind doing another one for us, Killerbee-san?"

The man who had been sitting stock-still beside them raised his arms, gesturing while he spoke, "Straight up, pink-headed girl! Imma 'bout to spin your world!"

The woman beamed happily. A hush fell over her companions.

"This is it." Kiba poked his head through the gap between Lee and Neji, "Behold a new genre."

Lee was listening with an open mind, but Neji's face had become a sounding board of discomfiture. Killerbee established a beat:
This real shit
That I spit
Made you want
To kick it
Your big day, gonna be sick
A triflin' rich-ass picnic
With Karui
And Omoi
Purebred ninja pedigrees
Sitting, stanking, they hate it here
But kids I thought I made it clear
I came back to rip y'all some rhymes
Never gonna waste your time
Def 'gon fill 'yo theater pits
And teach some whiny ni-ta-wits

Killerbee stopped and glared his students, "One day ain't gonna kill you."

"This is completely stupid." Omoi hissed in response, crunching down on a lollipop. He tipped back his chair and it slipped, dumping him to the floor. He laid there unmoving.

Karui frowned down at her teammate, "Have some dignity. This is a wedding."

"Weddings are stupid."

"Generally, they're not." She sighed, "But this one is."

"Yo, Karui," Killerbee pointed a flattened hand at her, "Sit his ass up."

She glanced over her shoulder with narrowed eyes, "I think Omoi wants to stay down there…where no one can see him."

"We're guests! So sit 'em up!"

Karui blinked, seeing Kiba among the additional people gathered around her sensei's table. She immediately recognized him. She pulled Omoi's chair upright and murmured, "The escaped Inuzuka is here…"

"What?" He peeked over at the other side of the room, "You sure?"

"Positive," She reported, patting Akamaru's head in her lap, "This dog just appeared. And I'm pretty sure I remember it."
"Yeah…you're right." Omoi reached over and mussed Akamaru's head, "Hey boy. You're that friendly dog, huh?"

Akamaru's tail wagged with enough force to wobble his entire backside.

Killerbee continued rapping for the enchanted couple. Shikamaru, Lee, and Moritsune didn't seem to mind it much, and Lee had likened it to "very original poetry." Kim had drifted towards the stage to look for microphones.

Neji stood in chagrinned silence, feeling as though he was trapped in a waking nightmare.

Kiba had only been paying half-attention to the performance, as he had turned to face Karui when the kunoichi coolly made her way over to him. She stopped beside him and folded her arms, "Long time no see."

His smile was wolfish, "Hey, Karui."

Shikamaru's ear discreetly tuned in to the unexpected conversation behind him, 'No way! They're acquaintances?'

"You remembered my name," She looked pleased, "Sorry. I don't remember yours."

"Kiba," He reminded her, "But you called me dog-breath."

"Oh yeah."

"So you're here for the wedding?"

"Our sensei was hired to entertain." She sulked, "But he dragged me and Omoi along. He said he wanted us to get out and trip more."

"Well it looks like he picked a good location," Kiba's eyebrows rose cheekily, "You found me."

"I wasn't actually looking."

"Sorry if my escape caused you any inconvenience."

"Nah. I got over it," Her face was coy, "This is better timing now. My sword's been fixed."

Shikamaru nudged Lee, muttering, "Something weird is happening."

Accordingly, Lee and Neji gave their unnoticeable attention to Kiba and his red-haired confrère, feigning interest in the bizarre lyrical routine in front of them. It was a rare thing to get any kind of non-violent interaction from a kunoichi, at least these days.

"Oh, so you want a rematch?" Kiba teased.

"I've thought about it." Karui smirked and rolled her shoulders, conveying the sword at her back.

"That means you thought about me."

Her cheeks reddened but she was steadfast, "In the way that involves cutting your dog-face, I have."

"It's Kiba."

"I got that already."
"I thought about you too." He conceded, leveling the field.

"What do you want? A trophy?"

With nothing to lose, Kiba went for it, "How about another opportunity?"

Their tête-à-tête was in the background of the conversation going on between Kiba's teammates.

"He is…quite self-assured." Lee whispered to his teammate, "I would never be confident enough to speak to a beautiful woman!"

"You might find they're trouble later on." Neji opined, "Look at the position we're in: seven women after the blood of one man."

"Neji, you're not one to talk about troublesome women. That's my gig." Shikamaru replied quietly, "Sheesh! And your woman is trustworthy and loyal. You have no idea what trouble is. Don't preach."

Lee amended with a pointed finger, "Tenten is not an object, Shikamaru. We have discussed—"

"Shaddap!"

Meanwhile, in Neji's head, he had received a weird, unanticipated boost of elation that Tenten was indeed a faithful partner…and other men were picking up on it. Not to say that he had any official stake in Tenten's heart, as far as he knew. It was nonetheless a good feeling.

All pleasantries were disrupted by an incoming fireball.

It soared across the room, scattering Shikamaru's team and the Cloud students. Killerbee remained contently seated while Sanomune ducked under the table, coaxing his confused fiancé down with him.

Two kunoichi that the Leaf ninja had not yet encountered had appeared in a puff of smoke. Shikamaru, for one, had spoken to Haka in the dark, but was surprised by her immodest appearance in the light of day. 'Way too much cleavage...' And next to the ringleader was a scowling, dark-skinned woman with black rings around her eyes, 'Kind of like Gaara. Huh. I wonder if Gaara does his with eyeliner?'

"Matti, look!" Haka was tittering with laughter, "They invited a circus for the wedding! How about that?"

"Too bad we weren't invited." The dark woman gnashed her teeth.

Shikamaru confronted them, "Exes don't get that privilege, besides; you brought the circus. Why don't you pack it up and scram?"

"You've got a mouth on you." The leader smiled, "But we're not leaving without exacting the payback we deserve, Nara."

Abruptly, Omoi, Lee, and Neji had been pounced upon by replications. Kiba had darted back after snatching up Karui, sparing her from a swipe by one of Matti's clones. While evading, Neji took a reading with his Byakugan, 'Fire Clones, like the technique that Sato uses. These won't last long…'

Before a Fire Clone could grab Moritsune and use him for leverage, Lee had kicked the bunshin squarely in the back of the head, dispelling it with a burst of flame. He carried the Lord of the Oga to
the table his brother was taking shelter under. Lee returned to the fracas as Kiba and Karui, in attempts to impress each other, swatted and smashed incoming clones.

Neji and Shikamaru were having difficulties with Haka, who was keeping them at sword's length. Omoi had come up from behind her to assist, parrying her swordstrike, trying to position her for the Leaf ninja. Shikamaru's shadow had pitifully missed several times, and Neji had nearly taken Omoi's head off with an Air Palm he had stepped in the way of. The woman laughed at their frantic cooperation and tossed a food pill to her cat, Gidion.

The tabby growled, his fur standing on end as his chakra soared, and Haka used seals to transform the feline into a Beast Copy of herself. Kiba was mildly outraged by the stunt, and hurriedly followed suit with Akamaru. He and Neji traded adversaries, and Lee found that Neji was more suitable in the clash with Matti, whose use of Fire Jutsu and clones was tearing the dining room apart.

Surrounded, Haka substituted when her enemies leapt for her. She wheeled away with impressive flips before settling on the stage, snickering, "You kids kind of made this fun…"

"Wah!" Sanomune screamed as he was dragged out from under the table by a wire. Ingri had returned, worse for the wear, and reeled him in from her position behind a screen. All of the other jilted women descended from various balconies and windows of the building, surrounding the united forces of Leaf and Cloud.

The groom was hoisted up so Haka could catch his chin and squeeze his face threateningly, "You know what I'm going to do, Sano?"

"Apologize?" He replied through fish lips.

She shoved him, pushing him down to the polished wood of the stage. Haka brandished her Ninjato sword, "I'm going to cut your dick off."

"I need that." He protested, "Please! Just leave everyone alone!"

"Why should I? You obviously don't know how to leave people alone; you've passed through the hands of eight women and rubbed salt in our wounds!"

"Nine, actually."

"The truth is…" She stomped on his stomach with a pointed heel, pinning him, "I want to kill everyone here. Your Leaf pals, your pink-haired whore, the entertainment…even the caterers. I want you to watch them die after I neuter you."

His eyes were wide, "You bitch."

"You're the bitch! You shouldn't have forsaken me-!" Her words trailed off.

In the span of a moment, tentacles had grown out from Killerbee's back and wrapped around the unsuspecting, would-be-avenged kunoichi. The women screamed in unison.

Killerbee continued to sit with his arms folded, "Bitter ladies need to cool it, fool ya fools!"

An eighth tentacle freed Sanomune from his hog-tie, and the groom was able to scamper back to his Leaf guards. The captured women struggled in a panic when Killerbee stood, toting the prisoners along. Haka whistled for her transformed cat to come to the rescue, but the Cloud ninja brushed it aside when it came bounding. The cat hit a wall, released its transformation, and then slid down into
"Gidion!" She began kicking in a rage. "Let go of me you freak! You're like some kind of porn monster!"

"That's just low…" The man replied, "But you should know…"

Eight Tails, that's me

Da rappin' Killerbee!

Makin' beats and rhymes

And makin’ ’em live

It's what a Jinchuriki needs

To survive

A Tailed Beast resides

In my hide

Step aside

And prepare to be petrified

Cause it's hard out there for a Jinchuriki

When you're fightin' and recitin' and your rhymes are freaky!

My vanquished foes do the dance of defeat

And we celebrate my win with these ice cold beats!

He whirled the howling kunoichi around in a vortex, a few vomited from the spin, and he tossed them like ragdolls. They rocketed across the room and crashed into the screens of the stage, knocking the set over.

A moment later, Kim poked her head out of a stage door, looking around curiously. She noticed the pile of defeated kunoichi to her left, "Oh. I missed something." She turned and called for backup and several other janitors joined her in extricating the unconscious women, "Get this cleaned up. Watch out for that puke on the floor…"

Sanomune hugged one of Killerbee's beefy arms, not afraid of the receding tentacles in the slightest, "You're like my actual hero! I loved your music, but now I really love you."

"I'm dope." Killerbee agreed.

Shikamaru was assessing the abrupt and single-handed (or eight-tentacled) defeat of the party crashers. He gave a suspicious look to Karui and Omoi, "So…about what your sensei said before…is he really a jinchuriki?"

"He really is." Omoi confirmed.

"He's the Eight-Tail's container. He also thinks he's a superstar." Karui added, "Sensei is skilled and
we trust him with our lives…but he never shuts up."

"Ah! The octopus arms that emerged from his body…" Lee was astute, "That was the Hachibi?"

"Yeah. They're buds." Omoi unwrapped another lollipop, "Not every jinchuriki is on good terms
with their Tailed Beast, but Sensei made it work. He's one of the strongest shinobi in our village."

"Good to know." Shikamaru yielded, "He saved the idiot's wedding."

Moritsune arose from beneath the table and dusted his robes off. He crossed over to Shikamaru's
team and also gave a grateful look to the Cloud ninja, "I would like to thank all of you! My brother
would have been maimed if you hadn't intervened!"

"Just doing our duty." Shikamaru shrugged, adding, "But you may want to give us a little extra for
our trouble."

Moritsune nodded, "I can accommodate that. Well! We have to get on with the rehearsal now…so
would you mind helping us set these tables and chairs back up?"

"We're not getting paid." Karui nagged, motioning for Omoi to follow her, "Count us out." She
located an intact table to relax at.

While Sanomune and his intended were still preoccupied with Killerbee's lyrics, Shikamaru and his
teammates reluctantly cooperated in restoring the theater hall. A few times, the team leader caught
Kiba glancing back at the red-haired kunoichi who had refused to help. Shikamaru flicked his ear.

"Hey!"

"Quit making eyes at her, Kiba."

"I wasn't making eyes at anyone, you grouch."

"We don't have time to mingle. We need to finish the security detail and get out of this hellhole."

"I know that. Jeez! Don't get annoyed just because I have game." He grinned mischievously. Kiba
had moved over to the next row of dismantled furniture to work on his own, where, as luck would
have it, Karui was watching him with a carefree expression.

Peeved, Shikamaru set up a chair and took a seat, reasserting his usual lazy-mode. He sighed, "I need
a break. His ego just exhausted me."

"You deserve a rest, Shikamaru." Lee assured him, and then his voice lowered, "But what
is game? Is that like rap?"

The next day, correspondence had been sent by messenger hawk from the Oga residence to the
attention of the Hokage. Tsunade opened the scroll in amusement, supposing that Shikamaru had
something to tell her before coming home.

_Hokage-sama,_

_Nara Shikamaru, checking in. It might be worth mentioning that we arrived at the Oga homestead
and were quickly attacked by a group of seven kunoichi. They wanted to get back at Oga Sanomune
for rejecting them. Needless to say, we had our hands full._

_The rapper hired to entertain the bride and groom happened to be the Eight-Tails jinchuriki from the_
Cloud Village. He also easily neutralized the threat. Don't get me wrong, we deserve some credit for the work we did. Neji, Lee, and Kiba made a great team. Regarding the Hachibi, I have never encountered a jinchuriki as far as I know, but this shinobi from Kumogakure made a good impression on us. I could have done without the rapping though. It may be worth staying on Cloud's good side, whenever possible.

Unfortunately, we were asked to stay an extra day to participate in the wedding. Sanomune thinks we're friends now. If Neji turns up in your office all by himself it's probably because he couldn't stand the awful music they're playing here. He looks about ready to run for it. Lee and Kiba are happy, otherwise.

Consider this mission a success. On that note, I'd like to request a day off this week. Can you mark me down?

Tsunade finished the message and snickered, "Sure! I'll let you have a personal day. But then I have every intention of assigning you as a proctor for the Chunin Exam."

She set the scroll aside and stretched, cracking her back. The door to her office opened after a single knock, and she frowned at her visitor, "You're late, Tenzo."

"Forgive me, Hokage-sama. The team briefing at HQ ran long."

Tsunade stood, skirted around her desk and then exited the office, inclining her head so that the ANBU agent would follow, "We shouldn't be wasting any time right now. I had some of the veterans keep an eye on Root for the past few days. We have a bit of a problem. Keep up!"

Tenzo kept pace with her down the hallway, "A problem?"

"Danzo recently donated a subordinate of his to fill in the gap on Maito Gai's team. His name was Sai." Tsunade explained, "And Hyuga Neji informed me that Sai hesitated to obey orders to exchange them for an armistice. Since the failure of that endeavor, which I was not alerted to…" She grimaced, "That shinobi has been held in some rather inhumane conditions."

"The veterans reported on it?"

"They did. I had concerns that mistreatment continues in Root these days, even after the Third's reforms." Tsunade hurried down the stairwell, "At the very least, I intend to call Danzo out on his unauthorized instructions…and to I want to pick up a few things."

"I see. Do you intend to visit the Root command center now? I can arrange guards."

Tsunade smiled, "You will suffice. We'll be meeting up with Kakashi along the way as well." She pushed through a back door and left the building with Tenzo at her heels, "Take that mask off for now. Danzo may think twice about crossing me after he sees your faces."

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*Bonus Soundtrack: "Another Winter" by Anamanaguchi*
How to go Home

*Chapter Soundtrack: "Bloom" by ODESZA & "Memories that you Call (ft. Monsoonsiren)" by ODESZA*

Often, when people are asked to think of the last time they felt happy, they may mark an instance within a few hours of the present, or maybe as far back as a day or so. Happiness is not a permanent state of being, nor is any emotion, for that matter, but in its cyclical way, it rebounds from time to time and sustains the human condition. There is always something to appreciate in a day: waking up with good hair, finding money on the ground, a decent joke, a blue sky, the aroma of street food, time with friends, and so forth.

But if one were to ask Sasuke if he could recall his last recognition of happiness, he would certainly tell you it was several months ago.

Of course, no one was around to ask him silly things as he hiked over Mount Daisen and then into the stone valleys beyond in the north. It was worth mentioning that Orochimaru had ordered him to embark on a mission without any supplies or travel gear. He had set out straight from the desert wastes. Sasuke had the sense to bring a container for water and tool scrolls before his departure from Sound, but was otherwise traveling much too light.

The first day of the journey had no complexity to it. He was far enough from civilization to avoid most shinobi patrols and concentrated on picking a route into the Land of Earth. Once at the mountain range on the country border, Sasuke had access to fish in the freshwater streams. He ate well and replenished his stores before moving on.

And as he moved through the plateaus and peaks of the Earth Country, in its sparse plant life, he found that he quite enjoyed his solitude. Getting away from Orochimaru’s hideout was a welcome change of scenery. It was nearly as pleasant as his trip into the Land of Lightning, when he had accidentally encountered Kiba and his small companion. That was the last time he had felt remotely happy.

Right away he had observed how Kiba had advanced. He had shed his headstrong stubbornness for strategic thinking; he had approached Sasuke carefully, asked all the right questions, and had not once made a bid to pounce on him or return him to the Leaf Village. Kiba had been annoyingly persuasive during their few discussions, but was generally supportive. The words were still clear in his mind: ‘Sasuke, look…I’m not gonna try to bring you back. I actually want you to do what you have to do.’

Those words had uplifted him. Maybe he shouldn’t be surprised that Kiba was able to relate. He too was part of an influential clan of Konoha that, if decimated by one of its members, Kiba may also desire revenge if he had the chance to pursue it. It was not outside the realm of possibility.

Despite his flaws, his annoying, high-ground speeches, and his mediocre skills…Sasuke felt it was only right to call Kiba a true friend. It wouldn’t do to bring him along on the quest to obliterate Itachi, but he was a person to rely on if everything else turned to shit.

By the third day of travelling, it was getting a little old hunting for food. Luckily, Sasuke had passed through a small trading village and was able to buy what he needed. He kept his eyes averted and his voice dull when he made purchases.
Miles beyond the trading post were rolling mountains covered in untouched forests and wilds. Small towns and settlements were scattered throughout. These were the lands close to the coast that Orochimaru had specified. Sasuke wagered that it would be best to stake out the clustered hamlets, rotating his watch between them until he spotted that swirled, orange mask.

After a day of careful planning, he had discovered that three small villages: Nashi, Shincha, and Ine, were all within an hour of one another. They formed an acute triangle; Nashi at the dip of the valley, Shincha at the mountaintop, and Ine situated on the coast to the east.

He entered Nashi through back alleys and empty lanes, examining the layout of its buildings. From rooftops, he looked down on the streets and studied them. Sasuke became familiar with people’s faces, their voices, the shops and residences… He stalked and flitted about like a hawk watching pigeons waddle below. The following day, after taking shelter in a hotel loft (he had broken into during the night) Sasuke set out for Ine in the east.

It was a much busier town. He learned that he could blend in completely with the bustling crowds at the marketplace. In a harbor filled with voyaging ships there was a call for migrant workers to cross the sea for mining work. The first month paid double the going wage, and a burly man had asked Sasuke if he was interested. He declined quietly. Once again, he found a suitable perch and watched the flow of citizens in the roads. By night, he watched them moor boats in the port and then file into their cottages.

When the next day yielded nothing in the fishing village, Sasuke set out for Shincha. The trip up the mountain was steep, and the town was nestled on a series of plateaus and hills mid-way through the climb. The forest there was dense. The air was thin. It was a pristine location and Sasuke watched from the cover of tall tree branches, scrutinizing villagers as they hiked up a trail to the Shinto Shrine. After he entered the town there was a lull of activity. An old man took a seat on a bench across the street from where he lurking, sighing softly as he rearranged parcels in a basket.

Sasuke took a break to eat before resuming his watch. It was just as empty and unassuming a place as the first town had been. Sasuke debated returning to Ine, wondering if the lively crowds had concealed Tobi during his first visit. He hopped from his seat near a chimney stack and crossed over to another roof; an elementary school, and then froze.

Below in the schoolyard, etched into the dirt by what had probably been a stick…was the insignia of the Hidden Leaf Village. It was poorly drawn and not definitive evidence that he could use…but Sasuke intuitively felt that it was not yet time to leave the stakeout. The school bell rang and marked the end of the day. Children scurried from classrooms, bidding their teachers farewell, and then changed at shoe lockers. As they trickled two by two into the yard, Sasuke watched. Voices drifted up from the gaggle of students.

“Don’t you think Tonushi-kun is cute?”

“Well maybe a little…”

Boys’ voices:

“Mokuba, knock it off! I have homework!”

“You promised you’d come out today! Everyone wanted to play in the good weather!”

“Who’s everyone?”

“Uh…”
Tittering and laughter. Squeals of play-fights.

“Won’t you show me a jutsu?”

Sasuke glanced down again, tipped off by the request.

A young girl was following a dark haired boy towards the picket fence. The two had textbooks clutched in their arms.

The boy smiled uncertainly, “I shouldn’t. Mom and Dad said I can’t unless I’m in danger.”

“But Koko said you can make a fireball! Please?” The girl pressed, “Just this once.”

“I’m sorry. I can’t! If Dad catches me he’ll get mad, and he’ll be here to pick me up any second.”

“He’s been gone for like a week! How do you know he’ll catch you?”

“He promised he’d be here.” The boy explained, “And he always makes it on time to get me. I won’t fool around and get in trouble!”

A child who could use jutsu was a damning discovery, made more serious by the depiction of Konoha’s symbol in an unassociated settlement. Sasuke could not say how a little boy was able to do such things without the instructions of a shinobi academy either. A village on the outskirts of the Earth Country, by all accounts, should not have inhabitants with such gifts.

“Yuma-chan! Please! You won’t get in trouble!”

He shook his head and then a grin spread slowly on his face, “Maybe…when Dad’s out of town again…I could show you and the rest of the class.”

“Oh! I guess that’s a better idea.”

The children continued to chat while they waited. Sasuke remained still in his place behind a roof exit of the building, his eyes fixed on the boy. Parents popped by and then whisked their children off. It was hard for Sasuke to conceal his surprise when Tobi did show up, mask in place, stopping at the gate with a wave.

Yuma bid his friends farewell and joined his father, “Hey Dad!”

“Hey Short-Stuff! Oof!” He was squeezed tightly around his trunk, “How was school, Yuma?”

“A little boring.” The boy fell into step beside Tobi, “But Sensei let me write on the board during math, though!”

“Ah. Good for you! That’s your forte.”

“Uh huh.”

“Did you participate in your other subjects?”

Guiltily, he admitted, “Not really…”

“You can’t just raise your hand for the one thing you like. You need to put some effort into everything, even the boring stuff.”

“Other kids do it. Everyone else hates math so I get to go up all the time.”
Tobi laughed, “Yuma, that’s kind of interfering with their learning. They need to learn how to participate too!”

“Well their parents don’t yell at them as much about what they do in class. They just have to do their homework.”

“I don’t yell at you. Neither does Mom.”

“Well you guys are pushy sometimes…”

“It’s because we love you and we want you to do well.” He held out a hand, “Here. I’ll carry your books.”

The small boy passed the textbooks off to Tobi. The pair walked side-by-side down the street, chatting in a manner most typical of parent and child. Sasuke was thrown for a loop.

At first glance, Tobi was by all accounts not the idiot he had portrayed while in the presence of Orochimaru. Even more ludicrous was that the buffoon was a father! It was surprising, but still not very much to go on to determine whether or not he was an informant for Leaf.

‘It wasn’t easy to tell by just looking what this guy does when he goes home.’ Sasuke noted as he stalked through shadows of buildings, ‘What’s the point of being shocked by this? Any second now he’ll prove that he’s guilty…’

Then he’d plunge the Chidori through Tobi’s neck.

The little one and his father traversed a dirt road through the town that wound up the mountainside, through the bramble and forest. Sasuke maintained a healthy distance, keeping sound below minimum, and watched from tall branches as the suspect laughed at the little boy’s school-day observations. It was fortuitous that the hike had brought them away from the ears and suspicion of other townspeople. The lone, mountainside house that Tobi and his child were moving towards was properly isolated.

Sasuke peered through the gap in the dense thicket of magnolia leaves. The oblivious duo had entered the house and shut the door. Their voices were still clear as they playfully fussed at each other. Cautiously, Sasuke slowly circled around the home into the shade of pines, getting the view of a window. The boy was the only one visible; seated at a table and reaching for a bowl of fruit. His father must have still been close by; they were talking.

He nearly jumped out of his skin when a loud sneeze came from the left, below his perch in the trees. A woman rubbed her nose in annoyance and adjusted a tote bag on her shoulder. It was full of vegetables. She hurried into the house and, luckily, she had not noticed anything out of place. Sasuke deduced that she was the mother in this family equation. He could hear her shout, ‘I’m home!”

A resounding Welcome back! answered her. He kept his eyes on the kitchen window, watching as the occupants shuffled around: washing hands, putting bags and school books down, trying to put everything away…

“You were gone for too long, mister…” The mother accused. She seized Tobi by his shirt collar and pulled him close.

Tobi suddenly removed his mask, chuckling his apology, and kissed the woman. Sasuke instantly memorized the face he was looking at, for fear he would forget it if he one day passed the faker on the street. He waited for the man to step back for air, learning the scars on the right side of his face, the pale skin, the dark, mismatched eyes, the merry grin…that had a familiar quality about it. The
smile made creases on the sides of his nose; maybe that was it. Sasuke dismissed it. He looked away when they kissed for a second and third time.

“Mom! I thought you said the garden wasn’t ready!” The boy whined, “You said you’d bring me along to pick…”

“I had to pick these or they would’ve gotten over-ripe. Everything else needs a few more days, Yuma.” She smiled, “And I’ll need your help.”

“Those are for dinner?” Tobi guessed.

“That’s up to you. I need to run or I’ll be late for those appointments in Nashi. Three families with the measles. I want to nip it in the bud and vaccinate people before it spreads too close to home…”

“Dad’s cooking?” Yuma was surprised, “It’s been so long! He probably forgot how!”

“Hey you, I’m a great cook!” Tobi asserted, and then turned to his wife, “Rin…that’s a lot of people to take care of.”

“I know.”

“You won’t need help?”

“There’s a local doctor there. She’ll assist me.”

“How long will it take, do you think?”

“Two days. Tops.” Rin curled into the man’s arms, “I don’t want to stay away long now that you’re home. I’ve missed you…”

“I missed you too.”

She muffled another sneeze and then accepted a paper napkin that Yuma handed to her.

Her husband chuckled, “What’s the matter?”

“Allergies. I removed some ragweed that was growing near the garden…but my nose is a faucet now!” Rin dabbed at her watering eyes, “I can’t smell a thing.”

“Hey Mama,” Yuma had opened a notebook to practice penmanship, “Where’s Sesshu?”

“He’s tracking Jiraiya-sama. Your Dad and I haven’t been able to get a hold of him in weeks. It’s like he disappeared.” Rin hustled down the hallway towards her bedroom, shouting, “Don’t worry! As soon as he picks up the scent and finds him, Sesshu will come straight home.” The sound of drawers opening indicated that she was gathering supplies for her medical trip.

“I miss him.” Yuma decided, balancing his chin on his hand.

Tobi sat across from his son, “Me too. But we just wanted to make sure everything was okay. Sesshu is very good at finding people.”

“I know.” He glanced down at his assignment and then back up, “Dad, will you help me with these characters?”

“Sure.”
Outside, Sasuke had crept closer. He had heard all that he needed to hear. The little family was allied with the Toad Sage, just as Orochimaru had suspected. As soon as the sneezing woman left for her house calls and the little boy strayed from his father’s side, Sasuke would be in position to deal with Tobi. He did not intend to make a big show of it, but he was growing impatient while waiting for the bystanders to get out of the way.

His eyes stayed fixed on Tobi, not blinking for a long while. The man sat beside the small boy, reaching an arm around him to guide the strokes of an ink brush. A few times they set the brush aside and practiced with a ballpoint pen. They had gone quiet with concentration. After a while, Tobi had stopped guiding the boy. Yuma was able to form characters perfectly on his own.

Rin returned with a packed travel bag and kissed her son on the top of his head, “Off I go! Be good Yuma!” Her next kiss caught the corner of her husband’s mouth and he grinned, “You too! We have some catching up to do.”

“I know we do.” His eyebrows danced playfully.

Sasuke watched as the woman darted out the door, rubbing the tip of her watering nose with the back of her hand. She settled into a run that was uniquely characteristic of a shinobi. He drew a loose connection that the woman could be a medic-nin, but whether she was one or not, it didn’t matter. She was out of the way.

Time dragged by. Sasuke kept his position, watching in still silence as the father and son refused to part. The little boy was attending civilian school, which only covered core academics. He breezed through his language and math assignments before huffing in disdain at a required-reading book. Tobi was chopping vegetables at the counter, and heard the rebellious sound from his child. He glanced over his shoulder, “Is something the matter?”

“This book stinks.”

“Not all books are good. At least that one is pretty short.”

“Sensei keeps asking us questions about this story and it’s, like, the most boring thing in the world! I asked if I could switch.”

“Did she let you?”

“No.”

“Hm. Good. If she made an exception for you, then she’d have to make an exception for any student who asked.” Tobi wisely stated, “It doesn’t matter if you don’t like that book. What matters is that you can understand it. Sensei cares about your comprehension.”

“I don’t see what the big deal is.” Yuma spun the small hardcover on the tabletop, “When I become a ninja I don’t have to worry about reading stuff.”

“Ha!” His father cracked up, wiping his hands on a towel, “You think so? I don’t know about you, but I’d be pretty embarrassed to be a shinobi who couldn’t read and understand files and mission requests…scrolls to learn jutsu too…there’s no use in trying to be a ninja if you don’t know your basic subjects, kiddo.”

“Ack!” In grumpy agreement, Yuma flipped open the book and paged over to his current spot, “Fine, Dad.”

“I finished the food prep, so let’s go inside and work on that book.” Tobi suggested, “I’d like for you
The boy made his way out and was followed by his father. Sasuke lost track of them as they ventured to another room in the home. He changed position, slinking up stealthily alongside the house, and noted that even though he couldn’t watch them through a window, he could still easily hear what they were saying. Sasuke was cautious not to express any chakra, step on a wayward twig, or breathe too loudly. The ninja-father was, obviously, too experienced to ignore any of those things.

Yuma’s voice carried for quite some time; childish and high-pitched. He only stumbled over a few words. The folktale was told from the perspective of a little boy, who hoped to win a gardening contest to impress the emperor of his country. The winner was promised to become the heir to the childless emperor’s dynasty, but the protagonist was disheartened by his inability to grow the seed he had been given. For a brief and terrifying second, somewhere in the third chapter, Sasuke had lost concentration. He had begun listening to the story.

Sasuke shook his head and snapped himself out of the trance. How incredibly irritating. He would be made to wait for his chance to strike. A child devoted to his studies and worse still; a father that was inordinately fond of his small son. Logically, Sasuke could understand that Tobi would be eager to spend time with the child after a long period of being away from home. But it took most of his patience not to burst in and skewer the man who was, probably, curled up on the couch with the innocent youngster. A true predicament.

When they came to a stopping point Yuma insisted, “I’m done now! Can we go outside and play?”

“Oh? Are you sure you have no more assignments?”

“Positive!” There was a sound of a book being tossed and a rushing of feet, “Let’s go!”

Sasuke could hear the boy pulling shoes on in the genkan. With little time to spare, he retreated into the surrounding forest to watch from a distance.

Frustration tempted him to pounce, but focus kept him still. Sasuke watched from a shady perch as Tobi and the little boy kicked a ball around to each other. They transitioned into an epic, chest-heaving, breathless game of tag that circled around the house and front yard several times, abandoning the ball altogether. If anything was a giveaway of the shinobi talents of the target family, it was likely Yuma’s screeches of ‘you’re it!’ and then disappearing in a blink. He was nearly as fast as his father, that was, until he was caught.

The pair wrestled and rolled in the grass; for a time, the same personality split into two separate bodies of contrasting ages. One small, squealing merrymaker and one large, giggling merrymaker. Their laughter was what began to sink Sasuke’s mood. The corners of his mouth tugged down, agitated; affronted by their enjoyment of one another. This exact pleasure: the carefree frolicking of family…it had been utterly denied of him.

His own father, as Sasuke distinctly recalled, had not been the playful sort. Occasionally, his mother had made time to play games and challenge him. But his designated, faithful playmate, best friend, and idol…

His brother had demolished the sanctity of their family in the most catastrophic way conceivable. Sasuke supposed that was achieved by the deep love he and Itachi had for one another, which abruptly disintegrated after his slaying of the entire Uchiha clan; their parents included, for a reason that, quite frankly, made no sense. Itachi had said that he was testing his abilities, but Sasuke could still not reconcile such a response. Soon, the reason wouldn’t matter. Itachi would be dead and...
justice would be effectively served.

“Hey! Cut that out!”

*Tobi* shouted in disapproval when the boy breathed out a miniature fireball in the front yard. Sasuke’s eyes widened in shock: it *was* true. Seeing was believing. Yuma protested when his father grabbed him from behind and hoisted him over his shoulder, ceasing all play and roughhousing.

“No jutsu! We talked about this!”

“Ha! I almost got you…”

“Not even close.” *Tobi* scoffed, “You’ll light the house on fire and then your Mom will kill me! She was serious.”

“How come Mom only beats you up when I do something I’m not supposed to?”

“Because *you’re* her precious baby, and *I’m* responsible for teaching you to behave when she’s not here.” The man snickered, “Just you wait! Once you have brothers and sisters, Mom will come down on you much harder! You’ll be held to a high standard as a big brother.”

“Nooo! Dad! Please don’t let her!” Yuma pounded on his father’s back, “Put me down already.”

He set the child down in the grass and Yuma laid on his back, puffing tiredly. The games had worn him out. *Tobi* sat down with a gentle sigh, relieved that he could take a break. Yuma shifted to lay his head on his father’s knees as if they were a pillow, “I’m sorry, Dad.”

“It’s alright. But you know better; don’t do that again.”

“I won’t.”

“Are you tired?”

“A little.”

“Take a nap if you want. You finished all of your work, so we can take it easy today.” *Tobi* chuckled, “Your Mom loves napping.”

“Yeah, she’ll sleep anywhere…”

He stroked the boy’s hair, “It’s because she works so hard. She’s always looking out for others.”

“Well…” Yuma paused to yawn, “You do that too, Dad.”

His eyes were trained on the ground, lost in thought, “Yeah…but I don’t get to look out for…all the people that need me.”

Yuma drifted off to sleep while his father waded in and out of memories, caressing the child’s head absently. The quiet afternoon was only interrupted by lone, trilling bird calls that marked territories in the forest. *Tobi* was motionless for a long while, staring at nothing.

Sasuke estimated that he would be *just* out of range of sticking a *Chidori Spear* through his target. There’d be no guarantee that he wouldn’t hit the child with it too, so he refrained. Trying to sneak closer could alert *Tobi* to his presence, who didn’t have a chattering child to distract him at the time. It was difficult to wait.
This deceitful, shirking, drop-out of a ninja deserved it, Sasuke thought. He walked through pain and suffering like a ghost, slipping past the suspicions of the Akatsuki and Orochimaru. And all the while, he had been one of Jiraiya’s pets...going home to play house with mother and baby when all of his faux-buffoonery was complete. Someone like this was getting away with laughing in the faces of S-Ranked criminals. Someone like this was enjoying a happy life, while others had to run for their lives, grieve over slaughtered family, plot a far-flung revenge mission, pander to body-snatching psychopaths, and scrape up the pieces of a shattered future.

Since he was forbidden from murdering Gaara in his sleep, impaling Tobi when he least expected it would serve as a decent substitute.

The man laid back in the grass and shut his eyes. Sasuke tensed. He could dart down and cut his throat. The rage boiling inside him escalated to an alarming level, irrationally linking Tobi to his woes, more specifically; having to be reminded that his family was dead and gone.

Tobi’s eyes snapped open.

With his hand poised over the flat hilt of his sword, Sasuke watched with narrowed eyes. The man on the lawn below shimmied carefully from beneath his son and then stood up. He removed his jacket and folded it beneath the boy’s head. He went inside the house quickly. Sasuke wasn’t sure what to make of the sudden disappearance. Was he aware that he was being stalked? Was he leaving the child as bait? Not as if he’d take it.

Descending from the lofty leaves of the trees, Sasuke touched down on the ground. He rounded the bend towards the back of the home, creeping without a sound, and had peered into a window. Tobi walked by briskly with an armful of supplies and a wooden box. Sasuke wasn’t sure what to make of the behavior. He treaded gently up cement steps, reached for the back door, and touched his hand to the cool brass of the doorknob, turning it gradually. It was unlocked. He let himself in with perfect stealth, and shut the door behind him, crouching on the floor. He had not been detected. A table, a wall, and a sofa sectional stood between him and Tobi. His thumb slid the kusanagi sword up a centimeter from its sheath as he prepared to spring. Then, a sound...

The front door chunked shut behind Tobi. He was outside again.

‘What the hell is he doing?’ Sasuke slipped forward, bent low, cautiously approaching the living room window which had blinds partially drawn. His eye level with a horizontal gap, he observed Tobi setting himself up beside Yuma, arranging items from the box on the ground. He took a seat and settled a board across his lap, laying a piece of parchment over it. Sasuke continued to watch in confusion as the man poured dark ink into a bowl and then dipped a brush into it. Then he tapped it to the paper softly, letting his eyes dart back to the sleeping boy in front of him. It took a short while for Sasuke to understand what he was witnessing. ‘He’s painting.’

He was painting the sleeping child. He was sitting there with sublime carelessness, concentrating solely on the fine lines of the rounded face and eyelashes and bow lips. He was capturing the moment. It was an immortalization of love that Sasuke would never bother to imagine, but after seeing it he could never forget it.

Sasuke stepped back from the window, sliding warily from view. He was left at a bizarre impasse. Not only was Tobi unlikely to be caught on his own, but Sasuke was also currently standing in the abode of a complete stranger. The same book that Yuma had complained about earlier was innocently teetering on the edge of a coffee table. It made him decidedly uncomfortable.

He retreated, passing by a corridor with bedrooms, which he was briefly interested in exploring. He
passed it by and exited through the back door, certain to not make a sound. And when Sasuke had hidden himself in the tree line once again, watching from the woods that surrounded the secluded, patchwork home, he watched Tobi with an aggravated expression. It was curious that his murderous aggression had been immediately diffused. At the very least, it would help prevent him from rashly launching an attack and screwing up.

The man painted, totally unaware that he had nearly been pounced upon in his own home. Over the course of an hour, Sasuke repositioned himself four times, trying to discern if there was a way to handle the killing delicately. At about the time he considered creating a diversion and blowing cover to cut the man’s head off, the little boy woke up. Yuma sprang to life and asked his father what he’d been doing.

“Take a look.” Tobi held the artwork up.

“Is this me?” Yuma took the paper into his hands gingerly.

“Yes. Do you like it?”

“Why do I look so chubby?” The boy set the parchment down and frowned.

“You’re not chubby. You’ve just got a round face. A kid’s face. When you’re older you won’t look nearly as cute.”

“Hey!”

They tousled.

Sasuke’s nostrils flared as he watched yet another opportunity slip away. When the duo finished their scrap they picked up the painting supplies and returned to the house. From an angle, Sasuke stole a glimpse of them through a window. Yuma had settled at the kitchen table to try his hand at painting, and his father had returned to the food that had been set aside. He bumbled around looking for a pan. The sun was setting.

Sasuke sniffed. It was later than he thought. Thick clouds rolled in over the mountaintop, and the violently orange sunset burst through gaps in the gray cover. He retreated to think and not have his attention so wholly occupied. The young man descended from high tree branches and followed a dirt path through the forest, winding down the slopes to a field below.

He had not expected Tobi to have a companion, and certainly not one that was such an effective shield. Sasuke would never deny his aptitude for killing, but he was a tad too morbidly noble to harm a child. Similarly, it wouldn’t be prudent to murder the traitorous informant in front of his son. Either way, the boy called Yuma was going to see his father crumpled up somewhere at some point, and ultimately be scarred by the event. A small kindness would be to do the deed without him standing by as a gaping witness.

Sasuke hopped down a ridge of stones and came to a sprawling garden with neat rows. He stopped and looked at it blankly, consumed in thought. The solution was quite simple.

He would wait until they were asleep. He could do it at night. It was a much more traditional route to choose, and maybe not his style per se, but it would do the trick. He had been more than ready to decapitate Gaara in his sleep days before. Then again, he might’ve woken Gaara up for the fun of it and then attacked.

Sasuke treaded alongside a garden row that was tufted with green tops, stalks, and leaves. It was an impressive agricultural assemblage for a town in the middle of nowhere. The woman must have
cared for it. Maybe Tobi did too. Sasuke halted at the center of the column: a familiar sight. The tomato plants shocked his brain straight back to childhood. He used to stuff his face with them voraciously.

He picked one off of the plant. The tomato had a pale vermillion tint, nearly ripe. Sasuke absconded with it and settled himself beneath an enormous oak tree on the side of the clearing.

With a cocked eyebrow, Sasuke glanced over the tomato again before tossing it. He cut it in half with a swing of his sword as it fell through the air, and then caught both pieces in one hand. It’d be easier to eat. He stowed away the blade and ate quietly, staring at nothing.

Something at the back of his mind was nagging at him. It was a dastardly little thought: Why would you unquestionably do what Orochimaru told you to, in this instance? Tobi was helping Konoha, after all. It was not something Sasuke was personally opposed to. People he cared about lived in the Leaf Village. It was still a place he could call home, or at least, his legal residence was there. And also, though it was a bit of a stretch, he could assume that maybe Tobi was or had been a Leaf ninja at some point in time. In conclusion, killing him to protect Orochimaru’s precious secrets was not a great motivator. He very begrudgingly obeyed the snake anyway.

But as Orochimaru had guessed, and the mother of the family unit had later confirmed, Jiraiya was the recipient of Tobi’s reports. It struck a competitive chord. Jiraiya was not only Gaara’s mentor, but he had been Naruto and Haku’s teacher as well. At minimum, the Toad’s three were his rivals and benchmarks for progress. Sasuke would even concede he had a jealous resentment of the team that had nearly succeeded in stopping his defection. It still wasn’t sitting well that Haku, the gentle, kind pretty boy, had nearly dissected him during their Cursed Seal fight.

Tobi had picked the wrong side.

If it meant wrenching away another rung of security from Gaara’s team as they scaled the “ladder of success,” Sasuke would gladly sacrifice Tobi to watch them all fall.

He finished off the tomato with a harsh bite. Sasuke stood up and returned to the tomato plant for more. His mother would cluck her tongue at him for taking what wasn’t his. She also always made him wait for other dinner guests before reaching for seconds. She’d probably be mortified by his selfish, jealous, murderous demeanor nowadays, he thought. He ought to be ashamed. ‘But she’s dead. Who cares?’

Sasuke plucked two more tomatoes and returned to his seat by the tree. The sky grew dark with swarming clouds, heavy with rain.

By the time night had fallen, Sasuke had returned to the mountaintop home and lurked outside. Lamps were still lit inside the house. He circled around in a watchful stalk until the rainclouds overhead poured down, with hardly a drop of warning before the deluge. Sasuke slipped into the shed behind the house to take shelter. The wooden door was slightly ajar, and within were shelves of various tools, gardening supplies, boxes and a dozen bottles of alcohol. He guessed that either Tobi or the missus liked to imbibe once in a while.

He pulled the door shut and watched from a tiny, framed window of the shack that faced the home. It would only be a matter of time. He merely needed to stay dry and keep focused.

Thunder rolled and shook a small spade on the shelf near his head.

Sasuke’s eyes remained trained on a light source emitted from the kitchen. It was a long wait. His
thoughts would stray like popping embers from a fire, shooting off in arbitrary directions.

He could acknowledge that Tobi’s association with Jiraiya was still not a good enough reason to kill the man. After all, confronting and dealing with his jealousy of Jiraiya’s team would be much better served by challenging them, not by punishing a spy. But there was something else; an offense that was hard to identify but nonetheless evident every time he sighted Tobi.

He was probably a good person. And he was probably a talented ninja. He had a happy wife and child and a quaint life tucked away from the cares and clashes of shinobi villages. These were all priceless, intangible things that could not be bought or taken by force. And they were also things that, as Sasuke was rapidly beginning to see, he could never secure for himself.

Sasuke shut his eyes and exhaled slowly. He was a have-not. An outsider. An untouchable. A killer. Had he resisted his personal woes and thirst for vengeance a bit longer, he might’ve come out on the other side of the “tunnel” and entered society as an acceptable human being. He might have become someone worthy of honor and friendship. He might’ve been that man that a wife could kiss three times in a row in greeting, or play for hours with a child who was enamored of his father. The opportunities to become that person had absolutely presented themselves to him, though in a covert and subtle manner.

And with his mind so set on one desire, Sasuke understood that he had brushed off and trampled those opportunities. He could only recognize them now. He could not reach back into the past to retrieve them. They were gone, and there was no guarantee that such good fortune would meet him again in the future. Many of his age mates in the Leaf Village had made efforts to be his friends; his teammates and sensei had tried to understand his pain (even if they came up short), and Sakura would have been happy to build a future with him. His recklessness had shredded those blessings. They had all moved on. Slowly but surely, Sasuke knew he would become an extraneous fixture that people would no longer know what to do with.

Except stay away from him.

Beyond killing Itachi, it was quite possible that there would be nothing left afterward. Every sense of purpose he would try to cling to would evaporate.

He stared out of the window, suddenly feeling helpless. He had done it to himself. Itachi had backed away and let the yarn ball roll and unwind, leaving Sasuke to dictate his own destiny. It was terrifying that he had ensnared his thread of life so irreversibly. There was no undoing this knot.

Tobi had a simple life. He didn’t have fame, wealth, or any kind of glamour. But it was the fact that he had that hurt worse than anything. Sasuke did not plan ahead for things he might wish for down the line, and essentially forfeited all good outcomes in the process of exacting revenge. A twinge of sadness crossed his face and his chin drooped. Lightning arced over the mountain, and was followed by a tumble of thunder again.

That was why he wanted Tobi to suffer. Maybe it would spread the ‘disproportionate savagery’ of the world a bit more evenly if he killed Tobi. It would make things ‘fair.’

Sasuke looked up and cleared his head, casting aside his doubts. Through the window he could see Tobi turn the lamp off. After a time, all of the lights in the house were extinguished. His muscles tensed. For a long time there was nothing but the sound of the rain and thunder colliding with the mountain peaks.

When the night was deep and still, Sasuke crept outside again. The rain had quickly soaked him through, and he stepped across the slick, soggy grass to the side of the house. He looked inside a low
bedroom window, in which the room was dark. The black plane of glass in front of him reflected his face like a taunting mirror. Sasuke stood and looked, verifying the position of his target.

Lightning blinked again with follow-up strikes and illuminated the room he was peeking into. Tobi was indeed fast asleep in bed. And there, like a humorous barb from the gods, was Yuma tucked under his father’s arm, swaddled in a blanket. They snored peacefully together. The child had probably been frightened by the storm.

The window went dark again. Sasuke stood in the rain, the rims of his eyes stinging, and observed the face staring back from the reflective surface. The person in front of him seemed to say, *You knew you wouldn’t. You didn’t want to.*

Of course he didn’t. Tobi was a success story whether he killed him or not. If Tobi did meet his end tonight, the little boy could grow up one day, track him down, and give Sasuke an ironic lesson in vengeance. It was a vain effort. The appeal of killing someone in cold blood had faded after seeing just how close the little family was. It wouldn’t be an effective release for all of the tumultuous feelings he’d kept inside. And it wasn’t even his idea, Sasuke reminded himself. Orochimaru had only redirected his rage with the expectation that he could get a loose end tied.

He watched the sleeping pair in the bed as a bolt lightened the room again. The hilarity was that if he killed Tobi, he would actually be destroying the core of a family. The mother would obviously be devastated, and so too would the child. It wouldn’t matter how Tobi felt about it. It was the people left behind who had to live with his decision. And what was more, it would be no different than Itachi’s heartless execution of his own clan. Very pointedly, Sasuke did not want to identify with that kind of villainy. ‘I won’t be like him.’

But what then? What was the answer? Orochimaru wanted Tobi dead if he was ‘guilty’, and he was going to accomplish that goal by any means necessary. It’d be just as insane to try to befriend a private, three-person family who would have no idea who he was. They’d never trust him.

After wracking his brain for a solution Sasuke began to walk away, ‘It’s up to me. If I am the only thing standing between you and imminent death, then maybe you really are an idiot. Maybe I need to save you.’ He concluded, ‘Orochimaru may not believe me when I tell him you’re useless…that you weren’t responsible for those reports.’ It would be quite the undertaking. If the snake sent henchmen to the mountaintop to determine the truth, they’d have to be done away with. If Orochimaru began to ask questions, Sasuke knew he would have to keep him off the scent.

It was a task that could have steep consequences. There was a considerable chance of failure. But as he trekked through the storm into the dark woods, approaching the lonely slopes of the highland, Sasuke supposed that this endeavor could very well be more worthwhile than his intent to destroy Itachi. Should creating his own family or having a normal life be an impossibility, it would feel nearly as good to watch someone else have that chance. It would feel even better to know that he’d been responsible, in part, for their safety. A tiny portion of his soul would admit that he had started to like them. He even remembered their names. They were innocent and happy, and try as he might, he just couldn’t hate them for it.

Sasuke mulled over a few harebrained ideas as he moved on, drenched to the bone, and then disappeared before the next lightning strike.

The next morning Shincha and its surrounding mountaintop were soggy. Scores of earthworms had poked up from between blades of grass to begin water-assisted journeys to parts unknown. Consequently, songbirds were ransacking their choice prey all through the forest.
Yuma was on a rescue mission with a tin can of dirt, picking up worms as he strolled through the yard. His mother always encouraged the gathering of ‘nature’s helpers’ to perk up the garden.

Obito had poked his head out the front door to call his son in for breakfast, but instead got a demand from the small boy, “Hi Dad! Will you go with me? I’m going to put these in the garden.”

“This early? Come on. Eat some eggs first, Yuma.”

“I’ll eat later!” He was running off with the can.

“You’ll forget!” Obito stepped outside, “Hey! I told you that you can’t go to the garden by yourself!” He slipped shoes on and followed the disobedient youngster down the hill to the forest path. His cooking apron was still fastened.

It was just a day like any other, chasing his son around…

At the bottom of the slope Obito caught up to Yuma and stopped beside him, seeing that his son had set to work making entry holes for worms near each vegetable plant. ‘He’s so much like his mother. A dedicated worker!’

“Don’t put them in right away. We need to make sure they burrow where we want them to stay.”

Yuma nodded, “I know. I’m just getting ready.” His hands were filthy.

“Why are you digging like that? You should’ve gotten a tool first.”

“Sometimes Mama digs like this.”

Obito sighed, “That’s because she and her clan…can’t help themselves…”

“Well I already started!” He pressed on.

“Fine. I’ll go get you a spade and bring it to you. You can only do the first row, and then you need to come inside for breakfast. Alright?”

“Okay, Dad.”

Obito marched back up the hill, grumbling to himself. Children. It was always a rush. Or a mess. Or an argument. Then again, he had been no different at that age, with the exception of his persistent late-streak. While passing under low tree branches, sodden leaves dripped water on the top of his head, ‘That was some storm last night…Yuma was frightened.’ He frowned to himself. It was the first time he had ever heard his son utter, “Ghosts.”

‘Someone was there.’ The boy insisted. It was unnerving.

He passed through the sprawling acre of the backyard and arrived at the toolshed. As always, the old, creaky door had swung open again. Obito bustled inside, collected a child-sized gardening shovel and then paused. The shelf was wet. His eyes scanned around. ‘That’s weird. Did this spring a leak?’ An overturned barrel was partially wet, and he gazed out of the small shed window to look at the house, curious, ‘I’d swear I keep up with this old thing.’

The floorboards were also wet. His breathing quickened as he noticed an entry floor mat he had barely made contact with. A heel print was distinct on the front of the mat, as if someone had exited not long ago. No. Certainly it was his imagination. ‘It’s a leak.’ He stared, furrowing his eyebrows, ‘But since when do leaks leave marks like that?’
Obito walked outside slowly, eyes to the ground, and gradually began to pick up on imprints that had been left in the soft mud of the yard. His heart rattled in his chest. The trail turned the corner and made a straight line for the side of the house. He followed it and stopped again. Dread filled his lungs and made it impossible for him to draw breath.

He was not imagining the two side-by-side footprints stationed directly outside his bedroom window. Terrified, Obito laid his own foot beside the track, measuring it, ‘This wasn’t Rin. They’re bigger. Like a man’s…’ His head turned sharply, looking out of the yard, ‘A villager?’ No! What would they be doing standing outside of his house at night? His heart rate was mimicking a freight train over tracks, hammering and clacking.

Obito skirted around his home, glancing around, picking up trails here and there of footprints that had been revealed by the rain. Sometimes the tracks disappeared, deepened, as if the person had sprung. He glanced up at the trees, ‘Taking cover up there…’ He could only assume the visitor was a shinobi. ‘Why here? Why at night?’ The ninja must have lingered for over a day, judging by the sporadic, coming-and-going trails all about.

‘Rock ninja? There haven’t been any here since Deidara blew up Junichi’s house…’ He had circled the home with the spade clenched tightly in his hand, ‘And Rin told me that she only fought a few Iwa Chunin just beyond the garden when she helped that Sand ninja…’ It was a sound assessment. No one ever came here. No one knew about this place.

But someone did.

He had been stalked and watched. He had been totally oblivious.

Obito’s blood ran cold. This threat was far beyond anything he was prepared for. With his guard lowered and his son young and defenseless, he was as good as dead in such a position. He raced from the front yard faster than wind, cutting through the forest back to Yuma. Being separate even for a second could spell disaster. Thankfully, the child was stooped over the garden row, safe and sound, gouging up pits as he had been before.

He looked over his shoulder expectantly, “Did you get it, Dad? What took so long?”

He approached his son with a hollow, pensive expression on his face. He handed the spade to Yuma without a word.

The boy observed his father shrewdly, deciphering this odd phenomenon. He pursed his lips, stuck his shovel into the ground and then stood, brushing dirt from his hands. “What’s wrong, Dad?” He asked.

Obito’s mind was elsewhere. What would Rin think? She’d have his head when she found out that he hadn’t noticed an intruder. He relied so much on her sense of smell, as well as Sesshu’s attentive watchfulness that he hardly ever looked for things that were ‘out of the ordinary.’ He’d have to promise her extreme diligence forever more. But his thoughts rounded the corner, trying to identify the ‘who’ in this situation. Who would be watching him?

Who could find him? Or know that he should be found? When he worked it out, he could only derive one, awful answer. ‘Deidara’s been here and Zetsu-san knows about every town in this valley. The Akatsuki might be watching me.’ He shut his eyes and tried to calm down, ‘I’ll need to warn Jiraiya about this. And if I’m really unlucky, others might know too. Maybe Koinyu noticed something…or Orochimaru. Someone may not be buying it anymore.’

And yet, he had only been observed; like a wildlife surveyor examining an animal in its natural
habitat. If any of his criminal affiliations had a reason to stalk him or suspect him, wouldn’t they do
something? Set a trap? Attack? ‘*I doubt it would be routine reconnaissance if they found me. What
would they be trying to figure out?*’ He was thankful that he and Yuma had not come to harm, but it was a
head-scratcher.

He felt a small hand wrap around his fingers. Obito glanced down.

“Dad? Are you okay?” Yuma inquired firmly.

“Oh,” He bent down and squeezed the boy affectionately, “I’m sorry, Yuma. I’ll be alright.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah. We just need to be more careful around here.”

“Why?” Yuma picked up his spade, “Did we get something dirty when we painted?”

“No. It’s not that.” His father rubbed his chin, thinking, “Do you remember seeing anything yesterday?”

“Like what?” He was on his knees digging again.

“Like last night, when you came to my room because of the lightning. You shook me awake and
said there was a *ghost.* Remember?”

“There was.”

“Where did you see it?”

“Outside your window.”

Obito’s stomach twisted in horror, “And…do you remember what it looked like?”

Ever the practical child, Yuma paused in his work and gave a skeptical look to his father, “Ghosts
don’t look like anything, Dad. Why do you want me to talk about it anyway?”

“I’m curious. I was a little scared too.” The man yielded.

“Well…” He sighed and began dropping worms into the holes one by one, “It was dark. It looked
like a boy.”

“A boy?”

“Yeah, Dad.” Yuma confirmed, “It looked sad.”

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Tsunade’s morning was exhilarating.

She was hoping that neither Kakashi nor Tenzo had noticed that she was dealing with a severe case
of ’stomach butterflies.’ They followed behind her on both sides after she had collected them,
respectfully silent as they made their way to a rocky alcove on the edge of the village.

She had been taking steps all of her life to confront wrongdoers and even people who pissed her off
in general. Back when Jiraiya and Naruto had begged her favor in a bid for her candidacy as
Godaime Hokage, she had worked up the courage to tell Orochimaru to shove his offer in an
unmentionable place. From time to time she had brief arguments with Homura and Koharu, her
elderly (inherited) advisors. She also had to put Kakashi in his place when he got smart. When Neji had more recently defied her, she had barely been able to contain her temper.

Now, someone who was genuinely subversive needed a talking-to.

By that, she explained to Kakashi and Tenzo, she had meant Shimura Danzo. They quickly understood why she selected them to accompany her to the Root Headquarters.

She had looked over a file kept by her late sensei, the Sandaime Hokage, which chronicled his own difficulties with Danzo. For a time she had thought her dislike of the Root administrator was a personal bias, but Tsunade had discovered that Hiruzen had a multitude of conflicts with the man as well.

One particularly hairy incident went back many years, during which Hiruzen had uncovered an experiment headed by Orochimaru in an effort to create a modern shinobi with the Mokuton blood limit. Tsunade had been disgusted to read about dozens of kidnapped children who had perished during these trials. Orochimaru fled after his lab had been uncovered, leaving the children to wallow and die.

One such young child had been the boy called “Tenzo,” so mistakenly named because a young girl from the Iburi clan had recognized him as her brother. The name stuck, even if the identity didn’t. Both Hiruzen and Kakashi had referred to the sole survivor of the experiment by that name.

Sometimes Tsunade liked to codename him “Yamato,” in an allusion to how he got along so well with others. But whatever he was called, he had endured a childhood under the tutelage of Danzo in Root. It had been a grueling experience that strained his fledgling friendship with Kakashi. Once he was a young teen, Danzo had tasked Tenzo with a mission to kill Kakashi, who had been in the service of Hiruzen after the death of the Fourth Hokage. It had been a close encounter, but fortunately, Kakashi’s persuasion had spared the unlikely friends from violence.

“That’s where these two incidents match up.’ Tsunade thought. In retaliation of Tenzo’s insubordination and failure to eliminate Kakashi, Danzo locked the boy up and had operatives beat him senseless. The commander wanted to cleanse him of his progressive, selfish thoughts and realign him with ‘Root’s standards.’ Before such brainwashing could be accomplished, Kakashi, Hiruzen and a company of ANBU shinobi had dropped by the Root command center, demanding Tenzo’s safe release. After a brief and tense discussion, Danzo had left Tenzo in the care of the Third Hokage.

Because Tsunade was a betting woman, she would wager that Sai was now experiencing the same harsh treatment. She would also gamble on the chance that if she flashed Kakashi and Tenzo in the old man’s face, now closely-bonded veterans under her command, that Danzo might finally consider her criticisms. After all, he didn’t want to take her seriously, but her donning the Sandaime’s fortitude and practices like armor might at least make him listen.

“‘We’re close by.’ Tenzo notified her quietly, “We’ll be under their surveillance now, unless you would prefer to enter by trap door.”

“No. There’s no need for the Hokage to sneak around. Root shinobi are still constituents of my village, and so their allegiance is to me.” She asserted in a hard voice. Kakashi got a kick out of her attitude and smiled to himself.

The group proceeded to a cement-lined stairwell in the face of a rock formation, following the steps down. It was a long descent. Within the giant, echoing chambers all walls were lined with cement or metal duct work beside various staircases and walkways. It was a sterile and uninviting place. The
path took them into the underground atrium, where suspended catwalks with rails intersected. The thin bridges went in four directions, leading to different locations of the command center.

While on the main walkway, a small Root ninja who looked maybe 10 or 11 years of age stopped them. His eyes stayed only on Tsunade before he slowly sunk to one knee, customarily, “Hokage-sama. No one was notified of your visit.”

“I know. I didn’t have an appointment, all the same…” She smiled warmly, “I would like to talk to Danzo. Would you please fetch him for me?”

“Right away, ma’am. Please wait here.” The little Root ninja dashed away.

“See? That was a polite greeting.” Tsunade remarked to her guards.

“He was faking it.” Kakashi surmised, “He was startled to see you, Tsunade-sama. Don’t expect the welcome wagon to arrive after this.”

“I don’t.” She added softly, “Are your hounds in position?”

“Yes.”

She rolled her shoulders, “Good.”

They weren’t kept waiting for long. After a few minutes, Root ninja began to trickle into the atrium, watching from perches high above the perpendicular pathways. They froze like statues when Danzo appeared from a stone-decorated doorway, seeming as expressionless as ever. He crossed over the first half of the suspension and then stopped a few feet away from Tsunade.

“To what do I owe this visit, Hokage-sama?” He asked gently.

“I wanted to have a discussion with you at my leisure, considering that you enter my office uninvited whenever you see fit. Forgive me for dropping by so suddenly.” She began, “Can you please tell me what orders you gave to Sai when he joined Neji and Lee’s team? I seem to have missed something, according to that abysmal mission report.”

“He had no orders at all, my lady. Only to serve that team well, I assure you.”

Her eyes flashed impatiently, “I am not at all assured. Hyuga Neji gave me precise details of when and where Sai was in written contact with a rogue ninja. They were accosted in the abandoned Toi mine, where both Neji and Lee were able to defeat their prospective kidnapper.”

“I had no knowledge of this.” He replied passively. His visible eye fell on Tenzo and his mouth pulled into a disapproving scowl, “You seem to imply that I organized such an encounter.”

“I’m not implying it. I am telling you what we both know to be true. I will warn you now to never again attempt such a foolish exchange or give orders that compromise a team under my command. So help you… I will replace you faster than your slippery fingers can bribe each member of the village council.” Tsunade confidently rested a hand on her hip, “But I’m not here to get details on that mission. I am here on behalf of your subordinate called Sai.”

Danzo balanced a cane beneath his palms, “What of him?”

“I am here to inform you of my intent to transfer him. His performance on the Toi Mine mission was outstanding.”
The old man scoffed, “Outstanding, you say? It was really quite the opposite. He disappointed all involved parties.”

He was calling bullshit. Kakashi noticed a few more Root agents popping up along the perimeter of the wide, square room. His senses pricked as he prepared himself for possible hostility.

“You’re entitled to your opinion. However, I would like your verbal consent on this transfer so that Sai can be escorted to ANBU HQ for an evaluation. I can send you the paperwork later for your signature.”

Danzo was silent for a long moment, his discontent swelling far enough to make his Root subordinates antsy, “Tsunade…I cannot give approval for that. He will remain here.”

“So you object?” She raised her eyebrows, “Why?”

“He has been detained in our corrections facility.”

Tenzo winced at a distant memory of the place. It was a cellblock that doubled as a torture chamber to save space.

“I am ordering this transfer. Unless you can give me a reason why he cannot be physically transported, I must insist that you retrieve him immediately.”

“He has proven himself an unreliable shinobi, the likes of which completely lacks value.”

“That’s not very specific…”

“He does not follow orders.”

“Ah,” She nodded, “Regardless, I stand by my command. Release him to me now.” She added sweetly, “Please.”

“Hokage-sama, you are trifling in a matter that doesn’t concern you.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about. How am I trifling? I came here to complete a very simple withdrawal.” Tsunade concealed a sly smile.

“If you consider this visit to be transactional, then you should deposit a shinobi before I release one to you…” He recommended, “I will have one less operative in Root, and as such have an inadequate number of ninja to ensure security.”

“Root already has a deficit. You told me that Sai is undisciplined. If he’s as disposable as you say then do as I ask.”

“Trade me a shinobi. I already made this request of you days ago.” Danzo countered boldly, “The foundation needs to make a sensible exchange.”

“You’re referring to Tenten?” Tsunade confirmed before saying, “Preposterous. I could not trade something of great value for something worthless. You said it yourself. It’s in your best interest to clear your cells and have no shirkers to deal with. Let it be my problem. You can train new Root agents according to what the Sandaime’s reforms stipulate. It’s all that I will allow.”

“All that you’ll allow…” He repeated in a sharp, low voice.

“There is only one shinobi that would be suitable for such a trade.” Tsunade announced, “You can have Jiraiya. I’m sure he’d be welcomed as a new recruit.”
Danzo shut his eye and sighed quietly. She had made her point.

“Do we have an accord?” She asked calmly.

The old man was aware that since their conversation had begun, veteran ANBU agents had crept inside the chamber from several locations. They took unthreatening positions beside their Root counterparts, not likely to attack unless Tsunade was in distress. At the same time, a small dog with a bandana tied around its neck padded up beside Kakashi. His presence, as well as Tenzo’s, was intentional. Danzo felt like he was reliving the day Hiruzen had made his hardnosed request.

He couldn’t deny that she was a clever woman. Tsunade came fully prepared and backed him into a bureaucratic corner so that he could not refute her demand. And the only exchange he could get out of this was that perverted, washed up old Toad. He’d be at an even greater deficit than before with that oaf roaming around.

“Please, keep Gama-sennin in your service.” His voice carried a haughty tone as he turned and walked back down the bridge, “Consider this transfer…approved.”

He stepped through the stone doorway and disappeared, having nothing more to do with the Hokage’s ultimatum. Kakashi relaxed a little and beside him Tenzo finally took a breath. Their anxiety abated. Tsunade had been able to talk her way to victory.

The sentinel Root agents remained where they were, but after what could have been 10 minutes or more, a new guard exited from the left doorway, pushing Sai onto the suspended bridge. The small Root boy from earlier was also sent out with a package in his hands. He passed Sai, who was tottering dizzily, and handed the folder to Tsunade with a small bow, “Here you are, Hokage-sama. Danzo-sama promised you this framework for the exam, but he neglected to give it to you. Please accept his apology.”

“It’s fine. Thank you.” She took the documents, grateful that Danzo had not made a stink about anything else.

The nameless boy continued on down the eastern bridge and was long gone before Sai rounded the corner. His pale skin had erupted with hideous bruises in several places. He was disheveled and tired-looking. What was most noticeable, upon Kakashi’s first impression of the now ex-Root subordinate, was how dejected he looked. Tenzo picked up on it as well. Root operatives loomed and watched him pass by in silence. Though their expressions were plain, some looked mildly malicious, as if Sai had become an example of what they would never hope to be: a reject. They were glad to see him go.

Sai stopped in front of the Hokage, skillfully concealing his shame. It was harder to bend for a respectful bow, as his back had been mucked with from correctional beatings. He accomplished it and spoke quietly, “Thank you for inviting me into your service, Tsunade-sama.”

“You’re welcome. I was eager to fetch you, Sai. Is that what you still wish to be called?”

“I have no other name. Please call me Sai.”

“As you wish. Come along! We have appointments to keep,” Tsunade raised her head to look at the Root ninja surrounding them. “And to all of you: have a most pleasant day!” She pressed on and her ANBU veterans retreated in a timely fashion.

Tenzo ushered Sai along to follow behind Kakashi and his canine companion. Sai could hardly lift his head up as he walked slowly. The only organization and community he had ever known found
him obsolete, and Danzo had quickly decided to hand him off to the Hokage. His sense of worth had reached a new, all-time low.

As they climbed the long staircase to leave the subterranean command center, Tenzo spoke to him softly, “I’ve gone through this too.”

Sai glanced at him, “You have?”

“Yes. The Third Hokage retrieved me from Root in nearly the exact same way.” Tenzo’s smile was small, “Do not feel ashamed. I am much better off now.”

“I don’t know if the same can be said of me…I have no life or family or belongings. I will have nothing in your world.”

‘Your world, he says. Like he’s never been a part of Konoha...’ Kakashi thought while chuckling to himself in front of them, listening to the conversation.

“You will have all of it and then some, once you start over. Tsunade-sama and your comrades in the standard forces will help you.” Tenzo spoke light-heartedly, “Try to recognize that this is the best day of your life.”

The morning was just as productive and agreeable for Tenten. She was very narrowly missing Hayate’s head with sword strikes while they trained at his preferred field.

He dashed away too late. She had already used Dance of the Crescent Moon, and when one of her clones phased into vision beside him, it was the only sword swing he could parry. She and her second Shadow Clone had caught him and held their blades near his throat, hinting that he surrender. He sighed and lowered his weapon.

“Not bad. I’m not even going to ask you to do that again.” Hayate sheathed his sword and crossed over to a basket Yugao had prepared for them. He took a sip from a water bottle before adding, “You’ve been almost cutting my head off for three days now. I appreciate your restraint.”

“No problem.” She replied happily.

He had expected her to pick up the technique quickly. She was easily as intelligent as her father, and equally as industrious as her mother. But there was plenty more she needed to learn. When Tenten performed well, as she had been doing this week, he liked to give her free time to sharpen her other skills. He had been nice enough to set up two targets for her at the edge of the lawn, but they had since been hacked apart. She had conceded it was a nice gesture and she had liked using them up until they broke. Hayate thought to himself he should’ve asked Gai how often he replaced targets for his team beforehand, but he had already gotten an estimate of Tenten’s destructive output.

Similarly, Hayate was not crazy about letting her aim scores of deadly projectiles at him, as he was not very good at deflecting them en masse. Takaharu had done the same thing to him when he was younger, and blocking exercises had been difficult when the man could empty two tool scrolls in a few seconds. Today, Hayate had set up a new target circle for Tenten in the hope it would hold her over for a while.

In a twist, she had summoned a weapon he had never seen her use before. It was a golden-lacquered bow that, as far as he could tell, had no arrows to accompany it. Tenten took a position about 70 meters away from the target, quiver-less, and steadied the bow with her right arm. Hayate leaned against a tree and watched from the sidelines in fascination. He blinked hard when he watched the girl manifest an arrow made of pure chakra, notching it to the string which absorbed the blue glow.
She aimed and fired.

The dart of energy swirled into a fiery bolt shortly after it launched, and it exploded into a ball of flame when it struck the target. Charred chunks and cinders remained after the attack. Tenten looked at her teacher apologetically, “Sorry. I haven’t used this in a while.”

“It’s okay; just understand that I am not setting any more up. It’s a waste.” He warned her, “What the hell is that?”

“The Hiyumi. The Third Hokage let me keep it after I picked it up on a mission.”

Hayate crossed over to her to look the weapon over, “Never heard of it. But that also has a Han design. We don’t have bows that shape in shinobi countries.”

“Yeah, I could tell it was different.”

“It’s a beauty. Can I hold it for a second?”

Tenten compliantly handed it to the man and he turned it over, reading the inscriptions and subtle, engraved designs. After a moment he held it up and was successful in generating a chakra arrow at the bend, notching it, and then let it fly. The sad chakra projectile petered out halfway across the field and did not transform into anything. He gave her a puzzled look.

“I can’t…explain why it lights on fire.” Tenten admitted haltingly, “It just always did that when I used it…”

Hayate tried again with the same result. He handed it back to her and scratched his neck, thinking it over, “That’s weird. It doesn’t like me. It could be a technical issue.”

“Technical?”

“I’m a Lightning Nature. I’ll go ahead and guess you’re Fire. Your mom and dad could generate Fire Transformations.”

“How do you know that?” Tenten was astounded, “I didn’t even take a test!”

“I don’t. I’m assuming. There are weird rules about the clan you’re descended of. Shishou told me about them when I was a kid.” Hayate explained, moving back to the basket, “Let’s eat. Then we’ll practice more later.”

Tenten returned to their break area and unfolded a box of rice and blackened chicken. “What kind of rules? He used to tell me things too.” She prodded.

“Unusual things. Superstitious. Hard to prove…” Hayate muttered and unwrapped a rice cake, “He said that everyone in your line will be a Fire-type Nature Transformation, no matter what. They always have been, and descendants will be as well.”

“Why?”

“His explanation sounded like a fairytale, but if you want to know I’ll tell you the same thing he told me.” The man shrugged, “Maybe it’s true.”

“Try me. I’ll listen.”

“Well…” He chewed his food and then continued, “Shishou talked about…your namesake. The founder of your clan had the same name as you, a heck of a long time ago.”
“That’s not surprising. Dad was way too sentimental.”

“They often went by Han names, because many people began settling here and mixing in with the local populations. Try to imagine an era when the concept of a ninja was new…it was a historically dark time. Lots of competitive shinobi clans were trying to one-up each other while they wandered around. They weren’t shy about finding foreign, skilled warriors to join their ranks.” Hayate opened a thermos of tea, “The woman who founded the Sasagainu clan married a man who had Han heritage, which became a common occurrence. That clan married and accepted them to learn new techniques.”

“Huh. So those people possessed Ninjutsu?”

“Of course not. Only shinobi can use Ninjutsu. These strange new people brought over Tao Arts. And I’m sorry, but I don’t know much of anything about it other than what we might call it…” He snickered, “Magic. We can’t explain how it works. Long ago people used to understand. Shishou said he wondered if maybe some of his jutsu were nonconforming because of abilities your clan passed along.”

“So you’re trying to tell me that’s why everyone is a Fire Nature? That’s not very convincing.”

“I’m not trying to convince you, missy. I’m just repeating what I was told.” He corrected, “That woman, Tenten the First, whatever…she commanded that her clan would only align their chakra with Fire for some stupid reason or another. The point is that it stuck. Forever. No one can explain how she did it.”

Tenten paused in her eating and frowned, “I’ll admit that is pretty strange.”

“That’s hardly the strangest thing she did. Did your Dad explain the daughter-limit to you? That’s a freaky one.” He pointed a chopstick at her, “You’re his one and only. Every family from your clan can only produce one daughter. The clan founder made it that way.”

“That is complete nonsense.”

“It’s completely true.”

“How would that even work?”

“I already said I don’t understand how it works. It just does.” Hayate shrugged, “That’s why your Dad was reverent of your ancestor. It was a rare thing. Your namesake went through something that made her institute that limit. If anything, it just made girls more special in that clan. Boys were pretty average.”

“Let’s say I believe all of this…because it does sound a bit familiar,” She yielded, “Does it mean that the jutsu I use won’t be normal?”

“Nah. You’re just better suited for Fuinjutsu and Bukijutsu. You’re as modern and capable as any other ninja around.” He assured her, “You might just discover some quirks like your Dad did.” Hayate set aside his thermos, “For example, he had many tricks up his sleeve. It wasn’t just the Dance of the Crescent Moon. That’s only as far as I got. I can’t use its parent-technique.”

Her eyes widened a fraction, “There’s another?”

“Sure there is, it’s what your Dad was famous for, in part. The Dance of Lunar Phases. It’s a hell of a lot more draining and complex, and to be honest, I don’t think there’s any chance you can get it. Not without your father’s guidance.” He unwrapped another rice ball, “That opportunity is lost.”
“And why not? You never learned it?”

“I learned about it and watched as closely as I could, but I can’t use the same Nature Transformations that come naturally to your clan. I’m not compatible. Tao Arts specialize in Yin and Yang Release, and that’s one thing that is seldom achieved in shinobi training. It’s always ridiculously difficult. Sage-level shenanigans, usually.”

“...you lost me.”

“I could never get that hang of Yin Release. Your Dad could rather easily manipulate the Dark element within chakra, which is the backbone of his jutsu. It’s not really something that can be taught. You have it or you don’t. It’s heritable.”

“I might safely count myself out.” Tenten agreed, “I wouldn’t even know where to begin! In fact, I didn’t know that chakra was broken down into light and dark.”

“Congrats. Now you do.”

“How did he do it?”

“A person has to be very talented and maybe just as lucky. Only the most skilled shinobi utilize Shadow or Light styles. Typically, Kage can use them to great effect, but there’s evidence of it in this village’s clans too.” Hayate divulged, “The Akimichi clan, for one. Their techniques harness Yang Release to change and regulate physical composition. And on the other hand you have the Nara, who use Yin Release as the basis of their shadow skills.”

“Holy-!” Tenten put her food container down, thrilled, “All this time? That’s how they did it?”

“Yeah, you putz. Didn’t you ever wonder? Non-elemental jutsu often extract light and dark properties to function. In your case, you would take after your Dad. He used both from time to time.”

She was let down that Hayate would not be able to guide her, “And you definitely can’t help me learn about it?”

“Sorry. You’re on your own. Figure out Yin Release and apply it to the jutsu you just mastered. That’s about all I can advise.” He snorted in addition, “And forget Yang Release. Shishou was disciplined enough to harness both, but forgive me if I don’t give you that much credit.”

“I guess I can.”

“Finish your lunch. It’s about time I get you prepped for our next project.” Hayate directed her, “You’ve got no problems with the Dance of the Crescent Moon, and you’ll only get better with time. But now we’re going to talk about what’s in the black scroll.”

“A weapon?” She perked up.

“Not in the traditional sense. I figured since we’re covering topics that include the weird and wonderful, it might be worth bringing up.”

“Can I summon it?” She was anxious.

“Finish chewing first, sheesh.” He smirked and handed the scroll to her, “You tell me. Can you?”

Tenten excitedly unwound the scroll and laid it flat, observing what was definitely not a tool summoning scroll. The design had a similar appearance, but the calligraphy was foreign. She stared
in the hope she could make heads or tails of it.

“Calm down. You can’t read Hanzi so it won’t make sense.”

She arched an eyebrow, “Can you read it?”

“You flatter me. No.”

“What is this?”

“This is a kind of summoning scroll you don’t normally work with, miss. This is a contract.”

She instantly understood and nodded, “Of the foreign variety?”

“More like the old variety. As old as the day is long. Dating back to when your clan got into…sticky situations…in the beginning. They came up with something that could defend against the most terrible powers ninja wielded in those days.”

Tenten had to consciously relax and steady her breathing. This was not the kind of jutsu she would expect to inherit, but it was reassuring that her father had imagined her capable enough to be entrusted with it. As she had learned about summoning contracts roughly in the Academy and by word of mouth, Tenten wanted to reach for the scroll and sign up.

Hayate halted her by waving a cut stick of squash, “Hold on. We’re still eating lunch. You’re not doing anything until we finish up our talk.”

She sat back and relented, “Alright then. Talk to me.”

“When was the last time you saw someone contractually summon something?”

“Sato can summon owls and I’ve seen Naruto use toads.” She added thoughtfully, “Gai-sensei hardly ever asks Ningame for help…”

“So what do you suppose this does?”

Tenten sipped from a beverage can and thought about it, “I…don’t want to assume…it’s an animal.” She decided, “It’s not an animal.”

“It isn’t. That’s why this isn’t your run-of-the-mill contract.”

“A weapon.”

“Great guess. The trouble is that contracts are formed only with sentient beings. I hope you’re starting to see why your postulation is logically unsound.” Hayate took a moment to chow down on vegetables, “But knowing your Dad and all of the things we spoke about previously…maybe you’re not so shocked.”

She asked brightly, “This is a sentient weapon?”

“Sure. As bluntly as I can put it, that’s all it is. It’s a product of Fuinjutsu, which handily enough, can bind souls, chakra and other curious states of matter into objects and so forth. That’ll explain why this contract can be in agreement with anything.” He waved his hand, “I’m no expert, but I’m glad I asked my Master questions when I had the chance. I can at least give you the background of it.”

“How nontraditional.”
“That might as well be your middle name.” He sniffed, “This contract will only summon one thing: a jian. And while you don’t need to refer to it by name, this sword is called Susumajin. It’s unique and it’s not very safe. It wasn’t made for the present day. It was made for war in a time when chakra was more abundant and volatile.”

“And I still have your blessing to work with it?”

“You sure as hell don’t want anyone else using this thing. Maybe your Sensei has told you about the Seven Shinobi Swordsmen and their weapons?”

“Well it wasn’t much, and my team did fight Raiga, you know.”

“And you probably wouldn’t look forward to doing it again.”

“I wouldn’t.”

“Right; because no one wants to tango with a soul-forged weapon. They carry too much chakra, they can seal things, they conduct nature transformations, they eat chakra, etc. So can this. Weapons like that were made to deal with ancient clans that made those qualities necessary.” He elaborated, “In this day and age, we might call that overkill. But if Hoshigaki Kisame came around for a fight, he wouldn’t think twice about letting his sword devour someone’s chakra. It’s an easy way to win.”

“In other words, I should use this wisely?” She muffled a laugh, “Lest I become a hated tyrant.”

“Don’t joke about that.” He narrowed his eyes, “You’ve got the potential to be among the worst of the worst rogue nin, if you ever went bad. I won’t shun my responsibility to take you down as a former teacher either.”

She was contrite, “Sorry! You know I wasn’t serious, Hayate. Come on.”

“Good. We can get into its properties and abilities this evening, but for now, let’s just learn about summoning it to start.”

Hayate commanded her to finish eating her lunch which she had barely touched due to anticipation. She nibbled while he demonstrated hand seals that would allow her to use the Summoning Technique. It wasn’t difficult to memorize. She continued eating while he pointed out a space for her to sign the contract.

“Your signature needs to be in blood. It’s the only way.” He instructed, “After that, using seals for the summoning jutsu will call the sword to you. A few words of advice…” Hayate packed up his lunch stuffs in the basket, “Susumajin sleeps underground to avoid contact with humans. That’s where it breaches. Keep your summoning matrixes on the ground as opposed to air, because it will shoot up to reach you. Shishou has done it. Also, keep it in its sheath until I instruct otherwise. I don’t want to get sent to the hospital, got it?”

“Understood.”

“Thanks. Jeez…it’s such a pain teaching a prodigy. You need to jump through all kinds of hoops for them…”

“I’m not a prodigy.” She protested, internally comparing herself to a teammate.

“Don’t try to argue, Tenten. Geniuses are the people who are exceptional in one or more regards, by shinobi standards. You fall under that category. You’re not some generic foot soldier. There’s no use in imagining that you are one.”
“…I think I should thank you…but you were only justifying your complaint.”

“Exactly.”

She tilted her head to appraise him, “You know…I don’t recommend that you teach anyone else in the future. You’re too crabby.”

“That’s fine by me.”

By the early afternoon, Tsunade had treated her Root-infiltrating companions to lunch. She had even sent a catered meal to the ANBU HQ to feed any shinobi on break to show her appreciation for their participation. She’d be expecting their thank-you notes later.

Sai ate timidly, but judging from how rapidly his plate emptied morsel by morsel, Tsunade supposed he had been starved for many days. Tenzo and Kakashi had relaxed considerably and joked around as they typically did. Tsunade hoped that their interaction would provide Sai with an example to go off of. The boy hardly spoke or made eye contact, but he made his gratitude known at the end of the meal.

Afterward, Tsunade asked Tenzo to accompany Sai to government appointed housing (two options available) that Sai could choose from. Then he was expected to bring Sai to an evaluation at the ANBU reception center.

On the way back to the administrative building with Kakashi, she explained, “He really does have nothing at the moment. His home was subsidized by Root and so were his worldly possessions. They have since been cancelled and recovered by the foundation, I was told on the way back. How prompt…”

“Do you think Tenzo should stay with him?”

“Only for a short time. I expect Sai to assimilate and live on his own.” Tsunade replied, “Tenzo can advise him on many things, but I won’t allow him to become a crutch. After all, Tenzo is still overseeing a project I tasked him with.”

“Oh?”

She gave him annoyed look, “It’s none of your business, Hatake.”

Kakashi chuckled. He had an inkling of what the ongoing assignment was.

After arriving at the office, Tsunade gave Kakashi a verbal pat on the back and tossed a scroll at him. It was a mission requiring that he lead the entirety of Team 7 to protect Prince Michiru on his way back to the Land of the Moon. “Wait until Kiba returns from the Oga castle, and then you may depart when you are all packed.” She advised, “Watch the Prince carefully. He’s a big spender and he has his critics.”

“Understood, Hokage-sama.”

Tsunade settled in her desk chair and sighed as Kakashi made his exit. She was able to tick at least one thing off of her conscience bucket list. Rescuing a wayward member of Root was not something she would independently choose to do, but after hearing of Neji and Lee’s concern for the boy even after they had nearly been captured…she made up her mind. Hopefully, Sai would become a trustworthy shinobi she could one day depend on, ‘Much like how I rely on Tenzo now…’
Shizune came and went, delivering documents and afternoon tea. After a brief, solitary period, Tsunade was visited by a white-cloaked ANBU agent whose greeting was unusually chipper.

“You heard the news?” She guessed.

“Yes. One of my teams told me that Danzo was visibly embarrassed.” The man was amused, “Tsunade-sama, your bravery inspires me.”

She feigned a humble expression, “Oh Kegon, it’s just routine checks and balances. All in a day’s work…” She used his name when they were in private meetings, much like how she addressed Tenzo by name.

“As you say, my lady.”

“I thought you’d still be out scouting near the Toi province.”

“Reconnaissance is complete. I expect my assessment will herald some good news you have been waiting for.” Kegon announced, “The rogue ninja Shimofuri Koinyu, alleged slayer of Hyuga Hikune, was located and engaged in combat on the border of the River Country. He retreated in defeat from Team Izu, who I have asked to continue tracking him. Team Ro, under my command, was able to locate Dintei Bihokokuni as well.”

With wide eyes, Tsunade folded her hands and asked, “That outcome?”

“He was able to avoid combat and detection by penetrating further into the Rice Country. It appears that he keeps in frequent contact with Orochimaru, and by that measure, he will continue to evade scouting teams when possible.” The agent added, “This presented my team with two concrete facts: he avoids all Fire Country patrols and is not in direct contact with his servant, who has been isolated in the River Country. We maintain the upper hand.”

Tsunade exhaled in relief, “We need to keep it that way. I suspected Orochimaru was assisting him in one way or another, but Bi is shorthanded and not liking the attention he’s getting.” She continued, “I apologize for making all of you work so hard. I’ve felt guilty about keeping many teams on patrol for such a length of time…”

“Tsunade-sama, please do not regret your decisions. I speak on behalf of all of my comrades when I tell you that we do not resent our duty to secure the safety of Konoha,” He tilted his head playfully, “And we certainly don’t mind the overtime pay.”

“Ha! Of course you don’t, you rascal.” She grinned, “Go home and buy your wife some flowers. She probably won’t remember who you are after all of this time.”

“I’ll remind her.”

Hinata was excused from training with her father after the sun set. She humored Hanabi’s demands and sparred with her sister for a short time before they were called in for supper.

Tomorrow she could look forward to a mission with her team, she noted. Hinata was always searching for ways to occupy her time. She trained with her family, her team, went out with friends, and generally dallied in her hobbies so that her mind was not so absorbed with the one person she missed most.

While sitting through dinner, she noticed that she was not the only one quietly thinking. Across the table, Neji sat blankly and chewed, hardly concerned with the food in front of him. Hanabi kept up
an unnecessarily loud conversation with her father, preventing Hiashi from questioning Neji or Hinata’s lethargy. As it stood, Hinata knew full well what Neji was dwelling on. ‘Neji-niisan has done a lot of growing up in a short amount of time. I’ve never seen him like this before.’ She nipped a bit of mushroom, ‘He must think about Tenten all day long…’

She could relate. Hinata devoted at least twenty minutes of each day purely to imagining what Naruto now looked like. All of her friends and family had grown and changed around her, so it only made sense that Naruto had matured as well. Goosebumps would rise up on her skin just at the thought of him being taller. She ate her meal in silence, retreating into her thoughts.

Hinata wanted to see him. Immediately. She wanted to know what he looked like, what his voice sounded like, the roughness of his hands, to see the blue light in his eyes unchanged…

It was terrible to wait. The thoughts consumed her, and she worried that there would be no relief after setting her sights on him again. What if a glimpse couldn’t satisfy? What if she needed everything he was? To touch and taste and hold. Hinata conceded she was not the child she once was. His personality alone transmitted through written words bewitched her. Naruto sounded almost too good to be true in his letters. But to walk beside the person who thought of her so tenderly and trusted her above all others…it would be an overwhelming privilege.

Hinata looked up and beheld Neji giving her a curious look, Are you alright?

She nodded sullenly. Neji must have suspected what made her swoon and daydream so.

At the end of the meal, as always, the Main family parted ways to enjoy private time before sleep. Hinata absently prepared a travel bag to be used for her next mission, and then stored and labeled containers of healing ointment for wounds. Her friends and teammates used them up so quickly…

Once her shinobi-related concerns were attended to, Hinata crossed over to her desk and lifted her mother’s old sewing basket. Nothing soothed her nerves more than taking up the tools that her mother had once skillfully worked in her hands on cool nights. She took a seat on her bed, dressed in pajamas, and prepared to knit until she fell asleep. Today’s project was a continuation of the fingerless gloves her sister had wished for. They were coming along.

She worked serenely until the night was deep. Her eyelids drooped. ‘Nearly finished…’ She thought, but tomorrow she could add the finishing touches.

Hinata set aside her creation and the basket before tugging a lamp string. She slipped beneath the covers of her bed and made herself comfortable. Her head felt unusually heavy on the pillow.

With her eyes still shut, she indulged in a habit that many members of the Hyuga clan did. She used her Byakugan to survey the house and her family. Her sister had even admitted to doing the same thing regularly. It was reassuring to go to sleep knowing that everything and everyone was in their place. Her father and sister were settling down as well. However, there were a few people awake and lollygagging. Some were absent on missions. And one room was vacant when it shouldn’t have been. ‘Niisan…’ Neji had snuck off and it wasn’t the first time she had noticed him do such a thing. Of course, he had a perfectly good reason to set out and stay unseen.

With a knowing smile, she relaxed and gave in to sleep.

Neji had relocated to a lookout on top of a newer high-rise, lingering in the shadow of the adjacent building. He had no intention of getting anyone’s attention, and thus kept his distance from lights and bright structures. He had not bothered with a change of clothes to disguise himself. He wore what he
typically did around the Hyuga house: a teal gi and gray pants, with the Hyuga crest emblazoned on
the front of the shirt.

Even now, he was hesitant to disobey the Hokage. Certainly he knew better, and he most definitely
trusted the kind ANBU agent who had advised against his defiance. But even if they could not meet
face to face or speak to each other, simply seeing Tenten from afar wouldn’t jeopardize anything,
Neji supposed. Nothing provided adequate distraction these days. Not time with his friends, training
with Lee and Wong Leung, not even the mayhem at the Oga castle could stop him from thinking
about her. His only reasonable solution was to steal a gander and then be on his way.

He gazed with his blood limit into the apartment complex beside his perch. The floor she resided on
was a few degrees below his line of sight, and so he looked down into her home as it unfolded in a
transparent collage of rooms and items. The household was lit and she was awake, even at a late
hour. Neji wondered if she habitually stayed up. If he could, he would tell her in a most authoritative
tone that she get proper rest.

She was chicly dressed in a traditional white cheongsam and dark pants, keeping her back turned to
his position. Maybe it was an optical illusion, or maybe it was due to the passing of time, but she
looked taller, slender, and her eyes (which he saw for a brief moment) were wiser and more
beautiful. She was pinching dumpling dough shut in her hands, standing in her kitchen in pink house
slippers.

Well, that ought to have sufficed. But he did not look away. Neji found it hard to swallow, keeping
his line of sight steady, and watched her perform the menial task of cooking as if it were the key to
salvation and Heaven. His short peek converted into a full-blown stakeout.

It had been physically and mentally painful to be away from her for weeks on end. Neji had lost
count of the days. It was truly wondrous how the neurotransmitters in his head instantly balanced
themselves, and at long last, he felt a surge of happiness that he nearly forgot he was able to feel at
all.

After getting over the initial, joyful shock of viewing his teammate, Neji did question why she was
cooking so late at night. She was steaming the dumplings in stacked bamboo baskets on top of a
boiling pan of water. Tenten waved a hand fan to disperse the vapor that was filling up the small
kitchen. She took care of other tasks while she waited for the food to heat. There were scrolls
scattered around the living area as well as tea cups on a tray. Maybe she’d had a visitor? She cleaned
up odds and ends, followed a hallway to her bedroom, and returned everything to its place.

Tenten lingered in the room and rooted around in a dresser drawer. Neji nearly didn’t look away fast
enough before she started to undress and change into street clothes. He respectfully ceased the use of
his blood limit, hearing Sato’s irritating jibe in the back of his head, ‘You have the Byakugan! You
get to look for free!’ He also remembered rendering Sato unconscious; but a pricking inquisitiveness
was setting in, and maybe he used the Byakugan again a little too soon, as she had barely completed
pulling a silk blouse over perky, unrestrained breasts. After that, Tenten was essentially decent again,
but the impression had been made.

Neji stood like a statue on top of the building, mildly appalled with his actions. He had seen her
naked before even without the Byakugan, he asserted in vain. The town called Katabami had been
his first brush with her nudity. But there was no use. He had deliberately looked because he was
undeniably attracted to her, and he could not say he disliked what he had seen. It was the first
instance of rudimentary, sexual interest Neji had ever recorded, save for the things he couldn’t recall
while sleeping. He was otherwise, to the shock of his peers, chaste. What Sato didn’t seem to get
was that, in spite of his self-control, he did want to look and partake, but chose not to do so out of
respect for the one he desired.

His thoughts got carried off in a cerebral current, and while trying to explain away his momentary breach of decorum, Neji noticed that Tenten had bagged up the containers of dumplings. She slipped on sandals and then silently left her apartment.

His heartbeat quickened.

Neji observed as she moved briskly down the communal hallway, raced down the stairwell, and exited on the opposite (front) side of the building. Tenten then proceeded at a casual walk, with a plastic bag swaying from one hand. Neji acknowledged at this point in time that he should go home and quit the game; for fear that the next agent to catch him would not be so forgiving.

But, as was genuinely characteristic of him, he pushed the threat of punishment far from his mind. Neji followed after Tenten from the rooftops. Clouds that rolled past the moon would black out all light for short intervals, but he kept the young woman firmly in his sights.

Corners and turns, long stretches of alleyways and paths unfolded before Neji began to recognize which quadrant of the village they were passing through. ‘Of course.’ It should have been obvious. Tenten came to a stop outside of Lee’s house in the middle of the night.

There was an unfamiliar pang of jealousy and admiration he felt for Lee as Tenten stooped, arranged the bamboo container on the porch, and then immediately ran off. She too understood that it would not do to defy the Hokage.

After bolting down a long street and turning a corner, Tenten halted and caught her breath, pressing against a wooden fence. Neji had perched on the rim-like, tiled rooftop of a circular building. He debated calling out to her. Or tipping her off to his presence. Subtler still, letting her glimpse his moonstruck shadow on the road beneath her feet, if he decided to stand up.

And then she was off again. He was surprised by her swiftness.

Neji continued to trail behind her, not thinking much at all as the quiet accompaniment turned into a meditative exercise. He felt better. He felt together with her.

It was a peaceful walk northwest up several streets and through a plaster tunnel (he loomed above) before Neji stopped in his tracks. She was a block away from the Hyuga estate. Tenten’s course was sure as she continued on towards the front gate. He pieced together the meaning of her visit.

She wanted to see him. Tenten had not brought him food or anything like that, but her appearance would have been more than enough. It appeased the kindled light of hope inside him. In so far as what his imagination allowed, Neji believed they were equally in need of each other. He looked left and right and saw the way was clear. He leapt from the top of a small cottage, crossed a power line, and then dropped down on the opposite side of the estate wall.

While on the lawn, Neji estimated it would only be a matter of seconds before she passed through the gate. He wondered which action he should take next. Run to her? Sweep her up? Casually call her over? He elected to stay where he was, not wishing to startle her. She would notice.

The night air was calm and filled with the songs of spring wildlife. He waited longer than he expected to before using his blood limit. He spied Tenten frozen in front of the entrance in hesitation. Then, just as soon as she had arrived, Tenten departed with a shake of her head as if to scold herself.

He was taken aback by her flight. Neji had to collect his wits before rushing after her, not likely to catch up after her head start. But he had a good idea of where she was running to. Why wouldn’t she
follow through? She was stronger than that. Even she had the ability to test Tsunade’s boundaries, but maybe that was not why she had wavered.

She was racing back to her home. Her knowledge of streets and shortcuts was far keener than Neji’s navigation. He trusted that was because she visited friends more often and knew how to reach them. When she blended into the thin, late night foot-traffic of a main road Neji slowed down. After a right turn she was only a few dozen steps away from her apartment complex. He could still catch her. He sped up and prepared to drop into a back alley where he would meet her half way.

“Neji!”

He halted. From his immediate left, the same ANBU agent had hurled himself onto a department store rooftop and held up a hand. He bent double for a moment and panted. He must have run all the way across town after detecting him.

Knowing that it was foolish to challenge the interceptor for a second time, Neji relented, watching as Tenten reached the entrance of the building down the way.

“You know…” The masked shinobi caught his breath, “We’ve been over this already…you put your faith in me and promised you wouldn’t cause trouble…”

“Where were you? I nearly spoke to her.” Neji quipped, “The Hokage would not have been pleased by your tardiness.”

“Don’t get me started on what pleases the Hokage.” The man growled, standing upright, “Neji, please do not test me. I have been very lenient with you.”

He nodded slowly, watching with the Byakugan as Tenten scaled the stairs, “I know. I appreciate that.

“You have a fine way of showing it…” The agent grumbled, “So are you going to make me watch you all night?”

“No. I won’t contact her in any fashion. I only…” His voice lowered, “Wanted a short time to see her.”

“Well, I suppose that’s alright.” The veteran ninja crossed over to a stonework ledge and took a seat, “But no tricks.”

Neji stood nearby with folded arms, observing as Tenten finally made it back to her home. She locked the door behind her and sighed, removing her shoes. She moved about the house and shut lights off. She cleaned up the kitchen and stored away cooking tools. Tenten seemed defeated.

“Ahhh…” The ANBU agent yawned and then said, “Excuse me.”

Neji gave him a strange look, “Are you tired?”

“Yes. ANBU are tired half of the time they are on duty. But Hokage-sama has kept me so busy lately that I haven’t had a regular sleep schedule.”

“Is that why you were late?”

“In part. I am looking after a new recruit.” Neji could see the man smile behind his mask, “A friend of yours.”
“Is that so?”

“It is! Sai was released from Root.”

Neji stared at him in astonishment, unsure of how to take the news.

“If you had never said anything after your mission report…Tsunade-sama would not have paid him any mind. Sai was in dire straits when we picked him up.” The agent went on, “He’ll live much better from now on. He’s learning quickly. I’ve been helping him sign up for programs and shelter and such…”

Puzzled, Neji spoke after a moment, “What does he call you?”

“Pardon?”

“Sai gives everyone he meets nicknames.”

“Oh! He did call Kakashi…Mr. White Fang. That was odd.” The man recalled, “But he calls me Tenzo.”

“That’s…”

“My real name.” Tenzo shrugged, “You’d learn it sooner or later. There’s no way I could stay anonymous when you can plainly see me and recognize me on the street.”

Neji’s small smile was good-natured, as he had thought the exact same thing.

“So she tried again?” Tenzo asked, “She’s done this before. I have seen Tenten bring things to your other teammate’s home twice, and then an old gentleman took them inside.”

Neji nodded. She had a closer relationship with Lee and his grandfather. It came as no surprise that she would find ways to interact with them.

“Sometimes she was on the lookout for you.” Tenzo chuckled, “On the streets uptown late at night… I knew where she was headed. I politely asked her to go home when I found her doing that.”

“Polite and professional.” Neji mused, “I could learn something from you.”

“It isn’t easy, but it is quite gratifying.”

“Teach Sai well.”

“I intend to.” The man sighed softly, “But he will be a tough nut to crack…”

Neji turned his all-pervading gaze back to the building. Tenten had settled on the sofa in the living space of the flat, turning her head to stare at a framed photo on a lamp stand. Maybe it was a picture of family, but more than likely, Neji believed, it was a team photo. They took one each year with Sato, and Lee and Tenten coveted the memories.

“Tenzo.” Neji said at length, “Go get some sleep…or attend to something else. You can trust that I won’t do anything.”

“Should I?” The man was amazed.

“Yes. I don’t want to make your job any more difficult than it is.”
“Huh!” He was thrilled, “Then I think I will…” He stood and shook out his limbs, warding off exhaustion, “Thank you, Hyuga Neji. I can say that you have been a very pleasant assignment.”

After a quiet goodbye, Tenzo moved on, judging that Neji would not abuse his trust.

Tenten carelessly fell asleep on the couch she had nestled on. It was tempting to move her to her bed, or maybe even communicate with her in some way, but Neji refrained. He kept watch as the moon continued its slow trek across the sky.

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The same moonlight flooded the Toad Valley.

Naruto had worked until a late hour with Fukasaku’s assistance. He had made some headway in sensing and absorbing natural energy with Toad Oil. He could more or less blend it with his own chakra safely, seldom transforming into a toad while he did so. Fukasaku was impressed.

“Now I’m off to bed!” The old toad declared, “You should be too, Naruto-boy. Don’t horse around and become a statue while I’m a sleep.”

“I won’t, Pa.”

After the elder had hopped away back to his house down the sprawling hill, Naruto abandoned his spot near the oil pool. A knapsack of items had been left on the edge of the stone courtyard, and Naruto took it with him as he proceeded along a narrow footbridge. He crossed over a nearby pond and followed the light of lanterns hanging from whimsical, twisted tree branches.

Naruto stopped and made himself comfortable on the cushiony top of a giant toadstool. ‘Yeah, there’s enough light here…’ A glass lantern containing a small swarm of fireflies was hanging just above him. He retrieved a blank scroll and an ink brush to write. He shifted to lie on his stomach, letting the light fall only on the parchment in front of him. Before he forgot the things he had thought about during the day, Naruto wanted to compose a letter before retiring for the night.

‘Okay, let’s see...’ He exhaled slowly.

Dear Hinata,

I’m sorry that I am a few days late getting back to you.

Naruto twitched his nose in annoyance. Jiraiya had been particularly pushy that week. He had plenty of criticism to give about how “ready” Naruto was to move past training with Toad Oil. The arguments had delayed him from replying to Hinata’s most recent letter.

Ero-sensei is cycling back into a mid-life crisis. Every time he watches me train he gets upset or needs to disparage me somehow. One minute he’s supportive, and the next he’s whining about how he misses being young, and that I’m stealing his limelight. At least he’s honest about his feelings.

But there’s something else. Jiraiya told me that he’s my godfather and was asked by my parents to look after me. How about that? I never had any idea that there could be a link between Ero-sensei and my family. It explains why he’s stayed with me when no one else would. He also promised that he would explain soon, but I still have a hard time accepting it. My parents are dead. All of this time he never spoke up.

Tension escaped him in a short breath.

I’m sorry. I’m not trying to weigh you down with any of those facts. It just feels better to get it off my
chest. I feel so frustrated when I have to look at him every day and try to forgive him. I hope that the more I learn, the less it’ll hurt. But I’m not so sure that will happen. It’s kind of a relief to know that there is one person who can tell me about my parents. It gets me thinking about what I want to do someday when it’s my turn.

When we have kids-

Naruto’s hand froze and he stared at the characters he had formed. He edited the idea by drawing a strike-through line, and reworded the concept.

If I get to have kids, I would do anything and everything to make sure they weren’t alone. I don’t want them to go through what I did. I want to watch them grow up smiling, and be confident and proud that I was their Dad. I think that when I get that chance, every day will feel like the best day of my life.

He then carefully added:

Did you ever think about having children?

It almost felt silly to ask, but Naruto feared he might come across too forward if he asked her what he was really thinking. ‘With me! Let’s have it all! Whenever you want! I’ll take time off from missions, hell, I’d even forget about becoming Hokage if you’d take me as your-’ He shook his head, ‘Gosh…I am losing it. I’ll sound like I’m nuts. I shouldn’t be worrying about any of this. She’s probably never even let it cross her mind! I’m sorry, Hinata…’

So he simply continued:

I have.

Naruto paused and cleared his throat before changing the subject.

I’ve thought about a lot of things I want to accomplish in the future. Really, I put together a tentative schedule! Although when I think about it…the waiting part kind of sucks. Here’s a bit of it:

The likelihood of me getting back to Leaf in time for the Chunin Exam is pretty low, so I’m not going to let that discourage me. I may need another year or so to finish Sage Training, and I promise you that I’m doing my best. I’d say I have made some decent progress! But I don’t want to draw it out. Then I’ll come home as fast as I can and take you out to dinner or whatever you want, because your patience is something I might not be able to repay ever. But I’ll try! Then I’ll put up and shut up and do whatever Baa-chan says. I’ll take crappy missions because beggars can’t be choosers, and now that Gaara is Kazekage, I will need to find a new normal. I’ll register for the test with any team that will take me. I hope it doesn’t sound conceited, but I’m not worried about the Chunin Exam. If I am worthy then Baa-chan will know it, won’t she? What matters to me is that I feel confident in myself.

I can tell that you’ll be promoted soon. Don’t hold back in the next exam, alright? I’m just sorry that I won’t be there to watch your matches, Hinata. The world is your oyster. And when it’s my time to move up I’ll keep my head down and work hard. It won’t matter how long it takes. I can go as far as I want. From what Ero-sensei and Gaara have been telling me, becoming a candidate for Kage is half dedication and half politics. We’ll see where that goes. My point is, no matter how it turns out, I will never have a reason to be disappointed. As long as I’m with you I have what I want.

Naruto heaved a heartfelt sigh.

So I was wondering if maybe you could tell me how you see the future… If you let me stay by your side nothing would make me happier. I will fight for your dreams. I promise I’ll help you achieve
them, Hinata. I have exactly what I need out of life right now, and I would never trade you for anything. I don’t know how significant it is coming from a guy who has known you since we were little kids, but...no man will ever love you more than I do. I’ve never stopped, not since I met you. That was an honest appeal, for whatever it’s worth. I won’t be the only person in life who tries to catch your eye...but I know there is no one more precious on this earth than you, Hyuga Hinata. And that’s a truth I live my life by.

All my love,

Naruto

He finished and went back to read it over. Naruto made a soft chuff of approval, “Heh! This didn’t turn out too bad…”

The young man rolled up the correspondence and stowed away his tools in the bag. He rubbed at his eyes and then teleported back to his room for some shuteye.

Naruto did not get to sleep in for long before Jiraiya’s voice was booming throughout the house. He sounded happy.

Naruto winced and retreated beneath his blanket when the door to his room slid open, allowing a wall of sunshine to cascade inside. Jiraiya stood in the doorway, overjoyed, “Wake up, student!”

“Erg…” He coiled beneath his cover.

“Ha! Today is a perfect day to have a functioning arm!” The sage crowed, flexing both arms with zero difficulty, “I am a complete man again.”

Naruto muttered something that Jiraiya could not make out.

“What was that, kid?”

His mouth poked free, “I said that you’ve lost some bits you’ll never get back, you old Perv.”

“Huh. Hearing that come from a horny bundle of testosterone like you…” Jiraiya smiled, “Assures me that you’ll be in my position someday.”

“Bye. You were just leaving, right?”

“Nope! I am fit and rearing to go! We are going to train this morning.”

“Pff. Shut the door behind you.”

“I’m serious!” Jiraiya insisted, “I’ve got a clean bill of health. I can spar with you, Naruto.”

Naruto rolled over and frowned up at the man, “Remember the last time we did that? It wrecked your shit.”

“Well we can take a different approach to it this time. After all, you’re the one who’s consciously abstaining from Kyuubi chakra. What do I have to worry about?”

Naruto sat up, “Plenty!”

“Ho ho! Then prove it.” Jiraiya turned around and joined Fukasaku and Shima for a morning meal. Their voices drifted into Naruto’s room, encouraging him to join them.
‘Ahh fine…’ He sat up and had a satisfying stretch. Naruto dressed quickly before stepping out to join the toad family.

He took a seat at the table and thanked his hosts for the food set out. Jiraiya dropped a scroll in front of him, “Sorry that I took a peek at this. I didn’t realize it was for you. But hey, there’s good news in it.”

“Really? Who’s it from?”

“Gaara.” Jiraiya took a sip of tea, “I’m pretty proud of my Kazekage.”

Naruto rolled his eyes and then glanced over the message while he ate.

Naruto,

Your concern about controlling Biju chakra is not unfounded. It was a subject that occupied me as well. I will first begin by saying that I have not told Sakura anything yet. I have every intention of doing so, probably if an opportunity arises around the time of the Chunin Exam. While I’m in Leaf I think I could provide her with an explanation. Sakura will handle it well. Her studies in the Hidden Star Village have actually made her curious about jinchuriki, so in that respect I am sure I will be just another vehicle by which she will educate herself.

Naruto nibbled on a wheat roll, ‘Lucky jerk…’

What I am about to tell you next may bring some comfort. It might be hard for you to believe, but Shukaku and I get along. We speak regularly and have come to an official agreement about how we will support each other. I have promised that after my death and subsequent release of the One-Tail from his seal, Shukaku will be set free and protected from capture or abuse in the future. I was surprised to find out that he has a home that he would like to return to, and I do not plan to keep him from it. In exchange, Shukaku will help me learn how to master all of his chakra and associated techniques. He expects that I will challenge you to a duel one day, in the hope that his power will overwhelm the Kyuubi. It is a genuine dream of his.

Naruto dropped the roll in shock while he read on.

I never imagined that an entity that once terrorized me actually had feelings and hopes for the future. He admitted that he took out most of his frustration and aggression on me. He wanted to direct it at the Sand Village and those responsible for imprisoning him, but he has since let go of that resentment. He was not opposed to friendship; he just didn’t know how to take the first step. I am optimistic that Shukaku and I can take significant strides together. By the way, that is his birth name and I habitually refer to him as such.

Similarly, I am certain that you and the Nine-Tailed Fox can make amends the same way. If Shukaku was aggrieved by his treatment and exploitation by shinobi, without a doubt, the Fox will feel that way too. Maybe even more so… But believe that it is possible, Naruto. I am not lying to you when I say that two days ago while training Shukaku unquestioningly lended me all of his chakra. I was not prepared for such a ‘jolt’ and I lost consciousness…which resulted in my transformation into a giant tanuki. A few of my Black Ops guards panicked as they stood by. As it turns out, Shukaku immediately surrendered control to me and woke me up. There was no threat of violence or destruction. He just mocked my weakness. I will continue to practice a safe distance away from the village just in case, but I am telling you this so that you understand it isn’t impossible. With some effort, you and the Fox will be able to find a middle ground.

Naruto asked Jiraiya, “Did you read all of this?”
“I did. I was curious.”

“Did you believe it?”

“Sure I do! What Gaara was saying was by no means nonsense. He took a chance and it paid off! Maybe you shouldn’t push relations with the Nine-Tails off the table, Naruto.”

“Feh!”

*Naruto, the only suggestion I can give you is that you take your time. Do not rush into a discussion with Hinata, but when you have returned to Konoha and feel the time is right, you should be honest with her. Additionally, there is a place to start should you decide to speak to the Kyuubi. It might help referring to him by name. Naturally, he wouldn’t appreciate being condescended to or treated like an object. His name is Kurama. I hope that helps.*

*If there is anything else I can do please let me know. I look forward to hearing from you.*

*Gaara, Fifth Kazekage*

*Oh, and beware. He and Shukaku do not get along. Isn’t it strange that we do?*

Naruto looked up from the scroll, completely bemused, ‘*Kurama? So he’s got a name just as most things do…but I don’t think me calling him that will make a bit of difference…’*

“Come on, kid. Eat up!” Jiraiya pushed an omelet on a plate in front of him, “I actually made this for you. You know that Ma and Pa don’t eat this junk.”

The boy returned to the food, “Sorry. I’m just trying to believe what Gaara told me.”

“Give it a while. It’ll sink in.”

“It was good tidings, I hope.” Shima wondered.

Jiraiya nodded, “It was, Ma. One of my other knuckleheads, Gaara, is a jinchuriki as well. He was encouraging Naruto to not dismiss the prospect of cooperating with the Nine-Tails.”

“That’s easy for him to say. He didn’t actually injure anyone…” Naruto muttered.

“Eh? Don’t go there. He ballooned into a fat, sandy beast during the Chunin Exam finals!” Jiraiya reminded him, “That was a classic shit-show, if there ever was one. A few shinobi saw it happen, infrastructure was destroyed, and lives were risked…the whole nine yards. Just because no one was hurt or killed doesn’t mean it was not a disaster.”

“And it seems he has made incredible progress.” Fukasaku determined over a bowl of broth, “Naruto-boy, surely you can do the same.”

“Everyone is…riding my back about this…” The blonde shinobi’s voice was low, “But don’t any of you forget that it’s my burden. It’s more work and worry for me! Another chance to screw up!” He took a breath and reeled himself in, “I’ll listen to Gaara. I know that he’s telling me the truth…but I’m not going to let this get in the way of Sage Training. It’s gonna have to wait.”

“Fair enough.” Jiraiya shrugged. They continued eating in relative silence.

After ten minutes or so, a great clamoring came from outside of the house. Many toads were shouting and passing by to look at something. Naruto looked over his shoulder inquisitively, “I wonder what’s up?”
“If you’re all finished, go on and find out.” Shima instructed, “I’ll clean up.”

Naruto was followed by his two mentors as he left the home barefoot. He stepped off of the porch and crossed a stretch of grass before being stuck behind a crowd of gathered Toad Valley residents. Some were making “ooh” and “aah” sounds.

Miffed, Naruto nudged Gamakichi, who was tall enough to see over the mid-sized toads, “Hey Kichi! What’s going on?”

“Mornin’ Naruto. We’ve got a visitor!” The toad was jubilant, “This kind of never happens.”

“Who?” Naruto leapt up to get the view from his toad friend’s head. Below, his eyes fell upon a monstrous golden dog whose size was nearly equivalent to a horse. The dog took a seat and wagged its tail, sniffing at his toad greeters innocently.

“A dog?” Naruto was astounded.

The canine looked up at him, “Yes! But I have a name, you know.”

Surprised, Naruto slid down from Gamakichi’s back. It seemed that the more animals he met, the more often they could speak.

Jiraiya had finally pushed through to the front of the congregation, “Sesshu! How the hell did you find this place?” He gave the golden beast a pat on the muzzle when Sesshu trotted up to him.

“Rin trusts my nose. I have been tracking you for a long time, Gama-sennin.” Sesshu explained, “We were beginning to worry that something had happened to you. Obito had tried to contact you several times.”

“Ah jeez! I’m sorry. I fell out of touch with him while I was recovering here.” Jiraiya conceded sheepishly, “I had a…training accident. I didn’t mean to cause any worry.”

Naruto stood beside his teacher and inspected the tracking ninken, “You’re Obito’s dog?”

“Partly.” Sesshu tilted his head, “Rin is my master. And she is Obito’s master, in certain ways.”

“Uh…”

“His wife, Naruto.” Jiraiya explained, “Rin is from the Leaf Village too. This is her trusty partner, Sesshu. I knew you’d get to be introduced eventually.”

“I swear that name sounds familiar…” The boy scratched his chin.

Jiraiya sighed, “It’s…a bit of pickle. I don’t want you talking about this with anyone. Not your knucklehead teammates or your princess, got it? Obito’s family…is a responsibility of mine that not even Tsunade knows about.”

Naruto frowned, “What do you mean?”

“No one knows that they exist. Long ago, Obito was reported KIA on a mission while Minato was still his Sensei. His team did not realize that he had survived. Years later, after Rin left Konoha…the two reunited and have lived together ever since.” The old man’s tone was stern, “But their teammate, Kakashi, has no idea that any of this has happened. It’d come as a complete shock.”

Naruto merely stared at his mentor.
“It’s not my job to patch every communicative hole our village has! It isn’t!” The man’s eyebrows furrowed, “I made it very clear to Obito that he owes his friend a true apology, but I’m not getting tangled in that web.”

“That is crazy. So…no one knows about Yuma?”

“No. No one has a clue.” He waved his hand towards the ground, “Have a seat. You might need to sit for this…” Naruto sat down and Jiraiya added to all of their animal companions, “The rest of you might want to sit too…”

Only the dog sat. It was a command, after all.

“What? What’s the problem? You know, other than people lying to Kakashi!” Naruto grumbled.

Jiraiya attempted to speak but shut his mouth. He looked at Sesshu, “Could you please do me a favor and…go way over there, boy? I’m sorry. Some of this just doesn’t need to get back to your family.”

“Very well.” The dog stalked off.

Naruto gave his teacher and impatient look after the ninken had departed.

“The problem…is that I have kept them a secret to protect them, Naruto.” Jiraiya explained calmly, “This isn’t a normal shinobi family. Obito…well…the three of them…”

“What?” Naruto folded his arms and sniffed.

“They are all that is left of the Uchiha clan.” The man admitted, “They never learned about the massacre, and likewise, Sasuke and Itachi don’t know about them. If keeping them safe means keeping them away from the rest of the world…then it’s going to have to stay that way.”

The explanation had effectively silenced the young man. It was a shock, and at the same time, it was some incredibly happy news. Even now his dreams were still haunted by the carnage that he and his friends had discovered at the Uchiha homestead. Maybe it wasn’t so strange to treat survivors with the utmost care, ‘Seeing how Sasuke and his brother turned out…’

Naruto looked around him at the toads that were quietly digesting the information. His eyes passed over the dog at the far end of the settlement, and then stopped on Jiraiya, “I…didn’t know that you were trying deal with so much.”

“It’s okay, Naruto. But that’s the truth. My hands have been pretty full…”

“Will you try to bring them back to Konoha?” He was interested, “Or would that attract the wrong kind of attention?”

“I’ll have to talk to Tsunade about it. She won’t like it, but she’ll help me come up with something to protect them. As soon as others find out that there will be shinobi with the Sharingan back in Leaf…it’s going to be a real party…” Jiraiya sighed and shut his eyes as he thought, “I don’t know how villagers will react. I don’t know how Kakashi will take it…or Sasuke, for that matter. I’ll go ahead and guess Itachi wouldn’t come back just to bump them off…but there’s no telling what might happen.”

Naruto let Kosuke settle next to him and patted the small toad’s head, stewing over the information, “Yeah. It’s a big deal…” A small smile spread on his face, “But I can tell they’re not the types to…go crazy.”
“Don’t jinx it, kid. That’s my hope too.” The man took a seat on the grass, waving goodbye to the toads that had left to return to their morning routines, “Their little unit could begin to restore that clan after a few generations…and I’m not going to hold my breath for the two nutcases.”

“I’ll help you look after them.” Naruto announced assertively, “They’re a nice family and I’d hate to see them struggle.”

Jiraiya’s smile was a bit lopsided, “Thanks, kid.”

“And I won’t mention this to anyone.”

“Good! Or I’d have your head!”

Naruto stood up and brushed his pants off, “Ha! That’s if you catch me, Ero-sensei. You said you wanted to train with me, right?”

“I believe I did, punk.”

“Whoa, don’t use your fighting words yet.” Naruto teased with a grin, “Go tell that doggy to go home…and he’s going see you get your butt whooped.”

That same morning marked the start of blossom-viewing season in Konoha. Citizens and off-duty shinobi had gathered in parks and forest clusters with picnic blankets, settling beneath the cherry and plum trees to enjoy the lovely atmosphere and throw small parties.

Ino had smoothly wrangled together her kunoichi friends to join her viewing spot. The majesty of the pink plum blossom she had set up beneath had attracted other admirers, but they set their blankets down on the far side of the tree. Hinata and Sakura arrived together and brought refreshments with them. They didn’t need to wait long for Tenten to show up as promised, but Tama was not as prompt as usual.

“She’s still at work.” Tenten updated them, “It might be a little while.”

“Alright, and if I know her she’ll bring some baked goods with her.” Ino indicated a free spot beside her, “Sit down, please.”

Tenten compliantly took the spot and accepted a bottle of sweet tea from Hinata. She felt naked without any weapons or equipment on her, but Ino had pointedly told her days before that “nothing happens” at Hanami festivals and she could “relax.”

“So…” The blonde woman’s smile was devilish, “Explain yourself.”

“What?” Tenten felt put on the spot.

“Your hair.” Sakura added helpfully, “I like what you did to it.”

“It wasn’t me.” The girl shrugged, “Yugao cut it. I let her do girly things with me because she’s surrounded by guys all of the time.”

Hinata covered her mouth to giggle. Tenten had blunt bangs and braided buns which were, most obviously, the efforts of another woman’s hairstyling. Typically, the weapon-specialist was not concerned with her hair so long as it wasn’t in the way. Yugao, who had been ‘on a roll’ after the makeover, had pierced her visitor’s ears as well. Again, Tenten was rather neutral about the alteration.
“You look girlier.” Ino assessed, “That’s a good thing.”

“I was girly enough.” Tenten insisted.

“But you like the change, don’t you?” Sakura asked.

“It’s fine. I’ll keep up with it I guess.” She sipped her beverage, “Honestly, I’m much happier with my jutsu and the sales in my shop. If someone wants me to look pretty…then they can fix me up.” She simpered, “You girls are the pretty ones.”

“It’s my specialty.” Ino nodded. She made sure that Sakura and Hinata had complementary nail colors and trimmed hair ends weekly. If they didn’t keep up with maintenance she took offense to it.

“It’s good that you’re training hard, Tenten. Tama and I are giving it our best effort too. Tsunade-sama was reading about plans for the Chunin Exam, so it won’t be long now.” Sakura then added, “But she wants aggressive advertising for it. I wonder if she’s worried that no one will enter or show up to watch?”

Hinata agreed, “That could be a problem.”

“How will Hokage-sama reassure people?” Ino scoffed, “Serve alcohol?”

“That would definitely make it worse.” Sakura countered.

Tenten was confident, “She’ll come up with something.”

“Tama should cater it.” Ino suggested.

“Then how will she participate?” Hinata chirped.

“Hm, that’s a tough one. Her dad is a finance man so maybe he can get sponsorships…”

Sakura’s eyes widened, “I need to tell Shishou that!”

Ino smirked and then helped herself to a chocolate from a container, “There’s a million ways to make it work…besides having gorgeous women competing in the final rounds.”

“It might be hard competing against each other…or our teammates.” Hinata said softly.

“If I have to sucker punch someone, then I have to sucker punch someone.” Ino proclaimed, “We’ll all get over it later.”

Tenten nodded, “She is absolutely right.”

They relaxed and enjoyed snacks for a while before Hinata asked her pink haired friend, “Sakura-chan, do you have any plans for your birthday tomorrow?”

All eyes fell on the Hokage’s apprentice and Sakura sheepishly admitted, “I…might take a mission.”

“Unacceptable.” Ino deadpanned.

“Come on! It’s my day so I can spend it how I want.”

“At least let your teammates take you out to celebrate first.” Tenten advised, “My birthday was weeks ago and…I would have killed to see Lee and Neji.”
Her companions made devastated sounds of sympathy and she told them to “can it.”

“They have been thinking of you, Onee-san!” Hinata tried to assure her, “Once the Hokage lifts her order I am sure they would do something special for you!”

Tenten’s smile was small, “It’s okay, Hinata. I’ve been thinking of them too.”

“Yeah…your birthday, Miss Forehead…” Ino’s expression was shrewd, “Surely the Kazekage is aware of it?”

Sakura shut her eyes and smiled in warning, “Don’t go there.”

“I plan to. You know why? Because you got a key to his place.” The girl grinned, “That’s a very special present.”

Hinata and Tenten gasped in unison upon hearing the news. After a moment Tenten unexpectedly peeled with laughter, “Ah, who cares? Heh!”

Hinata blanched, “I have a key too…but I only water Naruto’s plants there.”

“It’s…it’s just for me to decompress after my mom screams in my face. So I can be alone and have some quiet!” Sakura asserted, “Don’t be ridiculous, Pig. I’m not constantly looking for hiding spots like you and your boyfriend do.”

“One day you’ll have to. Privacy is a commodity.”

“Spoken like a true expert.”

“There’s no need to be salty, novice. Your time will come.”

“Please don’t argue!” Hinata squeaked.

They girls settled down and finally laughed at each other. Tenten’s mirth was infectious. She hadn’t been happy or expressive in so long that her friends had been afraid to emote around her. The mood had definitely lightened.

“But seriously, if he shows up…” Ino smiled at her friend, “That would be a tale for the ages.”

“He said he’s been busy. I’m not going to explode if he can’t be here.” Sakura reminded them, “I did want to take a mission, remember? I won’t always have free time for my team. It’s because Shishou has been working on other things that I can go where I want.”

Ino heckled her for a little while longer until Tama appeared at the entrance of the park. Filing in behind her were Shikamaru, Chouji, and Sato, who had a small basket of bakery items in his arms.

Tenten nudged Ino beside her and inclined her head towards their approaching friends, “Careful now. You might need to censor yourself, Ino.”

“Oh, you know you love my imagination.”

“As long as you don’t start ragging on me, I love it.”
Threads that Stretch 'Round the World

Chapter Soundtrack: “Kids” by Childish Gambino

With the recommendation that mid-Spring was an ideal time to enjoy the beach in the Land of Waves, Temari had settled herself on a reclining chair on the sandy shore that morning. She was promised that there would be no tourist crowds and the weather would be at the peak of loveliness. Temari had concluded preliminary advanced-placement exams as well as kept timely correspondence with Gaara each morning. With nothing urgent pending, she decided that she could afford a short break.

‘This is the first time I’ve worn one of these.’ Temari acknowledged while fiddling with the tie of a simple black bikini, ‘Luckily no one gets to see me in it.’ She had been very liberal with sunscreen and had tugged on a wide-brimmed sunhat before laying back in the recliner. Her trusty fan was beside the chair, just in case she needed to deal with a peeper.

As she had explained to Gaara before leaving Sand, she had every intention of staying in a luxury suite of the Star Notojiso hotel while she oversaw the training program. ‘I paid for it myself and I have to admit…’ She smiled smugly, ‘It was completely worth the money.’ The private beachfront behind the inn was included and she was taking advantage of it.

While she had settled in the hotel lodgings away from the barracks, Ebizo and other Suna shinobi had to extricate Chiyo from the prestigious boardinghouse. She had been most reluctant to leave. After much hassle, Chiyo was escorted home with the first wave of returning Sand ninja Kankuro had supervised.

The initial ‘changing of the guard’ had been a tad awkward. Matsuri had discovered that a boy she was smitten with likely did not return her sentiments. The girl had recovered from her bout of despair and reappeared the next morning entirely blank. She was slate-like and serious, but her compassion for others was still evident in small ways. What was markedly different, Temari noticed, was that the girl refused to speak about her personal thoughts or feelings. Matsuri had not attempted to contact Inari or Menma before returning to Sunagakure. From an update Temari had received from Gaara days later, he confirmed that Matsuri had entirely invested herself in training and nothing else. He was happy to oblige her, but he worried that his student’s ambition to improve was for the wrong reasons.

For a brief time, maybe a whole ten minutes, Temari had thought about sticking her nose in the young kunoichi’s business. She could have gotten to the bottom of it all. Quickly. She would have had no problem marching up to the ninja called ‘Menma’ and inquiring ‘what the hell his problem’ was. Maybe it was all a misunderstanding. Or maybe he was a tried-and-true schmuck. But after considering her involvement in mending Matsuri’s crush problem, Temari had thought better of it. She had spied Inari walking with the blonde haired, heart-breaking suspect a few times, but she had never said a word. ‘It’s not my place to meddle in other people’s relationships.’

Though she remained mildly curious as to whether or not Menma had genuinely misled Matsuri, Temari kept her distance and went about her duties.

‘What do I know about relationships anyway? I’m terrible at it.’ She thought while closing her eyes. ‘I am not the kind of person who’s qualified to vouch for the hearts and feelings of others. I barely know my own.’

The breeze trickled across her bare skin as Temari dozed, setting aside her cares. She had put in
motion the beginning stages of the second training program, and soon enough the Tide Village
would be in control of its own affairs. So long as she did not repeat Kankuro’s escapade and damage
the city while rooting out miscreants, she would call it a job well done.

A soft sensation that was decidedly *not* wind traced along her right leg below the knee. With a jerk,
Temari tipped the hat up for a clear view of her surroundings and stretched out her hand for her fan.
Then she stopped. Nosing around at the foot of the chair was a rabbit. It looked an awful lot like the
white rabbit that delivered mail to Gaara sometimes.

After the creature had her attention it hopped closer and nudged a scroll towards her across the sand.

“I’m on a break. Come back in an hour.” The woman grumbled.

The rabbit remained stationary.

“Hmph. What’s your name again?”

After a beat of silence the animal replied in a soft voice, “Pua.”

“Huh, that’s right. I remember that Gaara said you can talk.”

“Pua.” The animal agreed.

“Not all that well, though…” Temari picked up the scroll, “What is this? Is Haku sending
 correspondence again? I thought he said he’d stop. Tch!” She opened the parchment to see that it
 was blank, “Oh…”

The rabbit fussed at one of its long ears.

“What’s the deal? Is he expecting a reply?” Annoyance pricked at her voice, “He said that I didn’t
 have to.”

“Ramen.”

“Wow, you really *can’t* talk. I bet he put you up to this.”

Pua looked at her with an expression of unfettered innocence.

Temari laid back and adjusted her hat again, “I was trying to enjoy this morning before going back to
work later. Thanks a lot. Just buzz off.” She snickered, “Can you learn how to say *that*? Buzz. Off.
Say that one to Haku.”

Silence prevailed again for several minutes as the ocean winds swept down from blue skies. When
Temari suspected that she still was not being left alone, she glimpsed down beneath the rim of her hat
again, noticing that Pua had not budged.

“Did you follow me here all the way from Hidden Sand?” She rolled to her side, letting her irritation
ebb away, “That was a long trip for a little puff like you.”

“Pua.”

“Yeah, I know.” Temari sighed, “You’re probably used to it. You go between Gaara’s teammates to
deliver their letters. You might be the only example of a rabbit worth your salt.”

Upon receiving the praise, Pua procured a ballpoint pen that had been pinned beneath her bandana.
She replaced it on the armrest of the chair with her mouth, to Temari’s surprise.
“It seems like…you’re a pet of many talents.” The woman yielded, “But I already told you I don’t want to reply. I’ve got nothing good to say.”

The rabbit’s nose twitched as if to indicate: *even if you respond as scathingly as possible, Haku will still appreciate the knowledge that you read what he wrote.*

“It’s nothing against you, bunny. I planned to disappoint him from the start, because that’s what he did to me.”

She had a lengthy stare down with the animal in which Temari realized she was wasting precious sunbathing time.

“Alright.” She lifted the pen and sat up, positioning the scroll flat on the stretch of the chair, “I’ll disappoint him with words then! The only crime is that I’m not as eloquent a writer as he is. If you bring this back…then that should be the end of it.” Temari frowned down at the parchment. Words would not come easily.

The rabbit’s quiet voice came again, “Maybe.”

From the corner of her eye Temari glanced at Pua, “Unless you can tell me what to write, don’t distract me, cotton-tail.”

But of course, Pua was no such distraction. Temari knew full well that she was getting in her own way. Her brain raced for a short while, reviewing possible worthy answers to the heartfelt letter she had read. It covered the spectrum all the way from, ‘Please don’t bother me again’ and ‘Go die’ to ‘I accept your apology and I am relieved that you told me.’ Nothing seemed quite effective enough when she hesitantly pressed the pen to paper.

She scribbled a response with handwriting that was not her best. She only needed one line to get her feelings across. Temari closed the scroll and returned it to the courier rabbit, “Here, Pua.”

Temari settled down again and added, “That ought to shut him up.”

While on their way to Tanzaku Quarters for a mission, Neji iterated to Lee in a quiet voice how he learned of Sai’s fate. The boys followed behind Gai who was gradually picking up the pace of their trek.

“The ANBU agent told you about Sai’s reassignment?” Lee was genuinely surprised, “Is that not something that should have been kept confidential?”

“Tenzo told me about it in the hope that you and I would help facilitate Sai’s transition into…” Neji searched for the word, “Citizenhood.”

“Wah?” Lee was aghast, “And he told you his name? What an unprofessional agent!”

“I do care, Neji.” Lee clarified, “But I cannot imagine why a Black Ops agent would so easily confide in a Genin who defied him multiple times…”

Neji snorted at the thought, “I was not in violation of the Hokage’s request. I just needed fresh air.”

Lee nodded. *Fresh air* was synonymous with getting a glimpse of Tenten, he knew. Lee then went on to suppose how they could possibly assist Sai after taking into consideration their *first* encounter
with the uncouth ex-Root. Lee guessed that introducing Sai to their extended group of friends would be a fair start.

“He’ll insult them all.” Neji warned.

“Yes, he will,” Lee acknowledged, “But you have insulted all of our friends many times over, and they still spend time with you, Neji.”

Peeved, he replied, “…then it’s of no consequence…”

“Exactly. With time Sai will surely become as dependable as you have.”

Lee did not realize that was raking his friend over the coals, but as a more self-aware person, Neji discovered that he was force-fed humble pie whenever friends shared their opinions of his former attitude. He was a recovering jerk and he knew it, but Neji didn’t want to hear Lee say it every day like it was the only topic of discussion.

“My, you boys are awfully chatty back there!” Gai remarked in a lilting voice, “Your bonding is getting me fired up!”

Of course Lee was quickly inspired by the declaration and rushed forward, joining his Sensei for overly enthusiastic musings and a pre-mission pep talk. Neji was still listening and kept his irritation in check. He had no right to object to their youthful outbursts and he was becoming more tolerant of them. Reciprocally, Gai and Lee were more careful these days not to get on his nerves as Neji was, still, slightly hair-trigger without Tenten around.

While proceeding through thick forest towards their destination, Gai reviewed what Tsunade had explained to them earlier. The mission to Tanzaku Quarters was to address some growing unrest between an original founding family of the tourist town and the mortgage lenders they were quarreling with. Gai had glazed over the financial furor because it so happened that his brother, Maito Ken, was already visiting the office in Tanzaku to provide legal counsel. Team Gai had been sent to preside over discussions and dissuade any violence.

“The Shibusawa family may have monetary troubles, but I was told that they have many friends throughout Tanzaku Quarters and shinobi nations far and wide. If they are in distress, it would not be out of the question for them to ask shinobi to intervene on their behalf.” Gai elucidated, “And if any strife erupts we will extinguish it like a storm!”

Lee liked the sound of it and was impressed that his mentor’s brother was involved. Neji recalled that Ken, Tama’s father, was a generally unfriendly and stubborn man. He was also an unrivaled businessman in Konoha.

By late morning they had arrived and did not make their presence known to the warring parties. From an observation deck near a landmark building, the team peered into a window and watched Ken duke it out with the head of the Shibusawa family. Neji was no lip-reader, but he could tell that the portly bald man in lavish robes was making liberal use of profanity. Across the desk from the Shibusawa head, Ken remained calm and used an acid tongue to eat through his adversary’s arguments, citing law and regulation. The family, no matter how big or influential, had defaulted on multiple loans. The Shibusawa estate was bank property now.

“What do you suppose he is saying?” Lee wondered after a while.

“My brother likes the words delinquent and foolish.” Gai spoke from experience.

'It's because he deals with Sato.' Neji thought to himself.
The stakeout persisted for nearly an hour until Gai excused himself for a bathroom break. Neji watched him enter the office building and ask a secretary to point him towards a lavatory.

“Missions have been uneventful lately.” Lee remarked.

“Compared to Oga Castle, we could nap through our assignments now.”

“Gai-sensei said that he would try to persuade the Hokage to give us higher-ranked missions.”

“I doubt that Tsunade-sama will revoke her limitation. We don’t have a fourth teammate.”

Lee’s eyes glimmered hopefully, “Do you think she will return Tenten to us?”

“I have no idea.” Neji was somber, “Fujita told me the other day he was nearly considered a replacement for our team, as he is waiting to receive teammates as well. The Hokage only denied him because his abilities are too similar to my own.”

“I see…”

“Perhaps Sai…” Neji shrugged, “But Tenzo indicated he met qualifications to join the ANBU Black Ops.”

“He may still be interested.” Lee tapped his chin.

“Even if he was interested, even if there was someone else who could join our team,” Neji was resolute, “I will never accept it.”

Lee’s sidelong smile at him was small, “I know. Neither could I.”

Neji scanned over the building with the Byakugan again and was shocked to see Gai had reappeared on the third floor. He was making haste towards the office his brother was negotiating in. Before Neji could begin articulating to Lee that there was a possibility of danger, Gai had engaged in a four versus one brawl in the hallway. Thugs had been discreetly lined up outside of the loan department office, but Neji was unsure of how Gai realized it before he had.

What was more remarkable: Gai had managed to quietly subdue the would-be interlopers. Ken and the Shibusawa family head continued their argument without an ounce of concern for the muffled sounds outside the door. After about a minute, Gai had either knocked out or choked out the hired brutes and piled them neatly at the end of the corridor in an unconscious heap.

Neji tapped Lee’s shoulder before moving, “We should probably go inside.”

“Why?”

“Gai just omitted us from this mission.”

“He did?” Lee was puzzled as he followed Neji, descending towards the street to enter the bank, “Did you watch something happen?”

“He just thwarted an attempted ambush. It took about sixty seconds.” Neji explained, “Everything appears stable now.”

The look of bubbly admiration on Lee’s face made their exclusion almost worthwhile.

In the lobby, the secretary at the front desk let them by without a fuss and Neji led the way upstairs. When they reached the third floor office, the Shibusawa patriarch was sheepishly apologizing for the
‘confrontational youths’ in the hallway. Gai stood beside his brother, not convinced by the apology, but his presence allowed Ken to serve the man his papers and to ‘settle his affairs legally.’

Ken added as he pushed his chair back, “Should you refuse to comply, rest assured that force the Hidden Leaf Village employs can easily overpower any of your coercions. Do not harass your lenders again…or expect the authorities at your door by tomorrow morning.”

“Understood, sir.” The hefty man bustled out.

Neji and Lee waited outside of the doorway interestedly, beheld as Ken quietly thanked his brother for the intervention, and then he briskly stepped out to the stairwell. Gai sighed heavily before regarding his pupils, “I would have notified you of the threat sooner, boys, but I did in fact have to use the men’s room. I was interrupted.” And with that he proceeded towards the nearest bathroom.

Lee was still intrigued, “Gai-sensei hardly needed our help for this mission…”

Though Neji did not say it, he completely agreed with Lee. Gai’s skills as a Jounin had become tremendously clear to Neji, at least on the last few missions they had been on. While the man could not help his impassioned speeches and motivated attitude, he could neutralize threats with all of the grace and speed expected of a Jounin. His fighting style was incredibly adaptable, his timing precise, and his leadership consistent. Beyond that, Neji had come to silently admire Gai’s ability to glean details from minimal information and react swiftly. While he waited in the hallway, Neji was still stumped as to how Gai knew that danger was present without confirmation from a sweep of the Byakugan.

When their Sensei returned he advised that they keep watch in the first floor lobby from then on. Neji decided to ask, “How did you know they were in the building?”

“Ah, you mean the mercenaries?”

“That you bludgeoned, yes.”

“Hm,” Gai restrained a grin and cupped his chin, “Sometimes intuition serves me well. I know my brother backwards and front, even if we can’t get along most of the week…” He explained, “I saw him signal me through the window. He knew about the intruders before any of us did.”

Lee gasped in awe.

“He didn’t signal.” Neji disagreed.

“It was the face he made.” Gai elaborated, “He only makes that face when he needs me for something.”

“Then naturally we would not recognize it!” Lee concluded.

Gai added, “Never fear, Neji. I expect we will have to deal with more persuaders out on the road, while escorting my brother home. Your boredom will abate!”

Unfortunately, as they made their way back to Leaf with the stone-faced and prim Maito Ken, the remaining thugs hiding out in Tanzaku Quarters all promptly fled in terror. It left Neji terribly bored as they met no resistance while returning to Konoha. The Shibusawa family had not gotten top-quality help, apparently.

So timely was their trip that Tsunade was a touch shocked by their reappearance in her office, “This one was too easy for you, eh?”
Lee took it as a hopeful sign she would give them a more challenging mission, but she turned up her hands, indicating nothing else needed to be done. She dismissed the team after a short debriefing and hurried them out, “I’ve got a long train of appointments today. Don’t bother me until tomorrow!”

The team politely exited before the Hokage’s temper ticked up any further. Gai announced that he had a few matters to attend to and that he expected them at the team’s training ground at 4 o’clock sharp that afternoon. Judging by the competitive edge in Gai’s voice, Neji and Lee could assume he had another silly score to settle with Kakashi. After their sensei had departed, it only seemed right to capitalize on the remainder of the morning. They agreed to get changed and meet Wong Leung.

Once Neji returned in proper attire he got the sense that Lee’s grandfather was in a bad mood. The old man raised his chin, grunting, and then commanded the two of them to work on a balancing exercise.

Wong positioned the boys into back-bends that made their shoulders meet like a bridge. He scolded them when their heads bumped together initially. Neji and Lee found that it was a struggle to keep their shoulders pressed for stability. Wong strolled off to pick up magazines from a shop down the street. Lee reported on how long they were expected to hold the non-traditional pose, “He said an hour. That does not seem quite so bad…”

“Most likely because he didn’t tell you what he had planned next.” The Hyuga retorted, wobbling.

A long silence prevailed as time tickled by without definition or measure. Thoughts passed through Neji’s mind as he and Lee got the hang of the exercise and struck a perfect balance. ‘I keep returning to this training even when I have clear memory of how onerous it is. I never would have agreed to such a thing if…’ He pictured Tenten’s face for a moment, ‘No. I would never have learned anything about Lee. I would have remained comfortable within my own limitations, and I’d never have the capacity to recognize that I had limitations back then.’ He had learned much from Wong’s lessons and embraced this new ‘sense of self.’

His application of Wong’s approach to Jyukken, as well as the development of his Wind Element chakra, was shaping him into a shinobi that would never wince at a Jounin opponent. He was more inclined to spend time with friends, converse occasionally, be more personable with members of his clan, and had acquired tools to cope with his emotions. Most of the time.

Lee had probably benefitted the most from Wong’s training. His skills were honed sharply and his evasion and speed were unmatchable, Neji admitted. Gai was hard-pressed to challenge Lee these days, and his handling of weaponry would certainly have made Tenten proud. But what may have been the most decisive improvement of all, Neji noted, was that his perception of Lee had changed.

He had once balked at the thought of being on a team with Rock Lee. The dead-last student was thought to be talentless. Hopeless. Neji never viewed him as an equal in any respect. While it had been a covert occurrence, the moment Wong Leung had been introduced was when Neji had stopped doubting Lee altogether. Quite suddenly, Lee was the one to turn to for answers and guidance. He understood every word and task and did not shy away from the unknown. When nothing made sense in a world without Tenten, it was Lee who listened and unscrambled his brain, navigating their new environment. Wong’s training bordered on punishment, but Neji returned each day because Lee’s presence made all the difference. They were both undeniably better for it.

Aside from the figurative support they gave each other, Lee also provided literal support, thirty minutes into the balancing act. Wong made sure to give them exercises that frequently required two people.

Lee made a puffing sound, snapping Neji out of his thoughts.
“What?” Neji’s eyes rolled up to get a glimpse of Lee’s scrunched face.

“Your hair. It is tickling my nose.”

“The wind must have blown it.”

“I do not know if—”

“Do not knock us over. He’ll make us do it again for twice as long.”

“I know, but, ah…achoo!” The hair strand remained after the sneeze and their maneuver had nearly capsized.

Neji had the decency to shift his head until Lee was no longer tormented by errant hair.

“I apologize for sneezing on you.”

Neji only sighed.

“I find this easier than prayer-crouches.” Lee mused out loud.

“Perhaps by a tiny margin.” Neji yielded.

“Maybe Grandpa will let us try something else today?”

“He looked irritable. Would he allow it?”

“I cannot say. He may have been annoyed that we took a mission before this.”

Neji shut his eyes to scoff, “Ninja activity is so off-putting. Aren’t you the only one with income in your house?”

“Yes, but that is irrelevant. I do not think Grandpa is bothered that we are shinobi…I suspect it is because…” Lee permitted himself to speculate, “He enjoys spending time with us.”

Neji’s eyes rolled back again to look at his friend, “How did you draw that conclusion?”

“It is a feeling I have when I speak to him. He is a very nostalgic man…” Lee supposed, “He must miss having students. Grandpa looks forward to training us.”

“He is a wretched teacher.” Neji added, “And very wise.”

When an hour was up Wong returned with his magazines. He immediately offered criticism, *What is this? Why are you talking? I never said you could speak during this training!*

Lee countered, *You did not say that we couldn’t, Grandpa. Neji and I have a lot to discuss.*

*Like gossiping wives, the two of you! Stand up now.*

Lee notified his teammate and they disentangled themselves, glad to be upright again.

*No more chatting from here out! When I am not here you practice your mindfulness!*

*Yes, Grandpa.*

Wong stepped up to Neji and gave the space above his heart a solid poke, *So…this kitten has improved a bit. He’s stronger in the mind than he was. We shall brush up on Baguazhang today to*
Lee passed the message along to Neji, “Grandpa wants to review Ba Gua forms with you.”

“I don’t object.” It still beat prayer-crouches.

*He will not be using his Bloodline Gift either. He must feel the energy and momentum of an adversary.*

Lee relayed that as well.

Neji consented and mimicked the circling motions that Wong approached with. It was a fairly decent effort and he did not make the old man correct him too much. For a while Neji was confident that he could keep up even without the Byakugan. Then Wong commanded Lee to attack from the rear and Neji got annoyed. Turning and wheeling away from two people was tremendously difficult, ‘*But maybe that’s the point.*’ He would not always be pitted against a single opponent.

When Wong was mostly satisfied with testing Neji’s evasion he asked Lee to sit out again. The old man appreciated Neji’s sincere attempt to strike him. They batted and spun, and Neji had prioritized turning Wong’s momentum against him rather than actively trying to drill tenketsu shut. The defensive strategy worked well for a little while until Wong got in close, using clever footwork and a brush of his arm to sweep Neji’s block aside like dust. With his pinky finger, Wong poked a fleshy spot behind the Hyuga’s ear and watched as he dropped to the ground on liquefied legs.

Spooked, Lee rushed over to his friend to help him up, but Wong stopped him.

*Relax, grandchild. He’ll be up in a few moments when the nausea wears off.*

*What did you do, Grandpa?!*

*I used a Tao Nerve Strike. A small one, I assure you. This one very handily shuts one-fourth of the chi points below the left hemisphere of the brain. It is a reactive closing. I bet his right side feels like jelly! Ha ha!*

Lee kneeled beside Neji and asked quietly, “Do your limbs feel like jelly?”

Neji sat up with a very aggravated expression, “I did not assign this feeling a *specific* quality yet, Lee.”

“Grandpa used a Tao Nerve Strike! He said it can close many tenketsu at once!”

“Terrific.” Neji growled, and with the Byakugan proceeded to locate his violated tenketsu in order to open them again.

*Give him a moment.* Wong insisted; *He’ll be up. He’s very sturdy.*

And sure enough, after Lee patiently waited a few paces away, Neji was able to mend himself and stand. He was still irritated that he had been schooled again, but he managed to keep his comments to himself.

Wong’s mood was much improved. He gently rotated Lee around to reveal the back of his grandson’s head, indicating that Neji move in close to inspect it. Lee made an uncertain sound but did not protest. Neji understood with slight astonishment that Wong intended to demonstrate to him what had happened, and maybe even how to perform the strike himself.
Wong gestured at his eye orbital, suggesting what Neji took to mean: use your Blood Limit. He obliged.

**Good, you’re a smart boy after all. I know you don’t really understand me, but Lee will help. Look here.** Wong said, pointing out the bundled nerves near the top of his grandson’s neck, **This is what I did to you. I bet your clansmen don’t take advantage of this area because of the high margin of error. If you mistakenly touch a cranial nerve...it doesn’t end so well. But right here is a ‘lock’ that you shinobi don’t pay attention to. These connect our ‘Gates.’ Lee uses these, no? It is one of the few ninja talents that overlap with Tao teachings.**

While observing with the Byakugan, Neji asked Lee for a translation.

“Grandpa is explaining that [locks] stand between the Inner Gates!” Lee, who was turned away from them, was excited, “He is saying that they are not frequently used because of the margin of error. I suppose the Hyuga clan does not attack them?”

“If we did, Jyukken that is not precise enough will damage all the nerves in this area, and will likely result in death.” Neji reported, “I imagine a bad track record is why this isn’t taught in my clan, if it was ever taught at all.”

**But if you see with more than just your eyes, you will not make a mistake.** Wong encouraged, privy to the youngsters’ discussion, **We will talk about this lock and look at it today. In the future, I will help you strike it with confidence. Then you can learn about the others.**

Lee passed the message to Neji, “Grandpa can teach you how to correctly manipulate them. He can introduce it to you today. He is certain you can learn it!”

It was somewhat flattering.

*The right and left hemisphere locks will free or restrict the Opening Gate and Healing Gate above. It will signal chi points and ‘lift’ bodily limitations.* Wong went on, **This is a way to assist my grandson, should you ever need to. His Capitate Locks have been shut since he was born. His parents should have taken greater care...**

Stunned by the diagnosis he had never known about, Lee looked over his shoulder at Neji, “I have… faulty locks.”

Neji blinked curiously at him, “Meaning what?”

“My ability to use jutsu is hindered by it, I gather.” Lee was a bit dismayed, “Grandpa never explained it to me before.”

*Now, now, Lee...a tremendous warrior like you should not be insecure over something as trivial as two closed locks. Ninjutsu is not a vital skill. But if you must talk about it with Neji, as you two have a proclivity for conversation...* Wong folded his arms, **Then we’ll do it over lunch. Let’s go inside for now.**

The old man abruptly interrupted the start of the lesson and spun on his heel, walking back in the direction of his home.

Stupefied, Lee stared at his friend.

“Why is he going inside?” Neji was confused; he also responded to Lee’s expression, “What?”

“He said your name!” Lee moved to follow, “He usually calls you something else...”
Lunch was informative. The stewed cabbage and beef was filling. All the while they talked about Neji’s opportunity to learn about *locks*, which acted as connectors between chakra points and the Eight Gates. Wong lectured through Lee’s translations about “chi flow,” better known to them as chakra, and how it was not too distantly related to the physical changes stimulated by Inner Gates. Formerly unrelated subjects were sewn together through old Tao ideas. Neji was amused to learn that Jyukken and Gouken were not mirror-image approaches to combat as he had thought. They were expressions of the same ‘way,’ as Wong described the styles as two adjacent spokes that supported a ‘wheel.’ Nothing could be definitively different while everything is connected, the old man put it.

Lee’s handicap was briefly discussed, but Wong had a ‘could-give-a-fuck’ attitude about it. Lee was a spoke on a wheel like everyone else, Wong insisted, and there was nothing *broken* about him.

When the meal was over and the old gentleman was tired of expanding the minds of young people, he commanded them to take their questions elsewhere. *At least for today…I haven’t had my nap yet.*

That made them right on time for Gai’s 4 o’clock rendezvous as they crossed town in Han clothes. The two boys had never felt their camaraderie so strong, nor had they ever expected a friendship like it had. Though it went unsaid, both Neji and Lee had thought about it at different times. Life, while not perfect, was still quite enjoyable these days.

Gai commended them for their promptness. He was eager to announce another arm-wrestling victory against Kakashi that had secured them a double-training session at the end of the week. Team Gai’s students versus Team Kakashi’s students. Neji had a suspicion that Gai was aware of the impending date of the next Chunin Exam but was not at liberty to announce it. Their sensei wanted them prepared regardless.

Added to the itinerary was more melee weapon testing and, after that, hand signal review for stealth missions. Team Gai was fond of radio communications, but Neji had astutely pointed out that Gai and Lee could not be shouting at each other during every mission.

“I believe we do need new radio headsets.” Lee announced, “I recall that mine has not worked in weeks.”

Gai made note of it, “Very well, Lee. And you, Neji?”

“I suppose I could use something more current.”

“It seems I have a bit of shopping to do then. I don’t suppose we’ll need a fourth…” Gai trailed off sadly, “A set of four is fine.”

It occurred to Neji that he had left behind the Tool-Summoning scroll that housed Lee’s nunchaku. He would have to fetch it before proceeding with their lesson. He tried alerting Gai to this minor blunder, but the man paid him no heed while gawking across the grassy field. Neji slowly followed the gazes of Gai and Lee to determine what was so distracting.

Gekko Hayate had stepped into the training area while blowing his nose into a tissue. He was prone to spring allergies. What was the actual subject of concern was the kunoichi following behind Hayate. The men of Team Gai were at a loss for words, although Tenten did not look nearly as flabbergasted as they did.

“Hey, Gai,” Hayate cleared his throat, “Sorry. I was given a mandatory evaluation day for my student. I already matched her with Kurenai’s team but they weren’t enthusiastic opponents. Do you have some time for a combat test?”
Gai inhaled a large portion of air through his mouth before managing a reply, “Of course we have time!” Then added cautiously; “Is this arrangement approved by the Hokage?”

“I guess it is when she demands that I get out of her office.” Hayate shrugged, “Other teams were preoccupied so I thought I’d check with you.”

Neji registered Lee’s transitioning facial expressions for a few seconds before looking back to Tenten. She was dressed in the new attire he had seen her in before: a white cheongsam dress over dark pants and her customary weapons holsters at her sides. Her hair was more elaborate, her posture relaxed, and she had a large weapon’s scroll secured low on her back. Above that was the scabbard of a small sword he had not seen before. Her eyes and mouth were serene, distant, and Neji could not help but feel like he was looking at a stranger.

She was here for nothing more than a training assessment. It was almost cruel to parade her around as someone else’s student, Neji thought, and watch Gai struggle to remain pleasant. While his blood pressure assured Neji that he was excited and astounded to see the girl, he was unhappy that she was a wholly separate entity now.

Gai approved his team’s participation for a one-on-one test and Hayate gave a nod of his head, prompting Tenten to step forward. She had zeroed-in her attention on Gai, which was immediately perplexing.

When Gai stepped back uncertainly Hayate clarified, “I always pit her against Jounin first. Have at it!”

Maito Gai quailed for a moment before pulling himself together with a stupendous burst of gusto. This former student was still his student, and he could not think of the last time Tenten had been willing to challenge him.

With a roaring laugh Gai charged. Neji and Lee remained at the edge of the field, silent and mouths hanging open in dumbfoundment. There was no previous recorded confrontation between Gai and Tenten to serve as a precedent, and so naturally they had no idea what to expect.

Without a quip or emotional signal of any kind, Tenten executed a cartwheel towards the charging bull of a Jounin, pulling open the tool summoning scroll with her heel. Her free hand conjured up a chain-bola while she tumbled and flung it in the same motion. The weighted chain struck Gai’s legs, snaring him. He began to topple and rolled out of the way of the follow-up onslaught of projectiles. With pent up momentum Gai went in for a sliding-tackle, but the kunoichi leapt cleanly over him and kept throwing.

Gai took evasive actions while freeing his legs. He about-faced quickly enough to see the girl’s silhouette against the sun as she sprang. He had the foresight to pick up a discarded kunai from the ground as Tenten bore down with the jian that had been at her back. Metal rang as the weapons met, and there was a tearing sound of fabric that followed, tipping Gai off to a second sword that was slicing through his flak jacket from behind. Eyes wild, Gai quickly identified the clone behind him. He had no idea when or how Tenten produced it, but he was barely fast enough to knock it back with a superficial elbow nudge to the chest. Its hardiness revealed that it was a Shadow Clone, ‘Amazing! I might’ve fallen for it if Kakashi hadn’t done something similar to show me up! Ha!’

He then smartly ducked when the Shadow Clone swung in during another pounce, and in a concerted act of coordination, rolled across Tenten’s back and away as the original kunoichi slashed forward. The speed with which she struck and dashed would have easily cleaned even Lee’s clock had he not stayed on his toes. Grinning, Gai countered as appropriately as possible with a kunai,
blocking the two circling kunoichi. He would have blinked and missed the *third* copy that snuck in from, well, he didn’t know where. The mounting pressure called for a bit more aggression, but the moment Gai took the offensive with his single kunai he was immediately punished for it.

Part of his bowl-cut was hacked by a brush of two jians, and the third sword nearly went straight through his foot while he hollered in outrage. He had to hop away and watch his back. The Shadow Clones were too fast to predict, lacking any kind of pattern he could exploit, and Gai realized that he was not facing a basic Kage Bunshin barrage, ‘*The Dance of the Crescent Moon! This jutsu gives purpose and direction to clones that far surpass a traditional attack- whoa-*!’ That was nearly his head again, ‘A fourth?’

He was mildly alarmed. Two was the typical cap, but to pigeonhole Tenten as typical at this point would not make sense.

At about the point he felt a drop of sweat streak down from his temple; he thought it proper to counter more seriously. Gai drew out his nunchaku from a holster and tossed it over his shoulder, below his elbow and let it smash viciously into the nearest Shadow Clone’s head. It exploded into smoke and Tenten changed directions, her replications staying at the front while she provided covering fire with projectiles. Gai blocked everything that was tossed at him but had to retreat from the advancing clones. It was a bit of a goose chase until Gai found another opening, somersaulting over clones, hearing the ring of sword metal against his nunchaku. He came within a few feet of the real kunoichi, who had swapped out projectiles for her jian again in an instant.

After pummeling a clone that wedged itself between him and Tenten, Gai took advantage of the brief smoke buffer. With a burst of speed, he worked his way around Tenten’s back, looped the threshing chain around her neck and pulled it taught. There was a hiss of breath as the kunoichi froze, recognizing that she had been caught unaware.

“Hm, hmm, hmm!” Gai was laughing to himself, very pleased, “What incredible fortitude! Tenten you have-” He stopped speaking self-assuredly when he felt the tip of a jian press threateningly against his throat. The clone that had been caught in the nunchaku was dispelled.

“I know you are probably quick enough to block and keep going, but…” Tenten’s voice was stern, “I don’t think you should.”

“Oh! Hmm!” He laughed again, “Well met on a spring day! You have bested me, Tenten.” It was a sunny surrender and the sword was withdrawn, ending all hostility.

Tenten sheathed Hok at her back again and the dip in her eyebrows suggested sadness. Before Gai could offer any more booming congratulations, Hayate had come up beside the kunoichi, “Not bad. The two of you took advantage of the same moment of distraction. Great minds think alike, huh?”

She gave Hayate a sidelong look, “That’s how students and teachers are supposed to think.”

“*Hey,* don’t get snippy with me again.”

“I am *not.*”

“You’ve been bent out of shape about this evaluation. You were dragging your heels with Kurenai’s team too. Can you stop giving me a hard time?” The man groused, “Are you going to continue the assessment or do you refuse to fight those two basking sharks over there?” He was referring to Lee and Neji, whose mouths were still agape, “You declined to fight Hinata earlier and *that* pissed me off.”
“She’s my friend!”

“Aren’t they all your friends?”

Tenten puffed her cheeks, “She’s different. I couldn’t hurt her even if the Hokage ordered me to…”

“Psh, what a softie. Looks like you’ve got a way to go…” Hayate grumbled, “So I’ll take that as a ‘no’?”

“No, I refuse.” She affirmed.

Across the way, it was a bit hurtful to her friends that she was unwilling to test herself against them. It was a short encounter. Just like that she would be on her way again, probably to apply her skills against other Genin who she didn’t mind clobbering.

“Alright, fine, listen up then.” Hayate folded his arms and frowned, “I had to put up with a lot and follow strict rules while working with you. I cleaned you up and pointed you in the right direction, Tenten. I guess I shouldn’t expect a thank-you, but the reason why this evaluation was slated for today was because I delayed it to be today. The Hokage only said it had to be completed within the suspension period.” He sniffed, staving off an allergic sneeze, “Remember when I got kicked out of Tsunade’s office earlier? That was her confirming the suspension is over. I could complete the evaluation and then turn you over.”

After giving the man a long, critical look she nearly screeched, “Why didn’t you tell me that? I…I wouldn’t have been so stubborn about all of this if I had known!”

“Yes you would have. And you know…there are these things called surprises,” He grunted, “I was trying to be nice.”

“The Hokage approved it?” She asked again, paranoid.

“She did. Jeez, what am I a liar now? You don’t have to train with me anymore.” He muttered thanks under his breath, “I don’t know if you can take missions because that’s for the Hokage to decide tomorrow, but you can return to your team.”

Gai withheld an excited sob and, meters away in the background, so did Lee.

“I…you…” She struggled to find fitting words, “Thank you.”

“Yeah, yeah, I know. You can still visit if you like. Yugao was worried she wouldn’t get to see you after this.” Hayate nearly rolled his eyes, “Don’t let her down.”

“I won’t! Tell her not to worry!”

“Sure.” His lips folded in an impatient smirk.

She dared let happiness bloom in her features, “I’m sorry I was stubborn, Hayate. About as stubborn as you, I guess. You really did help me…”

“Alright, that’s enough.” He made a shooing motion with his hand, “Off with you. I want to return to my regular mission activity, and I know that you want to return to all those grinning idiots over there.”

Hayate gave a short wave to Gai before lumbering off, drawing out another tissue from his pocket. If he stayed any longer Tenten might find more to say, and he frankly did not need to hear what he was
sure he already knew.

Lee could no longer hold in his scream of joy, “Tenten!”

She turned around to look at her teammates, not dreading the distance between them (which was considerably smaller) as she did for weeks. She felt the heaviness of Gai’s hand on her shoulder, welcoming, and watched Lee and Neji approach in a great hurry. They were on the cusp of being difficult to recognize, ‘They’re going to be as tall as Gai-sensei! And what’s with those clothes?’ She would swear Wong Leung had something to do with it, if she knew that old man.

Lee raced up to her and scooped her into a lift. Tenten did not fight the automatic need to laugh in elation while he kept her raised, shouting incomprehensible things, and then slowly lowered her back down to the ground. ‘Woo! Oh boy, he’s almost a whole head above me!’ She estimated, ‘And I’m in heels.’

Then she was squeezed into a youthful hug, “Tenten! I knew that you would come back to us! We were willing to wait as long as it took and we worked hard hoping to make you proud!” He sniffled, “Why are you so beautiful and-?” Lee sobbed, “Why did you almost kill Gai-sensei?”

“Lee! I didn’t! I would never hurt anyone!” She assured him in an urgent chuckle.

The hug had bunched her shoulders up, one of which Lee was weeping onto, and the other was being patted by Gai who had also begun to cry with joy, “I have never been so happy about anyone coming that close to slicing a major artery!” He added with a tearful, “Welcome back, Tenten.”

“Gai-sensei!” She admonished, “I wouldn’t. Come on, guys, you know better…”

It took a few minutes for the two of them to dry up, but by then Lee had gently released her. Tenten peeked around her childhood friend to get an eyeful of Neji, who she had only glimpsed from over shoulders and heads during her greeting. Something was decidedly different about him.

Aside from his height and the more muscular broadness that was evident in the clothes he wore, there was a radiance that had not been there last time. It occurred to her that Neji seemed friendlier. Tenten was sure her prediction was accurate when Neji shut his eyes for a moment, overcome by a tiny smile of relief.

“You were gone for too long.” He informed her.

“I’m sorry I made you wait.” She took a step closer, “I know that Lee has been keeping you company.”

Neji nodded in confirmation. He came a bit closer, and as the sounds of Lee and Gai’s blubbering quieted down, he too reached to pull her into a sincere embrace. Since he had initiated it Tenten felt she was within her rights to hug back, chin about level with his shoulder, and was entirely aware of the contrast between this hold and Lee’s squeeze. Neji’s hands had settled in the space between the sword scabbard and summoning scroll at her back. Maybe it was a sympathetic response, but she had mirrored the gesture.

‘He must’ve missed me.’ That was certainly a good feeling, ‘I wish I could be absent for weeks on end more often…” The sensation of welcome and happiness, while it had been acute with Lee, was exponentially more noticeable with Neji’s voluntary touch.

He probably did not mean to brush his face against hers. A rosy flush crept over the bridge of Tenten’s nose when Neji spoke again, “Tell me everything.” He added, “Later. Gai was about to go over signaling with us.”
“Oh!” She took a step back and returned her attention to her sensei, “I can join in, right?”

“Yes! We have not yet begun!” Gai was sanguine, “And you are also right on time for a melee weapon review, Tenten. Lee will be keener to take part now that you’re here…”

After a successful review of hand signaling, nunchaku, and then a trip to a ninja equipment store, Gai could say that he felt revitalized. Tenten’s giddy participation upon her return had assured the man that she was thrilled to be a part of the team again. And also, thanks to a suggestion made by Lee, the team celebrated Tenten’s recent birthday as well as her return. They dropped in at their preferred restaurant and caught up on what they had missed. The laughter was loud, the food impeccable, and no alcohol was ordered or accidentally ingested.

Gai was overjoyed to share this news with Tama the next day on an early-morning jog around the village. His niece was an occasional cardio-companion when she had free time.

“I knew that she would be re-assigned! I had a feeling…” The girl smiled thoughtfully, “Tenten was so out of sorts for a while…she butted heads with her tutor and was in such a bad mood…”

There was a spring in Gai’s step, “Ah yes…all is as it should be! I am giving my students some space to reconnect for now. We can resume missions again in a few days with the Hokage’s permission.”

“It’s about time!”

They proceeded uphill towards posterior steps near the Hokage monument.

“And how is my rival? I suspect he is very pleased to be your sensei!”

“He is. Kakashi-sensei is always checking to see if we’re available for training.” Tama reported, “Sakura-chan has a hectic schedule, so we wait up for her whenever we can. Kiba-kun is bouncing back.”

Her uncle frowned, “I heard that his family is in turmoil.”

“Not exactly. Kiba-kun told me his father was arrested two days ago at a rest house. He was trying to leave the Fire Country, but he didn’t make it far. He’s been hospitalized again. Tsume tracked him for nearly a week, I was told.” Tama explained, “They’re trying to hold it together until the court hearing.”

“Such deception deserves firm justice!” Gai was climbing the stairs three at a time while he fumed, “Who could ever scheme to use their child that way?”

Tama hurried to keep up, “There are…a lot of rotten people in the world, Uncle Gai…”

“Real men take responsibility!”

“They should-!”

“His karmic track record is ruined!”

“Wait up, Uncle Gai!” She was panting, trying to scale the top of the staircase as he had in a matter of seconds. When Tama arrived at the top her uncle had slowed down to accommodate her.

“I apologize, pretty gem. The thought of such dishonor maddens me.”
“That’s alright…” She took a deep breath, “It bothered me too.”

“Of course. The blood of our family is thick with contempt for disgrace and cowardice. My brother too…” A switch seemed to flip in his head and Gai noted, “I forgot to ask Ken something.”

“What did you want to ask?”

“He might’ve known…I expect Sato must be considering places for you to live. He doesn’t have the proper space for you…” Gai grinned, “Kakashi should be able to give him guidance about home-hunting! You two don’t have enough room to cohabitate for marriage.”

“Uh, Uncle Gai…” Tama was shamefaced, “Are you seriously thinking about that right now? We still have time!”

“It’s borrowed time you speak of; that’s all that shinobi have!” Gai reminded her, “Tama-chan, surely you are looking forward to the merging of our two esteemed families!”

“I do. We just…don’t imagine the future much.” She was a tad disappointed to admit, “Short-term goals are about all that we work towards.”

“Your betrothed needs to step up! I’ve seen the maturity of my students grow by leaps in these last few months. All of your comrades are young adults now! Certainly Sato-kun must be prepared?”

“He’s…attentive.” Tama supplied a word, “But I don’t think he’s prepared, Uncle Gai. Sato just doesn’t think about getting married.”

“That kind of attitude won’t give me grand-nieces and nephews!” He boomed indignantly.

The idea shocked Tama somewhat. She had to mindfully shut her mouth to be sure bugs would not fly in as she ran. Her uncle’s grand vision of the future packed on a lot of pressure.

“Uncle, my attitude has nothing to do with grand-anythings you want to play with.”

“Naturally, it’s at your discretion, Tama-chan, but what better way is there to bind the Hatake and Maito families?”

“I don’t know,” She wore a small, impish expression, “Why don’t you and Kakashi-sensei get married, then?”

“HA!” That comment stirred Gai up, “We are too competitive for married life, Niece!” He added more seriously as he vaulted over a roadblock, “And I have a dog allergy.”

Later that same morning, because it was difficult for them to be prompt, Sato and Kakashi had also gotten together for training away from their respective teams. It was a common practice nowadays to meet at the training field.

Kakashi was astounded that, after their close shave with members of the Akatsuki, Sato’s jutsu and performance had advanced vastly. On multiple occasions, Kurenai had quietly remarked to Kakashi that she was unable to challenge any of her students lightly. She was nearing the end of personal knowledge she could share with Sato regarding Genjutsu, which he aptly applied thanks to her direction and tests. They would have ‘mind battles’ at their training field and attack each other with vicious illusions.
“You’re a brave woman.” Kakashi reminded her.

She had smiled slyly, “It’s about time you challenged him. He’s employing totems and gestures now, which are among the most advanced ways to cast Genjutsu. You ought to be able to handle it.”

So Kakashi had acquiesced to the idea and evaluated his nephew when he could. He was surprised that Sato was able to use a sneaky verbal suggestion tucked within meaningless conversation, and it made his uncle happily stroll over a trap even when his rational mind knew better. Sato’s seamless weaving of illusion and tricks made Kakashi grateful that the Sharingan was at his disposal. He was not ashamed to use it.

His nephew had improved in other ways as well. While still a button-pushing extrovert, Sato had gained an unexpected sharpness in his personality. Kakashi had no doubts that his near-death experience had provoked it. This quality carried over into the way Sato fought, decidedly more brutal with Taijutsu and weaponry, and far less shy about melee combat than he had been in the past. He had become well-rounded thanks to his newfound motivation.

“It’s a work in progress, but…” Sato announced proudly, “I invented a new type of clone.”

“That’s nice.” Kakashi was taking a five-minute break with a paperback book.

“Want to see it?”

“Not really. You’ll probably make it hurt me.”

“When you finish reading that section, then, I’ll show you what I have so far.”

“You know, I doubt you’ve made something new and original when scores of shinobi who have preceded you, long ago, invented most of the techniques we use today. There are only so many methods of generating a clone, Sato. I don’t think it’s really new.”

“It’s new. You can cry about it later.”

‘He’s as cheeky as ever.’ Kakashi mentally noted, ‘I wondered if it is out of the question to write him a Jounin recommendation letter…but Tsunade wouldn’t accept them this early. She’ll likely want to read those over after her Exam concludes.’

Sato took a seat beside his uncle on a log, glancing over the erotic page Kakashi was reading, “I bet you’ve heard already…”

“About Gai’s team?”

“Yeah! They looked ridiculously psyched! Tama was talking about it before I stopped by.” He looked upward and smiled, “I’m glad for them. They’re not supposed to be apart.”

“As Gai’s friend, I couldn’t be happier for him. I’ve felt the same pain and disappointment he did.” Kakashi agreed while flipping a page.

“I can’t imagine what it’d be like to be forced away from my friends.” Sato mused, “Just about everything I do involves them…”

Kakashi solemnly closed his book, “…it’s terrible.”

“Huh?”

“Being apart from…Rin…and Obito.” His sigh was soft, “Nothing was the same after that.”
“Crap, I’m sorry.” Sato realized he had approached the topic carelessly.

“It’s not your fault.”

“I know it isn’t,” The young man acknowledged, “But it hurts you. It hurts you every day so I try not to bring it up.”

“Relax. Many things have hurt me that haven’t ruined me,” Kakashi patted Sato’s shoulder as he stood, “I was thinking about stopping by the Memorial Stone later to say hello.”

“I’ll go with you.” Sato offered.

“If you like. I go to keep Obito current on what’s happening in my life. I like to think that Rin is still safe out there somewhere.”

“That’s fine. I’ve wondered if it’d be right for me to visit when I…” He hesitated to finish, “Think about my dad.”

“I’m not so sure of that. We never could confirm what happened, Sato.”

“I just wish he had something, like a gravestone or whatever, that I could visit.” Sato elaborated, “Mom said that he took a mission one day…and then was gone without a trace. They don’t think he even made it out of the Fire Country.”

“To tell you the truth,” Kakashi replied, “As a favor to my sister, I tracked Riei. We really couldn’t find a trail since I suspect he had flown most of the way. There was no body or evidence to be found. Maybe if his summoned owl had been killed we would have spotted something…but we had no way of knowing what happened.”

Sato smiled to himself and left his seat, “I think…that I’m getting close to not caring so much about it anymore.”

Not much more than a week after Haku’s bet had gone awry, he and Ranmaru were still conscripted for work at Migawari’s office. The two friends cautiously darted into the doctor’s office day in and day out, making up excuses to their swordsman mentors for their absences.

For the most part, Raiga had bought Ranmaru’s tales of jaunts around town. He did not question his protégée’s whereabouts so long as he was on time for training.

Haku had more difficulty keeping Zabuza convinced. While not assisting in Hiroshi’s teashop, as he was still expected to do, Haku’s time was divided further between training with Zabuza and clandestinely learning from Migawari. When the Demon of the Hidden Mist had heard the sixth explanation of why Haku was not taking a mission, Zabuza decided to stop asking altogether. He doubted it was because the Toad Sage had told him not to. Haku was clearly distracted by something, but the brute stalked off and took missions on his own, supposing that the façade Haku had constructed would eventually fall.

Early one afternoon, Haku had once again evaded suspicion and joined Ranmaru for medical jutsu training. Migawari had ushered them into a room where a young patient was seated.

“You’re late for practice. That’s one less bathroom break,” The beady-eyed man warned, “Ranmaru cared to make it on time!”

“I apologize. But unless you want a famous nukenin to pay you a visit, I suggest you let me sidetrack
him first.” Haku replied evenly. He then greeted the patient who was waiting quietly; a middle-aged woman on crutches.

Migawari gave brief instructions to his new assistants before standing back, allowing them to mend the lady’s leg fracture. He had deduced that while Ranmaru had a more natural talent for healing, it was Haku’s exceptionally precise chakra control that made him a candidate for healing. Migawari had taught them ‘skills of necessity’ that Medic-Nin relied on, but nothing too advanced. Migawari had hesitations about investing in their studies when he was well aware two swordsmen were down the street, and that they might have reason to object, ‘I’m too old to get murdered. It just ain’t right.’

Haku surveyed the site of the woman’s injury with his chakra; laying a gentle hand over her swollen leg. His eyes unfocused while his concentration shifted to the internal mapping of the body, chakra brushing over the fibula, quickly illuminating a hairline fracture above the ankle. Haku had identified the spot and ceased the jutsu, looking up with a small smile, “May I ask how you hurt your leg?”

“I told Migawari-san before, but it’s just so embarrassing. It’s the same work I do every day.” The woman admitted, “I move shipments off of pallets into the depot downtown, but I jumped off of a stack carelessly and…” She sighed, “I’m more fragile than when I was a kid, I swear.”

“It’s alright. This is a very small break.”

“I can’t miss work! I have a double shift in three days.” She added urgently, “Can you fix it by tomorrow?”

Migawari rumbled with laughter, “We fix worse than this in less time. Shinobi can rarely afford a day to heal.”

Ranmaru took a turn to use the System Survey Jutsu, scanning over the injury with his chakra to identify it. When he had a satisfactory image the small boy scooted over and allowed Haku to heal the lady’s broken leg. They chatted cordially while the soft glow of chakra bonded bone and soft tissue, the pain remained minimal, until finally Migawari stepped forward to inspect the handiwork. He commended Haku’s prowess and waived the woman’s medical fee. She thanked them sincerely during another chat, and later was able to leave on her own two legs.

“Migawari-san, you don’t pay us for this work because you don’t charge patients, is that it?” Ranmaru wondered.

“No. I don’t charge people who can’t afford to be charged.” The old gambler added, “And I don’t pay losers for anything.”

“There’s no need to be rude. You said yourself that you consider our mastery of these techniques to be an achievement.” Haku chided.

“Sure, but neither of you can gamble to save your lives. It’s no fun.”

“There are other ways to have fun.” Ranmaru assured him, “Like eating spicy foods.”

“…no. I have peptic ulcers.”

Haku reminded, “I can take care of those, if you like.”

“And then you can try spicy foods.” Ranmaru added excitedly.

“I may just have to fire you two after all, since you’re trying to sabotage my stomach…”
“Then you might actually have to get some work done.” Haku pointed out as they returned to the front of the building, single-file down the hall.

“Damn, you’re right. Scratch that. I’ll never fire you.”

They sighed collectively before rounding the corner to the waiting room. Ranmaru stopped in his tracks and squealed in fright. He quickly ducked behind Haku. The group looked ahead to see Zabuza seated on a cushioned chair, his arms folded in annoyance, glaring ahead without a sound as soft music played on the radio.

Migawari’s tiny eyes widened as far as they could go, “Oh my god.” He cleared his throat, “Er-hem! Are you in need of medical treatment, sir?”

A growl answered, “Huh…so you want to play dumb?” His Seversword was leaned against the exit of the waiting room, preventing anyone from running outside to save themselves.

Haku stepped forward to take responsibility, “Please don’t threaten these people, Zabuza.”

“I won’t. I don’t give a rat’s ass about the midget or the old gamester. You are the one who’s been lying to me, so my problem is with you.” Zabuza clarified, “What the fuck are you doing here, Haku? I suggest you don’t bullshit me this time.”

“I am learning Medical jutsu.”

“You could’ve just said that from the start.” The brute pointed out.

“I know, and you would have called it a waste of time.”

“It is a waste of time.” Zabuza added with a tilt of his head, “Isn’t that Raiga’s twerp?”

Ranmaru made a small sound of fear when he was acknowledged.

“So…Raiga’s here too?” Zabuza deduced, “Could you fuck up our situation a little more, Haku? If you don’t want me to kill anyone, that merits a head’s up. Keeping me in the dark won’t work the way you hope it will.”

“Right…” The apprentice agreed weakly.

The wrinkling of Zabuza’s brow indicated great distaste when he observed the tiny, violet-haired boy, his eyes were narrow with criticism, “There’s no way a runt like that is going to succeed a swordsman.”

“He has a better chance of it than I do.” Haku countered boldly, “I’ll make this up to you. But whatever you do, please leave Ranmaru and Raiga be. He doesn’t even know that we’re here.”

“That’s awfully convenient.” He considered it for a long moment, “Fine. I have better things to do than provoke a stupid asshole like him, but…if he so much as blinks at me with the idea of a fight, all bets are off.”

The word ‘bets’ attracted Migawari’s attention, “So that’s all you care about, eh, Momochi Zabuza? Never imagined the day I would see a monster like you in my office.” The old man puffed up, no longer intimidated, “What about the townspeople? Or these two studious boys? Aren’t they reason enough not to cause uproar around here?”

“You want to think you have a point, but you don’t, Old Man.” Zabuza sneered, “There’s unfinished
business between the Swordsmen, and don’t pretend that you understand. Our coup d’état in Mist would not have failed if idiots like Raiga didn’t flee from critical battles. The first possibility of loss was enough to change his mind, and I will never let a shinobi with that reputation shit on my plans again.”

“You are tremendously self-centered!”

“Tch. Why is that an issue?”

“There’s more to life than your half-baked plans to oust the Mizukage, you damned fool.” The retired Grass nin huffed, “There are other forces at work! Even you can see that.”

“Watch your tongue.” Zabuza’s hand traced over the hilt of the gargantuan sword beside him.

“Oh believe me, I will. I’ll come out and say it: you ought to take the advice of someone like me, a man who’s seen a lot of success in his lifetime, ho ho!” Migawari waggled his spectacles, “If you are so dedicated to seeing an apprentice rise and meet your expectations…and thereby help you realize your dreams…Haku can do much better than learning the fastest way to destroy the human body. He ought to learn to fix it too! The next time you’re in a tricky battle, you won’t regret that he is of both worlds, will you?”

“He’s a decent enough healer.” Zabuza sniffed, “He’s a reluctant killer.” He added angrily, “And Haku sure as hell can’t heal his way to a new regime.”


“Shut the fuck up. You’re no Hokage.”

A poisonous retort, “Neither was she. Tsunade-sama grew into it.”

Migawari waved his hands, “Enough of this! Are we hostages or have you concluded what you had to say? You implicated that you need more time to train with Haku, is that it?”

“Yeah. At least you pay attention.” He moved the sword aside to unblock the door, “Haku needs more training, and I’m not going to let you get in the way of that.”

“Fair enough. I don’t intend to cross you.” The old ninja yielded, “But I ask that you don’t start trouble around here.”

As Zabuza rose to stand, his dark, rumbling chuckle unnerved them, “Cheap layabouts don’t usually tell me what to do…unless they can afford it.”

“Leave him alone, Zabuza-san.” Haku intervened, “Seeing that you haven’t gone out, I can train with you for the rest of the day. I won’t be much longer.”

“Good.” The man grunted and turned to leave, glancing over Ranmaru, “And you. Not a word of this goes back to that stooge.”

“Uh-huh.” Ranmaru nodded meekly.

There was a tense stillness as Zabuza exited and left Haku with a lingering glare, and the young man bravely returned it. The office door slowly creaked closed when a white rabbit dashed inside just before it shut. Migawari sat down on a chair to catch his breath, surprised that he had used most of it to argue with the Demon of the Hidden Mist. ‘These boys will keep me young whether I like it or not…retirement was supposed to be relaxing...’
Calmer than before, Ranmaru crouched down to pet the rabbit, “This is your messenger, right Haku-kun?”

“Yes,” He scooped up Pua and spoke to her directly, “You’ve been gone for so long. Did you get any responses, girl?”

Pua brandished a particular scroll of the three she was toting and Haku found it odd. He wondered if Jiraiya had written to him again, but upon unrolling the parchment he discovered foreign handwriting. It was not addressed to or from anyone. The message was extremely brief. It dawned on Haku after a moment of consideration that this reply was from someone he truly did not expect to hear back from.

His eyes hurriedly re-read the message:

_I don’t know what to say to you._

An invisible wrench and socket twisted his torso, making his chest tight with regret and curiosity.

“What is it, Haku?” Ranmaru wondered. Migawari was puffing in the background, trying to return to his senses.

Haku gently set Pua down on the floor and took a seat in the waiting room as well. His best guess was that this was Temari’s response to the letter he had sent her. More than likely, it was the only reply he could ever expect from her. ‘But she answered when she didn’t have to…’ Haku noted in astonishment, ‘It wasn’t a very favorable sentiment…but Temari knew that she wasn’t obligated.’ He quickly inferred that she might have felt a hint of appreciation that he reached out.

While Haku sat, flummoxed, Ranmaru peered over at the message, “If someone doesn’t know what to say to you…then why would they bother writing?”

Haku snapped out of his thoughts and sighed, “It’s…complicated.”

“Who sent it?”

“Someone I love. She’s angry with me.” Haku summed it up.

“Oh!” Ranmaru was mildly impressed.

Pua hopped up to take a seat on her master’s knees.

Ranmaru sat down between Haku and the wheezing gambler, deliberating on the matter, “Hm…maybe she doesn’t want to be mad at you.”

“Maybe so, but I don’t know how to change things. I am in no position to ask for her forgiveness, let alone a second chance.”

“Even Raiga got a second chance.” Ranmaru swung his short legs off of the chair, still thinking, “No one will ever forgive him except for me, and he used to do bad things to people.”

“This is different.”

“It probably is.” His small friend agreed, “But you’re not bad, Haku-kun, no matter what you did in the past.”

Haku’s smile was wistful, “I wish that were true, but I have realized that I am not nearly as good as I thought I was.”
Ranmaru paused to look at him, “That’s okay.” He continued kicking his legs, “If you write again and she doesn’t answer…then you know for sure that it won’t change.”

“I shouldn’t.”

“But you want to know!”

“And I don’t want to make her upset.”

“You already did.” Ranmaru reminded him, “I had to reach out to the person I cared for, and I had no idea if it would make a difference when I tried. All I know is that…if I hadn’t done it, we would have been stuck under those storm clouds forever. I never would have seen the world or met my friends…”

“Hm.” Haku shut his eyes and took the thought to heart.

Unexpectedly, Migawari stood and hobbled across the room, “Come on, boys. To the treatment room…”

“Why? Is something the matter?” Haku asked.

“Yeah. I’m going to take you up on that offer to treat my ulcers.” Migawari replied, “Your conversation gave me horrible acid.”

At about roughly the same time, far off in the wilds of the Toad Valley, Naruto was also spending time with a mentor. He was seated once again beside the Toad Oil pool, legs folded in a position of meditation, and his eyes lightly shut. Jiraiya was nearby keeping watch as his student absorbed natural energy.

‘This is going to be a long day.’ Jiraiya thought to himself, ‘He’s on the verge of getting it. I wanted to help Naruto out and speed this lesson along, but that went and backfired…’ Earlier, Jiraiya had asked Fukasaku to bond himself to Naruto’s shoulder and attempt to gather natural energy. It was an excellent way to keep Naruto on his feet in battle while an assistant did the meditating for him. ‘It looked great on paper…’

But in practice it had failed. As soon as Fukasaku had nestled onto Naruto’s shoulder and tried to quiet his mind, a thundering roar echoed up from inside the boy and hurled the toad across the yard. Alarmed, Naruto quickly apologized for the rejection.

Still not completely convinced, Jiraiya asked his toad mentor to give it a second attempt. Again, Fukasaku was expelled by the Nine-Tailed Fox, staking its claim of space inside his vessel.

Fukasaku rubbed his backside after he had landed on stone steps, “It seems we won’t be able to aid Naruto the way we aid you, Jiraiya-boy.”

“That’s how it looks.” Jiraiya rubbed his chin, mulling over the next option. He advised the toad to go home for a rest while he watched after his pupil.

As there were no other methods to indirectly harvest natural energy, Jiraiya set Naruto back to work with his personal meditation. He and a shadow clone focused side by side as Jiraiya kept watch.

Naruto was tapping into the natural energy of the environment more rapidly than he had before. His eyelids were tinged red like the skin of his toad-friends, but almost immediately after that, the shape of his face would widen and his hands slowly developed webbing. Jiraiya was sure to bop him on
the head as soon as the transformation passed that threshold.

Over the course of a few hours, he had to interrupt several dozen times. Remarkably, Naruto was not frustrated by any instance of intervention, and occasionally thanked Jiraiya for his swiftness. ‘I don’t want to end up a garden decoration. Ero-sensei would probably make fun of me every time he walks by...’

As the day progressed, Jiraiya could not shed his desire to chat. He took a seat on a step and fiddled with his pipe, “So... I was thinking...”

“About what?” Naruto opened an eye.

“Fukasaku and Shima might be able to bond with your body after all.” Jiraiya suggested, “We just need to persuade the Fox to allow it.”

Naruto shut his eyes again, annoyed, “I’m not talking to him.”

“Gaara already told you that it was a good idea.”

“It won’t get me anywhere. I’m better off training on my own.”

Jiraiya sighed, “Fine. Today isn’t the day. But, down the line you’re going to realize that you can’t do everything yourself. The Kyuubi doesn’t have to be a burden, Naruto.”

Naruto said nothing and returned to his quiet state. His mind was restless, unfortunately, ‘Great. Now I’m distracted.’ He exhaled roughly, ‘Ma and Pa don’t need to help me. I’ll use Shadow Clones to gather energy. They can use jutsu too. It won’t make much difference.’

He could hear Jiraiya walking around to stretch his legs. ‘The Fox doesn’t want to change. Even if I had a heart to heart with him, he’ll still have it out for me...’ Naruto then acknowledged, ‘I guess eventually, though... there’s gonna be a time when I can’t avoid him. We’re going to have to reach an understanding or truce. Something.’ He knew for certain it was not a conversation he wanted to have at the moment.

“You’re not focusing at all.” Jiraiya noticed out loud.

“You don’t make it easy, Ero-sensei.”

“Yeah, I know.” He took a seat beside his student and patted Naruto’s shoulder, “Take a break. I can tell you something encouraging for a change, if that’ll calm you down.”

“Really?” Naruto unfurled and stretched.

“Sure. I think now is a good time to discuss the life of someone who had to deal with the Nine-Tails long before you did.” Jiraiya began, “I mentioned this to you before, but the jinchuriki who came before you did not have it easy either.”

The blonde young man gave a measured look to his teacher, “Of course she didn’t. Can you tell me about her?”

“I promised you I would. Let’s see, where do I start? Hm, back to the time when she first arrived... it was the Third Hokage’s prime. Huh. I was still a little wet behind the ears then.” Jiraiya chuckled at his memories, “Around that time, Uzumaki Mito requested that we begin looking for her replacement. She had been alive for, phew, a very long time while containing the Kyuubi. She outlived her husband by a couple of decades. Naturally, my sensei agreed with Mito’s preference to...
find someone of Uzumaki descent, but, unfortunately, the Hidden Eddy Village had been ransacked shortly before this transition. I won’t get into those political details, but you can imagine how it made the search for a successor difficult with refugees scattered to the winds.

“But they did find someone.”

“Yes. They found three, actually. Two middle-aged ninja, a brother and sister, and that woman’s small daughter: Uzumaki Kushina. After they arrived in Leaf at a safe house it was decided that the girl would become a jinchuriki.” The man went on, “Everyone agreed that her mother and uncle were not as suitable. They settled down and tried to adapt as best they could, but Kushina had to endure a lot of bullying and attention at the Academy. She was colorful and unique, so the jealous kids liked to pick on her for it.”

“Colorful and unique?” Naruto was puzzled, “Are you talking about personality or…?”

“Figuratively and literally: Kushina was the reddest redhead in red-town. Very pretty. Almost all of the Uzumaki clan had that crazy, scarlet hair. That’s how we used to spot them in the old days. Anyway, she also dreamed big and made sure everyone knew what her intentions were.” Jiraiya clarified, “Who could forget that girl running around the school and village, proclaiming that she’d be Hokage one day? I never did. She wanted to gain people’s respect and have a sense of belonging in Konoha.”

“I can relate.”

“You sure can. She did great in school and made a few friends…but her torturers relished getting a rise out of her. Kushina fought back hard; more than likely she was struggling to accept her mother’s death…and her uncle was a pretty apathetic and useless guy before he bit it.” Jiraiya sighed, “Mito consoled her when she could, but soon after the Nine-Tailed Fox was transferred to Kushina, that support was gone too. She probably felt like she was alone most of the time. She had to care for herself, study hard, fight bullies, and try to hold onto her clan’s identity as it slipped away. I bet she knew more about Sealing Techniques as a kid that most Jounin do these days, but it still didn’t make her life easy. No one knew that she was a jinchuriki, save for the few that needed to know…but it was still an uphill battle.”

Naruto lowered his head a fraction, feeling empathy for the girl.

“When she graduated and became a Genin, she had the good fortune of becoming a student to a caring sensei; a member of the Aburame clan. He had more than enough patience for her and her teammates. They all got along quite well, as I understand it. That team was able to survive clashes during the war that had bumped off other young teams. They looked out for each other as best they could, but I know for sure that two of them died. The bullying let up enough for Kushina to make a name for herself. Although, it’s not always a good thing when people know who you are…”

Naruto blinked hard, waiting for the other shoe to drop, “Did something happen to her?”

“More than once. Kushina had to stay on her toes to avoid anyone who was ‘poaching’ for Tailed Beasts, usually other hidden villages. Because the Cloud Village has such a fondness for military fortification, they were hoping that when they ambushed Kushina at her home and escorted her away in the night…that no one would notice.” The man laughed, “Heh! It almost worked. They picked a time when the Hokage was distracted and most shinobi were occupied.”

“She got captured?” Naruto was horrified, “That’s just…”

“Part and parcel of being a jinchuriki: sometimes they’ll catch you with pants down around your
ankles, kid. That’s why we are preparing too, as you know. I’ll say this, at the time I was a sensei and sometimes I told my students to bugger off and quit asking so many questions. Minato was the worst. He was always reading and observing things. What I didn’t know at the time was that he was watching whatever Kushina was up to.” Jiraiya shrugged, “And he noticed when she went missing. ‘Course he wasn’t especially her favorite person either, because, like I’ve said before, she had opinions about him…”

“He must’ve told someone.”

“He didn’t tell anyone.” The Toad Sage corrected, “He followed the trail and saved her himself. That’s the man I trained.”

“Oh.” Naruto raised his eyebrows, “Kind of risky.”

“I won’t argue with that. Minato had to beat the hell out of that ambush team, but he was happy to do it. He had such a big crush on Kushina that he probably could’ve made the sun rise in reverse for her. It wasn’t until I inquired after the fact, because he did get in trouble for that stunt, that I learned just how bad Minato had it for her.”

The young man tilted his head in shock, “He…”

“Yeah. Pretty much as nutty as you, I’d say. Kushina was fine after all of that. It certainly changed her mind about my student! By the end of the next year the two of them had become Jounin and, shortly after that, Kushina was kind enough to teach Minato some Sealing jutsu.”

“Whoa! Wait a second; you’re saying that the jinchuriki before me was…” Naruto lifted his pinky finger, “Like that with the Fourth Hokage?”

“Naruto, he wasn’t the Hokage at that time. Minato was just some blonde chump who impressed her.” Jiraiya shut his eyes and snickered, “She still had to fight most of her own battles.”

“Were they-?”

“What I wanted to arrive at was this…Kushina put up with the Fox somehow. I don’t have much insight as to how she accomplished that, but she went through it too. It’s been said that she used its chakra to great effect in battles long ago, and she was by no means afraid to do it. She stayed in control.” Jiraiya concluded, “I don’t want you to give up yet, Naruto. Just remember that you’re not the first person to go through all of this.”

“I get that, Ero-sensei.” Naruto sighed and leaned back on his hands, “I won’t give up on it. I guess I just need to get over how I feel about it.”

“Then you work on that. This isn’t a bad place to do some thinking and feeling.”

“Alright, so tell me the rest of it.” He nudged Jiraiya interestingly, “That probably went somewhere! I know you know about it.”

“Nah. That’s a story for another day.” Jiraiya stood and cracked his back, “Ah…I’ve got to go write some erotic scenes now to get the romance out of my brain.”

The next morning in the Leaf Village, Neji was promptly informed that before he could leave Hyuga estate grounds his presence was required at a meeting of clan elders. Hiashi added that he was not told the particulars of why the Hyuga heir was slated to join the old folk that morning, but Neji would be free to return to his team after the conference.
Hiashi reminded him to keep breakfast quick before joining the elders in the formal meeting room. He returned down the corridor from whence he came and Neji sat by himself in the tea room, completely detached from eating the meal in front of him. He was absorbed by his thoughts again.

‘This is sudden.’ Neji noted, curious if his role as a successor of the Hyuga might be in question. Or, the opposite; ‘I don’t expect that I will be replacing my uncle as leader for…quite some time.’ But he had never given it too much thought. The occurrence always seemed to be ‘down the road.’ It was tomorrow’s endeavor. What Neji did not doubt was that his time as leader would be filled with challenges just as Hiashi’s had been. He would be the representative that all other clan heads spoke to for matters of cooperation. Neji would need to keep relationships with allies strong and maintain the clan’s distance from threats. His overseeing of these sacred responsibilities would have made his father proud, he supposed. ‘If I had half an idea of how to do it...’ Neji had still not hammered out all of those details.

By the time his train of thought pulled into station, the bowl of food had been emptied. Neji wasted no time in venturing to the far side of the building. He was the last to join the meeting.

The gathering room was where all of the clan, Branch and Main House alike, had space to meet; and did so about once a month, usually the last week of every month. It was that obligatory meeting that Neji was accustomed to attending, not so much the private awkwardness of retired Main House elders. Six of them (all that remained) were seated in a line on tatami mats. To their right, Hiashi was settled beside Hideyasu, still looking annoyed that a morning meeting was necessary. Neji respectfully took the space in front of the old men, nearest to where his uncle was seated. He bowed his head to the floor in greeting, making sure they could all hear him say, “Good morning.” The man on the far left was mostly deaf these days.

“Thank you for coming, Neji.” The man who spoke, Haburo, had a quality of coldness that completely outclassed Hiashi at any given time. It seemed that he would be doing most of the talking while his fellow elders spectated.

“It is my honor to be here.” Neji said as he rose.

“It is. This meeting was called to address some of our concerns. To start, however, I wish to discuss a subject that is unrelated to our concerns.” Haburo inclined his head towards Hiashi and Hideyasu, “Neji’s training has recently yielded significant results, I have heard.” He was anticipating some kind of explanation, but not from Neji. The young man knew better than to speak unless an elder’s eyes were firmly planted on him.

Hiashi had his reply ready, “That is correct. I have endorsed his training with a local Wushu master, which has considerably furthered his prowess with Jyukken. Hideyasu can also confirm Neji’s ability with Wind Element chakra.”

Haburo’s frigid gaze fell on Hideyasu.

“I can confirm it. I ought to mention that is the reason why we don’t have the back panel of forest anymore behind the property.” The man added sheepishly, “I apologize, but it serves as proof of a Wind Nature Transformation, if you’re looking for it.”

“It will satisfy. We have no intention of replanting that area, at the moment.”

There was an odd moment of quiet. Another elder, Hosuke, spoke up in a quaking voice, “This council of elders’ wishes to announce…our complete confidence in young Neji.”
Other old men nodded in agreement. Haburo continued the statement in a trenchant tone, “Neji is the clear choice as a successor for leadership. His dedication and skill will undoubtedly bring prosperity to the Hyuga clan.” He then spoke directly to Neji, “You are nearing the age at which you must assume this role in its entirety, should anything ever happen to Hiashi-sama. Normally, if an heir is underage or unfit to serve, the standby of the Main House would act as steward.” Haburo was referring to Hideyasu. “Understand that this plan will not go into effect with respect to your qualifications, Neji. Be aware that the council believes you to be capable.”

“I understand.” Neji answered calmly. This was better news than he expected.

“And now we will address our concerns,” Haburo went on, looking towards Hiashi, “The council would like to make known their disappointment in Hinata-sama. Her unwillingness to respect the wishes of her elders is most unbecoming.”

Neji, upon hearing the statement, was glad that his uncle was in good health with little to no clogged arteries. Otherwise he might have had a stroke just then.

“In what way has she disrespected you?” Hiashi’s response was clipped.

“She has denied the appeals of many eligible clansmen and lords who would secure her future with marriage. While the council agrees this outcome is no grave offense, the disrespect we speak of is the rejection of the young lord of the Taketori clan.” Haburo explained, “As our most distinguished ally and friend, the Hyuga cannot afford to distance itself from the Taketori. We expect conditions with the Taketori clan to fray because of this decision.”

“I saw no such repercussion.” Hiashi disagreed, “Magan-sama completely understood.”

“Magan’s elders will not.” Haburo retorted.

“Forgive my ignorance,” Hiashi leashed his anger as best he could, “But I find it difficult to understand why marriage is the only reasonable future this honored council of elders can imagine for Hinata. Your great concern is reserved for her advanced Kekkei Genkai, which you expect to manifest in future generations. In the event it does not, her unnecessary squandering of a shinobi career would be most unbecoming.”

“Hiashi, we have no intention of forcing your eldest child to neglect the duties of a shinobi. She is a tremendous asset to the Hidden Leaf Village, after all.” Haburo countered, “Nor is our concern only for her Bloodline Gift. Your elders seek to strengthen bonds with our close friends in the Taketori, as well as lead the Hyuga clan down the path of prominence. In the history of our clan, our ranks have not seen such talent and power since the times of our ancient forefathers.”

“Understood. However, I do not wish these goals to be at my daughter’s expense.”

“You seem to imply she would suffer if she were to fulfill her obligations to this clan.”

“I cannot help but to champion her own decisions.”

“She is free to make her decisions based on the guidance of her elders; as do you, Hideyasu, Neji, and all of the Main Branch. Our supervision benefits all of the clan, not just one individual.” Haburo lectured, “If we went by such senseless logic…we would be no better off than the Uchiha clan, in which one foolish child was spared from a massacre.”

Hideyasu balked at the hurtful comparison but said nothing. Hiashi was not too pleased with it either. Neji kept his mouth firmly shut for fear of an incredulous sound escaping.
Hosuke spoke again, “We elders believe that Hinata is obligated to preside over a family one day, whether or not her children inherit her gift…we expect excellence from them. While there is no strict timeline, we will enforce the choice of a suitable match for her.”

“Very well. Let’s revisit this matter in a few more years.” Hiashi recommended.

“You should be informed…” Haburo cut in, “That the council has deliberated further and recognized another potential spouse, apart from Magan’s son. It should be taken into consideration before you postpone this discussion, Hiashi.”

“I recall this council assuring me that there would be no more suitors on Hyuga grounds.” Hiashi retorted evenly.

“There won’t be. A worthy candidate is here with us now.” Haburo’s lofty eyes went back to Neji, “Your responsibility to this clan may very well include a covenant with Hinata-sama, should she fail to humor our requests.”

The weight of eyes on him was an intangible force, but it pushed Neji to the brink of his tolerance. For once, he had thought that he could receive a bit of good news from clan elders and be on his way. He should have known better. He should have expected them to drag him into such petty nonsense.

Neji dared to speak, as he had been given the floor, “And if I fail to honor this request as well?”

“You will not fail. You are in no position to do so.” Haburo warned, “If an arrangement cannot be made, you will wed Hinata in accordance with the timeline we set. It is tradition for the Main House to make matches like these; while not always favorable by related blood…it is an option we rely on when certain parties remain stubborn.” Hiashi was grinding his teeth furiously off to the side while listening to the pompous comments.

Neji replied, “You will find both parties to be stubborn, Haburo-sama.”

The old man was provoked, “Neji, please realize that with certain persuasions…neither of you will remain stubborn. It is in your best interest. I advise that if you care for anything or anyone dear to you…that you do not defy this demand.”

Neji detected the threat and decided that, no matter his audience; he could be his genuine self and make use of that attitude Shikamaru always poked fun at.

“You have certain expectations about what a marriage between my cousin and I would entail. Please try to make them more realistic. While we are on good terms, it stands to reason that our relationship would be dysfunctional at best, and at least, it would be a miserable embarrassment for the entire village to see.” Neji added, “Such a union would be unhappy and childless. You will forever regret arranging it.”

“Silence.” Haburo held up a hand, “Your disrespect is incomprehensible.”

While he did not want to, Neji quieted down. Thankfully, his uncle intervened.

“Neji is correct. It is true that the Main House has counted on such matches in the past, but make no mistake, these two talented young people have no desire for each other. They are nearly siblings. That is a problem.” Hiashi explained, “Furthermore, it makes little sense to afford my daughter a variety of options without extending those same courtesies to Neji. If he were to choose a partner from the Taketori or other noble family, it would eliminate any hostility you fear can occur.”
“Enough, Hiashi. This council knows very well what it is asking.” Haburo was losing patience, “Neji should heed this resolution or face consequences.”

“Death seems gentler.” Neji remarked out of turn. His casual suggestion triggered Hosuke and the elder beside him to backpedal on the plan, squawking in panic, fearing a shameful suicide or other such propaganda-storm. Haburo was pressed to get the meeting back under control.

“Perhaps a compromise?” Hideyasu suggested innocently.

“There is no need.” Haburo declared adamantly.

“I disagree. There is a great need for compromise here.” Hiashi glanced at Neji briefly before saying, “Both Hinata and Neji are entitled to make these decisions themselves.”

“If that is so…and they prefer alternatives to what the council suggests…” Haburo was aflame with agitation, “Then so be it. Choose as you will and who you will. However, the council demands prosperity for this clan, and they are both obligated to confer their greatness to a new generation. They will abide by our terms, at the very least, or join the Branch.”

Neji could scarcely interpret the growling old man, but he took it to mean that singlehood was out of the question. If he was strictly obligated to find a spouse and have children, it was comforting to know he did not have to do so through incestuous means. It was a tough enough pill to swallow without that detail.

“Neji will abide by the same benchmark you did, Hiashi.” Hosuke concluded, “Before he assumes leadership, whether you should perish or abdicate the position, Neji will make a match.”

“There should be no great hurry then.” Hiashi supposed.

“Hinata must also comply.” Haburo chimed in, “While she has no deadline the way Neji does, I expect her to at least avoid old age.”

Hiashi nodded woodenly and then had a short, vivid daydream of knocking Haburo’s probably-false teeth out.

The hum of tension in the room was broken by Hideyasu’s comment, “Ah, look at that…it’s already 10:30 in the morning…”

Hiashi capitalized on the statement, “Let us adjourn this meeting.”

Most of the elders agreed, disregarding Haburo’s storm cloud of rage as the men in the room began to stand and exit.

As Neji entered the corridor his uncle and Hideyasu filed past him, both worn-out, and Hiashi merely shook his head with disdain. Hideyasu smiled wanly, “I did not think that would take a turn the way it did. I hope none of that was too damaging, Neji.”

“I now understand…why no one can enjoy those assemblies.”

“It is a perpetual nuisance.” Hiashi agreed, striding away, “Ignore everything they told you, Neji. I will settle it.”

Hideyasu patted Neji’s shoulder amicably before following after the Lord of the Hyuga. What a strange relief it was to know that they were on his side, however unlikely a pair they were.
Running a bit late, Neji set out to join his team at their training field, but he did not have an easy time putting the elders’ words out of his mind.

At the field, Gai was giving parting words to Lee and Tenten. He and a few other Jounin had been tasked with neutralizing a border dispute in the northwest. Landowners-turned-thugs had taken issue with the Hidden Grass Village’s domain over the area they operated shady businesses in, disputing calls to cease and desist. When gangs threatened a public bridge with destruction it all went to hell in a hand basket. Tsunade thought she ought to lend helping hands to the Grass ninja in the area.

“You will also report to the Hokage to take a mission, in the meantime.” Gai advised, “Be sure to bring Neji along when he arrives!”

Their sensei had been gone for a while before Neji finally turned up. Tenten could immediately tell that he was in a horrible mood. The contortion of his face, simmering with frustration, more than likely had something to do with his clan. ‘They can’t give him a moment’s peace, can they?’

It was a shame. For the past few days that she had been reunited with her teammates, Tenten could say that it had been an especially joyous time. Neji divided his time between training with Lee and Wong Leung, and training with Tenten. She was appreciative that he still went out of his way to work with her, even when she could tell he and Lee had become close in her absence. Challenging each other with new techniques certainly made it exciting.

She could get away with ambushing Neji with Shadow Clones when he did not use his Blood Limit. Tenten got a sense that he enjoyed the task of brawling against multiple opponents, while she simultaneously accosted him with weaponry. It was also fun to demonstrate that Neji did not have as easy of a time hitting her either, since Tenten had become slippery and fast during her time away. ‘It’s like we’re getting to know each other again.’

Even after training, they were compelled to spend time together when they could. There were anecdotes that needed to be shared. Tenten was quite amused by Neji’s recounting of the mission to Oga Castle, and was interested in this new person called ‘Sai.’ Tenten made a point of mentioning her expanded arsenal without demonstrating the deadly effects of her newest sword. She had grown closer to other kunoichi as well. They spoke until late one night before parting, and it had felt perfectly natural.

‘Well, he’s going to have a hard time talking today.’ Tenten thought to herself.

Neji came to a halt near his teammates, frowning deeply.

“What happened?” Tenten asked sedately.

With great annoyance, he made the problem clear, “A pointless meeting.”

She took it as a sufficient answer. The team proceeded to the Hokage’s office while Lee informed Neji of their sensei’s absence. The quality of mission they could get without a Jounin present, if the Hokage’s limitation was still in effect, would probably not permit much.

Tsunade seemed pleased to see them reunited, “Ah, here you are! You’re slightly behind schedule, but I have something you three can do for me. It will be time-consuming.”

Lee made a point to ask, “Are we still confined to local areas, Hokage-sama?”

“No. For now the possibility of danger has decreased, and I know where to keep you away from, at this point.” Tsunade reported, “You might have noticed, but your peers’ teams are dispatched at the
moment as well. You’ll be the last to learn that the official announcement for the next Chunin Exam is going out. I’ve got three months to advertise for it.” She smiled thoughtfully, “And that’s where you come in.”

It was sounding like another bothersome, pack-mule mission but Neji refrained from objecting.

“I’ve sent every other available team out to spread the word and distribute fliers. Everywhere.” She leaned back slightly in her desk chair, “And I mean everywhere. Countries in each direction, stopping at big commercial towns… I want every person who derives entertainment from Final Round battles to stuff that stadium. They need to spend money…it’ll help our budget deficit.”

“So where would you like us to advertise?” Tenten had been itching for a mission for weeks; even one so simple was enough to get her blood going.

“Well, Kurenai’s team is covering a western route into the Land of Wind. Kakashi’s team went south and Asuma’s north…but there isn’t much interest to be found in the west. Another team was moving through the Lightning Country last week…and the Land of Water will attract the wrong kind of spectators to our village.” Tsunade tapped a finger to her lip, “But I feel comfortable putting your team on the seasonal labor route.”

Neji sensed they might have drawn the short straw, “And what is that?”

“That route extends northeast over the sea. Please board a ship at the coast, preferably the port at Funabashi. If you hand out pamphlets to passengers they’ll bring them around to ports they stop at. I want you to disembark in the Marsh Country and put a few fliers up along the harbor. Then, while you’re at it, you can do some reconnaissance for me. I’ve needed eyes over there for a few days now, but no one has been available to go.”

Lee was nodding as the Hokage spoke and Neji perked up a little. This sounded more interesting that he had initially thought.

“A report came in last month about a secretive project in the Marsh Country. I don’t know when or if it has taken place, but I can confirm that nukenin and thugs have responded to this venture, probably for money.” She looked fondly at the team, “Stake out the area and get visual confirmation of what’s going on. It should be a brief check and do not confront any ninja you find. Once you have intel, board the ship again and return to the village.” Tsunade added with a pointed finger, “And advertise some more! Get those locals over here!”

“Yes ma’am!” Lee was revved up.

Tsunade pushed forward a small stack of folded fliers on her desk and Tenten picked them up, enthusiastic, “We’ll get this done for you, Hokage-sama! How much time do we have?”

The Hokage handed out vouchers for ship travel they could use and said, “As much as you need. Just be thorough and cautious.”

The teammates gave affirmative answers, bowing respectfully, and then exited the office. They parted ways to pack and prepare for a long journey.

That evening, Kakashi and Kurenai’s teams concluded their respective advertising ventures. All six students went home, moderately tired, and buckled down for some time off. In Sato’s case, he still had pep leftover, and he was quick to reunite with Tama after not having seen her in over a week.

“Ah, I missed you…” He admitted as they walked side-by-side down the road from her house, “You
look shorter, Tama.”

“I’m not. You’re just taller.” A smile tugged at her lips, “How was your mission? Did you see anything interesting?”

“A lot of tourists! We must have spoken to a couple hundred people, and we ran out of fliers. Your team went west, I heard.”

“Yeah. The Land of Rivers and then the Land of Wind…” Tama sighed at the memory, “It wasn’t very busy out there. And the desert was just oppressively hot.”

“Ooh, I would have hated that trip.”

“I know.” She chuckled, “But it was sweet when the Kazekage stopped by to see Sakura-chan.”

“Really? You know that you can call him Gaara. We grew up together!”

“Kakashi-sensei always refers to him as the Kazekage, so I guess I can’t help myself.” She gave a slight shrug.

“Well that doesn’t hurt, I guess. Did you have dinner yet?” Sato changed the subject, “I was going to pick up some food for home and then cook.”

“Hm. That must be an invitation!”

Tama looped arms with him and changed directions, veering left towards the fish market. They prattled for a while before agreeing on snapper, and then moved on to a nearby supermarket for mitsuba, daikon, rice, and the lengthy list Sato had in mind. The sun began to set as they walked back to Sato’s apartment with several grocery bags.

“Do you want to know what Uncle Gai was asking me about a few days ago?” Tama asked as they climbed the stairwell of the building.

“If you’d finally wear the jumpsuit?”

“Surprisingly, no.” She noted, “He asked about when we’ll start home hunting. He said that you don’t live in a space that would fit the two of us.”

“Sure it would!”

“Not…the way he imagines it. He thinks we’ll multiply.”

“Oooh.” Sato pursed his lips thoughtfully as they crossed a landing, “Then it definitely isn’t enough space.”

“We’ve never really talked about this before.” The young woman pointed out, “What do you think? Is it worth looking for a new place?”

He sighed quietly before acknowledging, “Realistically speaking…it’d be good to find a new house or something. I know I can afford it now.” His shoulders dropped slightly, “But this is the place my mother raised me. It’d be kind of hard—”

“To let it go.” Tama concluded, “I don’t know how I feel about it either. Whenever I visit your home it reminds me of your mom. I miss her too.”

Sato turned his head slightly, intending for her to not see a quivering, emotional smile that overtook
him. “Thanks…for saying that.”

“I think we should keep your flat for as long as possible.” Tama elected, “And…let’s not rush to get married either.”

“Totally. You’re, like, reading my mind right now.”

As they scaled another staircase Tama suggested, “I think we can get into more detail after the Chunin Exam is over. I’ve wanted to talk about the future with you for a while, but you were never quite grown up enough.”

“I can handle it now.”

Upon reaching the fourth floor, the couple stopped mid-way through the corridor, regarding what looked to be a new resident.

A pale young man wearing a black, gakuran uniform was standing in front of an apartment door. He had a large scroll tucked under one arm as he fiddled with a key in a lock. On the floor near his feet was a wooden artist’s box with various supplies, several canvases, a folded easel, and a large duffle bag.

Sato raised his hand in greeting, “Hi! Did you just move here?”

The resident at the door turned to look at him, almost embarrassed, “I suppose I have.” He continued futzing with the key, “Although… I have not yet seen my living space.”

Without a word, Tama took the bags from Sato’s hands so he could help the new down-the-hall neighbor.

“I’m Hatake Sato.” He shook the newcomer’s hand and then motioned for the key, “Looks like you’re an artist! What’s your name?”

“Sai.” His smile was small, “You’re Kakashi’s relative.”

“Yup!” Sato managed the old doorknob’s lock and then manipulated the deadbolt with the key, using half a revolution, “These stupid things don’t open with a full turn. You’ll get used to it. I’ve meant to yell at the property manager about it, but now it’s just a force of habit.”

“Thank you.” Sai said as the keys were dropped into his hand again.

“Can we help you bring all of these things inside? You’ve got your hands full.” Sato offered.

Sai nodded gratefully and allowed the affable Hatake to take his few precious possessions into the darkened flat. After a moment, Sai turned to Tama curiously, “Are you a neighbor too?”

“Not exactly. I plan to live here someday, though.” She tilted her head for a friendly salutation, “It’s nice to meet you, Sai. I’m Tama.”

He stared at her for a long moment, “Legs.”

She smiled in shock, completely nonplussed by the word. Sai then turned to watch Sato hefting the duffle bag inside, “And he is Sugar.”

It occurred to Tama that Sai was assigning nicknames, “Oh! Well, our regular names are fine, if you don’t mind.”
“He’s sweet and friendly…and you look like the front page of those magazines.”

‘Right…’ Tama thought to herself as Sai moved his belongings inside, ‘He’s got a weird way of doing introductions…’

She peeked inside the see the sprawling darkness and dusty condition of the apartment. No one bothered removing their shoes in the genkan; the home was too filthy to be barefoot in. Judging by the resounding echo made by Sato setting items down, the place was empty.

Abruptly, a flashlight snapped on at the far end of the room. It illuminated a mysterious face and frightened the youngsters who had entered. They adjusted for a moment and Sai remarked calmly, “Tenzo-san…what are you doing in here?”

“I came by to inspect this place for traps or paranormal phenomena.” Tenzo explained, keeping the flashlight level with his chin, “But it turned out to be really boring and dirty.”

“How did you get in?” Sai approached the wall to locate a light switch.

“This window.” Tenzo pulled back a drape and temporarily blinded the youngsters, “Whoops.”

After regaining vision, Sai flipped the overhead lights on. Sato squinted his eyes and regarded Tenzo. For once, the man was in regular Jounin attire and had not concealed his face with a mask.

“You’re my uncle’s friend.” Sato determined, “He talks about you sometimes…and says that you can act unnecessarily creepy to get attention…”

Tenzo illuminated his face again, “Is that what Kakashi says about me?”

Tama nudged her fiancée worrily when Sai took a seat on the dusty floor, as if he accepted the condition of the apartment, “I don’t think he…has anything. Or knows that he should have furniture in here…”

“Yeah…” The Hatake turned back to the veteran, “Is Sai going to be okay here? It looks like this is all the stuff he has.”

“It is.” Tenzo confirmed, “We’re still working on getting him what he needs. I can bring a futon over in a short while.”

“That isn’t a good idea.” Tama disagreed, pulling Sai back up to his feet, “At least, not until this place is cleaned.”

Sato leapt at the notion, “Would you like us to-?”

“No, that’s quite alright.” Tenzo smiled warmly, “Sai is my responsibility for now. Once he’s settled in here I expect he can look forward to getting to know his neighbors.”

“Of course,” The Hatake brushed a gray spot of grit from Sai’s sleeve, “Are you sure you don’t want us to help?”

“We will clean. You two have all of that food with you.” Sai replied, noting the groceries they had, “It’s better if you do something with it.”

“Then you clean…and we’ll bring you something to eat in a little while.” Tama offered, “To welcome you to the community, Sai.”

Sai stared at the benevolent duo as if they were too good to be true.
Sato broke the silence, “So were you like a missionary? Or a starving artist?” He added as Tama gently slapped her forehead, “You don’t have possessions so maybe…”

“He was part of the Foundation, prior to joining the standard forces.” Tenzo rubbed his chin in thought, “I guess you could say…the shinobi equivalent of a starving artist, indeed. They have nothing in Root.”

“But he’s also literally an artist.” Sato pointed to the easel.

“And starving.” Sai added.

Tama bowed respectfully before walking back to the door, “Then I’ll get started. It was a pleasure to meet you both!” She added, “Are you coming, Sato?”

In a whisper, Sato explained to his new acquaintances, “She makes me work and wear the apron. Tama just stirs and measures stuff.”

With a chipper goodbye he hurried after the young woman to begin dinner. Sai and Tenzo stood for a minute after that, glancing around to assess how much needed to be swept and mopped. They would have to go acquire those domestic trappings, though.

While following Tenzo to the nearest supplier of cleaning products, Sai asked earnestly, “If the man wears the apron…this means that the woman is dominant, no?”

“I don’t want to teach you things based only on generalities, but…” Tenzo shut the door with a shrug, “That could be the case with those two.”
Before leaving Konoha, Neji had been thoughtful enough to pick up a map and trace a route to the Funabashi seaport. He went over it with Lee and Tenten before they set out, although it was evident that Neji was still not in the highest of spirits.

Tenten kept pace with Lee as they traveled, thinking it would behoove them to let Neji race ahead and get some crankiness out of his system. Throughout the day she conversed with Lee about Wong Leung’s training methods, and how his grandfather had warmed up to Neji.

“Grandpa was hopeful that you would join us for practice too, when you can.” Lee informed her.

Tenten smiled nervously, “You think he’ll go easier on me?”

“Probably not. Grandpa will just make you focus on different areas.” He figured, “And he will also try to make you speak Hanwen more often.”

“Those are two opportunities for me to disappoint him. You’ve got to convince him to let me do something I’m good at, Lee.”

“I should not. He will ask you to cook all the time, if I did.”

“On second thought…training and speaking is fine.”

That night they made camp far in the west of the Fire Country, rotating shifts for sleep, and by mid-morning the next day they had arrived in Funabashi. It was a small sea port at the southern tip of the Land of Hot Water, just a few steps outside of the Fire Country. The city was bustling with tourists and migrant workers. It was a chore to squeeze through a crowd of people towards a tavern to get something to eat.

After a meal, the team went to work pasting fliers to every surface and handing them out to curious natives. It eliminated half of the stack, but Tsunade had wanted the whole seasonal labor route covered, and so they dutifully stopped in the harbor to find the next ship to the Marsh Country. They spoke with a ticket agent near the main dock to learn when they could set sail.

“The Marsh Country? Aren’t you all dressed a little too nice to do mining work over there?” The man at the booth inquired, “That boat is leaving in 40 minutes, but they’ve already got plenty of laborers on board.”

“We’re shinobi. The Hokage sent us to advertise for the upcoming Chunin Exam.” Tenten corrected.

“Oh! How about that? Heh, well in that case there’s space for you.” The agent accepted their vouchers and then asked, “Do you mind if I get one of those fliers too?”

Tenten handed over a pamphlet before they received boarding passes.

The team continued down a long pier towards a large, commercial ship. A few bored attendants ushered them along, “Move along…greeter’s up there…” And they crossed the gangplank of the ship to enter the vessel.

A beefy man in an ill-fitting shirt accepted their boarding passes and spoke in a rumble, “Welcome
aboard the Fog Skipper. I’m Chief Mate Ondo.” He glanced over the tickets, “Your cabin is on level one, starboard side, number 24. For any labor-coordination questions please see our rep on the forward deck. Have a nice trip.” Ondo handed Lee an odd-looking cabin key.

Lee thanked the mate with a sunny smile before they ventured down the corridor to locate their room. It was easy enough to find, but after poking their heads inside they discovered the size was not satisfactory.

“It’s a closet.” Tenten frowned in aggravation, “Is this all those vouchers were good for?” She pushed the door in roughly and it struck the wall with a hollow bang.

Neji and Lee followed her within, gazing in disappointment at the space that was barely two meters across, and not much deeper. Two, cramped bunks were available for sleeping; otherwise there were no furniture or amenities to speak of. The exposed pipes of the ceiling had hangers and carabiners attached, from which previous occupants had probably hung their belongings. At the “far” side of the room, a porthole let in sunshine.

“I did not expect luxury, but…” Lee was turning in a very small circle, “This room does not even look to be…up to code.”

“We can dispute this with the Chief Mate, later.” Neji offered, “This ship will not reach the Marsh Country for another three days.”

“Three. Days.” Tenten breathed quietly, “And two nights.” She smiled bitterly and then hung her travel bag from a carabiner, “Might as well try to advertise before we go insane.”

She and her teammates sighed collectively in agreement.

They stored their possessions in the teeny space and Lee locked the door behind them. The ship lurched with a metal creak as it slowly pulled away from shore. The team followed stairs to the top deck for some fresh air. Luckily, many of the laborers aboard were up and about, and Tenten estimated they had plenty of fliers for them.

Because Neji was not sociable enough to sell anything, he stayed by Lee’s side as he hyped up the Chunin Exam. The passengers took a shine to Lee and accepted the pamphlets, asking if he could demonstrate any ninja skills. On the other side of the deck, Tenten was also trying to encourage another group of travelers.

“The Hokage expects this Exam to be a huge success, and no one will want to miss the Final Rounds…” Tenten put on a coy smile, hoping they would buy it, “I’ll be participating, as a matter of fact.”

“Will you now, little lady?” A gap-toothed man chortled, “I’d happily go to that tournament just to see you in action.”

His friends roared with laughter and chimed in:

“This is one lovely kunoichi!”

“Do you have other skills?”

“Can you show us?”

“Yeah, can you show us below deck? Ha ha!” Many of them hollered excitedly at the idea, clearly not the type of viewers Tenten wanted to invite to Konoha, “Well come on now! Give us a
demonstration!”

“Sure.” Her wry smile twisted into an expression of scorching fury as she leapt, unfurling a tool-summoning scroll. Tenten unleashed an aesthetically pleasing array of pointed weapons, and made sure to miss all of the screaming laborers (though she did not want to.) Knives thacked down into the wood of the deck in a perfect arrangement of the Hidden Leaf symbol; then she landed and shut the scroll, eyeing them all with disapproval, “Still want to watch?”

The dozen men who had earlier harassed her were hushed into daunted quiet. Cowed, they nodded and held out their hands for advertisements. Tenten passed fliers out before stomping back to her teammates.

“Was your display necessary?” Neji asked her curiously, “They’re terrified.”

“None of these men are going to take me seriously. They think I’m some…floozy plaything.” She ground out her explanation, “It’s not that I want to have a man standing next to me just so they’ll listen to a word I say…” Tenten took a breath, “But do you mind walking around with me, Neji?”

He said simply, “I don’t.” He perfectly understood her indignation. This was not his type of crowd either.

They parted with Lee, who seemed to have connected with the friendliest sailors, and they roamed about the perimeter of the deck to speak to laborers. In between the pockets of somewhat-interested sailors, and those willing to distribute fliers, Neji conversed with Tenten in the hope it would dispel her outrage.

“Consider that none of these men have probably ever seen a kunoichi before,” He reminded her, “And of those that have, probably not one of your caliber.”

Tenten’s eyebrows raised an increment, “Well…they could only get a superficial impression of me. So do you mean…how I look?”

“I mean that you are top quality in every respect.” Neji assured her.

She smiled authentically, “Thank you. I appreciate that.”

And after that she seethed no more, and was generally more pleasant to each person they talked to. While Neji had not been entirely aware of it, Tenten had become buoyant after hearing his appraisal. As they came around the bend at the stern of the ship, Tenten stole glances of her reflection in the glass of promenade windows. ‘He said I’m top quality. Hm! I guess this new look even appeals to him.’ She shut her eyes blissfully as they came to a linear stretch of deck again, ‘Neji can say that about me even when we haven’t been around each other in months!’

“Over there.” Neji’s voice snapped her out of her thoughts.

Tenten followed him to where the Chief Mate was leaned against crates, smoking a cigarette. Neji addressed the subject of their cabin not being ‘of adequate size,’ and asked if there was a possibility of switching to something suitable. The man, Ondo, merely shook his head and exhaled a line of smoke, “Sorry. I couldn’t upgrade you even if I wanted to. Some families are traveling with us and they booked up all of the superior rooms.”

“Oh.” Ondo balanced the cigarette on his lip and examined the flier, “Thanks, bud. I’d love to go to
this thing. They said the last one was nuts.”

“It was. Hopefully, it’ll be more controlled chaos this time.” Tenten predicted, “Thanks.”

They carried on around the ship for a few hours, occasionally handing out leaflets, and sailing farther and farther out to sea. By the time they came to the bow of the ship again, they discovered Lee had been more or less adopted by the passengers he spoke with. Lee was seated on a bench, surrounded by his new pals.

Neji was rightly surprised to see a stranger pressing a bag of ice to Lee’s head. He and Tenten approached their teammate, asking if something was the matter.

“I think I have…” Lee paused, pressing his fingers to his lips for a moment, “Ugh…I could be… motion sick.”

Tenten took the spot on the bench beside her friend, “You’re seasick, Lee?” She took the bag of ice from a bystander and replaced it on the inside of Lee’s wrists, “This might help more. It’s a temporary cure, though…”

Neji looked out over the deck, seeing that the shoreline had completely disappeared from view. Without land as a point of reference, it would be difficult for Lee’s sense of balance to recover from the, admittedly, rough waves the ship was bouncing on. It would get worse the further out they went.

They opted to keep him above deck for as long as possible. The laborers who made the journey overseas often recommended that Lee get as much fresh air as he could. A ship hand volunteered to look for Dramamine tablets to settle Lee’s stomach, but cautioned, “We never have enough of that stuff…”

The congregation of passengers grew inquisitive and asked about the team of shinobi they were sailing with. The afternoon turned to night as they spoke, fascinated with Lee and his companions. If they had not been convinced before of watching the Chunin Exam finals, they were now compelled to do so and find out how this team would fare. They kept Lee stable even without medication, and the ship’s cook brought out several kettles of stew to feed passengers.

Later, the sky above was so clear that, as Tenten leaned on the railing of the deck, she could make out the wisped arm of a spiral galaxy. A pool of stars stretched endlessly in all directions overhead. She was tempted to stare at them all night long, but from across the deck Neji gave her a shout. They were going below deck for rest. She peeled herself away from the relaxing night breeze and sky.

The cabin was still as disappointing as it had been earlier that day. The teammates stood in silence for a moment, deliberating on the bunks that were suspended out from the wall.

“I prefer the bottom bunk.” Tenten announced, “But at this point, I’ll take anywhere I can fit.”

“We can squeeze in together.” Lee offered, “Or the floor does not seem too uncomfortable to me.”

“No, Lee. There’s room for two.”

They sidled in and attempted to negotiate space. As Neji snapped the light of the cabin off, Lee and Tenten found enough room so long as they lay pin-straight. Neji hauled himself up to the top bunk, settling on his stomach. With his chin balanced on his folded arms, Neji looked out the porthole and watched light play over the crests of dark waves. Silence prevailed in the room for a while.

Gentle breathing could be heard from below. Neji could not tell how much time had passed, but he knew that his friends had fallen asleep. There was nothing remotely upsetting about the fact that they
were nestled together, but it pricked at him. He would have liked if Tenten had chosen the top bunk instead. With him. ‘It doesn’t matter.’ Neji reminded himself. Lee wasn’t like that. He and Tenten had been bosom buddies since childhood. What was more, Lee was quite aware of Neji’s feelings. He would never seek to trifle with them in any way, Neji expected.

With a soft grunt, he finally shut his eyes and drifted off.

Hours later, the panicked sound of shuffling woke Neji. He initially believed that an intruder might have entered the room, but in the pitch dark of the cabin he witnessed Lee and Tenten rushing out. His next thought purported a fire, yet there were no flames or smoke. Neji willed himself back to consciousness and slipped down from the bed to move to the doorway. Peering out into the dim corridor of the ship, he could see Lee bent over a mopping pail, hurling his guts out. Tenten stood beside him and held his shoulders, concerned that he would topple head-first into the mess.

Neji then noted how unsteady on his feet he was. The ship was swaying as if tipped, like a teeter-totter. The water must have gotten rougher during the night. Without a doubt it had churned Lee up.

Tenten walked Lee back to the room and handed him off to Neji, “Hold him for a second.”

The young woman bolted off into the dark of the corridor. Lee was a gurgling, incoherent mess. Neji repositioned him on the edge of the bottom bunk, quickly scanning him over with the Byakugan. He was hopeful that if he prodded at a few trusty pressure points that Lee’s nausea would pass. That would help avoid a night of constant vomiting on a rocking boat. Neji began methodically poking spots along his teammate’s spine without consulting with him. Tenten returned swiftly with a second bucket, placing it below Lee’s face just in time for him to puke again.

She and Neji exchanged distraught glances.

“I sent a Shadow Clone to clean out that other pail at the facilities closet. It should be here soon.” Tenten’s voice was barely above a whisper, “It was all I could think to do.”

“Better than what I thought to do.” Neji yielded.

“If he didn’t wake me first, he probably would have gotten me…”

Neji continued poking Lee’s back and apologized quietly as his friend began retching again. Minutes later, the clone returned with an empty bucket and handed it off to Tenten, exchanging it for the full pail. The Shadow Clone made a face of disgust before marching out of the cabin.

Lee accepted the pail and made a sound that conveyed great humiliation. Tenten unlatched the window and swung it open, intending to air out the room. The sea outside was choppy, by the sound of it, tossing the vessel around. Neji concluded his frantic, impromptu, care for Lee and stood back. Lee’s voice was a soft rasp as his thanked his friends. He handed off the bucket and curled up on the bottom bunk again. He was asleep moments later.

“I don’t know…how that’s possible.” Tenten whispered, “I thought he’d be up all night?”

“I might’ve helped it. Maybe some equilibrium was restored…but I can’t tell you that it will last. It probably won’t.”

“That’s fine, Neji. He’s asleep.” Tenten turned to the door with the bucket, “It’s a start.”

She departed again in the dark. Since no smell had lingered in the cabin, Neji shut the porthole for some quiet. He looked over Lee one last time before returning to the top bunk. After what seemed like ages, Tenten returned with two clean buckets, and shut the door behind her. She set them down
beside Lee’s bed and then stopped. She exhaled in slight annoyance before she moved to climb up. Taking the hint, Neji quickly shifted over for her. Tenten collapsed beside him, exhausted.

“Thanks.” She muttered.

“You reacted so quickly I thought we were under attack.”

“No. I just didn’t want Lee to hurl all over me. That made me move fast.”

Neji smiled to himself, “I might not have been so fortunate.”

“Heh. If you’re feeling lucky you can sleep down there.”

“I prefer this.” He spoke to her back as she was turned away.

“Me too.” She agreed quietly.

And when they fell asleep again they were not woken for the rest of the night.

The next morning was peaceful. Sounds in the room were muted save for the ocean swells bashing against the ship’s side.

With his eyes still shut, lying flat on his back, Neji began to stir to the feeling of lips meeting his own. A hand brushed over his chest and down his arm, stopping at his fingertips. The hand that caressed him moved down with intention. He wanted to cry at the top of his voice with pleasure. Consciousness shot through him in a confusing bolt as Neji realized that he had been dreaming. It was a rather graphic dream, as he recalled while sitting up.

‘Shameful.’ He thought reproachfully. It was not often that he had sexual dreams so straightforward and vivid. Having them while sleeping beside the girl he desired, particularly while she was unaware, was extremely ill-advised. Neji groaned tiredly, upright, and rubbed at his eyes with one hand.

He was alone in the room. Lee and Tenten had already ventured out.

After gathering his bearings, Neji also left the cabin and ascended above deck. His teammates had been making idle chit-chat with the friendly passengers from yesterday. Breakfast was served, and Tenten glanced over to the top of the stairwell just as he stepped through. She waved him over, “I was just going to wake you! Did you sleep alright, Neji?”

“Fine, all things considered.”

“I apologize for my woeful illness last night!” Lee added, unable to resist a formal bow of atonement, “Never in my life would I ever want my friends to see something like that…”

“Think nothing of it, Lee.” Neji told him.

“Let’s get something to eat. The line is forming over there.” Tenten shepherded the men along to a serving table. She then showed Neji a small paper packet, “Look! One of Lee’s laborer pals spoke to the captain and got this! There’s enough Dramamine here to get Lee to the Marsh Country and back. He won’t be sick anymore.”

Neji nodded and to thought himself, ‘Thank the gods.’
They ate well and kept Lee properly medicated. He shed his sea sickness completely and was effective at rallying more interest in the Chunin Exam that day. Many passengers asked for mock battles and eventually, with Lee’s insistence, his teammates consented to showing off a little.

The men who had antagonized Tenten the day before found it wise to apologize for their behavior. Her fearsome display from yesterday paled in comparison to the hail of weaponry she tossed at her teammates. While Tenten appeared to have forgiven the inappropriate laborers, Neji kept a wary eye out for them. The first impression they had made had condemned them in Neji’s book.

Early in the afternoon, Lee discovered another passenger who was fluent in Hanwen. This rapidly associated another potential speaker in their conversation, namely Tenten. She was very hesitant, ‘I haven’t practiced in so long. I don’t really care now since Mom and Dad can’t speak it to me.’

Neji stood by cluelessly, occasionally glancing over at fishermen who had cast rods over the edge of the ship.

Lee urged his teammate, Tenten! I know you can do it! Say anything. Anything you remember!

No. She managed.

Very good! Lee was thrilled.

She understands what we’re saying. The laborer remarked.

Tenten always understands. Lee added to his teammate, Please; do not be reluctant to speak.

I…have terrible pronunciation. And your Grandpa is always correcting me. Tenten huffed, I want to wind up.

I think you mean “give up.” The passenger decoded her jumbling of words.

She turned to Lee, See? I’m awful.

Lee rubbed his chin thoughtfully, You know, that was really quite good.

That’s enough. It’s dinnertime.

You mean lunchtime. Lee understood.

“Yeah, that’s what I meant!” Tenten folded her arms and moved up in the line, “I don’t want to embarrass myself anymore.”

“You speak it better than my mother.” The laborer complimented, “And she grew up with it. I think she just disregards grammar entirely.”

Tenten shrugged off the praise and accepted food from servers. She and her teammates ate together before continuing to push the advertisement agenda, locating some of the families that were traveling aboard. They skipped over a family with very small children who they deemed, “too young” to appreciate the theme of spectating final rounds.

Lee’s suffering had quelled, and so he explored the ship and challenged mates to push-up contests. After handily winning every competition and earning more respect, Lee tried his hand at fishing and rope knot-work. By the afternoon, the old captain of the ship had even let him take the helm briefly. Lee’s steering was sub-par and he quickly had to surrender control to the skipper.

Neji and Tenten passed the day by not exerting themselves. Passengers came and went to visit them,
but while alone that afternoon they found plenty to talk about. The only subject Neji did not bring up was his uncomfortable meeting with Hyuga clan elders.

It did not come as a great surprise to either of them that they had disobeyed the Hokage’s no-contact order while it had been in place. Tenten did find it intriguing that Neji had managed to befriend the ANBU agent who had to intercept him multiple times. Tenzo had also stopped her once.

“He was a nice guy, now that you mention it.” Tenten acknowledged.

“I saw you bring food to Lee’s home one night.”

She took a moment to compose herself, feeling cornered. “I did. His grandfather really appreciated it…” Tenten noted the expectant expression on Neji’s face, “I wanted to do the same for you, really.”

“What stopped you?”

“I don’t know.” Slightly defensive, she replied, “What stopped you?”

“Incarceration.” Neji supplied simply, “I hardly left your side.”

She shook her head and smiled, “I had a feeling you were around.” Tenten sighed, “I don’t know if I could have gotten away with finding you, Neji. Not the way you did. The Hokage said it was for our own good.”

“Perhaps it was.” He agreed, “And I hope it never happens again.”

Lee rounded the bend of the ship with a handful of mooring line, and demanded that they try their hand at tying knots. Tenten felt the connection with Neji snap and slip away after the interruption. What a rare opportunity it had been. ‘Maybe this won’t be the last time we can talk like this.’

She and Neji humored their teammate as he tried to keep them engaged for the long journey. And that is just what he did for several hours; Lee as his youthful, energized-self once again.

That night, they made sure that Lee was medicated as they sailed through rough waters again. He retired to sleep after feeling drowsy. Tenten and Neji had stayed above deck for as long as possible before the ship passed beneath a storm cloud. They went below to avoid the rain.

With a yawn, Tenten stretched and turned down a separate corridor, “You go ahead, Neji. I’m stopping at the ladies room first."

Neji continued through the starboard bulkhead towards their minuscule cabin. Before entering, he used his Blood Limit out of habit to confirm Tenten’s position. She had just entered the restroom. She was not the only one in that stretch of the ship, unfortunately. Neji backed out of the room while watching two passengers he mentally blacklisted. They were nosing around a corner, poised to slink down the hallway after the young woman they had earlier antagonized.

Neji was blessedly quick and discreet, moving to the annex that connected with the hall he had his eyes on. As soon as the two oafs crossed at the doorway, they were struck with an Air Palm blast and squashed against the composite wall. They fell in a heap, their heads terrifically rattled.

He returned to the cabin with a sense of vindication. Neji knew they were scoundrels. And on the off chance he had mistakenly attacked two men who had no vile intentions whatsoever, they still would have no idea what happened or who to blame.

Lee was sound asleep in the room. Neji made himself comfortable on the top bunk and shut his eyes.
While it was sometimes a round-the-clock job, he was always glad to look after his teammates. The pattering of ran was a dull hum.

The light of the room was snapped off and Tenten sealed the cabin. Neji could hear her tiptoe over to Lee and assess his health. He then remained motionless as Tenten returned to the top bunk and took the spot beside him. She poked his shoulder. Neji opened an eye in response.

“There was a loud bang when I was in the bathroom.” She said quietly, “Can you see if the boat is sinking?”

He restrained a smirk, “This ship is not sinking.”

“You didn’t even check.”

“You’re safe.” Neji assured her.

“You mean we’re safe.” Tenten rolled over and folded an arm beneath her head. She had not noticed the unconscious men in the adjacent bulkhead, but Neji felt that was for the best.

She spoke again while facing away from him, “Do you care that I’m up here? I know that Lee will sleep better tonight.”

“I have no objection to it if you don’t.” He answered. In the past he had shared sleeping spaces with her before, granted there had not been nearly so much overlap of their persons.

“I think this is better.” Tenten determined, “Get your rest for tomorrow. It’s going to be a busy day.”

He replied with a low sound in the affirmative and made a true attempt to fall asleep. His thoughts ran rampant even as he held still. Neji found it remarkable that Tenten was able to drift off after a time.

‘This isn’t the same as it was.’ Neji tried to be honest with himself, ‘I’m distractible. Talkative. Informal.’ Whether he meant to or not, he was showing a new side of himself to Tenten. She, by and large, seemed as professional as she had always been. That did not include the moments in which Tenten would lock eyes with him without flinching, or discuss the intimate details of her life that she had otherwise been tight-lipped about in previous years.

He had never conceptualized before, in his young life, just how good it felt to get to know her. Neji had taken those learning opportunities for granted in the past. But he had become greedy for time with her. Moreover, it was totally unreasonable that he wanted to wake Tenten up so he could ask more questions during the night. Only after his mind had exhausted the trails of possibility, meandering along the banks of desire and doubt, did he finally fall asleep.

Sometime before dawn, Lee had begun snoring on his bunk.

The grating noise had pulled Neji out of dreams, ‘Hopefully Lee isn’t smothering himself down there…’ It sounded as if Lee had rolled face-down; his nostrils doing battle with the mattress for oxygen.

Neji’s other senses detected something was amiss. He did not need to open his eyes to decipher that the warm length of body pressed into his front was Tenten. The tickle of hair shaken loose from a bun, below his nose, still carried a hint of fragrance to it. He was immediately aware that his arms had formed a secure loop around the young woman’s mid-section, inadvertently spooning with her while they had been asleep. None the wiser, Tenten had draped an arm over his while slumbering serenely.
A filament in his waking mind suggested panic and reasserting propriety. Standard. It doubled back; alleging that moving suddenly could wake her, and as such was not a sensible way to react. Neji made no effort to shift or awaken. Tenten was deeply asleep.

What had he expected from sharing such a confined space? That they would repel as like poles of a magnet do? It would be futile to convince himself that he did not want be close to her. For the entire trip, Neji had done little else than be near Tenten or keep her attention. He had not purposefully tried to hold her, but Neji could not ignore the symphony in every cell that spoke of how right it was.

His uncooperative, early-morning brain veered off course, unable to concentrate on rectifying the situation. It only acknowledged the pleasantness that was felt. It prioritized the feeling…and then slept again.

Time passed, the sun crept up, and Tenten woke gradually from what was a surprisingly decent rest. She opened her eyes and tilted her head, noticing the extreme, unintentional close-up of Neji’s face. ‘Oh.’ His sleeping-expression was about the calmest she had ever seen him, ‘Here’s looking at ya, Hyuga Neji.’ She slowly extricated and unwound herself from the curve of his body, unalarmed. It was nearly a shame to leave such a warm and divine space. Neji did not stir as she inched away carefully.

‘This has been a small victory.’ Tenten thought to herself. She had anticipated something like it could happen, and she was indeed very pleased that it did. ‘Better move it before he wakes up and freaks out…’ They would be making land soon and Tenten had little interest in canoodling the morning away. ‘But tomorrow looks good. If we can hold it together for the last leg of this mission… maybe I owe it to myself to finally say something to him. I don’t know what I’m waiting for anymore.’

Tenten stepped out of the cabin and proceeded down the hall system towards the restroom. A mirror would be beneficial. ‘I need to fix my hair. It feels like a mullet right now!’ On the way, she passed by two men asleep on the floor of the corridor, and beside them was a suspicious dent in the wall.

By mid-morning, the ship had pulled into the brackish inlet of the Marsh Country’s great harbor. Prior to disembarking, Chief Mate Ondo bade them farewell, cautioning that the next vessel available for a voyage to the mainland was five days away, at best. The team of Leaf ninja filed off of the Fog Skipper alongside the seasonal mine workers. The laborers flashed their Chunin Exam fliers as they passed, promising that they would attend.

Lee’s sea-legs were not very well suited for solid ground, which he discovered while walking down the long wharf with his teammates. They stopped here and there to post advertisements, noticing that townsfolk were virtually non-existent in the small, bayside settlement. A handful of residents traversed the docks and sand paths between quaint, wooden houses. After the last flier was glued to a power pole, the team regrouped to determine their next course of action.

“Are you feeling okay, Lee?” Tenten asked, “That trip did a number on you. I can’t figure out how you could be sick and still introduce yourself to every person on that ship.”

“Youth is on my side! I would not have prevailed otherwise.” He determined, “Though I feel it would be wise for us to take a break soon.”

There was a seaside inn just up the hill from the harbor. When they stopped for lunch, Neji acquainted himself with the map while Lee and Tenten ate. Lee was still slightly ‘green around the gills’ while seated, and Tenten advised him to take small sips of the broth they had been served. A waitress came by their table to give Tenten the dumplings she had ordered.
“There you go! Don’t mind my asking, but do you happen to be Leaf ninja? Chichiya-sama says they’re the best allies this country’s got.” The waitress asked, wiping her hands on her apron.

“We are.” Tenten said after thanking her, “This place is quite far from home, though.”

“If you’re going out into the woods, just be careful. You see odd ninja popping in and out of there. The rumor is that something is buried deep under the mountain and everyone wants to know what it is.” The woman whispered, and then giggled at the thought, “Well, you have a nice day now!”

Tenten found the information redundant. Lee let out a soft groan of misery before deciding he was feeling slightly better. Tenten encouraged him to have a little more, and then pushed some food in front of Neji as well, “You’ve got to eat something before we go, Neji. It sure won’t ruin your figure.”

He eyed her with annoyance from behind the map, “Ha ha.” He said dryly, but he accepted one of the rolls anyway.

After lunch, Lee vomited violently behind the building in a weed-filled garden. He felt better straightaway and was prepared to go on, fully adjusted to land again. The time came to begin searching for the suspicious shinobi Tsunade had spoken of. Neji directed his team to a forest path that extended into the wilderness. It was teeming with wood frogs and reptiles that filled the forest with song. They eventually took to the canopy to travel more quickly.

As the day progressed they penetrated further into the climbing jungle of the Marsh Country. The emergent layer above them was so tangled with leaves and branches that most daylight was blocked, making it difficult to tell what time it was. Neji stopped occasionally to allow them a drink of water or to reaffirm their route with the map.

Sometimes a strange silence would come over the woods, as if it was all one giant organism holding its breath. In those strange and unnerving beats Lee would bring up a story from their Academy days. Though it seemed to help distract Tenten from their eerie surroundings it did not help Neji. He was too aware of their environment, as always. His face was pale with anticipation.

“There might be other ninja in this area.” The Hyuga eventually warned, “I can’t see any now, but…” He trailed off, hesitating to say more.

“What’s that matter, Neji?” Tenten knew the last bit of information would be crucial.

“I will not see far in this forest. It’s extremely dense and compacted, so it takes longer to work out the details.” Neji admitted, “When we’re out in the open again it will be safer.”

“Understood.” Lee said. They grasped that Neji had his limitations. The team of wayward ninja continued on, heading north.

They skirted a tree that was being guarded by an unusually large snake and rushed through the treetops. Small animals in the bramble watched the three soar by, confusing them for birds of prey as their silhouettes passed beneath the leafy ceiling. The chirping suddenly died off again and the tension came back. They stopped and Neji motioned for them to be still. He used his Byakugan, staring into the silence. He saw nothing and rested his eyes after a bit.

Tenten took a drink from her canteen. Neji, for form’s sake, used his Byakugan again. He could see a lone drop of water tracing down from the kunoichi’s chin to her smooth neck. His thoughts strayed as he stared at her from behind, and then looked away abruptly when a horrendous snapping noise reverberated through the jungle. Tenten and Lee froze, unable to pinpoint where the rolling crash
was coming from. Neji nearly noticed too late.

An enormous tree, rotted with age, was careening down, smashing all in its path. Tenten watched Neji spring, executing a perfect rotation in the air that diverted the falling behemoth away from his team. It was such a gallant move she wanted to kiss him for it, except that the giant crushed other trees in the understory, sweeping their footholds out from under them.

They cried out in unison.

Tenten tumbled and landed on a more secure branch. Lee fell close by on his back. She drew Hok and slashed debris that might have impaled her stunned teammate. Neji had fallen a long way down, and without much thought, Tenten and Lee followed voluntarily.

There were a few vines that slowed their descent, but eventually snapped under their weight. They fell a good way into a bog, but the landing was soft. The forest shrieked and moaned after the ancient tree had finally settled a distance off. Tenten did not bother sheathing her sword. She, along with Neji and Lee were covered head to toe with thick, pasty mud. Tenten held Hok above her head and waded to shore with her teammates as they groaned in aggravation.

“Was that not a fantastic adventure?” Lee laughed, sloughing off grime from his outfit into the underbrush.

Tenten relaxed a fraction once the danger had passed. Neji came up to her and she thought about actually kissing him for his quick-thinking, even though his face was streaked so that the mud looked like war paint. Instead, the Hyuga removed a leech that had latched onto her exposed shoulder. “You’re not hurt are you?” He asked a bit sullenly.

“No. How about you?” She thought she should return the gesture. She wiped some of the mire from his cheek. He closed his eyes at the contact, which she found oddly adorable. Like a child acquiescing to a mother’s need to fuss.

He and Lee, predictably, were fine. Neji directed them to the nearest source of running water, though it did slightly remove them from their previous course. They entered the shallow rapids, which were warm enough, and scrubbed off. Ignoring each other’s nakedness, they also washed out their clothing and supplies, waiting in their underwear on the rocky bank for their belongings to dry. It wasted an hour or so of daylight, but Neji did not have many complaints since it had been a close thing.

They were only able to travel a bit farther in the evening hours. Thankfully, they arrived outside the thick of the jungle and were on the spine of the mountain, where bare-faced rock and crags were abundant. Birds called out haunting melodies in the sunset. They made camp in the hollow of a stone ledge, and the fire was comforting as the temperature dropped rapidly outside the incubation of the forest. Tenten was first to sleep. She had not eaten much and let Lee have her dinner since there had been no food in his stomach anyway. Neji watched her from across the fire pit, his eyes steady but tempted with sleep.

He caught Lee chuckling lightly.

“What is so entertaining?” Neji demanded before taking a sip of his tea.

“Nothing. I think you see as clearly as I do just how beautiful Tenten is when she is asleep.” Lee replied thoughtfully. Neji snorted at the comment, not trying to deny it, and finished his tea. Neji made Lee take the first watch so he could rest. The two of them alternated for the rest of the night, deciding not to wake Tenten.
In the morning they made much better time without the forest’s perils to slow them. Tenten had developed a small limp, since she had apparently been jostled while evading the falling tree the day before. Their pace slowed, but not by much, since she was determined not to be a burden.

“You could never be a burden.” Lee promised her, “Truly, Neji and I would not know what to do without you, Tenten!”

It was around the time they were thinking about stopping for a mid-day meal that Neji halted them again. With his Byakugan focused on a sheltered valley below, he reported, “There are shinobi here. They haven’t sensed us.”

They crept slowly over the crest of the hill, low against the boulders, remaining unseen while they spied. When they were close enough Neji started with the more detailed findings, “A variety of nukenin, from what I can tell. It looks as though they’re just talking. Laughing, some of them. They are friendly with each other.”

“Can you see where they might hail from?” Lee asked in a whisper.

Neji strained for glimpses of hitai-ate, “Grass, Moon…several from Sound. There’s Mist and Cloud with them too, and a few others bear no mark.”

“How many altogether?” Tenten checked.

“Seventeen visible.” Neji answered, “There could be more that aren’t present. We should keep looking.”

They moved on, taking the long way around to stay undetected. During a pause, Tenten tried rest her ankle properly, and while they had lunch they discussed what had been found. “What do you suppose they are doing out here?” Lee wondered, “It is not as if this country is too involved with ninja squabbles.”

“Sometimes they join out of a common purpose, like the Akatsuki.” Tenten pointed out, “Maybe this faction has a collective goal in mind? That woman back at the inn said there’s something under these mountains.”

“I doubt they’d be able to find it unless someone has a bloodline talent like the Byakugan.” Neji interjected, “And whatever it is they can only achieve it when their numbers are solid. It may be potentially harmful to the Marsh Country.”

“Or any country.” Lee agreed.

“We’ll have to do more recon to find out.” Tenten added, “That means getting in closer to actually hear about their plans. What do you think, Neji?”

“We’ll shadow them today and get in close tomorrow.” He decided.

“What if we have an opportunity today?” Lee asked.

“Then we take it.” Neji said.

They finished eating and Tenten felt well enough to go with them. The team stalked down into the valley, cautious, depending solely on Neji’s blood limit to avoid exposure. When they were close enough they saw about nine of the seventeen ninja they had detected earlier. It became strikingly clear how some of them were ill. At least three were displaying flu-like symptoms. One of the women handed out something that could have been medicine to the ailing shinobi, speaking in an
encouraging tone. “We’ll get there.” She kept telling them.

“How did they get sick?” Lee whispered.

Neji shook his head. It was unclear how it happened, but he also did not want to talk. Not this close to the enemy; there was too much of a risk. There was a man among them who had provisions out and was feeding their companions. He turned to the medic and asked when the others would be back.

“They’re scouting the area so it could be a few hours. Keshin said he thought he smelled outsiders close by. They could be lost, or they could be meddlers.” The woman told him, “Without Keshin’s group here we’re still weak, so I hope they don’t find us first.”

Tenten smirked at the irony. Neji withdrew silently and his teammates followed. This was clearly the more vulnerable half of the congregation, and they did not want to start trouble with them. “The other group most likely has the information we want anyway.” Neji reasoned.

They followed the valley up to the backbone of the mountain pass. Neji scanned the area before finally spotting the other half of the nukenin faction. Tenten and Lee followed him northeast through a patchwork of conifers, and after coming out on the other side they stopped. The mountain looked to have been carved into by an ancient river, and along the canyon a line of ninja could be seen tracing the lip of the gorge.

The Leaf ninja kept low and moved slowly. Neji did not let them proceed until they were downwind. They had to bear in mind that the ninja named ‘Keshin’ had a heightened sense of smell that they would be wise to avoid.

“I have a bad feeling about this.” Tenten confessed, “Maybe we should wait for them to go back to their camp before we listen in?”

“If we do that they will have a greater advantage of numbers. There are less of them now.” Neji told her.

Lee agreed with Neji. They stopped at a ledge that overlooked the path the nukenin faction was following. Laid flat against the limestone, the teammates listened and watched without moving a muscle. The group below stopped for a drink of water and, sure enough, they began to chat.

“I hate it out here.” One of them said, smacking his arm, “I’m always getting eaten up by mosquitoes.”

A man with a long face and squinted eyes looked at him, “Quit your whining, Isso. We’re close to the tomb now. Once we locate it we can get back to the Demon Country and report it.”

“That isn’t stopping the bugs from biting.” Isso muttered.

“Demon Country?” Tenten mouthed to Neji. He figured it was enough information for one sitting, but before they could steal away the breeze shifted. The Hyuga cringed as the wind abruptly changed direction in the valley and gave away their scents.

A hulking man with a long, black mane leapt up. His eyes were wide with alarm. Neji made Tenten and Lee keep still.

“What’s wrong, Keshin?” One of his companions asked.
“Here. I smell people here.” He looked up to the ledge, narrowing his eyes, “Sneaks…”

He hurled a kunai with an exploding tag attached at the ledge, and Team Gai scattered before it detonated. It was a free-for-all with nukenin filing off and attacking whichever of the three they pleased. Neji dove ahead, knocking five of them down to the next steppe of the plateau with an exorbitant rotation. His teammates descended on the stragglers. It was one of their most reliable strategies: divide and conquer.

Hok was singing as it hacked off one of the nukenin’s arms, and he flopped over in defeat. Lee dislocated another’s elbow with a knee-kick, followed by a dizzying uppercut that left the poor fellow sliding down the gravel slope, unconscious. Keshin had gone straight for Neji, almost immediately recognizing him as the leader. He had some bear-like quality about him, no doubt from clan breeding. His punches wrecked boulders into dust, and the Hyuga danced away from him, waiting for an opening.

The other five scaled the slope and joined the fray again. Tenten and a pair of shadow clones raked two of them apart with Dance of the Crescent Moon. They were hurt badly enough to crawl over to their teammate with the missing arm.

Lee was fighting three-on-one, and forced his adversaries away after being stabbed with several senbon, “Konoha Senpuu!” They were knocked back, and one of them skidded off the slope and over the side of the gorge with a yelp.

Tenten sent one of her Kage Bunshin to help Lee fight off the last two, while she and her other duplicate rushed to help Neji.

The Bear-ninja was struck with several Jyukken strikes but resisted them dutifully. Neji could only keep Keshin and his devastating hammer-punches away with his rotation. His opponent’s speed was worrisome and Neji was quickly worn down. Tenten’s clone sliced at Keshin with her the replication of her jian. She skimmed his right flank, opening a superficial gash, while the man spun and clawed apart the clone. Neji attacked his exposed back but Keshin turned again, using pent-up momentum to send the smaller ninja tumbling.

With no traction on the unsteady gravel to slow him, Neji took a hard spill off of the gorge’s edge.

Tenten opted for aggressive tactics in that moment. She summoned the Hiyumi from its scroll, and with a screech of fury, fired point-blank at Keshin. He leapt aside nimbly, expecting an average arrow, but was blown back by the resulting explosion. Keshin rushed to escape, realizing he could not defend himself against the ranged attack. He crossed a thin log bridge across the chasm, and just after reaching the other side, the dead tree was blown to bits by another fire-arrow. Tenten stabbed the Hiyumi into the soil, letting it stand, and rushed to Neji.

For a moment she lost sight of him and panicked, calling Neji’s name; then he responded. She found him hanging onto a gnarled root jutting out from the side of the cliff. It was a good meter drop from the ledge. “Hang on a second!” She called to him. Tenten dug into the shifty earth with her knees, and then shimmied on her stomach off the side of the gorge. Her arms extended to their maximum length, and she reached for the Hyuga.

Neji took one of her hands and kept the other secured around the root. “If I let go I’ll pull you down.” He informed her, his voice oddly calm.

“So?” She snapped angrily, “Give me your damn hand, Neji!”

He stared at her with his pearly eyes, weighing the chances, and then reached for her. The earth
crumbled, falling off in unstable shards, and Tenten grunted with effort as she fought to stay up. Neji’s weight was pulling her forward, but before her leverage was lost she planted her aching feet with chakra. “Yeah…you got a bit heavy…” She puffed, struggling to breathe.

Neji tried to pull himself up independently by latching onto the cliffside with his feet, but his chakra only tore up the fragile soil. “No, don’t do that!” Tenten panted, “Just wait…I’ll…get you…”

“You won’t.” He told her.

She shook her head, infuriated, “I’m gonna punch you right in your pretty face if you don’t can it, Hyuga!”

There was a sudden, white-hot pain in her shoulder. Tenten looked up, and across the far side of the canyon could see Keshin hurling kunai. His accuracy was not nearly as quailing as hers, but he had nicked her shoulder and the blood began running down her arm. She watched the red stream reach her hand and begin to make her grip on Neji’s wrist slip. “Aw….shit.” She exhaled harshly.

“Tenten.” There was some sort of desperation in Neji’s voice that she was not familiar with, “Tenten!”

She could see he was watching Keshin with his Byakugan. Then she saw the fuuma shuriken being launched through the air with its menacing, hooked blades.

This time it was going to do more than nick her shoulder. She looked down at Neji, entirely focused. “It’s alright.” She told him.

He shouted again, his warning a millisecond in length. He then recognized the resoluteness of Tenten’s hold, and stabbed her with twin Jyukken strikes. She screamed and reeled back, her hands slipping, and Neji plummeted from view. The fuuma shuriken missed by mere inches.

Tenten could only hear the sound of rushing blood in her head in ears, frantic, understanding perfectly what had happened in the span of the last two seconds. She picked up the Hiyumi again and Keshin was running for the hills on the opposite bank of the ravine. She let several shots loose, tearing up the forest on the other side and lighting it ablaze. Her wrath had yet to be unleashed on the bear-fool.

She let another low-chakra arrow ring out towards Lee, where it burst on his remaining foe. The nukenin hobbled away, patting at his burning clothes and shrieking. She un-summoned the bow, crying pathetically, and ran to Lee.

“Neji…” It was the only word that could pass her lips before she turned back. Tenten considered rappelling down the side of the gorge, but could not ignore the danger of the unstable rock. She was still bleeding while she ran along the edge, looking for a place to descend into the canyon safely. Lee caught her, his arms barring her from going any farther.

“You are hurt!” He informed her, looking at her shoulder, “Please just take a moment, Tenten.”

“Neji fell…” She sucked in a shuddering breath, “He wouldn’t let me hold on…he forced me…” Lee rubbed a soothing circle on her back, shushing her.

“We cannot despair now. We need to be mindful if we are going to get him back.” Lee told her matter-of-factly. When she got a grip he released her, “I am going to check the west end of the ravine and you can check the east. We will meet back here in an hour or less, alright?”

She nodded anxiously, restraining her despair. They separated and Tenten flew on her legs, fear
giving them speed she had not known before. As she scanned the cliffside for possible footholds her thoughts whirled, ‘Why did he do that? I was going to...he just made me let go...’ It was proof that he cared, surely, but enough to let his life blink out? After all she had worked for? ‘You don’t have the luxury to walk out of my life anymore!’

Shock and relief hit her when she spotted a sure-footed slope descending into the canyon. Tenten slid down, carefully holding herself at an angle, and once at the bottom began her search in slight hysterics.

Oh how she wished they had brought radios with them! Usually they did, and Gai had bought new ones for the team; but this time they had gone without. There was a chance that the nukenin they were following might be carrying them too. It would be a disaster if they were able to pick up one of their channels. Tsunade would not appreciate such an obvious blunder. Still, Tenten would have killed to have had open communications with her team right then.

She followed the stream west, back towards where she had lost Neji. It was a fairly deep stretch of water, so he may have had a more fortunate landing than she was expecting. Tenten ran faster, hating how her eyes could only take in so much at once. Then she began to think more rationally. She knew that it was a strain for her chakra reserves, but she created four Shadow Clones and made them scatter across the canyon floor. One of them almost instantly discovered a body, but it was that of a fallen nukenin. Her remaining three clones kept searching.

Lee was nowhere in sight. He probably had not found a way down yet. Heaven permitting, they would be able to get out of the ravine without Keshin showing up to take advantage of their turmoil. Tenten felt the wound on her shoulder beginning to clot. She stopped only for a moment, washing off the dried blood on her arm with the creek’s crystal-clear water. Abruptly, after what seemed like an endless search, a transmission from a dissolved bunshin connected with her brain.

Neji had been found. Her other clones disappeared with a pop, and Tenten quickly descended on the scene, her heart beating a hole through her chest.

He was half-in, half-out of the stream. Maybe Neji had landed in it, but it did not look like he had. He was bent at an odd angle and was not moving. Tenten kneeled beside him, touching him gently. He was freezing. She knew the water was cold, and with evening upon them she would have to get a fire going soon. What she would not do for a radio...

Neji’s breathing was deep and slow. Tenten pulled the boy onto her back, as she had done on several other occasions, and then located the nearest route back out of the canyon. He was heavy against her shoulders while she climbed: completely inert with no signs of stirring. ‘Did he break any bones from that fall?’ She would have to check. He was not bleeding, which was good. ‘What happened to you?’

Back at the top, Lee, by some stroke of luck, ran into her. “Thank goodness you found him...” He said tiredly.

The sun was setting in a grim pink-violet wash, worsening their plight. “We need to make a fire. Neji’s freezing and I think he might become hypothermic...” She need not repeat herself. Lee was off snatching up bramble and kindling as they crossed back to a more sheltered area, beyond the reach of the nukenin faction.

After finding a decidedly safe nook in the side of a precipice, Lee struck up a fire in the cave and helped Tenten strip Neji down. He was starting to shiver, and Tenten only had one blanket to try and dry him off with. The Hyuga’s pale skin was lined with a few bruises, but he was not seriously injured. She willed herself to be professional around the young man’s ivory body. Lee snapped her
out of her momentary struggle.

“Where is his bag?” Lee asked with a frown.

“Oh…I guess he must’ve lost it when he fell.” Tenten ground her knuckles against her temple in frustration, “I was down there too and I could’ve looked for it!”

“It’s alright. We will just have to use our supplies to support him.” Lee recommended, “It would be far too dangerous to go back and look after…all of that.”

“We weren’t even supposed to engage…” She recalled glumly.

“We did not have a choice. If we did not fight back they would have killed us.” Lee justified it, as he knew Neji would have.

“Yeah. This just…it’s going to make it a lot more difficult getting back home with the information.” Tenten sighed, sitting back. She watched Lee arrange Neji so that he was closer to the fire. He was not shaking as much.

After making sure the Hyuga was resting easy they tended to their own wounds. Lee only had minor puncture spots from where senbon had stuck into his arms. He helped Tenten disinfect the cut on her shoulder and bandage it. They ate little, for neither of them were terribly hungry. They reflected on what was lost.

Neji’s map was gone, which meant they would have to find their way back with Lee’s compass. His rations were also lost, as were medical supplies, his cowl, and spare weapons. It was a heavy blow, and when he woke he would probably demand to fetch his things himself as repentance. They could flee back to the coast without the provisions in a day or two; hopefully with some speed they could avoid the remaining nukenin as well. It would be hard to last that long without enough food for everyone, though.

Tenten fidgeted, trying to get comfortable in her seat against the cave wall. Outside darkness had fallen, and the night creatures had begun their concert. After a long while, Neji’s clothes were dry. She asked Lee to help her dress Neji again. He seemed oddly light in their arms when they handled him. Tenten had run her hand unthinkingly over the crown of his head and found something worrying.

“His head…” She observed, tucking aside some strands of hair to find a small amount of drying blood.

Lee’s prominent eyebrows rose only with slight concern, “If Neji knocked his head during that fall it would explain why he was unconscious for this long.”

Tenten pressed her lips briefly against the Hyuga’s temple. ‘Feel better.’ She thought, ‘I’m sorry that happened. I won’t ever drop you again like that…ever.’

Lee seemed touched by her loving behavior. He had fleetingly believed that when she had returned to the team, after training under Hayate, that she had lost interest in Neji. Of course she hadn’t, after all, Neji was too much a part of who she was. ‘I just hope he realizes one day how much Tenten sacrifices for him…’

Tenten told Lee to get some sleep, “I’ll wake you when it’s time for your watch.”
He thanked her and then rolled over on his mat. Lee was positioned parallel to the cave entrance, so that if there was danger he would be the first to encounter it. Tenten thought it very noble of him. ‘Noble. Yes…that’s the perfect word for Lee.’ She smiled to herself. Her friend drifted off into a deep sleep, and his soft snores began to lull her.

Tenten distracted from the dull night hours by touching Neji. For the most part, she ran her palm over the smooth contours of his arm, from his shoulder down to his wrist, then knuckles. Again, she found it silly how she expressed her affection only when he was asleep. Tenten used to think it was so gutless. Now she realized she did it because she needed the tender contact. How many years had it been since she had last seen her loved ones?

‘It feels like a long time. Not since before Mom and Dad…went out that day and never came back.’ Tenten thought, feeling the automatic tightness of grief in her throat. Thinking about how they had been murdered hurt so intensely that she seldom did it.

She glanced at the digital lanyard-watch that was perched on top of her travel bag. Close to one o’clock in the morning. Tenten crossed over to Lee and gently shook him awake. He sat up without a word and took over the vigil. Tenten laid down on her own mat, quickly falling into a dreamless sleep.

In the morning Tenten woke with stiff muscles. She stretched for a few moments before looking over at Lee. He must have fallen asleep during his last shift. Since they had not encountered any peril during the night, such an oversight was forgivable. Across from Lee, Neji lay quietly behind the smoldering embers. Tenten called to Lee and he rose immediately.

“Did Neji wake at all during the night?” She asked him.

“No. Neji did not budge.” Lee told her, rolling his shoulders sleepily, “I am sure he will wake when he smells breakfast, though.” He smiled thoughtfully.

Tenten agreed with the idea. Since the cave provided good cover they stayed in it, revitalizing the fire. Lee put water on to boil for tea. Tenten took out some of the rolls from her bag, scraping the seeds off of one of the buns; just how Neji preferred them. After that she crawled over to him, pulling the blanket away from the dozer. She patted his shoulder gently and said, “Time for you to wake up.”

He did not stir.

Tenten bent down, closer to his ear, “Neji…”

A shift...slight but evident. She spoke again, “Wake up now, Neji…”

He was very groggy. His gypsum eyes opened a crack beneath thick lashes. Tenten smiled; this was the very one she so deeply adored. Neji opened his mouth to speak but only managed a moan. He sat up a little. Lee greeted him with a friendly wave from where he was boiling water, “Good morning! Would you care for some tea, Neji?”

“What?” He muttered, still unintelligible.

“Tea, Neji.” Tenten repeated for him, “It’s time for breakfast.”

Neji was silent for an unnaturally long moment. He sat up fully, first observing his attire as if he had
expected to be naked. Neither of his friends understood, especially when he reached up and touched his hair, seeming stupefied by its length.

“Um...are you okay?” Tenten asked softly.

“I…” He looked at her, “I don’t know you.”

Tenten blinked. She examined his eyes and facial expression, and read that he was not lying. He, in a state like this, did not have the capacity to lie.

“You...don’t know me?” Tenten asked, her voice shaking, “What about him?” She pointed to Lee across the fire.

Neji shook his head. Lee dropped the cup he was holding as if he had been stung.

Tenten inhaled a steadying breath, rapidly analyzing the situation. 'He banged his head...now he’s super-muddled. Let's try to figure out what he does know.'

“Okay...let’s start from the beginning. We’re ninja from the Hidden Leaf Village, and we’re all a team.” Tenten said, asking, “Is that ringing any bells?”

“No.”

“We were on a mission and you were hurt...you hit your head so you don’t remember...” She gulped, “Us...I’m Tenten, your best friend. That’s Lee over there, he’s your pal too.”

Neji looked between them, seeming to believe the information fully. He was like a new student in a Social Studies class. “You called me Neji.” He said perceptively, “That’s my name.”


“Alright.” He said, as if accepting it to be the only truth available, “You’re both...taking care of me because I was hurt...”

“We’re happy to.” Tenten told him, “But it looks like your memory is...in the gutter. You need to tell me if there’s anything you do remember, like...” She thought on it, “How long have you been training as a ninja?”

“I’m a ninja.” He repeated, dumbfounded, “I know what they are, but...I can’t be one. I don’t even know how to fight.”

His disarming honesty was ripping Tenten’s confidence to shreds.

“Actually, you’re arguably the best fighter on this team, with your Jyukken and all...” She answered hastily, “But okay, we’ll work on that... What else? I hope you still have basics. Writing? Math? Navigation?”

“I think that’s...” He sounded so embarrassed, “All there.”

“I guess if you don’t remember being a ninja you can’t perform supplementary jutsu either...” She mumbled, “Well...you definitely understand what’s going on...so it looks like you’ve just lost... your defense mechanisms. Hopefully your brain will kick in soon and you’ll be back on track.”

Neji nodded, the state of his condition dawning on his anxious face, “I’m sorry...you seem like you really care about me. I apologize if I’m inconveniencing you.”
Tenten could not hide her amazement at his humiliation. Neji was such a proud person that she did not think he was capable of it. Then another thought struck her, “Do you…remember your family, Neji? Or where you live?”

His eyes searched along the floor of the cave. “No.” He said, ashamed, “Is that why I can’t remember anything else?”

“Maybe. I mean, your crazy family is the main reason you became a shinobi.” Tenten reasoned, “The Hyuga clan caused you a lot of pain when you were younger. Do you recall what they did?”

He did not answer. He didn’t have to.

“Your father was confined to the Branch Family, and your cousins had many more opportunities than you did because they were born into the Main House.” She hoped the explanation would jog a memory, “You’ve always hated the segregation. You were resentful for a long time…”

“I don’t feel…angry. Not right now.” He admitted.

“Your father’s dead.” She added

“He is?” His eyes widened momentarily. Then Neji realized he did not know his father so it didn’t hurt at all, “Oh…”

Lee handed him a cup of tea and the roll Tenten had prepared for him. “Eat this, Neji. Tenten and I are going to have a small chat.” He said. Neji thanked him and watched as his two friends exited the cave to speak privately

“I cannot believe this is happening…” Lee said sadly, “It is as if…the chalkboard of his mind has been partially erased!”

“I know. And Lee, did you hear all that? He doesn’t know anything about the Leaf Village or the Hyuga clan…” Tenten told him, “It’s like he’s a normal person now. Balanced, you know?”

“That is still bad for us as a whole. How are we going to get out of this country while we need to defend him? He cannot fight, Tenten!” Lee wailed despairingly, “He might get killed if those nukenin come across us again…”

“Well, we’ll just have to write up the information that’s not on the chalkboard anymore.” Tenten proposed, trying to keep her cool, “We need to train him on our way out of here, that’s the only way this is going to work. You start him on basic Taijutsu. I’ll handle chakra control and ninjutsu…maybe weapons, if I trust him with them.” She sighed, “I know some Jyukken from Hikune but I’ll be a cruddy teacher.”

“Do not worry about that right now.” Lee said, “What is most important is that Neji is protected. We may have to avoid open areas since there are still many of the rogues left.” He paused, his face lit with hope, “Maybe his memory will come back when we start training him?”

“I’m counting on it.” Tenten agreed.

They returned to the cave and Neji had finished eating. What was subtly surprising was that he had spread out their own food for them and poured them tea. “I really appreciate you two looking out for me.” He said, looking at them, “Tenten and Lee.”

Tenten felt her heart break a little. He was almost like a child. It was almost like they had become his parents. What was most unusual about it was that Neji was making his best effort to please them,
because he must have realized already how much he had already disappointed them.

A short while later they decided they would remain at the cave for one more day. Any longer than that and they ran the risk of being discovered by Keshin. Tenten took Neji out of the shelter into the sunlight, and he seemed instantly refreshed, just like his clan namesake foretold.

She spearheaded the effort with friendly conversation, simultaneously fishing for what Neji still understood. Tenten discerned that Neji had a complete concept of what ninja were in society, a rough idea of jutsu; he recalled his birthdate and age, a place he assumed was home from memory: a foggy description of the Leaf village. He even had a lone recollection, for some reason, of a cutting wind that shot from his hands and hacked all of the trees behind his house. It puzzled him immensely.

‘Not the worst place to start.’ Tenten figured, ‘He isn’t running on empty.’

“Okay. I’m going to start teaching you how to be a ninja again.” She laughed at the absurdity of the idea for a moment, and then continued, “I’m your chakra-sensei. Lee is going to be your combat-sensei. You’ll need both of us to get your abilities back so make sure you pay careful attention.”

“Alright.”

“Don’t be upset if you don’t get this stuff right away, okay?”

“I won’t get upset.”

“Well then…” Tenten scratched her cheek, “Before we start do you have any questions?”

“Yes.”

She smiled, “Go ahead.”

“You said we were all friends. It isn’t as if I can’t tell, but I want to know…” He trailed off for a moment, “Has it been that way all our lives?”

“That’s pretty deep.” Tenten pointed out.

“I feel…some things are left over.” Neji said, making a circular gesture beside his head, “I’ve known you all along.”

“No. No we met in the Academy. That’s where trainees first begin to learn; maybe that’s why you associated that with this. It’s because you’re starting to learn again.” She felt bad about it, “Maybe we met once or twice when we were little, but we were just classmates really.”

“We became friends when we were put on the same team, then?” Neji asked.

“No. You kind of looked down on us.” Tenten sighed, “You were uptight back then. Lee usually just trained with Gai-sensei because you were such a bully. You weren’t so bad with me, though.”

“I’m a horrible person.”

“Of course you aren’t!” Tenten snapped, “You just wanted to know how things were back then. You aren’t that way now. You have fun with us and joke around…infrequently. You, um, well…you…”
Neji was silent.

“We are friends. Please don’t doubt it. We’d do anything for you.” Tenten promised, “So what if it’s kind of recent? Things worked out.”

“Was I cruel to you?”

“No.”

“I think you’re lying.”

She gulped, “You could be harsh sometimes, but I think that’s what made me stronger. You pushed us to our edge.”

Neji sat on a rock that was ringed with laurel. He seemed very down on himself, and Tenten suspected that Neji might have sensed his usual behavior: how he normally reacted to things, versus how he was reacting to them now. Not a good way to start training.

“Hey…” She sat down beside him, patting his back, “What’s wrong? Don’t be sad. You’ve done a lot of good things too. Your cousins really look up to you.”

“My cousins?”

“Yeah. Hinata-chan and Hanabi.” She grinned, “They call you their big brother.”

“I…I know a face.” Neji frowned in concentration, “Her hair used to be short…but it isn’t anymore.”

Tenten smiled, “That’s Hinata.” She added optimistically, “Your clan also has a ton of respect for you, since you’re going to be head of the family someday.”

“A clan leader?” He was mystified, “Me?”

“Yes. You’ve given them hope. When you become leader you’re going to abolish the Branch House and give them equality.” Tenten could only report the sunny side of it, as she was aware of the political chokehold his elders maintained. If she had mentioned how there was only a snowball’s chance in hell of Neji accomplishing his goal, he might have broken into sobs.

“We have lots of friends too. Fujita is also one of your cousins. He looks up to you too.” Tenten tried to pile on the positives, “All of the other Genin also respect you. You’re almost always chosen to lead teams on missions by the Hokage because you’re so wise and reliable.” ‘Laying it on a little thick, ain’t ya?’ Tenten ignored the small voice in her head.

“The Hokage?” He asked.

“The leader of the Hidden Leaf Village.” Tenten clarified, “She’s one of the Legendary Three, Tsunade-sama. My mother and I have always looked up to her.”

“Your mother.” Neji looked at her curiously, “Can you tell me about your family, since you seem to know so much about mine?”

“Oh. Well she’s…” Her eyes lowered, “She was amazing. Pretty famous for a kunoichi herself! She was a singer.”

“Can you sing?”

“No.” She laughed, “But I don’t think I’ve ever tried.”
Neji looked at her expectantly.

“I’m not going to sing for you. That’s ridiculous.” Tenten told him, “My mother. She and my dad were in the ANBU together. They were definitely soul-mates, so they had the fairytale life, I guess you could say.” She smiled to herself, “When I think about it…it makes me so jealous.”

“Jealous?”

“I want what they had. I want to be that happy but I…can’t.” Tenten rubbed at her bandaged shoulder, “Some things just don’t work out, you know, Neji?” She chuckled, “Gosh. I’ve never talked to you about this sort of stuff, not even back when you could remember.”

“Why not?”

“Why not?” She repeated, frowning.

“You said you were my best friend.” He reminded her, “You can tell me anything.”

“I just…I didn’t want to tell you certain things so that you wouldn’t get upset.” Tenten admitted, “You had lots of worries back then. They were always stressing you out, so all I could do was try and help you overcome all the nonsense.”

“I have no worries now.” He told her, smiling genuinely. It melted her heart.

‘He’s just so different.’ Tenten thought to herself in astonishment, ‘He’s free. Without all the bullshit weighing him down…he’s happy.’ That amazed and alarmed her

“Have I met your parents?” He asked curiously.

“No, they’re dead.” Tenten said quickly, “In fact, this team is painfully deprived of parentage. Your parents are gone too, and Lee’s…well, I think something happened to them. They might’ve left him but I’m not sure. He lives with his grandpa who’s the nicest guy ever.”

“Are you sad?” Neji asked her.

Tenten did not answer.

“Am I sad?” He couldn’t remember if he had been.

“I think you were…but you just never said so.” Tenten told him.

“And Lee?”

“I think he doesn’t remember his parents. Why would he want to? He’s such a good person all he knows is how to find joy.” Tenten smiled at the thought, “I don’t think Lee gets sad unless something bad happens to one of us.”

“Like me?”

“Like you, Neji.”

“Is he sad that…I’m like this?” He sounded worried.

“A little. We’re worried that something might happen to you, because we might not be able to protect you. We’ll do our best, we always do…” Tenten glanced at the sky, “You mean a lot to us. We’re not going to give up on you.”
“Thank you.” He said. It was heartfelt.

“That’s enough for now. We can catch up later.” Tenten decided, standing up and dusting off her pants, “You are now going to get the crash-course in chakra.”

Neji stood up and asked, “What’s first?”

Neji trying to contact his chakra after severe head trauma and memory loss was not as far-fetched as she had previously expected. He was so familiar with his chakra, it seemed that it was constantly ready to be put to use, just lurking beneath the surface. He discovered it swiftly, but he did not understand it. He picked up concepts easily but with a cautious air she could not place.

It was almost like putting someone who was accustomed to riding a regular bike on one with training wheels. Of course there would be some awkwardness there, not because they didn’t know how to ride, but because there was a different mechanic; a different balance was involved. Neji was on a new bicycle now, as far as memory and shinobi education went. He would adjust, but Tenten feared that she would not.

Just watching him try to run up and leap into trees unnerved her. It was so basic! So elementary! It terrified her to see him reduced to such a novice level. She encouraged him, though, hiding her mounting anxiety.

“I know you can focus your chakra already, but it’s too much. That’s why you can’t make it all the way.” Tenten told him, already a few hours into their training. “Keep it balanced! Too little and you’ll fall again; too much and you’ll snap off the tree like you did just now…”

Neji was on the ground, dusting his pants off. “Maybe you should show me one more time.” He requested.

Tenten stepped up to a tree, setting foot on it, and walked the rest of the way up with poise. At the top she called down to him, “See how I didn’t get a running start? You don’t need one.”

“Ah. Well, you have very good control.” He conceded, looking up at her perch.

“I have to. With the way I summon I can’t afford to waste my chakra, otherwise my techniques would be thrown out of whack.” She hopped down, light as a snowflake.

“You talked about summoning. What is that exactly?” Neji asked, not acquainted with it.

She laughed, “Just don’t move.”

Tenten gave him a very brief demonstration of Soushouryu, missing him deliberately but he still flinched. When the rain of weaponry ended, he was stunned.

“How could you be so strong?” He felt even more inadequate.

“That wasn’t even my best, and trust me, you…” She poked his chest pointedly, “You pretty much embody strong. You and Lee. I’ve gotten better because I had extra training. You are naturally talented.”

“Pfft.” He didn’t believe it.

“No seriously! They call you a prodigy.”

“Then why is this so difficult?” Neji muttered, walking up to the tree and running his hand over the
bark, “I want to know why…why I know what to do but I can’t do it.”

“Don’t push yourself too hard, Neji.” She put a hand on his shoulder, “We should take a break soon.”

He made a soft sound of agreement. To her surprise, he rushed at the tree again, adjusting so that he finally stuck to the tree. Neji ran up and did not stop. He nearly took a spill after his first leap, but he boldly tried to prove himself. He flew through the canopy into the next tree, and then the next, trying to mimic her agility. ‘But he’s going to break his neck while doing it’

“Whoa! Slow down there partner!” Tenten chased after him, catching him by the scruff his shirt before he slipped, “You know, if you fall from up here it’s going to hurt a lot more…”

“I’m sorry.” Neji followed her down to the ground. After he had shown fair proficiency with scaling surfaces with chakra, she later introduced him to water-walking. This was more of a challenge.

Tenten settled for practicing on an unmoving pond on the roof of the precipice. Lee eventually came out to watch. He stood by silently as Tenten explained the concept and then demonstrated. She stood out at the center of the pool and told Neji to give it a try.

The Hyuga took one step on the water’s surface, gingerly, and then another. He did not say it, but with Lee watching he felt like he was being judged. His chakra wavered and he fell knee-deep in the fishpond. Tenten calmly told him to try again. Neji waded out and repeated the process. At one point Lee went over to stand beside Tenten on the water, flabbergasting Neji.

“What is wrong?” Lee asked.

“I thought you said Lee couldn’t use his chakra.” Neji directed the statement to Tenten.

“I didn’t mean he couldn’t in this way.” She corrected herself.

“I have control over my chakra, but only to a point. It is true that my chakra coils are underdeveloped.” Lee admitted, “But that has never stopped me from anything.”

“What does that mean?” Neji asked.

“It means he was born different.” Tenten replied succinctly.

Lee walked off, explaining on the way resignedly, “I cannot use Genjutsu or ninjutsu.” He looked at Neji, “So I will teach you Taijutsu.”

Once Lee had gone Tenten told Neji that it was a sensitive subject on their team. He wanted to know why, as usual.

“Because Lee is a bit self-conscious about it. He almost didn’t become a ninja.” Tenten told him, “He takes his combat skills very seriously, so when you start training with him you better watch yourself.” She smiled, “You better watch yourself with me too, later on…”

“I don’t see why he would feel ashamed. He still has his abilities.” Neji pointed out, “I have none of mine.”

Tenten did not want him to continue sulking. “Get over here already. Are you going to walk on water or not?”

Neji tried again. And again.
At lunch time Lee and Tenten told Neji all about Gai-sensei. He was their esteemed, ever-enthused, perpetually youthful mentor who taught them tough-love and perseverance. Lee embellished on a few details, but for the most part Tenten had good things to say as well.

“I can’t wait to meet him.” Neji said, “Once we go home.”

Tenten held her sides as she pealed with laughter. Lee restrained a chuckle as well. Neji had never been a particular fan of Gai-sensei. It would be a strange meeting indeed if the new Neji actually could identify with their master, finally. Neji did not get the joke, of course.

They ate lightly and Neji asked if there was a problem.

“We lost your supplies, so we’ll have to find a way to get more food soon.” Tenten told him.

“I can hunt.” Lee volunteered. Tenten was hesitant with the idea, but acknowledged how it was one of their only options.

When they had finished with lunch Tenten resumed training. She wanted Neji to be able to keep up with them as they traversed the mountainside and its geographical perils. He had tree-jumping and water-walking under his belt, but his speed was not what it used to be. She taught him how to focus chakra in his legs to move faster, and also how to improve his reaction time. It took him a while to catch on.

By sunset his speed was much improved, and he could avoid (with some trepidation) the knives that Tenten hurled at him. He made it through the day with a few minor bumps and scrapes, which Tenten glanced over when they called it quits. “You’ll live.” She told him, slapping his arm encouragingly where there happened to be a greenish bruise. He groaned, a sign that her training was working.

They sat around a glowing fire, eating the last of the dumplings Tenten had. They told Neji about their likes and dislikes, which he listened to very intently.

“I own a forge.” Tenten told him, “I make most of my own weapons. And most of your weapons too, believe it or not.” She looked at Lee and Neji, “My mother also rubbed off her belief in astrology on me.”

“I didn’t take you for a spiritual type.” Neji told her.

“We are all like that, I think.” Lee informed him, “In different ways. You used to be very concerned with fate, Neji.”

“I was?”

“Yes, but Naruto helped you overcome that, er, phase.” Tenten grinned, “That guy is infectiously empowering.”

“Who is Naruto?”

Lee and Tenten exchanged a glance. It took a very long time, perhaps an hour and a half, to explain or at least outline who their boisterous friend was, moreover what he was (a delinquent/hardhead/inspiration) to Neji. Even then, their descriptions did not truly do justice, but when they were through they had Neji pretty convinced that Naruto was the future Hokage.

“I would like to meet Naruto.” Neji decided.
In the morning they set out. Neji at first had trouble keeping up with his team as they soared through the treetops, though he had no choice but to struggle along with their pace. On the wing, they explained the mission’s current status.

“We got rid of five of the enemy ninja, but…there’s at least ten more out there who are really going to be pissed.” Tenten updated him, “One of them is a specialized tracker who has a sharp sense of smell. He’s the reason they discovered us…and why you were hurt.”

“What happens if we run into them again?” Neji spoke the dreaded question.

Tenten remained silent, fearing the outcome.

“Do not worry about that.” Lee told him.

They traveled a good distance, circumventing the jungle and bogs for higher ground. It was a bit chilly on the mountain trail. Lee stopped, looking at his compass. “We are going the right way, but it will take much longer to reach the coast.” He said.

“They’ll probably try to cut us off before the harbor, since that’s the only way out of here…” Tenten growled at the thought. Another confrontation was imminent, it was only a matter of time.

There was a river that cascaded down the valley, and they decided to make the area their temporary camp. It was quite a distance from where they had last seen the enemy, and secluded behind the dense jungle. The nukenin were most likely trying to avoid such an area in favor of open road and coastline. In order to save on their rations, they went down to the water’s edge to prospect for food.

Neji hated the idea of not being useful, so he took everyone’s canteens to refill them. Lee waded into the stream in search of fish. Watching from the shore, Tenten was very impressed with his aptness for fishing. With his bare hands, Lee snatched up trout and tossed them ashore. ‘We’re going to eat well today!’ Tenten thought. Lee finished and went to a thicket where their belongings were kept, ready to cook his catch over the fire. Tenten helped him for a while, but became nervous when Neji did not return promptly.

She set out to look for him and found him pacing the water’s surface. “You scared me.” She told him, “You were gone for too long.”

“I’m sorry. I just wanted to practice.” He apologized.

Tenten assured him it was perfectly fine, and instructed him to take the water back to camp and let Lee know that they were going train. When Neji returned, she drilled him more on his basic chakra control. He could not get enough of it, which pleased her. Neji was more than eager to learn and seek new challenges. Tenten did not have an easy time supplying them.

They stopped occasionally to eat, but for the entirety of the day they trained and talked. Lee sometimes came by to join them, but he had found an enjoyable pastime in napping on the sun-warmed stones near the river’s edge.

During a break Neji expressed discomfort. “What is it?” Tenten asked.

“This hair…how did I live with it?” Neji complained, running his hand over the back of his neck that was slick with sweat, “It’s miserable.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t say that. Your hair’s beautiful. It’s the traditional style of your family.” Tenten informed him, “Don’t complain. It got lopped off once and took forever to grow back.”
Neji drew out a kunai from his leg holster, “That’s preferable…”

Tenten quickly snatched the knife out of his hand, “What? You’re going to cut your hair off and regret it when you remember everything! Then you’ll blame me for not stopping you…” She eyed his holsters, “I should take your weapons away from you.”

“Because you think I’ll use them?”

“No, because I’m afraid you’ll try to use them for something dumb.” Tenten corrected, “You might do something rash, Neji. Like now, for instance.” She sighed after a moment, “But if those nukenin turn up I’d rather that you were armed, so…wield responsibly, please.”

Neji nodded, smiling.

“Do you want to put your hair up?” Tenten suggested.

“Yes.”

She scooted to sit behind him on the sandy shore, and undid the hair tie that was set too low. Tenten gathered the silky tresses from the base of his neck and upward, pulling his hair into a high ponytail, and secured it with the tie. He turned around to face her and thanked her, “That’s better.”

Tenten blinked stupidly. With his hair back his defined cheek bones were no longer shadowed, and his widow’s peak showed slightly behind his hitai-ate. It was a sort of regality that went beyond his normal, pale, aristocratic look.

“You’re handsome.” Tenten told him, biting her tongue immediately afterwards.

She stood up and tried to pass of the comment as something trivial. Neji stood up, shaking off sand.

“You think so?” He inquired.

Tenten noted that she did not really need to agonize over her behavior because Neji lacked any set etiquette for her, currently. “Yeah, you’ve always had that…look.” She replied carefully, “It charms people.”

“Does it charm you?”

She smiled and admitted, “You in general delight me.”

He looked uncommonly happy with the answer. Tenten avoided the subject after that and had him continue with his exercises. By nightfall they regrouped, and since they were all too exhausted to stay up and chat they went to sleep early. They did not watch in shifts, fairly confident the enemy was out of reach.

In the middle of the night Tenten woke, mouth dry, and groped around for her canteen. She found it, but not without tapping Neji who was resting beside her. He seemed terribly jostled by the contact. She sat up, bottle in hand, whispering comfortingly, “Calm down, it’s just me.”

“Oh.” He rolled over to meet her eyes. He did not look so well.

“Are you okay?” Tenten felt his forehead but it was cool.

“I’m fine.” Neji said; his voice was not tired.

She took a few satisfying gulps of water. “I’m sorry if I startled you. Usually you don’t scare that easy.” She pointed out.
“It’s okay.” He rolled over, “Goodnight.”

Tenten laid back again, “Goodnight, Neji.”

For two more days they trained, periodically moving further down into the valley. The river began to trickle into a stream during their travels, making water-walking practice less practical. That was when Tenten decided Neji should begin training with Lee.

“He’s a great teacher. Very patient.” She assured the Hyuga. She would know, after all; Lee had taught her several battering techniques in the past.

“You’ve been a good sensei.” Neji told her, “Can we still train sometimes?”

“Whenever you like.” Tenten pledged.

In an open field Lee began his lessons. Tenten had to stop watching after the first fifteen minutes because Lee employed the same tough-love training that Gai did. Neji got plenty of tough-love all over his face before he figured out how to block properly. During that time Tenten tried her hand at hunting.

Using one of her standard bows, she set out into the forest in search of prey. She shot a wild boar squarely between the ears from her treetop lookout. By noon she had the beast plucked, skinned and turning over a fire, slathered with a hodge-podge of herbs. The lovely smell beckoned her teammates back to camp in a tree hollow. To her shock they approved of the taste, although she was convinced she had made an abomination of the meat. They might have been just hungry enough to ignore the flavor altogether. After trying it she found it was quite agreeable.

By evening, Neji was sporting several new bruises and welts. She treated his educative wounds with some soothing salve that Hinata had given her before they left. Tenten also made sure to credit Neji’s cousin with the ointment, “Make sure you thank her when we get home.”

“I will.” He promised.

Lee was very proud of Neji, “You did superbly for the first day, and I look forward to tomorrow’s progress!” His compliments didn’t count for much. Neji had learned plenty, but could not necessarily apply it when Lee was always twenty steps ahead of him.

As the evening hastened, Lee reported to Tenten that Neji seemed to have muscle memory to guide him. “He remembered how to do a prayer-crouch all on his own, from when my grandfather taught us.” Lee cupped his chin in puzzlement, “But he hates that exercise.”

“Maybe that’s why it stuck with him?” Tenten postulated.

That night, Tenten woke after hearing something. The register was within her light-sleeper range. She sat up, sensing no danger (probably just a mouse) and took a habitual sip of water. She glanced over to Neji and realized he was in the exact same posture as the night before. His breathing was not restful. He was awake.

“No.” Neji closed his eyes, “It’s not Lee.”
“Are you feeling well?”

“As well as I can.”

She caught on, “You…aren’t sleeping. When was the last time you slept, Neji?”

He looked uncomfortable with discussing it. After a moment he replied, “Probably since before I forgot things.”

“You haven’t gotten any sleep?” She was horrified. It had been days.

“I close my eyes and rest at night. I recover fine from the training, and I’m not tired during the day.” He tried to dispel her frets.

“Oh…Neji…” Tenten held her head in her hands, greatly dismayed.

“You startled me last night. I thought you were…something else.” Neji told her.

“Are you afraid that the enemy might find us?”

He frowned, “You and Lee…you’ve been doing so much for me and I feel like I’m not contributing. I want to look after you too.”

“Nuh-uh. Sleep is imperative. Out of all of us, you need it most!” She hissed softly, “Why didn’t you tell me sooner?”

“I wasn’t going to tell you at all.”

“Until you dropped one day of exhaustion?” She snorted, “Fuh! At least you’re honest, Neji.”

Tenten rifled around through her bag, looking for anything that might tranquilize the young man. Nothing. She reached over Lee, who was snoring blissfully, and searched his bag. He had some antibiotics in preparation for illness, but they would not do any good for sleep. Tenten turned back, seeing that Neji was already down again, his back facing her. She had another idea in mind but it was not particularly acceptable. She went for it anyway.

Tenten laid back down after one last gulp of water. She stashed the canteen back in her bag and then sidled up beside Neji, spooning him. He went rigid with surprise. “Relax, please.” She told him, “You need to get to sleep.”

“I don’t understand…how this helps…” He paused, “Not that I don’t appreciate it.”

A smirk tugged at her lips. This was the kind of thing he would never admit to remembering, even if he hadn’t bumped his head. Neji had consistently been, for the most part, averse to contact. Since it had already occurred while he was unconscious in their ship cabin, Tenten expected he could associate it with sleep on a subliminal level. Any method that might calm the panicky Hyuga was worth a try.

She slid her arm over his, reaching past his shoulder, and rubbed tiny, gentle circles on the nape of his neck. Based on scientific findings discussed among kunoichi peers, she had heard this could work. Neji did seem to be loosening up just a bit; or maybe he was over the initial shock of it. “You don’t need to do this.” He told her meekly.

“No talking. No thinking. Sleep is your friend.” She spoke calmly, fragmenting her words so they would register like a fog.
He sighed. Tenten felt a wave of tension seep out of him. She moved her deft fingers up from his neck to his scalp, running her nails lightly through his hair. His breathing evened out. She strayed from crown, to neck, to shoulders periodically. She distantly recalled hearing about endorphins that the body produced. His breathing began to follow a pattern, and she did not know how long it was before she got an authentic snore out of him. When she was sure he was asleep, Tenten withdrew carefully, rolling back onto her own mat.

She hoped that Neji would not be such high maintenance in the future. Not that she minded it particularly, but she could use the extra sleep too.

In the morning they ate quickly before setting out. They followed a route east up and out of the sheltered valley, hoping to reach the harbor. It was the long way round, and the landscape was chopped up into hazardous pillars of rock and slopes, intermingling with forest. Neji had finally found his footing, and could keep up with the team despite the new geological obstacles.

Lee led the front of the group, slowing down when the forest became too tricky to navigate. “This was always so much easier when we had the Byakugan…” He said dismayed.

“What’s that?” Neji asked him.

Tenten was sheepish, realizing she had forgotten to tell Neji about one of his most prized abilities. “Neji, the Byakugan is a special ability that belongs to the Hyuga clan. With it you can see through solid objects, and can also see far in every direction, minus one degree.” She explained briefly, “Hopefully you’ll figure that out, because it sure is helpful.”

“It’s something I do with my eyes?” He asked for confirmation.

“Yeah, but unfortunately we can’t show you how to do it. It’s something only you know.” She told him, “Sorry…”

Neji told them he would try his best to remember. It seemed these days he was doing nothing else other than training and desperately trying to jog his own memory. Nothing significant ever came up, no matter how much his friends explained, and it frustrated him. He was a shadow of his former self. Compared to what Lee and Tenten told him he was able to do, he felt like an infant.

A kunai sailed past his head by inches, shaving off a few strands from the end of his ponytail. Neji leapt back, warning his teammates, though they were already aware of the ambush. Lee descended on them first. There were only two nukenin present, who must have been away from their counterparts scouting. Lee plowed into one who was taking cover in a tall oak tree. The other dropped down, singling out Neji, since his reaction time had been slowest.

Before the Hyuga could even so much as throw up a defensive stance, Tenten leapt in. The nukenin also had a sword, and the kunoichi clashed with him by drawing Hok. A shadow clone appeared but it did not assist Tenten. The replica stood beside Neji, guarding him with watchful eyes. “I want to help.” He said to the bunshin.

“I won’t let you.” The clone replied, “You’ll only get hurt.”

Lee’s foe was a Sound ninja. The ninjutsu he possessed created sonic waves that snapped apart thick tree branches like toothpicks. Lee avoided the surges with his superior speed. He wheeled around behind the masked enemy, and connected a double-kick to his back. The Sound ninja was knocked from his perch. As he fell from the tree, he used another jutsu to take advantage of Lee’s open guard. A short-range blast hit Lee squarely in the front, sending him careening into a tree on the other side
Neji reported the mishap and Tenten knew it was time to finish up. She snipped Hok’s edge point into the other rogue’s throat and he collapsed in front of Neji. He did not have time to quail at the sight of killing, because Tenten was dragging him by his wrist to where Lee was. “I can’t do much against Sound jutsu.” She explained on the way, “We have to leave.”

Lee was very disoriented after he stood up, flailing, and Tenten pointed to a stone ridge just above the canopy. Sound waves wrecked trees in their wake. Lee hurried up the incline, and Tenten followed him with equally powerful legs. Neji lagged behind.

“Chakra, Neji, chakra!” She reminded him. After that his jumps matched their own. They disappeared over the crag and the foe’s jutsu died off. The masked nin was unwilling to pursue the wild team.

They ran for nearly a half hour, not trusting to stop until they had put comfortable distance between themselves and the battle site. There was a hilltop lined with willow trees that they finally halted at. Again, they had been knocked off course, and it would take much longer to reach the harbor. Tenten also feared they had made their intended destination clear to the enemy by where they had reappeared. The group slipped into the sheltering vines of an ancient tree to rest.

Tenten leaned against the trunk, heaving a breath. Neji plopped down beside her in the grass, still shaken by the encounter. Lee still stood, rubbing at his ears.

“You okay, Lee?” Tenten asked him.

He was looking at her strangely. She repeated herself, frowning, “Are you okay?”

His eyes went wide. “Tenten! I cannot hear you!” He shouted, pointing to his ears, “That last jutsu might have-!”

She clapped a hand over his mouth, “Why are you so loud? They’ll hear you!” Lee shut up, but only because of the contact.

“I…cannot hear anything.” He said, his voice still raised slightly.

Neji stared at his friend and asked him something, but Lee watched his lips move with no audio to accompany them. Lee looked at Tenten, seeing she was in the middle of a rant, but the world was consumed in silence. He frowned, truly perplexed. What was going on? He hadn’t the foggiest idea what they were trying to express.

“Okay…” Tenten muttered to herself, not getting any responses from Lee, “Okay…” She turned and paced the space around the tree, wracking her brain for a solution.

“He doesn’t understand anything we’re saying, Tenten.” Neji told her, “Is he hurt?”

“You could say that. He was hit by some jutsu, remember? It messed him up.” Tenten sighed, “Just…let me think…please let me think…”

Lee took a seat in the grass, keeping still and doing his best to listen in. It was futile, he quickly realized, and with a deep sigh he stopped paying attention to his panicking teammates. After a few minutes of contemplative pacing Tenten halted. “I got it!” She said aloud, startling Neji.

She crossed back to the tree trunk, where she dropped her bag, and began rummaging through it. She pulled out an old training scroll that still had a good deal of blank parchment. Further in was a brush
and black ink typically used for mission notes, or in her case, hasty sealing techniques. Tenten jotted on a blank space on the scroll before holding it up for Lee to see.

“We are going to use this to communicate.” Lee read the message aloud, and then grinned at Tenten, “Well…as innovative as that is, Tenten, it might still be a little difficult.”

She wrote something else down and let him see it: *But it’s all we have for now.*

He nodded in understanding, and Neji was very pleased with her idea. “Can I talk to him for a moment?” He asked.

“Sure. Just take this and you two stay put.” Tenten handed him the parchment and marker, “I’m going to get us some more water. When I come back we’ll have to pack up and keep going, alright?”

“Be safe.” Neji told her.

Tenten departed, looking over her shoulder and watching as the two interacted. Neji would write a question and Lee, in the cover of the vines, would half-shout an answer. She zipped up her bag after cramming all of their canteens into it.

‘*This…’* She thought to herself, ‘*Is the bat-shit craziest mission I have ever been on…’*
Adaptation: Part Two

Chapter Soundtrack: “Folklove (Instrumental)” by Kenichiro Nishihara

In the afternoon they made good time, avoiding another swamp, and eventually landed in a peaceful birch forest. The thin white trees did not provide much cover, but Tenten estimated they had put a safe enough distance between themselves and the nukenin group. She brought back two wild pheasants for lunch, and afterwards sent Neji off to train with Lee. Even with his hearing impaired, she figured Lee could still teach Neji plenty.

While the two boys sparred Tenten stole away, crossing through the birch rows and tangles of rhododendron. She backtracked to a small rivulet she had earlier been following, and sat beside the stream on the grassy bank. For a long moment she stared ahead into the forest, supposing she should be devising some sort of plan to help her team survive. The trouble was that she could not be struck by inspiration even when their lives depended on it.

‘This is about as close to worst-case-scenario as I am willing to cut it.’ She thought bleakly, ‘God forbid I get my head knocked off, then deaf and tone-dumb Lee will have to guide poor amnesic Neji home somehow…’ There was little hope for the two, she noted, especially if she was killed or debilitating in a future fight. Even now things were hairy, and putting Lee’s new deafness aside, Tenten’s thoughts strayed back to Neji.

‘There’s no way I can handle this. He’s learning fast but it isn’t going to be enough…’ She cradled her face in her hands, ‘And if Neji stays like this…what do I do? For so long I’ve depended on him and now…he’s not the same. He’s lost. He’s different. He’s…’

Tenten looked up and black dots swam before her eyes. Her breath became ragged. The realization that the entire mission depended on her, teammates and all, swept over her like a hurricane-force gale. The panic that gripped her left her heaving dry breaths, shoulders shaking furiously, and she quickly made a grab for her weapon holster. She drew out a kunai and let the tip of her thumb glide over the edge. The skin split apart, and the pain was just enough to snap her back to her senses.

After her hyperventilating passed Tenten wiped her brow with the back of her arm. She was clammy. She could not afford to let her teammates see her this way. She reached into her hip pouch and drew out a swath of gauze and stemmed the bleeding. Tenten stood and brushed off her pants, reasserting her leadership mindset.

‘Stay focused. We need to get to the harbor, but cutting southeast through the mountains is too dangerous.’ She recalled, ‘The best solution would be…continue south through this forest until we hit the shoreline, and sneak up the coast so we don’t run into those assholes again.’ It was the best she could do for the time being, but she was fairly certain the enemy would not be expecting them to take a longer route.

She could hear Neji calling her name after a while.

‘Oh right…they’re probably wondering where I am…’ The Byakugan was still unavailable to the team right now, she acknowledged, and that was also a disadvantage. She quickly returned to the campsite and the Hyuga looked absolutely perturbed.

“What were you?” He asked sharply, but concern was more evident in his voice than anger.

“I went somewhere quiet to come up with a new plan, and I have one now.” She told him, and
waved to Lee vaguely to let him know she had returned, “Sit down and I’ll tell you about it. I’ll have to write it out for Lee.”

They sat in a sunlit glade near the camp, and Tenten wrote down what she was relaying to Neji on parchment for Lee. “So here’s the deal…if we keep trying to pass over the mountain heading east, well…it just isn’t going to happen. We’re going to get caught up in another scrap…”

“What’s the alternative?” Neji asked.

“We keep heading south like we are now. It’s going to take us a long way out of the way…but it’ll be safer to travel up the coastline than risking another run-in with those nukenin.” She explained, finishing her notes, and then passed them to Lee.

He read them quickly and nodded to her, speaking in an almost-normal volume, “That is the wisest course of action, Tenten. It will also give us more time to teach Neji to defend himself if we continue this way.”

“Good point.” She said, looking back to the Hyuga, “How’d the training go today?”

“Better. Though I’m not sure if it’s because I’m getting stronger or Lee just can’t hear anything.” Neji admitted, “I suppose it could be both.”

“Do you want to train with me for a little bit?” Tenten asked.

“Yes.” He stood to go, and Tenten quickly jotted down for Lee where they would be for a while. He nodded to them and curled up to take a nap in the warm grass.

Neji’s chakra control was close to flawless now, much to Tenten’s relief. He had no problem picking up the supplementary jutsu he had been lacking. When he showed proficiency in basic techniques, she then demonstrated proper use of weaponry. “You usually use kunai or tonfa.” She told him, “But tomorrow I can show you how to wield a sword if you like. It’d probably be better for the situation we’re in anyway.”

He liked the idea of becoming a swordsman, “I would be honored if you would teach me.”

A short while later he had nearly put one of her eyes out with a shuriken, but she waved off his terror and simply sent him back to practice more. By evening he handled all past weapons he had ever utilized and then some. They settled down for a meal with Lee and Tenten wrote out the next day’s agenda by firelight for their deaf teammate.

Neji had no issues getting to sleep that night. Tenten settled between the two, considering keeping watch for enemies, but was too drained from the day’s chaos to do so. She fell asleep, hoping that a higher power was guiding them through their struggle.

For three days they continued on the altered course, training Neji as they went. He was advancing rapidly in Taijutsu thanks to Lee. Tenten had begun instructing Neji in the way of the sword (a very modified lesson,) and let him practice with a spare blade from her scroll. He picked it up quick, but was often sloppy and not as sure-footed as she would have.

In their free time she also encouraged him to meditate, which he had fewer issues in understanding, and occasionally Lee would join in for a group spar. The three of them tussling together was a bit reckless, but afforded Neji invaluable experience for a real battle.

Neji slept through the nights soundly and recovered more quickly from his injuries. Tenten was
gradually beginning to regain hope for her team. Lee’s deafness was also becoming less of an
obstacle. They had established many hand signals and signs to represent particular ideas, and Tenten
estimated they were up to about 100 signs in two days. Lee’s adaptive ability was incredible,
although there were certain messages she had to write down for him anyway, too complicated to
convey.

Neji had warmed up to them unbelievably fast, Tenten also noted. He especially loved laughing with
them, even though it was Lee’s soundless plight that was found most comical. The fourth night they
had stayed up telling stories around a fire, re-educating Neji on the Leaf Village. At one point, Lee
had ended up doing his impressions of their fellow Genin, a number of which were hilariously
accurate.

The Hyuga was overcome with side-splitting laughter after a very slanderous impression, one which
Tenten was desperate to contain her giggles from. “Who…who w-would say something like that? So
insensitive.” Neji asked when Lee had finished.

“Oh…” Tenten was chuckling, “That was actually you, Neji. You said stuff like that all the time.”

Neji stared at her for a long moment, but then bubbled over with mirth again. They enjoyed
themselves until it was time for sleep.

They woke refreshed the next day, and things looked promising as they set out. Gulls soared
overhead and the air had a salty tang to it. “The coast can’t be far now.” Tenten appraised, “Just a
few more days and then we’ll be out of this stinking country!”

Lee did not know exactly what she was shouting about so he gave her a thumbs-up. They traveled
through the treetops until the forest was exhausted, and they had to brave several treacherous crags
before the ocean came into sight. It was still a fair distance off. They stayed close to the river,
knowing it would be one of their last sources of fresh water for miles.

Tenten sent Lee off to take a bath when they had finished making camp, and Neji would go next
after they finished some light training. He was brushing up on certain forms he had learned with his
‘rented’ sword, and Tenten was fairly convinced he had a better chance of defending himself with it
than he did with Taijutsu.

She had pulled his hair up into a ponytail again and they settled for a break, sitting on top of a hill
that overlooked the crashing waves. There was a wonderful calmness, and Tenten dared not speak
for fear of breaking it.

“You’ve lead us so far.” Neji said with his eyes trained on the sea, “And in such…troubling
circumstances. Have you always been this strong?”

“I’m not sure. I only become strong when you guys need me, I guess.” Tenten told him.

He gave her a sidelong look, “I can’t thank you enough.”

She laughed lightly, “Stop that already. This is nothing, Neji. When we get back home then the real
fun starts, you could say. You’ll get reintroduced to everyone and it’ll be pretty hectic. I promise I’ll
help you, though.”

“Do you think we’ll run into the enemy before we reach the harbor?”

“Probably not, but just in case…” Tenten slipped the baldric from her shoulder and passed it to Neji,
“I want to you hang onto Hok. It’ll keep you safe, and it handles much better than that rusty old
sword you’ve been practicing with.”

He had to protest the offering, “But you−!”

“I have hundreds of other weapons, many more lethal than that sword, so don’t sweat it.” Tenten smiled widely at him, “Just take care of yourself. You’ve done me proud, Neji.”

He was silent for a long moment, and his knuckles were white as he held the scabbard to his chest. Neji then looked back to her and said, “Thank you.”

She smiled again and looked back to the inlet. ‘We are definitely going to make it.’ She had a good feeling about getting home. Seeing Neji hold his own only reinforced the notion.

“Tenten?”

She glanced over to him and was a bit unnerved by his stare, “What is it?”

“I…need you to tell me something.”

“Of course.”

“Before I forgot everything when I was hurt…” Neji’s lunar eyes were searching her face, “Did we…have feelings for each other?”

Tenten felt her head swim, “E-Eh? What makes you think that?”

“It’s the way things are between us. The way you treat me and…” He lowered his eyes, “The way you touch me.”

She flushed an award-winning shade of crimson. “Well that’s…all decorous contact, I assure you! I give Lee a pat on the back once in a while too, you know.” She explained feebly.

“But that night when I couldn’t fall asleep...”

“Won’t be repeated.” She said bluntly.

He frowned to himself, deciding to pursue the matter from a different angle. “I know there’s…something.” Neji said lowly, “It’s the things you do for me. The small things and…the big things.”

He lifted the baldric Hok was slung in, “You would not do anything like this if you didn’t have an important reason.”

“I think you’re reading into this a bit too much.” Tenten told him passively. Somewhere in her head a voice was screaming, ‘Liar-liar-liar!’

He was visibly upset, “Why are you acting as if it isn’t true? I may not remember much but I’m not stupid, Tenten.”

“Because it isn’t true, and by the way, you can say you aren’t stupid now, but you were dumb enough to overlook me when you could remember. There wasn’t anything there, and you’re the reason why.” She regretted her venomous retort immediately. She had said it so bitterly...

“But that can’t be.” He protested, rubbing the side of his head as if scrambling for a memory; any kind of evidence. There was nothing, but still, he felt it so certainly he wouldn’t allow her to say otherwise.

“Look…I’m sorry, Neji. Maybe there was going to be something...maybe. It just didn’t turn out that
way.” Tenten looked away from him, “You want the truth? The truth is you didn’t care about me, Neji. Not that way.”

“I don’t believe that.” He said stubbornly, “And even if I didn’t then…I do now. I’m sure of it, so please listen to me when-”

Tenten covered her ears, “No. I can’t listen to this. Don’t talk like that.”

He scowled, “What is wrong with you? I’m trying to tell you that I-”

“It’s not the same! You’re not who you used to be! You’re not that person who I used to cherish. I’m waiting for him to come back; you see…waiting for you to remember so you stop acting like a puppy dog!” Tenten exploded, “You’ll forget all about this…little infatuation. You will! I won’t allow myself to fall for someone who’s not even going to be around for very long!”

“What? You expect me to just remember everything one day?” Neji’s voice was rising, “What if that doesn’t happen? What then? You told me you were going to help me get my life back together when we reached the Leaf Village!”

“Yes, and then hopefully that’ll jog your memory and I can have Neji back.” She said pointedly.

“I am Neji!” He roared furiously.

“No you’re not. The real Neji would never…” She trailed off, unsure of how to put it. ‘Care about me? Romantically? Devotedly and loyally?’ She did not have to continue the argument. Neji had snatched up Hok and stormed off back towards camp.

The anger and embarrassment in his posture was very clear. Tenten suddenly felt like a quintessential hypocrite. There had been times in the past in which Neji had trampled all over her feelings, but was it really fair to do the same when he wasn’t even the same person? Physically he was Neji, but mentally, she conceded, he was a young man who was in love with his friend; and she had just filleted and gutted him with barely any provocation…

She glared up at the blue sky overhead, ‘Okay up there. I get it. I’m a complete jerk.’

Neji passed through a ring of bulrushes and returned to their camp where Lee was boiling water for tea. A seagull was perched nearby on a boulder. Neji kicked a stone that bulleted for the bird, sending it scrambling from its roost in surprise. Lee looked up at the movement. “Hello Neji! Where is Tenten?” He greeted.

Neji pointed his thumb back up towards the hill wordlessly. Lee understood, but was alarmed by the Hyuga’s furious expression. It didn’t help when he carelessly tossed Hok and its sash to the ground like a broken play thing. ‘Oh dear…he seems very distressed.’

Rather than having a one-sided conversation with his friend on the matter (that obviously had to do with the kunoichi) Lee decided to speak to Tenten instead. He poured tea for Neji and offered it to him before heading off to find their other teammate. Neji sat near the embers, staring moodily at the ground while he sipped his drink. His eyes strayed over to where Hok lay a few times.

Lee marched up the hill and found Tenten resting in the grass leisurely. She looked to be deep in though. “Um…Tenten?” He began, taking a seat beside her. She gave him an attentive look.

“Neji looks very…upset. Did you offend him somehow?” Lee got straight to the point.
Tenten cupped her hands to form a ‘zero.’ It was equivalent to saying, “I did nothing.”

Lee did not buy it. “He was training with you. Did he do something wrong or…was something said?” He checked.

Tenten sighed and drew out her marker and parchment. She scribbled down an answer and let Lee read it: *He was saying silly things.*

“Hm. But I say silly things quite often.” Lee pointed out, “And it would help if we were lenient with him, seeing that he has amnesia.”

Tenten threw him a dirty look that said: *Must you be so perceptive?* She scrawled another message beside the first and held it up again: *Butt out, Lee. It’s settled.*

Lee laughed out loud, “It does not look settled to me, Tenten.”

She sighed and said something, and then caught herself, ‘Oh right…he can’t hear.’ She wrote her verbalization down: *I’ll apologize later, okay? I was out of line and he was just being naïve and innocent like he is. Just don’t try to get involved, fair?*  

Lee saluted her, seeing he had gotten a better answer, “I trust you to it, then. Now do not create any more strife, if you please.” He smiled and stood up, “I will train with Neji for a little while so he has a chance to relax.”

She signed the word ‘thanks’ to him. He nodded pleasantly and walked away. Tenten stowed away her writing implements in her hip pouch and fell back to the grass with a huff.

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After training with Lee for a while Neji stalked off to the river. He picked a secluded spot and stripped off his clothes. He learned from Lee and Tenten how bathing during a mission was a luxury, so he proceeded as they had instructed earlier in the day. He rinsed out his fetid clothes and hung them to dry on a tree branch. He briefly wondered at his stark nudity out in nature, but then settled on the bank and began to wash himself. The water was very cold and unpleasant.

He was still thinking about what Tenten had said. She had made a very good point in that he was definitely not the person he had been before. How could he expect her to return his sentiments when she was thinking of him in a completely different light? What was most frustrating was that even though her words had been cruel and thoughtless, they hadn’t changed his feelings one bit. He was still determined to at least get her to acknowledge him. It was difficult for him to picture how he was going to do it.

After he was thoroughly rinsed he towed off and waited for his clothes to dry. Neji watched the churning water, and could see where the fresh and saltwater met a dozen yards away. The ocean was near, and that meant their journey was coming to an end. He only hoped that Lee and Tenten’s friendship with him would stay as strong when they were back in their home village, when they did not need to look after him so fiercely. He tried to imagine the Leaf Village but could only conjure vague images, if any. All Neji saw were vast forests, crags and bogs of the Marsh Country.

It seemed there was still much he had to learn. Neji dressed when his clothes were dry and chose not to be angry any more. It was too much work, and he cared too much about Tenten to keep up the argument. He went back to camp with an improved mood.

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When Tenten saw Neji exit the forest after washing up, she slinked off to take a bath herself. She went about it quickly, standing waist-deep in the water, leaving her clothes on the shore, and ignored
her chattering teeth. She let her hair down and washed it after discovering a twig had been tangled up in one of her chignons.

She was fully aware of how she owed Neji an apology when she returned. She had been derisive for no reason, and she hated how she’d let her bitterness get the better of her.

A water snake coiled past her on the water’s surface and she watched it, reflecting on the situation. ‘Let’s weigh the consequences here. On the one hand, I can hold out and ignore Neji’s feelings. Well, the new-Neji’s feelings. That should be easy enough…but it’s an extremely backwards policy for me.’ Tenten thought to herself, ‘And on the other hand: I could reciprocate.’

It was strange and almost unfair. Tenten considered that, since she had returned to the team, Neji had seemed particularly warm and fond of her. He had become strong and mature, appreciated his team more than he had ever appreciated them…and all of that progress had been lost.

‘It ticks me off! I want Neji to be who he was! I don’t want him to be this…stranger…’ She splashed her face with water, ‘But he isn’t. Not really. I’d be stupid to call him weak. After everything he’s done and what he’s been through…’ After all, even when he could hardly remember details of his immediate life, Neji nebulously remembered her.

Tenten smiled to herself, ‘That has got to count for something.’ She began to wring her hair out, ‘And when I think about it...the things he forgot were the things that...generally made him unhappy.’ She noted that his shinobi career had been sanded-down to the basics, his recollection of his clan was limited to Hinata’s smiling face, and Neji had forgotten how miserable he had once been: ‘In spite of that, he kept us close. He didn’t have to trust me or Lee when he woke up. But he did! Neji did not hesitate to believe us when we said that we cared…’

She blinked hard, surprised by her conclusion. ‘He’s innocent. He’s all of the things that he never let himself be before.’

The young woman waded back to shore and quickly dried off, still thinking, ‘If my problem is with accepting the parts of Neji that are gentle and kind...then I’m going to have to get over it. I got used to when he was rough-and-tumble, so I don’t see why I can’t care for this side of him too.’

Tenten redressed and wondered aloud, “And…I guess I’m just a bit curious.”

Back at camp Lee and Neji were talking…as best they could. The Hyuga proved very clever at substituting ideas with signals, and Tenten suspected he would be skilled in a game of charades. ‘I’ll save that for another time, though…’

When she appeared Lee quickly stood, grinning at her, “Good! You are back, Tenten. I am off to fish for our dinner, so would you and Neji please revive the fire, if it’s not too much to ask?”

She pressed her thumb and index finger together in a sign for: OK. Lee walked off, suspiciously chipper about something, and Tenten took his seat near the fire pit.

Neji was prodding at the fire with a stick when he looked over at her. His eyebrows raised in surprise to see that her hair was down.

Tenten noticed his reaction. “You know…you used to do the same thing back then too.” She said with a chuckle, “Whenever my hair was down you’d just stare, like it just occurred to you that I was a girl.”

He looked back to the fire, “I see. Though I figured it was just easier to tie it up since you handle
“Weapons so much.”

“Exactly.” She told him, “When I was younger, and first learning from my dad, I accidentally hacked one of my own braids off. I’ve kept it up ever since. That’s a true story.”

He smiled slightly at her, catching the humor in her tone. Neji tossed a sprig of pine on the fire and watched it snap and hiss as flames ate up the dry needles. Tenten stuck a few more branches into the pit in an effort to help.

“I’m sorry about how I acted before.” She said at length, “I was being a killjoy. You were just trying to be honest with me and I couldn’t handle it.”

Neji shook his head, “I don’t think it was my place to—”

“No, listen; I like you, and that’s the truth.” Tenten said, managing not to flush, “I suppose I just couldn’t wrap my head around what you were telling me, since…you’ve never done that before.”

His cheeks were pinkish.

She smiled as she continued, “You know what? Let’s let bygones be bygones. I can’t hold you to all the crap that happened before since, technically, it wasn’t you who did it. It was your nutty, over-stressed, alter-ego.”

“That’s one way of…putting it.” He muttered, a bit flustered, “Does this mean we’re still friends?”

“No, don’t be ridiculous. That never changed.” She admonished lightly, “No matter how pissed we get at each other, and this has always proved true: we can count on each other.”

Neji was smiling again, completely at ease. He moved to lift Hok from where it sat beside him, but when he tried to hand it to her she shook her head.

“I’m not taking that from you until we’re back in the Leaf Village.” She told him adamantly.

“Alright.” He appreciated it, and then thought to ask, “When I told you before about how I felt…you’re not bothered by it? It’s only been a few days that I’ve really known you.”

“A week, actually.” Tenten corrected him, “And I…well…I kind of enjoyed it, honestly.”

There was something bright and emphatic in Neji’s eyes. Tenten was unable to identify it exactly. He remembered what she had said a few days ago, ‘You in general delight me.’ It had been a very benevolent thing to say. Now he was fairly certain she had meant it.

Lee returned moments later with several fish speared on a pointed stick. “Are we getting along now?” He asked as he sat with them, distributing the catch.

Tenten gave him another OK sign and Neji mimicked it. Lee was satisfied, but not because of their sign language.

Their contentment was written all over their faces.
report for Tsunade-sama?" Defeated several enemies, discovered their whereabouts and intent: all while teammates are deaf and suffering from memory loss.

“Huge brownie points…” Tenten murmured excitedly to herself.

Neji glanced over to her curiously, “What was that?”

“I’m just excited, is all.” She told him, grinning, “We don’t have much further to go.”

He smiled back, equally happy.

They scaled the dunes up onto a stone bluff that overlooked the ocean, racing past nesting seabirds. With the sky and sea stretching blue all around them, it made for an excellent and uplifting run. Their journey was abruptly cut short. Tenten nearly lost her footing on a ledge that crumbled out from under her. The flimsy limestone had been savagely eroded and was unfit for travel.

Worse still was that there was no more coastline. The cliffs had been eaten away by the waves, and a churning inlet stood in front of them. Tenten turned back, cursing loudly, and kicked a patch of dandelions. The spores hovered off in the breeze. Lee and Neji looked at her, aware of the setback and hoping for guidance.

“I really wish we still had that damned map, maybe then I would’ve seen this coming!” She groaned, stomping around in a circle, “Even if we had the Byakugan we could’ve accounted for the…” She looked at Neji and then sighed, “Oh, never mind…”

“Tenten, we should just continue inland until we’ve circumvented the bay.” Lee suggested, “Then we can head straight for the harbor.”

“But that’s exactly what I was trying to avoid Lee...those nukenin…” She trailed off, realizing her reply fell on literally deaf ears. She didn’t bother writing her reason down this time, and just crossed her arms in a large ‘X’ to signify her reluctance. He got the idea.

“We have no choice now.” Neji told her, “And if we go quickly they may not catch us at all.”

“If they do catch us you’ll have to fight.” She warned him tiredly.

His face was stern, “I want to fight. I’m able to now, Tenten.”

She heaved a sigh, but inwardly conceded that he was right. Tenten motioned for Lee to move along and they continued inland, crossing back over the crag and into the forest. They traveled by canopy, following the curvature of the bay. The detour was going to take them out of their way, and this time, put them back in danger. Tenten knew it could not be helped, but was cross with herself for expecting their return to be so easy.

Later on they stopped in a sheltered and defensible part of the woods. Tenten mandated that they not make a fire, “The smoke could attract their attention if they’re close by…and that goddamn tracker of theirs will smell anything we try to cook.”

“Maybe we should just gather plants to eat, then, at least until we are out of here?” Neji asked and Tenten agreed with the idea.

Lee set up camp and a perimeter of the area while Tenten agreed to train Neji for a short while. She was surprised by what he wanted to learn.

“I know you can’t show me, but could you at least tell me how I did it...the Byakugan?” He asked
her, “If I could use it... things would be easier for the team, and we could anticipate the enemy’s movements.”

“Neji...” Tenten frowned, about ready to decline, and then said, “Aw, what the hell...”

She gave him a brief lesson on the chakra circulatory system and then added, “But you’ll understand it better if you see it for yourself, I’m sure.” Tenten (poorly) demonstrated to him some of the Jyukken forms she had learned by watching him and training with Hikune. “I can’t use Jyukken; not the way you do. I could give somebody a nice whap that might seize up a muscle... but you can kill with this.”

“With the Byakugan?” He guessed.

“It’s your specialty!” She laughed, “You do damage you can scarcely even believe. There’s more to it, though. You can also make a shield through a rotation, by forcing chakra out of your tenketsu.

“I have... many abilities.” Neji said, aghast.

“I could go on and on, but the most basic skill is your bloodline limit.” Tenten walked up to him, gently touching her fingertips to his temples, “Behind your eyes there are chakra pathways. They control your Byakugan, and it’s up to you to give them a wake-up call.”

“So I should focus chakra in my eyes?” He checked.

“That would be my educated guess... but don’t quote me on that.” Tenten told him, taking her hands away, “Give that a try, but feel free to switch it up. You’ll definitely know when you have it right.”

“How?”

“For starters, you’ll see right through my clothes.” She prompted.

His eyes went wide in shock. Tenten laughed at his reaction, “It’s alright, I’m used to it. You’ll see a lot more than just that, though. Chakra pathways are what you’ll be looking for.”

He nodded, “Right.”

Tenten fell silent and took a seat against an oak tree, watching him focus his chakra. It was a predictably fruitless endeavor. He worked at it for nearly an hour, exhausting his chakra, unsure of how to go about it. For something he knew how to do instinctively he was beginning to think Tenten had a better chance of using the Byakugan than he did. Lee had stopped by at one point to ask what they were up to, and Tenten wrote down the sorry answer for him.

“Do not let him work too much at it.” Lee advised.

She nodded in agreement, but still knew that it was something the team sorely needed. Later on they stopped to gather up something to eat. They were in a hospitable area that actually had an orchard of wild fig trees, and they dined on those fruits in the evening.

“I’m sorry I couldn’t do it.” Neji apologized to Tenten, “I’ll work harder next time.”

She put a comforting hand on his shoulder, “I don’t want you to push it. Take it easy, Neji.”

That night they slept huddled closely together to overcome the cold. Tenten missed having a fire, but she understood that they couldn’t risk it. She slept lightly, always on edge in preparation for the enemy.
The next morning arrived and they gathered plenty of figs before setting out. They ate as they traveled, and covered half the distance of the bay by noon. They rested near a small brook to gather more water, and Tenten scouted briefly ahead for any good spots they could train in. She was unnerved by what she found.

A tall tree was lined with a number of kunai which were not their own. Tenten quickly returned to her team.

“They’ve been through here...” Tenten told them anxiously, “We have to keep moving.” The Leaf ninja proceeded without a second thought, straying from the treacherous forest and back to the coastline.

Lee eventually pointed out a discreet route down one of the cliff sides, at the bottom of which they discovered a series of tide pools that had scored caves in the rock. After carefully surveying the area and where the tide would reach in the next six hours, they settled on the best shelter for the night: a cavern that had been carved long ago and was beyond the water level’s reach.

They were very pleased to be able to make a fire that evening. Lee made a move to leave but Tenten stopped him on his way out. “I will catch us some dinner.” Lee told her.

She shook her head, glowering.

Lee gently moved her to the side so he could exit the cave. “I promise I will be back soon!” Tenten was against it but she let him go anyway. Her stomach was twisted with hunger, and they had run out of things to eat.

She took a seat beside Neji in front of the fire. “You’re still at it?” She asked him, surprised.

His face was set with concentration, and he nodded silently. Come hell or high water, he would figure out the Byakugan.

Tenten smiled tiredly, “Okay then. Wake me when Lee gets back...or if you get it.” She shoved her bag up against the cave wall, and after making herself comfortable, settled down for a nap.

She almost immediately began to dream. In her vision she realized that Lee could hear and Neji was fighting with Jyukken. Their enemies had them surrounded but their numbers were dwindling. ‘Whoa! We must’ve ambushed them!’ Thrilled by the imminent victory Tenten made a move to run to her teammates, but was unable to budge.

She looked down and could see one of the blades of a fuuma shuriken had pierced her stomach. She was bleeding out far too quickly, and Tenten realized that the damn bear tracker had successfully wounded her. Yet still...Neji and Lee were safe! Neji had his memory! ‘But I’m...I’m...’ She flopped backwards, realizing the fatality of the situation, and woke up with jolt.

Tenten rubbed her head as she sat up, quite disturbed by her dream. Could that have been the result if she had not released Neji in that battle? ‘I...don’t think so. The wound didn’t even look like it was in the right spot...’ All the same, it was symbol enough of her mortality.

“How long was I asleep?” Tenten asked groggily.

“Not long.” Neji told her, “Barely twenty minutes.”

“Gee...” She sighed, scooting closer to the small fire to warm up, “How did you manage, Neji?”

“I stopped. It actually starts to hurt when I focus that much chakra.” He confessed.
“I’ll bet. Don’t worry about it.” She patted his arm soothingly, “We’re almost out of here.”

Neji glanced at her and then looked back to the fire, “Could you tell me something?”

“Most likely I can.” She said, rubbing her palms together to generate some friction.

“How did I get hurt?” He asked.

“You mean when you lost your memory?”

“Yes, then.”

“Well…I’ll sum up. We were noticed while we were spying on the enemy and you ended up fighting this bastard named Keshin.” Tenten explained, “You took a tumble off a ledge, and I went to pull you up. That guy kept attacking me while I was trying to help you, and I suppose you…wanted to save me. You forced me to let go and I dropped you.”

She turned and jabbed his shoulder moodily, “By the way, don’t ever do that again! Self-sacrifice is just stupid, especially when I’m busting my ass for you!”

He nodded in compliance. “So I must’ve gotten hurt during the fall.” Neji surmised.

“You hit your head.” As she spoke the words guilt crossed her face, and she reached out and stroked the site of the injury, “I’m…so sorry. We could’ve avoided a lot of hassle if I’d just held tight. I won’t let anything like that happen again, just so you know.”

Neji smiled to himself, “The way I see it…it was meant to be this way. If I did it to help you, well, it was really the best decision.”

“But you scared me half to death!” Tenten growled.

“You’re more important.” He answered, “You’ve proven that these past few days. Once Lee was hurt…you took charge. There’s no doubt that this team hinges on you.”

She shook her head, “Believe me; I’m not too happy about it…”

Neji was watching her face steadily, “Without you…I’d have nothing. No way to go home or to defend myself…no joy.” He chuckled, “Hitting my head was a blessing.”

“You’re nuts.” She retorted shortly.

He stroked her cheek with a tentative finger, “Maybe. Just as much as you, I’d say.” Her eyes were fixed on him, questioning, and he added, “I think I’ll always depend on you. I want to…” Neji leaned in closer with his eyes half-lidded.

Tenten moved into the touch, her heart beating a tune against her ribs, and nearly jumped out of her skin when Lee returned very loudly. “It’s raining!” He called to them, unnecessarily, since his voice echoed in the cavern.

She snapped back and away from Neji, who gave Lee a very put-out look since he had unintentionally interrupted what could’ve been a perfect kiss. Lee paid the expression no mind, and set three small rabbits in front of them.

“One for each of us! Please help me skin them, will you?” He requested.

Tenten gave him her most reluctant OK signal yet. She set to work, shearing the poor dead creature
in front of her. She glanced over to Neji who was still staring at her intently. Lee was saying something but they paid him no mind.

“No worries.” She told Neji, “We can work on it tomorrow.”

He looked at her with an eager expression, and then drew out a knife of his own.

The next morning Tenten rose with an inexplicably sunny mood. She woke and there was Neji, curled asleep beside her, and she knew it was something she could get used to. The fire had died off in the night, and scraps of their dinner were charred in the embers. She kicked some gravel and sand over the fire pit to put it out fully. Lee awoke shortly after her.

He stretched his arms over his head, yawning sleepily, “Good morning…ahh, Tenten…”
She waved at him with a smile and he chuckled, “Good morning to me too? Thank you.”

Tenten scooched over and brushed her hand against Neji’s cheek, “Time to wake up…”

The Hyuga stirred and then sat up. He plucked her hand from his face and held it in his own contentedly. They sat wordlessly for a minute until Lee cleared his throat. Tenten glanced back to him, forgetting that their teammate was not aware of the new development.

“Ah, well…if we are all prepared I think it would be best if we set out.” Lee suggested, regarding Neji curiously.

Tenten nodded in agreement and stood, taking her hand back from her clingy teammate. They picked up their bags and set out into the sea-salt air. Gulls cried out overhead, and Neji was surprised to see a whale breach and take a breath just off shore. He looked at Tenten and said, “It’s amazing. Have I ever seen one of those before?”

“No.” She told him, “I don’t think any of us have. It is pretty neat.”

Once on the topside of the cliff they continued a short distance along the ledge, and eventually turned to the forest in search of food. There were no figs around, but there was a grove of citrus blossoms. Unfortunately, none of the fruits were mature or ripe, but they picked them anyway along with the blooms, willing to eat anything. The fruits were very sour, and Tenten suspected they were tangerines. They ate briefly and continued to find a source of water.

They passed another grove before entering a shaded forest. The trees towered into the sky, and they passed beneath the behemoths in reverent wonder. The Fire Country had some impressive forests, naturally; but Tenten doubted she would forget the magnificent geography of the Marsh Country either.

Some deer scattered unexpectedly and they avoided the startled creatures, leaping up into the nearest tree. “Do you think we frightened them?” Lee asked.

Tenten wasn’t sure. She had thought they had been treading lightly. There was a gasp from Neji behind her and suddenly he was on bent-knee on the branch, clutching his head. She turned back to him worriedly, “Neji? What’s wrong?”

“There was…so much to take in.” He mumbled, shaking his head.

Her eyes brightened, “Did you…was it the Byakugan?”
“For a moment, I saw…” He trailed off and then looked up, “There!”

From a few branches above them, a ninja hurled a fistful of shuriken at the unsuspecting Leaf shinobi. Neji had spotted the danger just in time, and he and his teammates ducked back to avoid the projectiles. The foe’s back up descended quickly.

With Lee and Neji safely behind her, Tenten summoned rapidly, hailing the treetops with a tempest of weaponry. She killed their hasty attacker since he was nearest, but the other three scattered to avoid the assault. One of the nukenin happened to be the Sound ninja who had injured Lee, and pointed out the weaknesses of the team to his comrades, “The Taijutsu kid can’t hear a thing, I got him with a sonic wave. For some reason the other one can’t fight, so just focus on the girl!”

Tenten signed an express command to Lee and he immediately obeyed. He unclipped his leg weights and disappeared into the forest.

Neji was astounded, “What just-?” He was thrown forward when a flashbomb detonated behind him. He righted himself in the air and landed on the ground. Neji drew Hok and clashed with the nin who had ambushed him, adrenalin giving speed and precision to his attacks.

Tenten felt sick to her stomach. Lee was after his previous Sound ninja opponent, immune to his jutsu thanks to his untraceable speed. He plowed into the nukenin from every direction, delivering relentless hits.

Tenten concentrated on her own enemy who had grown an alarming set of sharp claws. She summoned the great-cleaver, Chinigui, and dove ahead, side-stepping the nin’s raking talons. She swung her giant blade in a calculated arc. She clipped her foe’s arm but only drew a drop of blood as he evaded. He rounded on her, slashing furiously, and gored her in the side. He balked when the Leaf kunoichi dissolved into smoke.

She took advantage of her Shadow Clone’s distraction to catch him from behind, and hacked into her opponent’s back. His spine severed with a crunch, and he fell to the ground lifelessly. Lee was still busy throttling the Sound ninja, and so Tenten quickly went to assist Neji.

There was a cut on his cheek that was bleeding freely, but he had kept up well with his enemy. Neji had scored several hits on the nukenin, who obviously was not used to defending against swords. Tenten took advantage of the opportunity and leapt, plunging Chinigui down. The hooded nukenin barely avoided the assault, rolling, and the massive sword stabbed into the earth beside him. Unscathed, he lashed out with his chain-scythe, and snagged Neji’s arm in the cable.

Tenten managed to free her blade, but was taken by surprise when the hooded shinobi turned back to her, dragging Neji with him. The Hyuga dug his heels into the ground to resist, but was flung forward by their adversary with the intention of impaling his own teammate. Tenten skirted the devious move, watching Neji tumble, and she gave him an apologetic look. She cried out when something split open her back at the shoulder blade.

The hooded nin had cut her with the scythe of his weapon. He shook Neji loose from the chain with the intent to snare Tenten in it instead. For a beat, Tenten groped for Chinigui, but pain surged down the length of her arm, leaving her incapable of lifting the sword. Neji was on his feet again, but too far away to intercept the inevitable attack.

Lee shot feet-first like a comet from the treetops. He slammed down on the hooded shinobi with blinding speed, smashing their enemy’s face into the nearest tree. The force had cracked his skull, and the nukenin crumpled at the foot of the tree in defeat. Tenten fell to her knees, seeing the danger had passed.
Neji sheathed Hok and rushed over to the kunoichi, “Tenten!”

She tapped a seal in her scroll to un-summon her weapons, and quickly scribbled a message for Lee. He read it while he snapped his leg weights back on. “No, Tenten, there are no more.” He assured her, “It seems as if these four were assigned to keep watch for us…which leaves about six more out there somewhere.”

“Good.” She panted, dizzy with pain.

“You’re hurt.” Neji’s voice belied fear that she had never imagined him capable of. He lifted her gently onto his back and they retreated a short distance away from the battle site.

Yards away and seated on the ground, Tenten wiggled out of her shirt, hissing at the sting of her back. She sat shaking and unable to speak. Lee had retrieved medical supplies from his bag and set to work. Tenten was temporarily angered that Lee cut away her chest bindings without any warning, leaving her immodest. Her teammates were respectful enough to face only her back as it was, so she conceded that it was not a big deal. She could sense Neji’s tension over her current state.

After disinfecting the gash and putting a stop to the bleeding, Lee threaded a sterilized needle, his tongue poking from his mouth in concentration. Neji frowned at him, guessing what he was about to do, “You aren’t actually going to-?”

Lee looked at him, not certain of what he said. He then held up the needle questioningly, “Oh this? But I must Neji! She’ll be alright…”

Tenten nodded weakly where she sat. “Lee knows what he’s doing, Neji…” She said, totally exhausted, “Lee, just make sure the stitches are small…I don’t really care how many it takes; goh! Ow! Ow!” He had begun without hearing her and it was awful.

Neji’s brow was knitted with immense anxiety, and he watched in horrified fascination as Lee sewed the kunoichi’s skin back together. Tenten had stopped making sounds of pain and just sat still, her breathing very labored.

“Hey Neji…” She spoke up after a few minutes, “You want to do me a favor?”

“Anything.” He answered.

“It might be…a little nasty.”

“I don’t care.”

“I want you to go back to where we were fighting and pick up their supplies. Not so much their weapons, but if they have food and equipment…” She inhaled sharply when Lee had hit a tender spot, “Go pick up that stuff so we can use it, alright?”

“I’ll be right back.” He told her, and stood to leave.

Lee looked over his shoulder, “Where is he going?”

Tenten gave him an OK sign that dispelled his concern. Lee was very thorough with his stitches, and once he’d finished he knotted and snipped the string, disinfecting the area one last time. A rectangle of gauze was taped over the site. She wanted to tell him thank you, but couldn’t sign to him while he was facing her back. Lee rummaged around through his bag again and drew out binding tape. “Do
you want me to help you, Tenten?” He asked carefully.

She shook her head, “No, I got it…” He obviously did not hear her reply. She took the tape from him and began to wrap up her chest one-handed, but it was too difficult. When she tried to use her stiff arm she shrieked with pain and dropped the tape. Lee reached around to help her, ignoring her breasts. “You’re a pal.” She sighed. He didn’t hear that either.

He was finished after a minute and she signed her thanks to him. He nodded cheerily, “It was no trouble at all, Tenten. Just please feel better.

Rather than pulling her ripped and bloodied shirt back on Tenten tossed it. She reached into her bag and drew out a spare: black with an embroidered silver tiger on the back. She would hate to ruin this one too, so she elected not to get carelessly injured again. She pulled it on and Neji returned, carrying the spoils of battle with him.

“Oh! An excellent idea!” Lee said, kneeling down where Neji set down the supplies. They leaned in and examined what found: another blanket, some depleted water and food rations, bowls and utensils, first aid necessities and painkillers, soldier pills (What a find! Tenten cheered,) a detailed map, a contract from the actual people who had assigned the mission to the nukenin, some money, and cigarettes. Lee tossed the latter into the bushes since they had no use for them. They packed the rest of the supplies with their own belongings.

“We should keep moving before the others decide to show up.” Tenten recommended, and staggered to her feet.

“You should rest. You don’t want to jar your injury.” Neji told her sternly.

She shook her head, “I can rest once we’re somewhere safe. Let’s go please.”

Of course Lee also protested. After a short-lived argument Tenten got her way. Neji ended up carrying her on his back while Lee managed their travel bags. They covered considerable distance, and eventually reached the opposite end of the inlet. There they found shelter near the cliffside again, and stopped under a ledge that overlooked the rolling waves.

Tenten settled in the nook, laying on her side, and tried to hold still so she wouldn’t tear any of her stitches. After surveying the cavern Lee deemed it safe and defensible, and then turned to Neji, “I will go find us something to eat. Can you please go find kindling for a fire?”

Neji nodded and Lee set out to hunt. The Hyuga sighed deeply and crossed back to Tenten. He kneeled beside her and stroked her uninjured arm. “Lee and I are going out. We’ll be back soon.” He bent and touched his forehead to her’s, “Please get some rest.”

She made a soft sound of accord, and Neji then stood and left the hollow. The sound of lapping waves washing in and out lulled Tenten into a dreamless sleep.

Tenten awoke to the tantalizing smell of fish cooking over a fire. It was then she realized how hungry she actually was. She sat up slowly, very stiff and uncomfortable, and her teammates perked up at the sight of her.

“I am glad you are awake, Tenten!” Lee greeted, handing her a speared and grilled fish, “Please eat this.”

She thanked him sleepily and accepted it. She glanced to the entrance of the grotto and could see the sun had not yet set. “Was I out for long?” She rasped.

“I am.” She admitted, shifting slowly to lean against him. He was much more comfortable than the cave wall.

He handed her a canteen and two pills. “Take these, they should help.” Neji told her. She downed them with a gulp of water and then took another bite of fish.

“Are you going to eat?” She asked Neji.

“I finished.” He told her, “Lee wanted to wait up for you, but we weren’t very sure how long you’d sleep.”

Tenten finished off her first fish and watched Lee set up their small tin kettle for tea. “Are we somewhere safe?” Tenten asked, still blinking off sleep.

Neji nodded, “Yes. On the other side of the bay, actually.”

“What a perfect time for me to get hurt…” She grumbled, and then remembered something, “Oh! Back in the forest! Didn’t you use the Byakugan?”

“I think I did, but just for a second. I’m not really sure how.” He told her quietly, “I think it had less to do with my eyes and more to do with…” He tapped the side of his head, “It went a little bit deeper. I’ll try again tomorrow.”

“I’m so glad that you’re figuring this out…” She sighed, hugging him with her good arm. He made a very pleased sound deep in his throat, and it sent butterflies fluttering in her stomach.

Tenten reached for another skewered fish and continued to eat. Neji watched her quietly, much more relaxed now that she was showing signs of improvement. Lee squeezed juice from one of their leftover tangerines into their tea and then handed it out. It was delicately sweet and delicious, and Tenten commented on his thoughtfulness only to recall how he couldn’t hear it.

She handed Neji her parchment and brush. “You’ll have to be my scribe until this arm works again.” She informed him, “Could you please tell him that I love the tea?”

“It would be my pleasure, since I was about to say the same.” He took it from her and wrote the compliment down. He showed it to Lee and their friend chuckled.

“Thank you very much, Neji.” He said.

Lee’s arm bindings were slightly marred from the earlier fight, so he set to work unraveling the old bandages, intending to re-tape them. While he worked, Tenten leaned her head against Neji’s shoulder. She had finished eating, and with a full stomach she was sated. “You fought pretty well with Hok.” She told him, “Make sure you keep it with you.”

Neji glanced over to the decorated sword that was leaned against one of their travel bags. “It’s protected the both of us very well.” He agreed, “Thank you for trusting me with it.

She laughed, “Why Neji, I trust you with my life. What’s a donation of a sword?”

The following day it became very clear they could go no further. Tenten’s injury was severe enough to inhibit her ability to wield weapons, and there was the constant threat of her reopening the gash with a sudden movement. They left their belongings in the grotto, knowing it would have to serve as
a temporary shelter until Tenten was healed. After feeding his teammates, Lee went out again to create a perimeter and set up traps.

Neji had stayed behind with Tenten, helping her sterilize her aggravated wound. “I don’t want to sit around here all day…” Tenten complained sourly, “Could we please go outside?”

“Not until Lee comes back.”

“We could leave him a message to let him know where we are.” Tenten suggested, “That hill just across the way. The one with the flowers; it’d be nice to train there.”

“Train?” He scoffed in disbelief.

“Oh course not me, I meant you.” Tenten told him, “I’d rather help you out than sit on my butt and wait to get better.”

Neji could see her point. “Alright.” He said, and wrote down a short message for Lee. Neji slung Hok onto his back and followed Tenten out of the cavern into the sunlight. She was smiling with relief to be out of the dank and musty grotto.

She treaded carefully, taking her time as she picked her way up the slope. The hillside was in full bloom, and she was surprised by the number of swallow-tailed butterflies hovering about. ‘I didn’t think these were native to the region.’ Tenten looked at Neji and told him, “I don’t think you’ll be needing Hok if you’re working on the Byakugan.”

“Point taken.” He slipped the baldric from his shoulder and set it down. Tenten sat in the grass and observed as the Hyuga tried to contact his blood limit.

A breeze swept up some of the loose flower petals on the ground, giving the illusion of flying blossoms. Tenten relaxed completely, letting the atmosphere sink in. The combination of the ocean’s distant roar and the periodic birdsongs were so soothing it nearly put her to sleep. Neji’s concentration was broken after a while and he breathed harshly. “Is something wrong?” She asked him.

“Maybe.” He took a seat beside her, resting an arm across his knee, “I think there’s a possibility that I’m hurting myself.”

Tenten blinked, “How do you figure?”

“When I focus chakra it becomes very clear where it isn’t supposed to be, in a matter of speaking…” He explained, “It’s persistent, and since I’ve been trying so often the pain stays.”

“Oh…” Tenten rubbed her neck, troubled, “You’ve said a few times before that you’ve needed to rest your eyes. I didn’t know it could…be that bad.” She remembered something Sakura had said once, “A friend of mine told me that chakra pathways can get damaged and worn down. They’re like arteries, kind of.”

He seemed to understand. “I’ll take a break then and try later.” He decided.

“You…you don’t have to. Not if it’s hurting you.” Tenten told him.

“But we need this more than ever, especially with how you are now.” Neji countered, “I’m going to do this.”

She heaved a sigh. It was a necessary evil. She spread out on the flowers, laying down
carefully on her side. Neji glanced down at her, and was amused when a pair of butterflies had perched on one of her buns. He shooed them out of her hair. Tenten closed her eyes and tried to will herself to heal faster.

Neji noticed one of her hands strewn across the grass lazily, palm open and facing upwards. He did not resist the impulse and reached down, taking that delicate, weapon-wielding hand in his own. Her eyes flickered open and she looked up at him. “Hm…what are you thinking?” She asked curiously.

Their fingers laced and for a moment he wasn’t sure. It had been the right thing to do, he thought simply. She was beautiful, wise, and courageous. Tenten had adapted to his handicap as well as Lee’s, and she said that she cared about him. What more reason was there? “I want to be with you.” He told her softly.

Tenten’s eyebrows shot up towards her hairline. “Oh…well, um…what do you mean?” She asked, taken off-guard by the statement.

“I would like very much to be your boyfriend.” Neji clarified for her.

“E-Eh!” She felt fireworks go off in her stomach, “I-I…I can’t say that this is the…best time or place…for that.”

He chuckled at the reply, “It isn’t?”

Tenten let out a shallow breath, “I just don’t know what your rush is…”

“Well…something could happen to one of us.” Neji made a valid point, “Even if it’d only be for a little while, we could be…” He trailed off, staring uncertainly at the swaying chrysanthemums.

Tenten frowned inwardly. ‘Don’t be an idiot, Tenten.’ She self-reprimanded, ‘Can’t you see what he’s trying to tell you? He wants you and you’re acting like a middle-aged spinster!’ She felt like one sometimes anyway. Her grip on his hand increased slightly and he looked down again.

“Fine,” She was smiling. “Then I’m yours now.” She took a moment to marvel at her own audacity.

Initially, Neji looked confused, or maybe even taken aback that he didn’t have to debate it with her. A very relieved smile crossed his face before he leaned down and kissed her mouth.

And it was not what she had imagined it would be, nor was it like the kisses that Hikune had tried to trap her with. It went beyond, to a place in her mind where there was stillness, and it destroyed the ugly, uncertain longing that had filled her for so long and replaced it with contented affirmation and heat. These are Neji’s lips, her brain logged the event for the first time, ecstatic that they had found her’s willingly. His scent, his taste and his smoothness had surpassed all of her expectations.

Their mouths parted for a moment, and after a pause, met again with the same curious gentleness…but definite certainty that this indeed was the partner that was desired. With the second kiss Tenten understood that she could never again doubt the man beside her. Whole or in pieces; in joy or despair. They drifted apart again and looked at each other, realizing that survival had become imperative.

A short while later Lee started calling for them. Neji insisted he stay and work on awakening the Byakugan, so Tenten parted with him and returned to their shelter. Lee greeted her and showed her some gnarled, wooly looking fruits he had with him. “These are almonds.” He told her, “We can eat them later.”
Tenten smiled and gave him a high-five of approval. She followed him back into the grotto and he asked her where Neji had gotten to. She tapped her temple near her eye and he understood. “The Byakugan…” He said, “We should call him in soon. I do not want him to overdo it.”

Tenten nodded in agreement, and then rushed to her pack. She snatched up the parchment and very gingerly wrote down a note for Lee as he struck flint for a fire. When she finished she held it up for him to read.

After seeing it Lee could not contain his surprise, “Ah! Neji asked you to be his girlfriend?”

Tenten nodded, grinning.

Lee grinned back and asked, “So…what did you say?”

Tenten held up her fist and signed yes.

Lee cheered for her. If anyone had been rooting for Tenten in her romantic endeavors it had most certainly been him. He had always wanted to see her happy, and even if they were on a mission (and in dire straits,) Lee was glad that things were going well for her. “Is he going to take you on dates when we get back home?” He asked, eyes gleaming.

She shrugged. Tenten certainly would not mind if he did, but she wasn’t sure if she would be able to explain to the rest of their friends Neji’s sudden change in attitude. Once Lee had the fire going he poured the water they had acquired from the defeated nukenin and tipped it into a makeshift pot to boil. “This is all very exciting…” Lee said, crossing over to his pack and rummaging through it, “Wait until Gai-sensei hears this!”

Tenten shrieked, crossing her arms in a very combative ‘X.’ Lee laughed at her, and drew out some plundered supplies from his bag. “Relax, I will not say anything unless you want me to. You will have to explain yourself.” He smiled mischievously, “We are having soup tonight, since it’s one of the things we happened to pick up yesterday.”

She gave him an approving sign, but Lee’s cheerful expression wavered. “Tenten?” He asked after a moment.

She looked at him and he then asked, “When we get back home…after all of this…can things ever go back to the way they were before? For us and Neji, I mean.”

Tenten signed the word no. Lee looked disconcerted by the thought, but she scribbled a better explanation for him: It’s going to be different, but I don’t think in a bad way. We’re just going to have to repeat a few things, but I have a feeling it’ll all be fine.

Lee relaxed and nodded, “You are probably right.”

Neji returned when the soup was ready and sat beside Tenten. To her astonishment he announced, “I have it now.”

Tenten gave him a questioning look, “But?”

“I can see there’s no fooling you…I can use it now, but I…” He hesitated, “I’m not exactly sure what I’m supposed to do.”

“Jyukken. I’ll start showing you tomorrow, I promise.” Tenten said.

“You’re still injured, Tenten. I don’t want you-”
“I’m feeling a lot better already, and besides, we need to get moving by tomorrow at the latest.”
Tenten overrode him, “And remember, I can only teach you basic maneuvers since I’m not a
Hyuga.”

He smirked at her, “I can change that.”

Tenten gave him an admonishing look. “Don’t even start thinking about that sort of thing. It’s not a
good idea.” She laughed quietly at the absurdity, “And you know that it would just be a name change, it’s not like I’d get any special powers or anything.”

He pulled her against his chest, mumbling, “I just want you by my side.”

Tenten frowned slightly, “That’s all I’ve ever wanted too. But you know…when we get back…you might find someone you like more-”

“Never.” He said tersely.

“We’ll see.” Tenten said with a sigh, “Just save these things for when we get back to Leaf, alright?”

“Alright.” He agreed.

Lee, though he could not hear a word they were saying, was very amused by just watching their exchange. He served them soup and said it was their “congratulatory dinner.”

Neji took up the parchment and scrawled a note for Lee. His friend read it and frowned at the message, “Pardon? I am not corny!”

The next day they packed up and set out. Now with the assistance of the Byakugan, Tenten was much more confident about cutting through the wilderness. Neji was a bit intimidated by his ability, though, and frequently stopped using it because he felt his blood limit was ‘voyeuristic.’

“It’s alright, Neji.” Tenten kept telling him, “Lee and I, we really don’t mind. It’s just bodies, and it never used to bother you.”

“Was I a pervert, by any chance?” He asked crossly.

Tenten laughed, “Quite the opposite. In your clan you don’t take the human form seriously. Or, yes, you’re all a bunch of secret perverts.”

He cracked an amused smile. Neji continued on, leading them through the forest with Tenten’s combined knowledge and direction. Shortly before noon he stopped them after spotting something. “Up ahead…they’re still a way off.” He reported, “It’s a woman and two men…they look like they’re sick. They’re sitting around and trying to rest.”

“Yeah, I remember them. Wow, that group must have caught something bad if they’ve been ill for this long…” Tenten answered, “Can you see the other three anywhere?”

“No, they are not here.” He told her certainly.

Tenten signed to Lee how there were three nukenin due north of them, but they did not pose a threat. Lee thanked her for the update. They continued on unnoticed past the ailing shinobi, and found the mountain path they had first set out on. It would lead them straight back to the inn they had stopped at on their first day, but Tenten determined it was too risky to put themselves in plain sight of the town.
“They’ll definitely be expecting us.” Tenten theorized, “We should hang tight for one more day and camp out. We’ll make a break for the harbor, and if it’s just the three of them, well…” She grinned, “That shouldn’t be a problem.”

Neji liked the plan, and after Lee reviewed the written version he also agreed to it. Outside of the bayside town they set up another camp in an overgrown forest. Tenten had Neji do one last sweep of the area before being absolutely sure Keshin and the others were not around. The cedar trees provided good cover, and Lee went off to hunt one last time while Tenten led Neji off to train.

“For starters, I’m going to need you to look at me with your Byakugan.” Tenten told him, and watched him quail in reaction, “Not in the dirty way, Neji, the fighting way. You need to get a sense of the chakra circulatory system again.”

“I don’t know about this.” He said quietly.

Tenten huffed in exasperation. “Look,” She said pointedly, “You’re going to be seeing a lot of semi-naked people from now on, the only difference is that they’ll probably be trying to kill you. Please pay attention.”

She pointed to the center of her ribcage, “Solar Plexus.” Then above her breast, “Heart.” Then at the point where her neck and skull met, “Brain stem.” Neji nodded and took note. “These are three kill-zones, if you drill them with chakra; you can say see you in hell.” Tenten summarized it, “You usually are less direct. You can shut off their tenketsu so they can’t use chakra…or just make them pass out by attacking their organs.”

“That’s brutal.” He said.

She smirked, “That’s Gentle Fist.”

He smiled at her, intrigued.

“I want you to get a good look at my system, for reference.” Tenten told him, “Then we’ll work on forms. I’m not going to let you hit me, but you should be able to visualize it.”

He understood. Neji ventured another look, getting over the awkwardness, and accustomed himself to the sight of chakra pathways. Tenten proceeded to demonstrate forms, although it took a while to get his stance correct. They were basic but essential moves that he copied accurately, and the ones Tenten could not show him she spoke about.

“Your rotation keeps all attacks at bay, it’s very impressive.” She told him, “It kind of looks like this.” Tenten spun in a circle, palms outward, her feet skidding in the dirt.

Neji laughed, “How would that protect me?”

“Well when you do it you’re releasing chakra from your tenketsu and moving so fast that you create an actual shield.” She added, “I can’t duplicate that.” Tenten paused in thought, “Oh! And the new technique you perfected: Air Palm. You can hit someone even if they’re not nearby.” She frowned, “I hate it when you use that one on me.”

He looked puzzled, “I’ve used it on you?”

“When we were training, a while ago.” Tenten told him, “You need someone to help you with your jutsu, you know.”

He touched her cheek tenderly, “But I don’t want to hurt you.” Tenten sighed at the contact and took
a step back, ready to continue.

“You won’t hurt me anymore, Neji. You don’t even know half the things I’ve been talking about
anyway.” She told him, and attempted to mimic the ‘Rotation’ again.

“I’m sure it must look cooler when I do it.” He suspected.

“On a good day. Sometimes it messes your hair up.” Tenten said playfully. She then took an
offensive stance and said, “Now show me what you’ve learned.”

Neji raised his hands, circling her for an opening.

Later in the day they found Lee at camp. He had been able to find some peaches in an orchard that
belonged to one of the locals. “I helped myself.” He explained.

They sat around and ate, and Lee was pleased to read that Neji was working on Jyukken. Tenten
predicted that Neji would be back to his low-average fighting level within a week or two of training.
She would prefer it if they were in the Leaf Village when they did it, though.

Lee sat across from the two, unable to hear a thing. He was not sure what to make of the new
interaction between his teammates. To date, Lee was not sure if he had ever seen Neji smile so much
at one person in the years he had known him. Lee was beginning to feel like an intruder in their
space, “Um…should I leave you two alone for a while?”

Tenten frowned at him and signed no. After lunch they asked Lee to train with them. He was a good
match for Neji, pushing him to get creative with his Jyukken, and Tenten sometimes cut in when she
felt she would not be hurting her shoulder.

For the remainder of the day they rested and ate lightly. At night they slept in a huddle, as it was still
unwise to make a fire, and they took watches in shifts.

Early the next morning they took the soldier pills they had won, and set out before the townspeople
would be on the streets. They passed through cautiously, but Neji reported no sign of the nukenin
whatsoever. Tenten found it extremely unusual. It was when an older woman poked her head out of
the front door of a house and beckoned them over that things took a bad turn.

“Can we help you, madam?” Lee asked politely.

“Are you those Leaf ninja who came through here a while ago?” She asked nervously.

“We are.” Neji confirmed it.

“You’ve done a fine job, getting my husband kidnapped!” She hissed at them, “Those damn forest
rascals came in here and said: There’s no way those Leaf brats can sail out of here if the ship’s
captain isn’t around! And they took him away! Just like that…”

“Where are they?” Tenten asked quickly, “Ma’am, we’ll bring your husband back to you. We never
wanted to cause trouble.”

“They’re at the harbor. I don’t think they’d hurt him, but…” Her eyes reflected sorrow, “They’re not
going to let you leave this place alive. I would understand if you fled to save yourselves…but I don’t
think they’ll return him to me so easily.”

“We’ll help you.” Neji said, “This is our responsibility.”
Tenten gave the Hyuga an uncertain look but she too agreed. The old woman thanked them breathlessly and they departed, Tenten scratching down the situation on parchment for Lee. He read about their predicament and was troubled, “If they have leverage on us…they will not be easily defeated.”

“We need to ambush them.” Tenten announced, and then smiled at her boyfriend, “And with Neji here we can do just that.”

They crept up a forested slope that overlooked the harbor below. The breeze blew in from the ocean, which meant tracking-ninja, wherever he was, would not be able to smell them.

With his Byakugan, Neji reported the positions of the three enemy ninja who were holding the old skipper prisoner. “The dark haired one you were talking about, Keshin, he is there. Right now he’s talking to his companions.” Neji said, “The old man appears to be safe.”

“Good. Do you see any way we might be able to sneak up on them?” Tenten asked.

“No.” He told her, but thought about it, “Maybe if we create a diversion back here, though, it will lead them away from their position. We could do it that way.”

“Let me just tell Lee.” Tenten said, but Neji grabbed her arm, “What is it?”

“Behind us!” He warned.

She and Neji leapt back to avoid the nukenin who had discovered them, but Lee had not heard the cry. Tenten watched helplessly as Lee was struck in the back by one of the enemy shinobi, and sent tumbling down the sandy slope, in clear view of Keshin and his companions. Neji rounded on the newcomers, his Byakugan active, “I didn’t expect this…”

“What? That they’d notice us?” Tenten said, standing back-to-back with him.

“No.” He smirked, “These are the sick ones.”

Then it hit her: the medic nin and her two ailing friends had come back to help out the rest of their group. Tenten sprang, summoning a storm of weaponry that her enemies scattered to avoid. Their reactions were sluggish. Neji caught one of them, not dealing any severe damage with his Jyukken, at first, but after a scuffle struck his opponent in the gut. The sick man crumpled, out of energy to fight as it was.

Tenten had beaten the other into submission with a Bo-staff, and only the medic remained. She had no obvious talent in fighting, and immediately surrendered. “Listen!” She said fearfully, “Keshin’s the one who’s got the real problem with you. Just leave me and my friends out of this!”

“Then get them out of here if you know what’s good for you.” Tenten snarled.

The medic quickly snatched up her teammates and made herself scarce. The two Leaf ninja exited the forest, and could see Lee was already fighting against the final three nukenin. His leg weights were off, and though it was an impressive sight he would not last long on his own.

“We need to get down there.” Neji continued to observe the fight, “Lee’s strong but he can’t take all of them.”

Tenten’s expression had stilled with seriousness, “I want you to stay here, Neji.”
Shocked, he gave her an uncomprehending look, “Why?”

“I don’t want you fighting Keshin again. He knows your style and he’ll go right for you if he sees you again.” Tenten warned him, “If you stay here Lee and I can take care of it.”

“I won’t let you do this alone.”

“I want you to be safe!” She protested, “I couldn’t do that for you the last time.”

Neji cupped her chin with his hand and gave her a stern look, “I have to go down there. We can’t help what happens.” Tenten was scowling, but not because she was angry. She let him pull her against his chest in a sincere embrace.

“I can’t shrink behind you forever. I’m a shinobi and I need to fight. That’s what you taught me.” He told her, “And if something happens…however bad it is…wait for me. I know how to get back to you.”

Tenten was still against it, but her grimace faded. “I’m holding you to that!” She warned him.

Neji took it as a valid answer. He leapt down the crumbling slope and Tenten had no choice but to follow.

At first Lee thought he had the advantage of surprise. He had an unpleasant fall down the slope, but once at the bottom, Keshin and the others looked genuinely startled. They could hardly believe he was by himself. Lee needed little more reason to attack.

No one anticipated his speed, which also helped, but Lee’s audio black-out left him vulnerable to the directions they shouted amongst themselves. He smashed one of the nukenin in the face with a flying kick, but noticed Keshin approach from behind a fraction too late. The tracker had decked him with a powerful arm, and Lee soared across the clearing like a rag doll.

The old man, from where he was tied to a docking post, hollered in Lee’s favor…however bleak it appeared. “Give ‘em a left, sonny!” The captain squawked, “A left!”

Even without hearing the encouragement, Lee staggered to his feet anyway. He was about to take off running again when a ninja had hit him with a weighted chain. The side-swipe tripped his feet out from under him, snaring around his ankle, but Lee was free to run. The nukenin cried out as he was dragged across the shipyard by his own chain, and Lee proceeded to do battle with the other two thugs.

“Get up, Jessa!” Keshin snarled at his teammate, “Don’t just let him drag you around!”

Jessa caught the chain around an unused anchor and it snapped, detaching him from Lee’s stampede. “I could use another weapon, Pejite!” The fire-haired nin called to his friend. Pejite summoned an iron-tipped spear and tossed it to Jessa as he tailed after Lee.

The three nukenin coordinated their attacks, attempting to surround Lee, but a storm of kunai and shuriken forced them back. Lee was appreciative when his teammates had arrived. Tenten dove straight for Keshin, intent on distracting him from Neji. A relentless barrage of weaponry, with the help of a Shadow Clone, poured down from her airborne scroll. She effectively cornered the tracker with a wall of metal.

Lee had reset his focus on Jessa; meanwhile Pejite directed his attacks at Neji with a hachiwari he summoned.
The Hyuga drew Hok and countered Pejite’s sloppy strikes. He was a mediocre ninja at best, compared to how Tenten made use of tool-summoning scrolls. Neji was comfortable enough breaking his foe’s guard, catching the crux of the hachiwari, and pried it out of his enemy’s hand with a sword-flick. Their weapons flew a distance before sticking into sandy soil. The coward made a break to run towards the wharf, but Neji reacted on reflex. He pummeled Pejite with the rudimentary Jyukken he had been tutored in. Lee attempted to assist before Jessa chased him off again with his spear.

Meanwhile, Keshin had used a strange jutsu that had amplified his strength, and Tenten struggled to avoid the lumbering brute as he tore apart the shipyard with his bare hands. Tenten could hear somewhere behind her Lee opening his chakra gates. His foe tried to interrupt the attempt with Fire Style techniques. Plumes of flame danced across the harbor, and Tenten feared her teammates would not fare well against the enemy’s Ninjutsu. Keshin came crashing down next to her and Tenten was thrown back. ‘Ugh! I owe this bastard for ruining everything! I think I know how to thank him…’

She had only made two previous attempts while in Konoha, and under Hayate’s supervision, at that. Even so, Tenten could not come up with a reason not to summon a volatile weapon in defense of her team, ‘I’m bleeding anyway.’ With a swipe of blood and the appropriate hand signs, Tenten pressed her hand against the grit of the seaside road.

Her summoning matrix spread an unusual pattern on the ground, and Keshin caught up to her, somewhat curious about what strategy she had adopted.

“Ha! Getting tired, you wee little bitch? What’s that you got there?” He grinned a crooked smile, “And how’s your friend after you dropped him?”

Tenten fixed her eyes on the man furiously. The ground split apart and erupted. Keshin leapt back, caught off guard, and observed in silent wonder.

The old jian called Susumajin rose up in an ornate sheath, and then rested at the lip of the fissure. The kunoichi walked by calmly and lifted it up. While her foe took an extra moment to wonder what sort of jutsu could pull weapons out of the ground, Tenten unsheathed the short sword. The blade metal had an obsidian tint to it, and while the young woman took aim at the nearest throat in sight, the sword had already begun its wicked work.

Keshin was aware of the feeling; abrupt, like an invisible gust that struck and then ceased. It had taken a considerable amount of his chakra with it. The pulse had shaved away the chakra of anyone near it, paused as if to analyze what it took, and then Tenten rushed at her enemy while he scrambled to gather energy again. A beat later, another ‘chi-stealing-wave’ swallowed an exponential amount of chakra from its target.

For fear of losing another third of his energy, Keshin charged, wanting to get the first strike in, but Tenten swung her sword before he had a prayer of attacking. A corrosive, leeching chakra soared off of the blade and hacked into Keshin, carving a deep gash in his chest. He fell back with a scream, burned by the attack, and Tenten needed only to drive the point of the jian into his jugular notch to end the threat finally.

Before Susumajin could begin mathematically (and indiscriminately) decimating the chakra reserves of Tenten’s own teammates, she sheathed it and threw it back into its burrow, and the ground closed up after receiving it.

Lee had hit Jessa with a hammer-punch that sent him streaking like a comet into the lagoon. Tenten looked past her teammate as she ran, and was alarmed to see one of six Water Clones disarm Neji. She watched in horror as Hok was knocked from his hand and the bunshin closed in. Somehow,
without it even looking rehearsed, the Hyuga took a textbook perfect Gentle Fist stance.

Tenten felt her mouth hang agape when Neji threw himself into a rotation and destroyed the water clones surrounding him. Pejite stumbled back, but could not counter as Neji descended on him with merciless stabs of Jyukken. The last nukenin was promptly defeated. Lee closed his gates and began looking around for his leg weights, having forgotten where he ditched them.

Tenten crossed the shipyard and picked up Hok. She heaved a deep sigh. Neji turned around and faced her. ‘He doesn’t have a scratch on him!’

She beamed, “That was amazing!” Tenten threw her arms around his shoulders in a loving hug, managing not to clip him with the sword.

Neji did not return her embrace. For a moment she thought maybe he had gotten hurt, but she could feel tension in his muscles. He was rigid and uncomfortable, and it slowly occurred to her that he didn’t like being touched. Tenten took a step back and looked at his face. He appeared very confused.

Something in her chest wrenched. Neji took Hok from her and slid it back into its scabbard. He slipped the baldric from his shoulder and handed it back to her, “Here, Tenten. I’m not sure what I was doing with this.”

She took it back from him with a shaking hand. Tenten inhaled deeply before asking, “Are you alright, Neji?”

“I am.” He told her as he glanced around, “Although…I can’t say I know how we ended up here.”

“Ah.” She laughed faintly, and then looked over her shoulder for Lee. He was untying the captain, who was singing Lee’s praises even though he could not hear them.

“Lee’s deaf right now.” Tenten informed Neji, “Do you remember why?”

He gave her an odd look, “He can hear perfectly well.”

“No, he can’t…” Tenten rubbed her temples, trying to relax, “What do you remember last, Neji?”

“We were fighting Keshin near the gorge.” He told her, “And then, inexplicably, we fought here back where we started.”

The entire week had just gone up in smoke. ‘Neji’s brain just did a total reboot.’ Tenten noted, ‘And here I thought it was never going to happen.’

Lee crossed over to them with the skipper. “Neji! You fought very well today!” He commented, “We should bring the captain back home now, what do you think?”

Neji looked completely perplexed. Tenten patted his shoulder and promised, “I’ll explain everything.”

After disposing of what remained of their vanquished enemies, the team returned the captain to his wife. The old woman invited them for tea to show her appreciation. They sat on the front porch of her house, and Tenten first explained to Lee, on parchment, what had happened to Neji.

Lee gave her a worried look. “Does he remember what happened between…you two?” He asked quietly.
Tenten signed no. Lee looked away from her. He did not speak for the rest of the afternoon.

Tenten then elaborated for Neji how he had been injured, how she and Lee had worked to help him, and how Lee had eventually been hurt as well.

“I’m hoping Tsunade-sama will be able to do something for him when we get back home.” Tenten told him.

“Why was I carrying your sword before?” Neji asked her.

“I gave it to you.” Tenten answered, smiling, “You handled it pretty well.”

Neji took a sip of the tea and she watched his face, waiting for a sign of recognition. There was nothing. He only recalled how they’d crossed through a jungle and begun spying. The rest he had to take her word for. He said he appreciated everything she and Lee had done for him. “I am indebted to you.” Neji told her.

Tenten waved it off, and then theorized how he his brain was compensating. “It must have been the fight…you see, once you’d forgotten things I wouldn’t let you get into any battles. Not really. I didn’t want you to get hurt.” Tenten explained, “Your instincts must have kicked in back there and helped you remember your most recent…memory?” She was no psychologist, so she lacked the scientific terms to make it sound sophisticated.

“Or it was sheer dumb luck.” Neji pointed out. Even he counted himself fortunate in such a dangerous situation.

“Tsunade-sama will have to check you too when we get back. There still might be something wrong with your…wiring.” Tenten added, “But other than that, I’m glad you’re back with us!”

He nodded. The smile she had gotten used to seeing was absent. Tenten glanced over to Lee and could see he had not touched his drink. He sat in silence while staring at the harbor.

“Is he well?” Neji asked her.

Tenten had a sinking feeling that Lee’s heart had broken even before hers had. In fact, she was surprised that she felt no remorse at all.

The Fog Skipper had actually been prepared to sail since the day prior. Due to the captain’s kidnapping, mates postponed the return trip to the mainland. Only a few people boarded the ship, and when Chief Mate Ondo saw how filthy and worn-out the team of Leaf ninja looked as they crossed the deck, he ushered them along, “Whoa! You three were here for over a week! Were you fooling around in the jungle?”

“You could say that.” Tenten replied tiredly.

“That’s crazy dangerous, but you probably realized that. Follow me. There’s a nice room available on the port side and I think you guys will need it.”

With muted thanks, the team followed Ondo to a room they supposed would be, optimistically, twice the size of their former closet. It was a startling delight to find that it was a spacious and well-kept suite with a bathroom attached. The single bed was quite large and, further into the room, was a sofa fitted between cramped furniture. A wide window faced the ocean.

“This is the nicest cabin we have. If you need anything else just give me a shout.” The muscled man
advised them.

Lee observed out loud, “Much better! The mate did not ask us to pay for this?”

Tenten signed no to him.

They set their bags and supplies down, grateful for a comfortable room for when their beaten bodies and minds needed it most. Tenten, ever the proactive one, fetched parchment and scribbled a note to Lee as he took a seat on the edge of the bed. She handed it to him and then spoke to Neji as he lingered near the window, “If you two don’t mind I’m going to wash up. Please look after Lee, for now.”

Neji nodded slowly, finally noticing that her white cheongsam had been replaced with a black shirt. He had clearly missed things. It was still a muddle when he attempted to pry open his memory, seeing a plethora of odds and ends, but nothing that recalled a wardrobe change. Tenten retreated to the restroom with a few items from her bag.

There was a familiar lurch as the ship began to pull away from shore. ‘There.’ Neji thought. The ordeal was over, ‘Whatever it was.’ Tenten had given him a rough overview of what occurred, but he felt a few more details would be beneficial. He came to stand beside Lee as his teammate gingerly laid back, allowing his muscles to relax after days of struggle.

“I want you to tell me-” Neji was interrupted when Lee quickly handed the scroll to him without looking. Miffed, Neji took the parchment and brush to express his thoughts as he had seen Tenten do before.

After a moment, Lee was nudged with the scroll. The boy sat up to read the message:

*Are you angry with me?*

Lee frowned in confusion, “What do you mean, Neji? I am not angry at all.”

On paper, Neji continued, *You have barely spoken to me since we fought those nukenin. You’re clearly upset about something. Did I do anything offensive that I can’t remember?*

“No, Neji. Nothing offensive. I suppose I am trying to get used to you being yourself again.” Lee explained.

*I wasn’t myself?*

“It could not be helped. You had no recollection of anything, as Tenten told you. What I meant was that it changed your behavior.”

Neji blanched at the thought. How dramatic of a change did Lee mean? He asked for his friend to elaborate.

“Well…you tried very hard to please us. You were aware of what a challenge it was for us to protect you without your abilities. You wanted to make up for it, Neji.” Lee tapped his chin, “You also laughed a lot more.”

Horrified, he wrote, *What did it sound like?*

“It did not sound annoying.” Perplexed, Lee added, “You do not know the sound of your own laugh?”
Wouldn’t it be stranger if I did?

Lee cracked a smile, “Maybe.”

Neji sighed in mild dismay. So he had acted foolishly, albeit he had not known any better.

“Because I feel we have grown closer as friends…I can give you an honest assessment based on how you normally are…” Lee wagered, tilting his head to think, “Your laughter and the sounds you made were by no means out of the ordinary. You asked many questions but they were perfectly valid. You were quite optimistic and forward-looking. You also…”

When Lee paused for too long Neji inquired in ink, What? What else did I do?

“You spent as much time with Tenten as you possibly could.” Lee announced, “You were very attached to her.”

Neji stared mutely as he processed the information.

“You wanted to know about her life and the things she liked. As I recall, she had no problem sharing those things with you. But…oh, how do I put it?” He furrowed his prominent brows, “When all of that stopped satisfying…”

“What?” Neji growled, knowing that Lee could at least visualize what he had said.

Lee finally reached a fitting description, and with a pointed finger he announced, “You solicited romance.”

Neji returned to his processing. While the silence hung and he stared at a wall, Neji abjectly flailed his mental self for acting inappropriately.

“It is alright!” Lee assured him, “Tenten was not upset by it.”

Then you can confirm that I acted like a fool?

"Not in any sense, Neji.” Lee disagreed, “I feel that…you merely acted as you would have if you did not have your-” He gestured at Neji’s scowling face, “Tremendous pride filtering your every word. If you stopped fearing the possibility of Tenten rejecting you-” Lee stopped speaking and dodged when Neji lashed out angrily, barking words that he couldn’t hear.

When he calmed down Neji managed to write out, I do not fear rejection.

“Of course you do.” Lee stated matter-of-factly, “I know how you feel, Neji. We have spoken about it already. If Tenten for any reason distanced herself from you while we are together as a team, it would risk the precious friendship that you value above all else.” He nodded wisely, “That may the one thing you cannot be careless with.”

Your inability to hear has made you shockingly bold.

“If you did not trust my opinion then I know you would not have asked for it.” Lee stated simply.

Neji groaned in aggravation, unable to contest his friend’s claim. Lee patted his shoulder reassuringly before asking, “Is there…anything that you can remember?”

They sat side-by-side on the edge of the bed in silence. After fishing for anything significant, Neji reported on paper, There was fruit.
“Yes!” Lee chuckled in disbelief, “Those were figs.”

Neji nodded. That was about all he could recall.

The door of the bathroom opened a crack and Tenten’s voice sounded, “Can someone… take a look at my back, please?”

As Neji was the only person who could hear the request, he stood and crossed over to the small compartment. Before he could form words to ask what her concern was, Neji laid eyes on a wound on Tenten’s shoulder that had begun to fester. He inhaled after a moment, shocked, “What happened?” He pushed into the room as she was reasonably covered with a towel.

“I was injured in a fight a few days ago. I thought I had been going easy and it wasn’t hurting…” Tenten glanced over the gash in the mirror, “Looks like it got infected.”

“How were you hurt?” Neji asked.

“When we were fighting those rogues I got tangled in a chain-scythe. You did too, actually.” She smiled, “Lee made him pay for it.”

Neji’s practical nature reasserted itself. Without further acknowledgment, he crossed back to Lee and wrote him an update. Lee reached for his travel bag (now containing extra spoils from fallen foes) and rummaged through it, “Ah ha! This bottle has enough antibiotics for two weeks. And…” He retrieved a small plastic box, “There is some ointment in here too.”

Neji accepted the items and returned to Tenten, placing the bottle of medicine in her hand, “You’re going to need this.” He examined the angry red patch of skin surrounding the cut on her shoulder blade, “Hold still.”

She restrained a hiss when he dabbed antibacterial ointment on the wound. While working Neji noted, “Lee did these stitches.”

“Yeah.” She peeped, breathing laboriously.

“They’re very good.”

Tenten exhaled through pursed lips. Neji did not overlook the numerous cuts and scrapes that lined her exposed skin. When he concluded the care of her wound, Neji bowed his head in disappointment, “I burdened you. If I had been able to defend myself, you would not have-”

“It’s fine.” Tenten cut him off, “You would have done the same for me, Neji.” She gently nudged him out the door, “I’ll be ready in a little while!” The compartment shut before he could express his regrets.

While Tenten had a point, Neji was not thrilled that she could not at least hear out his apology. They would have saved considerable time and energy if he had not taken a thoughtless plunge off a ravine ledge. Tenten had protected both him and Lee while they were weakened, but she had sustained significant injuries. On top of that, he could hardly understand how she had maintained an upbeat attitude through it all.

He returned to the space where Lee was sitting and his teammate flagged him down, “Neji! You must read this!” He held up a scroll that had been retrieved from a travel bag, “This document specifies what those rogue ninja were looking for!”

With a raised eyebrow, Neji accepted the scroll and looked it over.
Compensation: 30,000 Ryo a participant

Objective: Confirm coordinates of the tomb containing the seal of the Demon Moryo. When located, avoid contact with tomb guards. Do not alert retainers or High Priestess of the Demon Country. Do not alert daimyo of Marsh Country. Execute any bystanders or shinobi who choose to interfere. Report findings at headquarters to accept reward; no substitutions. Zero liability for injury sustained by interference or terrain.

Issuer: Lord Yomi

“Hm.” Neji was slightly impressed by the scale of treachery in the document, “The Hokage will appreciate us forwarding this to her.” He added, “And it seems prudent to notify the lords of the Marsh and Demon countries.”

Lee observed Neji uncertainly, having made an attempt to lip-read. Neji transcribed the idea on paper and Lee got the message, nodding in agreement.

Tenten reappeared with her hair tied up, fully dressed, and gestured towards the bathroom. “It’s free. You both should get cleaned up before we find something to eat.”

“I agree.” Neji handed her the shady mission request, “Read this for now. Tsunade-sama will find it invaluable.”

While Neji took his turn to bathe, Tenten was enlightened by the scroll they had pilfered from fallen rogues. ‘How about that? The whole time we were close to a tomb…but we ended up playing tag in the jungle with mercenaries.’ It was an exceptional waste of time, yet somehow they had fulfilled their mission parameters.

She and Lee sat down on the armchairs near the window to discuss the mission.

“Are you going to tell Neji anything?” Lee inquired.

With ink she replied, I don’t know if I should. At least not now. He probably wouldn’t believe me if I told him what happened.

“He would.” Lee insisted.

Alright. Even if he did believe me, it doesn’t change the fact that he may not feel comfortable agreeing to the things he agreed to when he wasn’t in his right mind. I don’t plan on forcing him into something he does not genuinely want.

“I feel that it is something worth talking about. Neji has come a long way.” Lee disagreed, “And I thought that you…might be upset about him forgetting.”

Tenten took a pose of contemplation, crossing her legs, “Well…” She wrote another response, It’s a minor setback. I don’t have anything to be sad about, considering that we’re all here in one piece.

“True.” Lee yielded.

You still can’t hear anything?

“There is occasional tinnitus.” He shook his head, “But nothing so far.”

I really hope Tsunade-sama can help you!

“I hope so too. Though, I think I can get along quite well with this handicap if I must.” Lee seemed
determined, “I wanted to ask you about something else, Tenten.”

She nodded as she listened.

“I saw you use it very briefly: a sword that came out of the ground.” He recalled, “What was it?”

Tenten hurriedly penned her answer, I was going to tell you about it. It’s called Susumajin. That sword is an heirloom weapon passed down from my ancestors. I am pretty sure the Hiyumi is an heirloom weapon from the same line, too.

“Ah, I see. Why did you not continue to use it?”

It’s dangerous. I can’t feel the effects, but when I trained with Hayate he explained that it didn’t take long for most of his chakra to be eroded. The sword siphons chakra away and stores it. I am not sure what else it does, but it isn’t appropriate for battles with teammates nearby. It helps end things quickly, I’ll give it that.

“And you must summon it with hand seals like a contract summon?”

She nodded.

“How odd.” Lee rubbed his chin, “Is there a person inside it?”

Tenten gave him a dumbfounded expression, unable to answer.

“What I mean is, do you know if anyone was sealed with it?”

How am I supposed to know that, Lee?! And more importantly: how could YOU know that?

“I have read about it.” He said simply.

WHAT are you talking about?

“The book you gave to Neji as a gift.” Lee elaborated, “I have read it. I do not know if Neji has finished it yet, but I returned it to him…”

Are you trying to tell me that this sword was in that history book?

“That is exactly what I mean.” He confirmed, “And…maybe you will benefit from reading about it. That book was kept in your family, and I imagine there was a purpose.”

Tenten leaned back in the chair, puffing, finding it hard to digest that Lee was so good at paying attention.

“When we return home, ask Neji if he has finished. I think you need it more.” Lee determined.

She nodded tiredly.

Neji returned after a short while and Lee was able to wash up. They ventured above deck to be served a meal. Afterward, Neji decided it was worth asking around if anyone had ever heard of the Tomb of Moryo.

The only person who had a remote idea of what they were referring to was the old sea captain. While at the helm, he explained, “Yes, that monster was sealed a long time ago by the Priestess Miroku. Her family resides in the Demon Country. That’s about all I’ve heard.” He twitched his mustache, “It would not be easy or smart to try to find that vault…but I guess some greedy knuckleheads will try
anything these days.”

“Do you know where the tomb is?” Tenten asked.

“Noppe. I don’t think anyone around here does, for our own safety.” The man speculated.

They thanked the captain for his honesty and for ferrying them home. Tenten began her regimen of antibiotics while Lee took Dramamine at the first sign of motion-sickness. The team could not spot hide nor hair of the other few passengers aboard.

While observing the ocean by rails at the bow of the ship, Tenten looked at Neji critically, “I never did ask you if your head has bothered you.”

“Not at all.” He confirmed.

Lee was on a bench meters behind them, practicing knots with loose mooring line.

“Tell me if you remember anything, alright?” Tenten requested.

“I will.” He shut his eyes to concentrate on the sea breeze, “Though...I do think I know what we ate.”

Tenten laughed at the thought, “Well, that’s something at least. How about trying to cut your hair off? Remember that?”

He looked at her incredulously.

“I stopped you, of course.”

“Thank you.” Neji leaned his chin on the heel of his hand, “That might explain the way my hair was tied.”

“Oh yeah. You wanted it in a ponytail.” She added, “It looked good.”

He glanced at her from the corner of his eye. A few of the things she spoke about sounded familiar, in a distant sense.

Later in the evening, after a meal and enjoying more fresh air beneath the stars, the team retired to their cabin. No one made a fuss as the lights were snapped off and they sorted themselves. Tenten happily collapsed front-ways onto the bed, overjoyed to have space. Lee made a motion to Neji across the room, encouraging him to join the kunoichi. With a sound of annoyance that Lee could not hear, Neji ignored the suggestion and took the sofa instead.

Foiled, Lee settled down for sleep in the free space of the bed and attempted to minimize his snoring.

The next day was punctuated with a gentle drizzle of rain. Gray clouds loomed as far as the eye could see, but the captain steered them away from the worst of the storm.

After waking, the teammates ate below deck in a mess hall, virtually devoid of passengers with the exception of cooks.

When the morning dragged by uneventfully, the bored ninja wandered around the ship. They even passed by their previous cabin, which was a sorry sight. The group stumbled across Chief Mate Ondo who was escorting a tiny old woman around.
“This is my Grandma.” The burly mate introduced, “She’s got some shopping to do in the Fire Country.”

The old woman was a firecracker who demanded entertainment. If the so-called shinobi could not fight each other to the death for her enjoyment, then she would settle for their life stories.

They shared brief anecdotes about their lives as an alternative.

“She might really like watching the Chunin Exam Finals.” Tenten suggested.

“Grandma was there last year. I don’t think she’d miss it for the world.”

Rain began to fall in a torrential curtain and the passengers quickly retreated below deck. The day resumed uneventfully from then on, and Lee held a conversation about the impending Chunin Exam with his teammates through paper.

“I expect we will pass this year.” Lee speculated, “What did the flier say the date was?”

Tenten scribbled, *June 26th. It’s a week before Neji’s birthday.*

He nodded, “Hm. So we will have two things to celebrate in that case.”

They ate dinner in the mess hall again, and Lee retired to sleep early when his stomach felt unsettled. Tenten made a venture above deck again, but the rain fell steadily. She and Neji lingered in the sheltered doorway of the stairwell to keep dry.

Tenten broke the long silence, “Do you still have that book I gave you, Neji?”

“I do.” He confirmed, “Do you need it back?”

“No, no.” She raised her hands, “I was just wondering if you read it.”

“I am part of the way through.”

“Will you tell me if it gets weird?”

“It already did. The protagonist is a character with your namesake, although that isn’t the part…that’s strange.” Neji elaborated. He still was not over the fact that the shinobi named Tian Tian had married a student nearly ten years her junior.

“Yeah. Lee mentioned it.”

“I will tell you when I read something significant. I understand why you’re interested.”

They returned to the darkened cabin later in the night. Tenten stopped in the bathroom to examine the progress of her shoulder’s healing. Neji stood in the center of the room, silently cursing Lee who had stretched out on the sofa in a deep slumber.

On the first leg of the trip, Neji had been eager to get close to Tenten. However, when told that he had behaved like a lovesick fool during a bout of memory loss, he felt a nagging reluctance to say or do anything in Tenten’s presence. She had not made a single mention of his actions days ago. Even so, Neji could scarcely reconcile the new, uncomfortable sensation of embarrassment.

He settled on the right side of the bed and lay rigidly on his side. The sound of rain pattered against the wide, rectangular window of the room. Tenten exited the restroom and took the space on the left with a yawn. She made no remarks as she positioned herself on her good shoulder. Neji’s frantic
awareness lasted for a stretch of time before switching off abruptly. In sleep his mind quieted down. Then came a dream that was not a dream, but a memory: Seeing sky between the open spaces of his fingers, free from any hold at the top of the ravine; Tenten’s petrified face shrinking from view as he experienced the rushing breeze from the fall. He contacted a rock face and rolled, bludgeoned by stone, dizzy when he fell again. A hard splash into water at the bottom of the gorge…

Neji could hardly keep his eyes open under the frigid stream. His limbs were not responding and his thoughts were sluggish. The pool could not have been more than ten feet deep, but it would be a great task to escape it with an uncooperative body. Happily, he was not sinking like a stone; the travel bag looped around his arm was buoyant. Above, the water’s surface trembled, light passed through in various shapes and shades. Neji could make out a face on the plane above as it stilled; perhaps it was his reflection?

But it was an older face with creases at the corner of the mouth, fair skin with a narrow jaw, a wide forehead wrapped in black cloth, and white eyes looking back at him with incredible fondness. ‘Are you going to save me?’ Neji wondered of his father, ‘Or will you leave me on my own again?’

He woke with a small start, realizing that he was flat on his back. Neji stared up at the ceiling to make sure there was not a volume of water above him. He had forgotten about meeting his father there in a canyon of the Marsh Country, at a watery window that provided a subtle glimpse of the afterlife. The next sight he could recall, though fuzzy, was Tenten and Lee sitting beside him in a cave.

Neji turned his head to observe the girl next to him. Tenten was asleep and facing towards him, with her hands curled beneath her chin. Her hair never weathered pillows well when she tied it up, but Neji quite liked how her chignons unfurled in brown tresses during the night. ‘You are the one who defends me…when he can’t.’ He thought wistfully, ‘Whenever I expect I might finally die and see him again, you stop me.’

She had become so proficient in saving his life, Neji wondered if there could ever be a proper way to repay Tenten. In the dark stillness of the cabin, he watched her face for a time before slipping his arm out and replacing it behind her. The young woman did not stir as she was pulled in carefully and shifted against Neji’s side. Her head automatically rested on the crook of his chest and shoulder while his arm folded around her.

Within moments, he was asleep again.

The teammates slept until late the next morning, and were jostled back to consciousness by the ship’s tossing and tilting. For fear of getting ill, Lee immediately rose and went above deck in the hopes of settling his stomach. Shortly thereafter, Tenten’s stirring woke Neji from sleep. He kept his eyes cleverly shut as Tenten calmly extricated herself from his arms. When he felt her stand and begin to root around her travel bag, Neji took his cue to rise. They decided to follow after Lee.

Upon observing the state of the sea above deck, the rough waters were stimulated by a whirlpool on the starboard side. After using his blood limit out of curiosity, Neji determined that they were passing through a column of water that had nearly seven whirlpools surrounding them within a square mile. Concerned that the captain had lost his mind, they decided to pay him a visit at the helm.

“Ah, you whippersnappers have no sense of adventure.” The skipper criticized, “Take heart, I use this route home all the time. I practically forged these waterways during my career!”

“And during that time have you ever sunk a ship before?” Neji queried.
“No, you smart-mouth. Why, I bet you wouldn’t believe me if I told you that it’s you Leaf Ninja that made me nostalgic for these parts.” The captain ventured, “This is the territory of your old comrades: the Land of Whirlpools.”

The name rang a bell from their Academy days, citing a textbook lesson about an allied village that had long since vanished.

“I’m eighty-nine now, but sixty years ago I would sail into the harbors here and have myself a very good time.” The old man laughed, “The Hidden Eddy Village was a center of the arts. You could catch a theater production or concert any day of the week. Oh, and the food… Oh! And the women…they were lovelier than red roses. My wife used to say this place had the most handsome men this side of the world has ever seen.”

Lee asked for a translation and Tenten set to work writing down the tale.

The skipper pointed out a window towards a landmass dotted with toppled buildings and ruins, “There it is now. When other ninja villages got scared of ’em…the combined forces of the Eddy village and Leaf…” He clucked his tongue, “Their enemies destroyed it, down to the last toy shop. It was one of the first horrific acts of war that I witnessed shinobi commit. Mind you, I’ve seen a lot.”

In silence the passengers observed the magnificence of a derelict society. It took the lesson from their childhood and twisted it with an amplified sense of loss.

“You three seem to be…the upstanding type of ninja that I admire.” The skipper commented, dusting off his hat, “I just have one favor to ask. Whatever you do, build things up and make them better. Don’t tear something down just because you’re in competition with others. That’s the mistake that ninja keep making time and time again.”
Chapter Soundtrack: “Blind” by Junggigo

My point is, no matter how it turns out, I will never have a reason to be disappointed. As long as I’m with you, I have what I want.

So I was wondering if maybe you could tell me how you see the future… If you let me stay by your side nothing would make me happier. I will fight for your dreams. I promise I’ll help you achieve them, Hinata. I have exactly what I need out of life right now, and I would never trade you for anything. I don’t know how significant it is coming from a guy who has known you since we were little kids, but…no man will ever love you more than I do. I’ve never stopped, not since I met you.

Hinata let out a long sigh of unencumbered relish. She was stretched out on her bed in the late night hours, reading a letter from Naruto beneath the light of a lamp. She set the scroll down and pressed it flat on the mattress, smoothing the parchment with her fingers, taking a moment to rest her face on a pillow and make small sounds of triumph.

Years ago, she was a timid girl: a mere classmate or, at best, a confidant of Uzumaki Naruto. She made no attempts to imagine that the young man would one day turn his eyes on her and see something more than that. Based on the correspondence that had arrived earlier in the day (which she had saved for an evening read,) Hinata was enthralled by the words that indicated Naruto truly understood her feelings and valued them…and he reciprocated eagerly.

‘He had so much to say…’ She recalled his mentioning of Jiraiya’s guardianship of him, and the confirmation that his parents were deceased. Naruto assumed he was not on track to attend the Chunin Exam, which she grudgingly accepted, and then he speculated about the future. While he had a more objective view about becoming a village leader someday, referencing Gaara’s experience, Naruto was surprisingly insistent on fatherhood. ‘Oh! He really gave it thought.’ He had even asked for her expectations of the future, which provided a subtle clue. Hinata, who could detect the subtext in his ramblings, breathed steadily while realizing that he was asking if she was interested in his companionship as a parent.

She folded the pillow around her head and bumbled happily. It certainly would not be an easy path to follow, but with some persistence, Hinata expected that Naruto could overcome Hyuga clan politics and become an eligible spouse. Or, with some creativity, she could manufacture a loophole and escape her clan-obligations. She decided it paid off more to be optimistic than it did to give up before trying.

Footsteps creaked on the wood floor outside her bedroom door. Hinata promptly switched the lamp off and rolled over, aware that her father made a few passes by his children’s rooms before retiring to sleep. She relocated the scroll to a bedside table and pulled her covers up, rejoicing in the dark.

‘I could. He could.’ Hinata thought, ‘We can have what we want if we try.’

She had an idea of what to tell him in a reply. She wanted those same things that he was consulting her about, and she was supportive of his goals to improve as a shinobi. Waiting for him from afar was not easy, but Hinata was certain it was worthwhile. On paper, Naruto was aflame with desires and ideas, and she could only imagine what he would be like in person when he returned.

‘Naruto-kun will be as outspoken and sociable as always, and he will work hard…’ She visualized him to be as tall and fit as the rest of her generation’s male friend-group, ‘He is wiser and more
organized. There are many things he is looking forward to, and I am sure that when he sees me...’ Her eyes fluttered shut.

Thoughts of him bending down for a kiss rushed to the forefront of her mind. Hinata imagined herself backed against a wall or surface, flustered and excited; noting the way he bent an arm behind her head, and his opposite hand cupping the side of her face gently. Behind her eyelids she could see him leaning down, never setting her parted lips free, her heart on the verge of failure...

A quiet commotion of noise came from outside. Hinata stole a brief glimpse of the grounds with her Byakugan, and spotted the bedraggled Team Gai escorting Neji home. Lee and Tenten dropped Neji off tiredly, waving farewell, and reminding him that they needed to see the Hokage first thing in the morning. Neji agreed quietly and went indoors.

Hinata rested her eyes and, after a long while of musing over the possibilities in Naruto’s letter, was lulled away from consciousness. Paradoxical sleep overtook her, a vision of Sakura seated beside her in what was roughly the Star Village surfaced. It was a friendly conversation that she would not be able to recall in the morning, but they laughed and reminisced in various locations: Upon Kutaiku’s feathered back, the damp canyons of the Land of Rain, and a bench beside the cobbled main street of Hoshigakure.

Later, she would distinctly remember the devastated expression on Sakura’s face. How the girl wondered if she was not an adequate match for the man she loved. Hinata’s determination overwhelmed the dream, Don’t think that way! They were in the Leaf Village again as her friend’s morale improved. You’ll be late, so hurry. Sakura informed her, directing her towards the northbound avenue of the village. The disjointed chronology and space of her dream brought her through several recognizable locations, and though she was lost, she continued briskly.

When she finally took a moment to reassess her destination, Naruto walked casually past her, taking her hand, and guided her along. It’s alright. I know you were going this way. Elated, she stepped lively beside him, crossing through the gardens of her residence, and afterwards arrived at a not-so-familiar place.

It was inside a home; a well-lit room with a stone countertop in front of a wide mirror. Naruto stood to her left, naked and lean, peering into the looking glass as if he was inspecting stubble on his chin. Her momentary surprise abated upon acknowledging, yes, she too was entirely nude, also evaluating herself in front of the mirror. She looked into it curiously, asking sidelong of her boyfriend; Is this... are we allowed to be here? He laughed lightly, We live here. Hinata nodded in understanding.

She turned back to the glass and, in a moment of terrified wonder, observed a man’s face staring back at her. White eyes were narrowed, a mouth pursed in slight annoyance, and from beneath the bangs of white hair atop his head, two curved horns protruded. With a cry of alarm, Hinata staggered sideways into Naruto’s arms. He had no idea what startled her, but quickly comforted her. She spoke quietly, Who was that?

It’s just you. Naruto reasoned while keeping his arms secured around her.

It didn’t look like me.

No? Naruto thought on it before asking, Were you looking at every part of yourself? Like we meant to?

I don’t know how to do that. Hinata admitted.

I do. He grinned at her ravenously, I’ll show ya.
Her heart was thundering again, magnetized to his kisses, and she shed any bit of bashful hesitance that remained. Her fingertips traced over the strong planes of his body, roving up and down his neck, fiddling with the chain of the necklace that hung there. His hands responded in kind, the pad of his thumb touched lightly over her bottom lip whenever his mouth moved away; his free hand explored the smooth curves of her front and waist. Her hands stopped in his hair as Naruto’s breath whispered past her ear, his arms hoisting beneath her bottom to relocate her to the countertop.

The reality of it, though fabricated in her young mind, was so intense that Hinata could perceive the pressure and taste of his mouth as they kissed. She knew hardly anything about making love, but she did know that she felt him inside of her. Trembling sounds and emotions of every color leapt out of her, free and adoring, and Hinata dreamt of her wide-eyed stare at the smiling young man as they finished. He asked thoughtfully, Did you see? She frowned as she tried to think. After that, Naruto led her along again through the invented abode. She could see the horned man in every reflective surface as they moved past.

Then it was morning.

Hinata sat up, having a near-complete recall of her dream, and felt the heat radiating from her cheeks, ‘We did that…’ Her hand covered her mouth in delighted shock. Ino had once said, ‘A young woman’s brain works in mysterious ways…oh, the amazing stuff that happens there!’

Fortuitously, today was one of the days off her team had scheduled. In the coming weeks, training would intensify for the impending Chunin Exam. Today, though, she got away with sleeping in a little.

She had booked important bonding time on this free-day. Hanabi had demanded it.

Slowly, Hinata sat up in bed and stretched her arms over her head. ‘A satisfying rest!’ Color crept onto her cheeks again when she thought about it. She began her routine by neatening her bed and then carefully storing Naruto’s letter in a cabinet drawer. Hinata took a minute to brush her hair out and then dress, bustling out of her room and towards a sitting room for breakfast. If she kept her sister waiting, Hanabi would grouse about it for the rest of the day.

The morning meal was spread out on a low table when she arrived. Hinata took a seat across from her little sister, “Good morning, Hanabi.”

A strand of hair on top of the girl’s head stood up in a cow-lick, “Morning.”

“Um…did you sleep well?”

“No.” Hanabi announced, “I’ve been shorted. I won’t sleep properly until I know the Academy sets things right.”

“What happened?” Hinata’s meter of concern crept up an increment.

“I have to wait six months.” Hanabi stabbed her chopsticks into a piece of fish, “The Academy says I am not allowed to take the Graduation Exam prior to that…” Her expression reflected fury, “Because my good-for-nothing classmates can’t keep up! What kind of an excuse is that? Huh!”

Her elder sister was confused, “I have heard that the Academy does make exceptions for gifted students, so why-?”

“Because, the only way to administer the exam to me would be if I had been moved up into the next-level class. I’m better than all of them anyway, but the dumb sensei of that group refused to accept me.” Her fists rattled the table, “Dad spoke with them and everything! Those teachers hate me!”
“No, they don’t…”

“Yes they do! I’m difficult, they say. I don’t work well with others.” Hanabi blew hair away from her face and then crammed more food in her mouth, “They will hold me back because they don’t know what to do with me.”

“Maybe Father could speak to them again?” Hinata began to pick at her food.

“Like that’ll change anything. They’re intimidated by Dad too, but the superintendent said that no changes are permitted unless Chunin Instructors consent.” She gave her sister a genuinely desperate look, “Onee-san, I want to be a Genin! I know I deserve it.”

“I agree.” Hinata nodded calmly, “But it seems the only thing you can do now is wait.”

“Ugh. I can’t believe...I’m behind that guy…” Hanabi grumbled, continuing to eat.

“Who do you mean?”

“Forget it.” The girl muttered.

Hinata polished off a small bowl of egg and rice, “You said that you wanted to spend the day with me on your break from school. Do you still want to?”

“Yeah.” She replied with a full mouth.

“Good.” Hinata smiled, “We haven’t had an opportunity like this in a while.”

Hanabi sighed in mild irritation, releasing the pent-up stress before asking, “So does that mean…you got it?”

Hinata knew of what her sister was referring, “I did! Tama-chan said we can borrow it.”

“Ah, I wish we were allowed to have one here on the grounds. Our elders forbid the stupidest things…”

“I know.” Hinata acknowledged solemnly

After breakfast Hanabi tidied herself up and dressed, and the sisters then set out into the village. Their first stop was outside of the bakery that Tama worked in, and Hinata poked her head into the store to greet her friend, “Good morning, Tama-chan!”

“Oh! Hinata!” Tama smiled widely while fastening an apron and headscarf, “You’re right on time.”

“I wanted to let you know before we borrowed your bicycle for the day.”

“Sure. Here, catch!” She reached into her pocket and then tossed a key on a beaded lanyard to her friend, “That’s for the lock. Why did you need it again, if you don’t mind my asking?”

“They are not allowed on Hyuga clan grounds and...my little sister enjoys them very much.” Hinata explained in a lowered voice, “She only has the chance to ride them...when she steals them.”

“Ooh. Well, today is a rental and I hope that she finds it to be just as much fun.” The older girl chuckled.

“It will be. Thank you!” She stepped out again and moved to the bike-rack at the side of the building. Hanabi was waiting there with her arms crossed, tapping her foot.
Not a moment after Hinata had undone the bike-lock, Hanabi reached for the handle bars and hopped on. She informed her sister, “I’m driving. You’re on the back, Onee-san.”

Without complaint Hinata stepped onto the bicycle pegs, held tight to her sister’s shoulders, and balanced as Hanabi took off. The only speed her sister seemed to ride at was fast, regardless of whether pedestrians were quick enough to get out of their way. In order to make the sharp left off of the main avenue, Hinata leaned to the side and assisted with the turn. From there, the course was straight down a dirt path and away from the urban area.

“Where do you normally go?” Hinata asked, “When you, um…have the chance to ride?”

“Huh, you mean when I steal some loser’s bike.” Her sister corrected, “The park on the east side of the village. No one bothers me there.”

The trip was short, considering the distance, as Hanabi stood on the pedals and thundered past the green countryside and forest. Her strength and momentum even propelled them up an incline with Hinata aboard, although chakra may have helped facilitate the climb.

At the top of a grassy hill they dismounted and walked the bicycle across a field, stopping beneath an old gingko tree. Hanabi pulled the kickstand out with her foot and then plopped down to the grass with a loud breath of relaxation. Hinata took a seat beside her, ‘It’s a beautiful day.’ The blue sky was abundant with cotton-tuft clouds that sailed by on a gentle breeze.

A peaceful quiet persisted between the pair, and Hinata at length asked, “Is there any time for Father to vouch for you again before the next Graduation Exam?”

“No. It’s two days from now. The instructors won’t budge.” Hanabi replied shortly, “I’m not a part of their class.”

“Two days.” Hinata repeated in disappointment.

“I know I’d pass.” The younger girl muttered, folding her arms behind her head, “But it looks like my rival is going to get a head start.”

Hinata perked up at the statement and glanced over at her sibling, “Your…rival is graduating?”

“He’ll probably pass the exam.”

Hinata smiled, “I didn’t know that you had a rival.”

“He talks big, like he’s some kind of star in his class…” Hanabi scoffed, “That never stopped me from kicking his butt.”

“Who is he?” Hinata was curious, holding her folded knees as she listened.

“He’s the Third Hokage’s grandson: Sarutobi Konohamaru.”

The elder sister tapped her lips in thought, “Hm. The Sarutobi clan…”

“You know what he said to me last week?” The girl seethed, “He said that the Hyuga clan doesn’t have shinobi fit or responsible enough to become Hokage, and that’s why it hasn’t happened. He said it will never happen.” She smirked at the memory, “Then I made his face bleed.”

“What a proper way to prove him wrong…”

“Well, what he said wasn’t true. I don’t have to prove him wrong.” She shrugged her shoulders on
the ground, “I just wanted to show everyone that he’s too damn slow to block.”

“I see.”

“Besides, Dad told me that he thinks that one day you can be Hokage.” Hanabi recalled, “You should do it.”

“It would put me in a…awkward position.” Hinata sighed, “And I know that it is not a simple task.”

“Yeah, but our clan has a lot of political connections and money. Getting the vote for candidacy isn’t something you would even have to think about.” Her sister sat up for the debate, “All you would have to do is become as strong as you can be, Onee-san.”

Hinata smiled again, “You are very encouraging.”

“I never used to think you would amount to anything as a shinobi. Even Dad was worried sick about it…” Hanabi admitted, “Pff! Back then, there were probably dogs with better judgment than us.”

“I did not have the most graceful beginning, I know.” Hinata acknowledged, “But I had to change. I had to help my team and my friends.” She shut her eyes and surmised, “No one would have been able to believe in me if I didn’t believe in myself to start.”

“You do now, and all of our clan knows better than to doubt you these days.” Her younger sister reminded, “So…do what Dad says and become the Hokage. Then I’ll watch that stupid grin melt off of Konohamaru’s face.”

“You say it as if it’s so straightforward; to just accomplish it.”

“It is.” Her sister pressed in annoyance.

“It isn’t. I would have competition, naturally. There are always competitors for the position.” Hinata reminded her sister, “And I don’t know if I would ever have the constitution for challenging Naruto-kun.”

“Is he still on about that?”

“He would be a more sensible choice, I think.” She tilted her head to picture it.

“Your boyfriend.” Hanabi said mockingly, “You would let him get in the way? I bet he’s not even as strong as you.”

“That has nothing to do with it.” Hinata corrected, “Naruto has always planned to be Hokage someday. I never have.”

“Do it anyway!” Hanabi grumbled.

Hinata patted her sister’s back before the girl fell to the grass again in protest, refusing contact.

“Don’t be upset with me. I want to achieve my own dreams. Maybe in the past…I would have wanted to do it for you and Father; to make everyone proud.” Hinata laid back as well, “But my decisions are the ones I prioritize now. I never understood the value of choice until our clan tried to make it impossible for me.”

“Well…I understand that.” Hanabi agreed, “I would want to do what I want to do, too. I guess.”

“I’m glad.” Her sister added, “And I will always try to help you achieve the things that are important
to you.”

“Hmm.” The younger girl made a sound of minuscule bother, then she shifted to lay her head on her sister’s knees, “You sound like Mom.”

“I don’t know if I can help that.”

“It’s alright. When I start to forget about her…you remind me of what she was like.” Hanabi replied soberly, her eyes skyward, “Dad appreciates it too.”

Hinata confessed quietly, “Even I worry that I will forget, sometimes.”

The sisters lounged on the secluded hill and spoke, free from scrutiny or interruptions from clansmen. Hanabi even expressed a mild curiosity about Naruto’s exploits in the Toad Valley, and wondered if his residency in the legendary dale was a sign of greatness. “He’s still way too loud.” She tacked on.

“Oh, hey!” A voice sounded over the fields, followed by a sweeping shadow. Hinata tried to diminish her sister’s surprise when her teammate swooped in for a landing nearby. Hanabi quickly sat up, on guard at the sight of a tremendous, black summoned owl.

Sato trotted over to them and grinned at Hinata, “Sunshine! How’s your day off going?”

“Very good! Hanabi and I are catching up,” She then wondered, “Are you going somewhere, Sato-kun?”

“Yeah, I have friends who live in Kaido. That town is a few miles south of here, and sometimes I like to fly out.” He rested his hands on his hips, “It’s been a while, so I thought I should use my time off to visit them. Didn’t think I’d spot you on the way…”

The gigantic owl behind them, Gyorai, stood tall like a tower, and ruffled his feathers in annoyance, “I was the one who spotted them, Sato-kun.”

“You’re right. Thanks buddy.”

Hinata gestured to the fixed-gear bike beside the tree, “Tama-chan let us borrow her bicycle. Did you see her today as well?”

“Not yet.” He winked an eye, “But I will tonight.”

“Ugh.” Hanabi turned away, losing interest in the newcomer.

Hinata momentarily wondered what her friend was implicating before he turned back to Gyorai, “Well, I won’t interrupt here any longer, ladies. Enjoy the day!”

“I will see you soon, Sato-kun.” Hinata waved before he took off again, the gust of a huge wing-beat swirled leaves off of the gingko tree.

The girls settled down again after the short visit. Conversation dwindled away to silence for a stretch of time, and Hinata was coaxed into a nap. She woke when Hanabi nudged her, “Come on, Onee-san. There are things I want to do in town.”

Hinata stretched sleep out of her limbs and followed her younger sister. Hanabi then pointed at the bike seat, “You drive.”

“Really?” Hinata knew how rare of an offer it was.
“Yeah,” Hanabi confirmed, “I want to stand on the back when we pick up speed down the hill.”

By noon, Sato had touched down in Kaido outside of the Toshisue household. He knocked on the door to determine whether Anyo and Sarincha were home, but received no answer. Based on previous experience, he deduced they were occupied by their day jobs. ‘So Sarincha-san will be at the clinic, then… ’ He did not want to disturb her during a shift.

He knew for a fact that Anyo’s place of work was a bit more accessible. Gyorai departed in a puff of smoke as Sato continued on his own, following the trimmed-garden side street to the main avenue.

He arrived at the municipal building and entered, glancing around at the quiet offices and darting clerks. ‘This place is looking way more organized now.’ Since the former Mayor Seung had been investigated, arrested, and later tried in the Leaf Village for his crimes; the city was under new, anti-corruption management.

And he found Anyo in the corner office, stewing over file folders on a desk. Sato rapped on the doorframe to announce his presence.

The white haired man quickly looked up and then pushed back his seat to stand. He was delighted to have a distraction.

“Whoa! Nice duds.” Sato grinned at the former Grass ninja, “So you’re officially running the show now, Anyo?”

He chuckled while adjusting a buttoned shirt sleeve, “I was voted and sworn in as the new city administrator. It helped that I had a man-of-the-people profile, though.” A black, buttoned vest was snug over the dress shirt; casual but qualified, “How are you, Sato?”

“Great! Ready for the Chunin Exam…but I’m taking a day off for today.” The young man dropped into an armchair in front of the desk, “I wanted to see you how you and the missus were doing.”

Anyo took a seat again and folded his arms, “Well enough. We haven’t seen as much of you as we’d like, but then we assumed you were preparing for the exam.” He added sternly, “If you don’t pass this year we will be pretty disappointed.”

“I wouldn’t want to do that to you guys.”

“Good.” Anyo shuffled around some of the stacks on the desk, “We already bought second-row tickets to watch the Final Rounds.”

“Eh! Are you serious?” Sato was shocked, “I didn’t know they were for sale!”

“Your Hokage’s advertisers and merchants are everywhere. I took advantage while I could, because I have the feeling her strategy will pay off handsomely.”

“It would…probably be the first time that’s happened for her.” Sato imagined.

“Before we get too comfortable here, allow me to finish up some work. I can leave the office and take the code book home with me for later research.” Anyo offered, “And I have no wife around for dinner tonight. You can join my table.”

Hours later, that same evening, Anyo concluded his office-related work and met Sato at his residence. He had a bag of take-out food with him. “Sarincha doesn’t eat this stuff.” He explained,
supposing a teenager might not be put off by it.

They settled at a dining room table and feasted, catching up on what had occurred while they had been apart. Anyo was alarmed to hear about Sato’s brush with death while facing an Akatsuki affiliate, while at the same time awestruck by his bravery. The young man followed up the harrowing tale with more wholesome stories about missions, friends and teammates.

“I even got a new neighbor who retired from the Root Foundation.” Sato added.

Anyo raised his eyebrows, “Retired? At what age do those wolves retire?”

“Well, technically he was expelled and then recruited into the Hokage’s ANBU Black Ops.” Sato corrected thoughtfully, “We helped him get some furniture for his place. He’s not very good at anything social or…normal. But I think he’s making the effort. He’s nice to Tama.”

“Ah I see. So he’s about your age?”

“Give or take.”

“And who is Tama?” Anyo inquired, nipping at a bit of pork held at the end of his chopsticks.

“Uh. Eh-hem! She’s my…” His words failed so Sato took a hasty slurp of tea.

“She’s your girlfriend.” Anyo assumed.

“Not exactly.”

“Another neighbor?”

“Ah, well, not that either…”

“Then spit it out.” The man ordered.

“She’s my future bride.” Sato had to say it quickly before the reality of it stuck him like daggers.

“My, my…don’t you move fast?” Anyo chuckled in entertainment.

“Hey look, my uncle and her uncle set us up in an arrangement, back from when we were babies. Okay? We didn’t get much of a say.” Sato explained with a huff, “Two ‘esteemed shinobi families of Leaf, uniting their friendship’ or Gai said something like that…”

The white haired man was perceptive, “Hm, so the Hatake family has a close bond with another family in Konoha? It’s no surprise they would be so picky about matchmaking.”

“Yeah, I guess.”

“Is your famous uncle married?” Anyo asked playfully.

“No. He’s got his bachelor-pad made up…” Sato pinched his fingers to signify it, “Just so.” He added more food to his plate and said, “A woman would mess everything up for Kakashi.”

“I used to think the same way.” Anyo nodded in whole-hearted agreement, “Part of me still does.”

“What’s that supposed to mean? Sarincha is awesome!”

He shut his eyes and smiled at a memory, “I didn’t always…realize that. But yes, it’s true.”
“So what was it like back then? When you were an active Grass ninja?” Sato leaned back to stretch, wondering about his friend’s youth, “Were you always the Kakashi-type?”

“I assure you, your uncle is far nobler than I ever was.” Anyo warned him, “We might have a few things in common, but I’m about a decade older than he is.” His expression darkened, “And the war back then…was raging fierce.”

“The Third Great Ninja war?”

He nodded gravely, “Yes. Those battles shook my homeland as Rock and Leaf were at each other’s throats. We Grass ninja…dearly hoped we could avoid confrontation as they marched on our borders.”

Sato’s curious expression wilted, and he was sorry that he had asked.

“I have no grudge against anyone, just so you know, Sato.” Anyo informed him, “Yes, Rock and Leaf did unspeakable things in order to gain the advantage, but what I learned during those times was that…I was my own worst enemy.” He finished eating and began to pack up boxes, “Are you sure you want to know what it was like for me?”

“If I said no now it’d be kinda rude.” Sato quipped.

“Then I’ll tell you.” He rumbled with quiet laughter before continuing, “I was the fourth boy born to my parents, and my brothers and I were all gifted with our Bloodline Talent: the Banryoku.” Anyo poured himself some more tea, “Kusagakure depended on clans and families like us for defense, as we were almost always under attack by the powerful ninja of the Five Great nations. Small skirmishes erupted in the Second War, which killed many of my clansmen, and then the Third War…that killed the rest of my family.”

“I was five years old when my father died in battle. Eight when my eldest brother perished, my mother fell ill and passed away shortly after that…” Anyo tilted his head to recall it, “By the time I was a Genin, I only had one surviving brother left. This situation left me…terribly cynical. I acted out and caused mischief at every opportunity. I wanted to feel alive when I could, because I believed I would be dead before long…”

“Jeez, that’s awful.” Sato muttered.

The man sipped his tea and continued, “That’s how it was. Many families were wiped out while trying to defend our territories from the invading Nations. I was fortunate to have such a supportive sensei and teammates at the time my last brother, Toma, died in battle. My team became my new family.” He nodded when he said, “And I refused to trust anyone else.”

“I feel that way about my team too, except…I have many more friends that I know I can count on.” The young man assessed.

“It’s good that you do. I pushed many people away. I hated how I felt; I wanted to kill my feelings. Knowing that, it would not come as a surprise to hear that I behaved shamefully when Sarincha spoke with me one day.” Anyo sighed at the memory, “She was training to become a Medic-Nin, adding extra studies on top of the missions she took. I never once noticed her until the day she stopped me and said that she understood what I was going through.” He laughed to himself, “My brain, at that age, could not reconcile with such a sentiment. I thought she was taunting me by saying something like that. Truly, who could understand the pain I was in? No shinobi had been through suffering like mine.”
“Yeah…you needed to think outside the box just a little there.”

“I didn’t. What was worse was that she chose that time to confess to me, admitting that she had always loved me and admired my heroism.” As an aside he clarified, “On those missions, it wasn’t heroism, but stupidity. Somehow I came out looking like an intentional strategist for salvaging missions with risks…but I was a complete idiot. If only I had known.”

“What did you tell her?” Sato was preemptively cringing.

“I told Sarincha…that it was embarrassing to look at her. Someone so generic would never interest me, and that surely she had hit her head or something. I knew that I was saying hurtful things with the intent to watch her kind and genuine aura crumble and die. Right there. That way, I could test to see if she really understood what I had gone through.” He added somberly, “I…laughed at her when she wept.”

Sato lifted an empty take-out box and hurled it at Anyo’s head, “You son of a bitch! I know Uchiha who are less shitty to women than you!”

“Don’t talk about my mother like that. And please, try to realize that I was a monster of a teenager. I was hateful and selfish in an effort to forget my sorrows.”

“Yeah, but still! That poor woman was going to be your wife someday!” Sato reiterated.

“It was never supposed to happen.” Anyo confessed quietly, “We became mortal enemies after that day. Sarincha hardly spoke or looked at me for many years. I cared only about Fumio-sensei, and my teammates, Mahoto and Isumi. They were my family, and to hell with everyone else.” He scratched his chin, “It was strange when Mahoto and Isumi fell in love, but I adjusted. I personally never felt a desire for love or attachment, and watching those two sufficed when I was curious.”

“Teammates.” Sato grumbled.

“Isumi was the most beautiful kunoichi in our village. Mahoto never stood a chance.” Anyo expounded, “And the two of them were such nerds. They were perfect for each other.”

“Huh.” Sato privately wondered what qualified as ‘nerd’ in Anyo’s opinion.

“The trouble with that war was…many groups took advantage of it; none more so than drug cartels. They sold to the most miserable, desperate people they could find.” He opened his arms for clarification, “Such as yours truly.”

“Sarincha mentioned that, I think.”

“Yes. This was a group that gained earlier experience from battles in Hidden Mist and sold near that region. They wizened up and began to hang around Kusagakure, covertly, selling to shinobi who were at the end of their ropes. I was a young man who had a taste for recreational anything: stunts, alcohol, sex, gambling, danger. It didn’t matter what it was as long as I didn’t have to think much.” He snorted in disgust, “I knew many of those dealers by name and refused to turn them in to authorities. What they gave me were the bumps I would reward myself with after successful missions.”

Sato leaned against the table, mouth open, fascinated by the debauchery, “I had no idea just how grubby you were…”

“I’ll spare you the gross details, but it was a very ugly time. Mahoto quickly found out I was a recreational user, but by the time Fumio-sensei was chasing away dealers and confiscating drugs
from my tool scrolls…I was a full-blown addict. There were days I laid uselessly and refused missions if I couldn’t get a fix. I knew I was letting them down, but I was a slave to it. Mahoto and Isumi helped me resist for about a year…but I began again in secret and hid it from all of them. They never knew.” Anyo shook his head, “I wanted them to have confidence in me, but I couldn’t abandon my coping mechanism."

He and Sato stared at each other in silence, sipping tea for nearly a minute.

“Hmm. When I think about it, functional addiction is not the easiest thing to manage when the drug of choice is an injectable.” Anyo reflected, pouring himself more tea, “I lied, denied and hid. The days I blacked out I made excuses for. By the time Mahoto and Isumi were expecting their baby, at a young age, I will say…they had begun to mistrust me. They couldn’t prove what I was doing, but they didn’t have to. I became a Jounin to avoid their accusations and take separate missions from my team.”

“This is some crazy shit.” Sato evaluated, “How are you alive?”

“ Barely.” Anyo said gravely, “My family is cursed. Everyone with the Banryoku dies in battle. I suppose I wasn’t helping my plight much with how I acted…but truthfully I didn’t care if I lived or died. I won battles for my village and handed my hard-earned money over to those scoundrels.”

The young man folded his arms on the table and rested his chin on them, absorbing the tale.

“Simultaneously, Sarincha was becoming the hero that I pretended to be. She and her father were the most renowned Medical Ninja in all of the land, save for Tsunade. They could heal mortal injuries and were just as fearless in battle. Sarincha had lost both of her teammates long before she became a Jounin…but many people in our village looked up to her like a big sister. She was never alone.” Anyo emptied his cup and slowly said, “All I ever wanted to be was alone, around that time. I liked that she had all of that attention. It made me invisible. I used to tell myself I was the better shinobi, that I could go unseen and assassinate targets. But she killed just as many opponents and saved comrades on almost every mission…and I didn’t want to consider myself a slacker.”

“Must be that denial problem.”

“It consumed me. I was so blind. Mahoto and Isumi were raising their son, Shigeyuki, as best they could without support from their relatives. They never let me near him. Mahoto told me finally to quit or he would never speak to me again…and I remember just leaving him there on the street. I had stopped caring about my best friend.” Anyo went on, “One day, I was added to a squadron with Isumi and some other surviving members of our generation. I was completely high at the time we were stationed at a construction site for a new bridge. Half of the group died when we were attacked.”

“And Isumi-?”

“I brought her body home. I was certain Mahoto would kill me and I was prepared to let him do it… but he didn’t do anything. He took her and buried her, and then got on with his life, cherishing every memory and photo he had of Isumi. He smothered Shigeyuki with love, as if the focal point of the universe migrated into that little boy.” Anyo balanced his chin on his hand, “And I finally stopped. I was a patient in Migawari’s clinic and was successfully rehabilitated. I knew that it was much too late…but at least Mahoto was willing to speak to me again.”

Sato’s lip quivered sadly as he held back his emotions.

“I was healthier and stronger, and I could visit Mahoto and his prince whenever I liked. I became a
reliable shinobi at long last.” Anyo recalled, “The leader of our village, Pitekuyo, took an interest in me. He trained me as his apprentice and perfected my sword techniques.”

“Everything turned around when you took that step!”

“Not everything.” He smirked, “I still had a mortal enemy.”

“Oh yeah…”

“Sarincha had become very successful and she assisted in crafting an alliance with Konohagakure, for a time. Her father was a very wealthy man to boot…although…” Anyo lowered his voice, “He’s an insatiable gambler. Anyway, they were the pillars of our village, and I had only just learned how to be a trustworthy person. I watched her and tried to be more like her.”

Sato smiled at the idea.

“Sarincha had become very successful and she assisted in crafting an alliance with Konohagakure, for a time. Her father was a very wealthy man to boot…although…” Anyo lowered his voice, “He’s an insatiable gambler. Anyway, they were the pillars of our village, and I had only just learned how to be a trustworthy person. I watched her and tried to be more like her.”

Sato smiled at the idea.

“It wasn’t easy. She still avoided me at all costs, but by then…I knew that I didn’t hate her. I didn’t even remotely dislike her. I understood that I had said untrue things and had been a fool to stand beside those words for years.” Anyo overturned an empty tea cup and slowly spun it on the table top, “But the same could not be said of Sarincha. I don’t know exactly how she felt, but she never had a reason to speak to me.”

“Well who would blame her?”

“Exactly. I was able to afford a decent home, since,” Anyo laughed darkly, “I was spending my money properly. I was assigned as a team captain for critical missions. I stayed close to my Master, my Sensei and Mahoto…and watched the tide of the war shift. Things calmed…and Sarincha was later engaged to a man who was…” He grinned, “Not as good-looking as me.”

“Phew, you sure are full of yourself.” Sato rolled his eyes.

“No. But she did leave the drapes open frequently. I guess she liked to look at the manicured gardens out front. I would return home from missions and see her knitting through the window…or doing
something else to unwind.” He added in amusement, “Sometimes yoga poses. She’s good at handstands and all of that.

Sato snickered.

“Naturally, when I tried talking to her, things fell flat. She was hostile. Taking missions with her was a nightmare, some days. And others…when truces failed or fighting flared up again…we worked better together.” He let out a soft breath, “What I learned after a time was that she had befriended Mahoto as well, and she was looking out for him and Shigeyuki whenever she could.”

“She sure is nice…”

Anyo smiled to himself, “She tried to hide her acts of kindness from me. Sarincha worried that it was a sign of weakness if I witnessed her generous or caring deeds. She never let her guard down around me. It was Mahoto who first told me how much she had done for his family. She became Shigeyuki’s god-parent, in the event anything ever happened to Mahoto. My friend explained to me that she was a ‘safer’ choice than I was. I didn’t object.” He refilled Sato’s tea cup as he said, “I did everything I could to be considerate around her, but she was always suspicious of my motives. Her break-up with that criminal didn’t boost her confidence much either.”

“That would’ve messed me up too, honestly. It’s a lot to go through.”

“At best, I had achieved an arm’s length tolerance from her. We cooperated rather well during an attempted sack of the village, beating back intruders. That was the event that motivated her father to look elsewhere, hoping to find a safer area to operate a hospital in. He founded the clinic here in Kaido, at that time. The stress of his late-in-life decision weighed on Sarincha, and it may have helped her speak to me more…” The man concluded, “But I am quite certain Pitekuyo-shishou’s carelessness resulted in our relationship.”

“Carelessness?”

“He smoked like a chimney. We villagers were always teasing him for leaving burning cigarettes on the ground, on lawns, in offices, in stores, in people’s hair. He burned down a dojo once…and he had to pay for its renovation. As talented as he is, our leader has his vices.” Anyo explained, “And one night while Pitekuyo smoked outside of our apartment complex, he flicked a cigarette butt aside before he went home. We deduced that it landed through the open window of Sarincha’s home, and it lit her room up quickly.” The man laughed, “I will never let Shishou live it down.”

“That is a really dumb thing to keep doing, if one claims to be a responsible leader!”

“We made him quit afterwards.” Anyo assured him, “Sarincha nearly didn’t wake from her sleep, but neighbors raised the alarm. She wasn’t happy to see me fetching her in the middle of the night…or watching her home burn like a bonfire…” His expression saddened, “I felt terrible for her. She had no possessions, clothes, or anything. She and her immediate neighbor lost it all in the fire. And because her father had relocated to the south…she had nowhere to stay. Mahoto put her up for a week, but her evening-work hours woke the toddler up from time to time.”

“Please tell me she got a break! What about your leader? Did he do anything about it?”

“He reimbursed them as best he could, and while we all suspected he was responsible for the accident…it was still an accident. Sarincha received insurance money and a hefty property deposit, not to mention Shishou’s apology-bribes…but real estate is not booming in Hidden Grass. There are not many places to live.” The man smirked proudly, “So I rented a room out to her. She had no other choice.”
Sato tapped his fist in his hand, concluding, “Ah-ha! That’s how you did it.”

“Sarincha didn’t like me, but she got to know me.”

“She didn’t want to leave the village?” The boy inquired, “You ought to have been enough to scare her off.”

“Please, we were rational adults at that point. Her duties and job were all located in Kusagakure. She was never the type to pick up and run.” Anyo noted, “And whenever I could, I tried to be the complete opposite of what I once was. I may have overcompensated a little, but I worried that I would be judged again. Defaulting to kindness made me far more easygoing, and while it lost me several arguments…I was better for it.”

“I’ll say. I never would have wanted to get to know the old you.”

“The war dragged on. While we suffered fewer casualties, parts of our village fell into disrepair. Many businesses closed, the Academy was outdated and underfunded…the beautiful promenade in the center of Hidden Grass was unkempt, and its gardens withered. It used to be Sarincha’s favorite place. Over time, the village had grown coarse and scarred…just as we had.” He added brightly, “Even if everything was drab and battered, it was still fun to live with Sarincha. I had been on my own for so long that sharing space was a novelty.”

“Tama?” Anyo guessed.

“Not quite yet, but she hangs around a lot. Her house can be scary.”

Anyo continued, “About a year passed before I could say that we were close friends. She wasn’t actively seeking out other accommodations, and she was relatively content. I tried to bring up how I had behaved in the past, but Sarincha dismissed it. It seemed to me that she wasn’t rejecting me, per se, but she detested her former self. She hardly ever reminisced about her youth around me.” The man was quiet for a moment, “We don’t always know right away…how profoundly we affect others.”

From his comfortable spot leaned against the table, Sato nodded gravely.

“I was a better cook than she was, but her meals always looked nicer. Her presentation was impeccable. Eventually, I gave up and stopped challenging her. We did more than just eat together, though. We spent time doing trivial things. Some days it was training and others it was knitting. She made me appreciate the fact that I wasn’t dead and buried.” He laughed lightly to himself, “I never knew that there were so many things I was good at.”

Sato smiled reflexively, keeping his eyes shut as he listened.

“We were terrified of each other.” Anyo concluded.

“Huh?” Sato opened an eye.

“Life together became too enjoyable. It wouldn’t take much to ruin it, and we both comprehended fully how unfortunate our past had been. Neither one of us said a thing for nearly another full year; frightened to admit how deeply we cared about each other.” The man fixed an intense stare on the boy, “It’s what you might call a great waste of time. I think there were instances in which we tried to be honest, but we never took anything too far. All that hesitation…and ultimately, Sarincha’s father wanted to retire. The only fitting replacement for him, of course, was his daughter.”
Sato shut his eyes again, “You had to do something.”

Anyo sighed, “I returned home from a mission and politely asked her to reject the offer. Though… she had already accepted it days before.”

“Jeez!”

“She was prepared to leave, but I could tell that she was upset. She didn’t have the emotional fortitude, at that juncture, to disclose her feelings for a second time. Sarincha moped all around the village as if to say goodbye…and our friends noticed. They asked me what I thought about her decision, and I couldn’t properly answer. I didn’t know if it was right to be happy for her or to be a raging maniac.” He rubbed his chin in thought, “I spotted her sitting on a bench by herself on the promenade, and I remember…all those dead things around her. The once-pristine garden of Kusagakure; sad and departed like her childhood.”

“Hm.” Anyo chuckled softly, “I thought it’d be nice to rejuvenate it. For me, it doesn’t take much chakra to grow a lawn.”

“It’s a wonder you’re not a landscaper.”

“I know.” Anyo agreed, “But I just…did it on a whim while I kept out of sight. I didn’t stop at that block, of course, I filled up the whole esplanade with zinnia and plum trees and whatever that garbage is that makes me sneeze…” He smiled happily, “All Sarincha saw…was the world come to life for no reason. She didn’t say it, but I think it made her hopeful again.”

“What a guy…”

“I disposed with the mystery after that. I had a seat on that bench with her…and we talked.” A toothy grin spread on his face, “And that’s how I ended up here, married to a very smart, compassionate, but battle-hardened woman who, in fact…knows exactly what I’ve been through.”

For a moment, Sato covered his face with his hands, combatting the desire to cry and laugh at the same time. It had felt as though he had lived another life for a short while.

Anyo stood from the table to begin cleaning up. “Come on now, Sato. My story wasn’t that special.” He bapped the boy on the head with a dish rag, “I’m sure yours will be much better.”

The following day, it was particularly muggy and hot in the Toad Valley. Naruto kept quiet composure beside the Toad Oil pool, while Jiraiya supervised nearby from his seat on a stump.

A sweltering, misty downpour began to fall mid-way through the morning. Aggravated, Jiraiya stashed away the manuscript he had been editing, trying to keep it dry under his jacket. At the same time, he kept a wary eye on Naruto, knowing that even a few moments of distraction could turn his pupil into amphibious statue. ‘Nah. He’s still lookin’ good.’ The man thought to himself, his face sullen, ‘But now I’ve got to sit here in this hellish weather!’

Naruto did not react at all to the precipitation or temperature. Jiraiya scuttled under a huge banana leaf in the hope it would shield him from the rain, ‘Naruto must be getting close. I haven’t seen him transform in a while…’ It was steady progress that shamed the efforts he had made in his youth, ‘And I thought I was working hard!’

After a time, Naruto’s hands had begun to look a little too webbed. Jiraiya crossed over and gave his pupil a light shake, “Sorry, kid. You need to snap out of it.”
“Hmph.” The young man immediately broke his concentration and assumed his normal appearance, “I was doing pretty well.”

“Yep, you were.” Jiraiya put his hands on his hips, marveling at the torrential shower, “This weather blows!”

“Yeah, and I think it’s washing the toad oil off of me…” Naruto surmised, “Maybe I should pick this back up when it calms down?”

“But a bad idea. Of course, I was totally fine with sitting out here in the rain for you.”

“Of course you were.” Naruto agreed with a hint of mischievousness.

They retreated from the stone steps and followed the muddy trail back to the toad settlement. Once at Ma and Pa’s house, Shima asked them to wait in the genkan before she returned with two fluffy towels, and she tossed them onto her guests’ heads, “Dry off! Wet feet will ruin my floors.”

In unison: “Yes, Ma.”

When sufficiently dried, the two parted for their rooms to change into dry clothes. Jiraiya stepped out and settled at the table, dabbing at his slightly soggy manuscript, “Please…if any gods can hear me…save my precious work!” He muttered.

“Jiraiya-boy, there are more important things to worry about than your dirty books.” Shima admonished him from the doorway, “Are you and Naruto-boy staying in for today?”

“We are, Ma. At least until the storm calms down.” Jiraiya countered, “And you know it took me over a year to compile this…”

Naruto ventured out and joined his master at the table, reaching for a plate of bugs that was set out, “Did something happen to your pervy-story?”

“It’s a bit drenched, is all. Still readable.” Jiraiya assessed his student’s outfit, which for some reason included a black fishnet shirt, “Normally you dress more modestly, kid. Where’d you get that thing?”

“It’s an undershirt I’ve always had. It’s hot today.” Naruto protested, “What’s the big deal?”

The old man shrugged, “I don’t care. Some girls might, though.”

“Good grief. You’re a horndog.”

“Heh! I know. But hey, your princess will like that one!”

“Shut it, you Perv!”

“She will.” Jiraiya defended, setting aside his in-progress book.

Naruto grumbled in annoyance while enjoying a snack. His mentor added thoughtfully, “You should know…you’re right on track for mastering Senjutsu. It won’t take you very long to finish at this rate, Naruto.”

“You think so?” A glimmer of excitement crossed his face, “I wondered if… I was imagining that I was picking it up.”

“No, don’t sell yourself short. You’re moving fast.” Jiraiya folded his arms and nodded.
“Maybe I can finish by the end of this year…”

“Sure, if you felt like not eating or sleeping and just meditated non-stop. Though, that could turn you into a toad statue in no time. That’s why Pa and I supervise you.” Jiraiya replied smugly, “Don’t go too fast, kid.”

Naruto agreed, “I won’t. Trust me; I’ve gotten a lot better!”

Shima returned with a pot of broth and bowls and set them down on the table, “You two young men must excuse me. I’m running late for a Toad Assembly, and I’m sure Pa is already there.”

“Thanks, Ma. Watch out, it’s pouring out there.” Jiraiya warned her.

The old toad pulled on her poncho before hustling out of the house.

Naruto mused while spooning soup into his bowl, “It’s kind of funny that she considers you to be young too.”

“It makes sense, at least from my perspective. They can’t differentiate between youthful people anymore. Ma and Pa aren’t exactly spring chickens.”

“Neither are you.”

“True, but they’re pushing one-hundred-years-old easily, and I haven’t had the bad manners to ask.” Jiraiya clarified, “And the Great Toad Sage…he takes elderly to a whole new level.”

“Speaking of which, when do I get to meet him?”

The man said simply, “When the time is right.”

Naruto may have once contested the point, being the active, curious type that he was; but he let the subject drop and ate in silence. Jiraiya would most certainly know when it would be time to refer Naruto to a super-ancient, prophesizing toad.

“There’s a lot I still need to tell you, Naruto, but I get the feeling we have more than enough time here in the valley for me to address it.” Jiraiya supposed and added, “I figured I should tell you what the plan is for when you do finish Sage Training.”

“You thought of that already?”

“Yeah. I care a little bit about the future.” The man conceded with a small smile, “When your time here is done, I’ll bring you back to Konoha, and I’d appreciate it if you stayed there and laid low. The Akatsuki will be on the lookout for you, and Gaara too…” Jiraiya went on, “Which brings me to my next goal. Before I consult with Obito about how we plan to counter the organization, I want to spend some time with Gaara and Haku. Separately, if need be.”

Naruto raised his eyebrows, pleased, “Huh! It seems only right.”

“Well, sure! We’ve been apart for a while, and the fact is I’m still their sensei. I have techniques and such to pass on to them. You got the lion’s share of my knowledge, and for good reason…but they deserve my time too even if I can’t give it to them right this very moment.” Jiraiya concluded, “A few of my jutsu…can probably be mastered only by Haku. And Gaara, heh, I have no doubt he’ll pick up most of what I show him.”

Slurping soup, Naruto paused to agree, “Good! It’s like you’ve been taking responsibility-pills or
something. When we first started out I was worried that you genuinely didn’t want to teach!”

“Nah, I do. I have my share of baggage and it got in the way. It won’t anymore.”

“Hey, even if it does, you’ve gotten your act together.” Naruto assured him, “And I’m glad that you told me as much as you did.”

“As am I. Actually, I should probably tell you more about Minato’s life today, considering that we’re waiting out a typhoon.” Jiraiya observed, “After lunch.”

The front door of the house slid aside and Kosuke entered. He politely blotted himself with a towel hung on the coat rack, and then hopped over tatami mats towards Naruto.

“Hey boss! I brought something for you!” The red toad reported. He presented Naruto with a scroll he had been keeping in a messenger bag, “Didn’t want it to get wet…it’s raining in the Leaf Village too…”

An ecstatic smile dawned on Naruto’s face, but he restrained it after catching Jiraiya’s knowing smirk. After thanking Kosuke, Naruto opened the scroll and set to reading it while he occasionally sipped at his meal.

There is so much I want to tell you, Naruto,

Your last letter made me very happy. Many things are happening, and I must confess that I am most surprised that Gama-sennin has been dishonest with you for so long. Since we were small children, I could tell that Jiraiya-sama loved you…I wish he’d had the courage to tell you the truth sooner. As your god-father, there is so much more he could have done. You deserved to be looked after. Also, I know that we have spoken before about you never knowing your parents. Will Gama-sennin be able to tell you more about them or what happened to them? Or at least give you their names? If he seems to withhold information, I would not mind doing research for you here if that’s what you want.

He sighed quietly to himself and thought, ‘Hinata, you’re the best…”

You also mentioned how you felt about becoming a parent. It sounds to me that your children will be very lucky to have someone who will love them so much. I know that you will be a wonderful father, Naruto. And yes, to answer your question, I have thought about the same thing. It is not something I contemplate very often, but…when I do feel hopeful about the future, on the days my clan isn’t badgering me…I imagine little ones of my own. It’d be so exciting to teach them, play with them, watch them grow into shinobi, and be there with them on a happy journey. I could not ask for much more than that; except for maybe one thing.

‘She said it! So she did think about it too. Then I guess I feel less crazy now.’ Naruto noted.

I really am afraid to admit this. It seems a bit less difficult to put it on paper, but the truth is…I do not see myself having children with anyone other than you. I simply could not do it. I know that you didn’t say so specifically, but I hope that’s how you feel about me as well.

In the same moment Naruto read the revelation, his body jolted as if to stand up, shoving the low-table roughly. It tipped over a partially emptied bowl of soup, and Jiraiya barely had time to move his beleaguered manuscript away from the liquid trail, clamoring, “Hey! What’s your problem? This is some of my best work here, kid!” He mopped it up hurriedly with a decorative napkin.

“Sorry,” Naruto exhaled, upright and frantic, “I was only…” He sat down again and distracted himself with reading.
Jiraiya puffed in irritation, “What? Was that some good news?”

“It’s good news.” He confirmed, short of breath.

“Heh.” His master snickered.

“I’m embarrassed. I’ve never told anyone before, but I dream about doing it. I want to be touched. I only ever think of you. I want all of those things with you.

Naruto’s eyes narrowed into a foxlike expression of cogitation. A silence like no other gripped him, and maybe his pattering heartbeat could be heard by the entire world. He wasn’t sure. Naruto fell back to the floor with the scroll clenched in his hands; eyes squinted, mouth pursed, and withdrawn from reality. Kosuke and Jiraiya regarded him worriedly.

Jiraiya snapped his fingers above his student’s face, “Whoa. Naruto, is this some kind of medical condition? Give me a sign here! Are you dying?”

“No.” He managed, “I’m…fine.”

“Really?” The man quirked an eyebrow at him, “People who are ‘fine’ don’t usually look like that.”

Naruto opened his eyes fully and got a hold of himself, “I know. It’s okay, Ero-sensei. I…” He deliberated for a moment before saying, “I never thought I’d feel much happier than I did, but now I know that it’s possible.”

“Something your princess said?” Jiraiya inferred keenly.

“Yeah.”

I hope you don’t mind. Oh, and please don’t worry about the Chunin Exam, Naruto. It was officially scheduled for the end of June. I promise that I will do my best, and I am feeling far more confident about passing this year. What you said is true, Tsunade-sama will definitely know if you are worthy. There is no harm in being patient when it comes to promotion, considering the difficult training you have undertaken. That’s far more important than becoming a Chunin. I don’t know if the world really is my oyster, as you said, Naruto. It feels like it is when you imagine it, though. I am so grateful that we can still communicate easily while you are away, and I never doubt that I am loved. Everything you have told me gives me strength, and sometimes it even keeps me awake at night. In a good way.

I love you too, and I hope that you know it, Naruto. We have so much to do when you finally come home! I don’t think I’ll ever be bored again after that! Please let me know if there is anything I can do for you.

Love,

Hinata

Naruto let out a long breath he had not realized he held. He set the scroll down and slapped at his cheeks, affirming that he was conscious. Her words had been bold and honest. It was so unlike how Hinata had been in the past, only a few years earlier, hardly ever able to express her opinions and feelings; not to mention the provocative ones.

Kosuke had located the plate of insects and helped himself from across the table. Jiraiya rested his chin on his hand as he observed Naruto, “I can kind of tell…what she said to you.”
“You’d like to think that, huh?”

“Seriously. She’s a young woman, and they aren’t all that much different from young men, when it gets down to it.” Jiraiya grinned, “I’m the authority on the subject, after all.”

“I’m not gonna deny you are the authority on it, but that’s not what she told me.”

“Well sheesh, it’s not like she was talking dirty to you. If she was, you’d probably be wearing this boiling pot of soup on your head.” The old man estimated, “It was just a tickle. Ha! She wants to keep you interested.”

“Knock it off, Ero-sensei, I swear-!” Naruto was bristling.

“Easy does it. It’s not like I’m going to read it, I just want some validation that I’m right.” Jiraiya teased, “Would it kill you to do that?”

“Okay. You’re right.” Naruto conceded, “Now shut your perverted mouth, will ya?”

The man rumbled with laughter after that, and Naruto made an effort to ignore him while reaching for more broth. He wanted to change the subject.

“Hinata also kind of confirmed that I’ll miss the Chunin Exam. It’s going to start in a couple of months.” Naruto announced, “I know that I’m not supposed to be upset, but it’s…getting to me.” He added quietly, “I’m being left behind.”

Jiraiya regarded him incredulously for a moment, “So…that optimistic talk of yours was a front?” He then ventured, “No one on your team will have the privilege to participate; you do realize that? Gaara is not eligible because he’s Kazekage…” Naruto rolled his eyes at the excuse, “And Haku’s in east-jabib training with an assassin. It’s not like this should surprise you.”

“Right. I’m not surprised. I’m just bummed, okay?”

“If it’s really eating you up inside,” Jiraiya began, “I’d like to remind you that you have options. If you bitch about it a little, there’s a chance you can get your way.”

“Sorry, but Baa-chan isn’t like that. You’ve seen what she does when people nag her.”

“I’m not talking about Tsunade.” The sage corrected him, “If a promotion is something that you can’t live without for another year-ish, which I assure you isn’t that long…remember that one of your best friends is a Kage. Naruto, if you really want to compete in a selection exam, what’s stopping you from asking Gaara to arrange one on a date that’s convenient for you?”

His eyes widened after hearing the idea, “I guess…nothing. I didn’t think of-!”

“Bear in mind, Gaara has got his limitations as well. I’m just saying that before you rule out the possibility, at least ask him,” Jiraiya wisely advised, “He likes you a lot. He’ll probably want to help you in that respect, if he can.”

“Heh! I can’t believe I didn’t think of that!” Naruto laughed.

“It was too obvious. Sometimes someone just needs to spell it out for you.”

Kosuke had finished his meal before hopping over to a window. Peering outside, he could see that the weather was still severe, “Do you mind if I stay here for a while with you guys?”

Jiraiya assured him that he was welcome to stay. The small toad curled up on a cushion to relax.
“So…if you’re done eating and you’ve got time to talk, you said you’d tell me more about Minato.”
Naruto segued, “How about it?”

“Ah, well…” Jiraiya rubbed his neck, glancing around, “I guess there’s really nothing else to
occupy me. Hmm…” He scrunched up his face to think, “I’m not sure where I left off with you, with
regards to Minato.”

“I remember you talking about how it annoyed you when he asked questions and read about things.”
Naruto provided the baseline for him, “Which was pretty much all the time. He was too smart for
you. And he saved Kushina!”

For some reason, Jiraiya began chuckling wildly to himself.

His student was peeved, “Was something about that even remotely funny?”

“You made it sound like it was your favorite serialization or something.” Jiraiya rubbed at his
watering eyes, “Heh! I’ll explain some other time why that cracked me up.”

“Good, then get to it old man.”

“Ha…let’s see. If I look way back to when I was initially inspecting the profiles of Academy
students…an all-male team was arranged. Minato: a quiet bookworm with marks way above
average, Gensu: the lucky underachiever; and Namba: the middle-ground, somewhat popular boy.
There was a shortage of kunoichi that year. At the time, the Sandaime wasn’t forcing me to choose
from the prearranged teams right away. He said I could observe them first.” Jiraiya recounted, “So
that’s what I did. I scoped out the Academy and watched from afar. They were well-behaved,
intelligent, friendly…In the end, the reason why I chose them was because they didn’t outwardly
seem like assholes.” He nodded thoughtfully, “Not like some of the other kids…”

“Not a bad way to go about it, probably.”

“I thought so. Of course, once you get to know people…their true colors shine through.” Jiraiya
sighed, “Gensu wasn’t very motivated to learn anything unless it a new technique. His aptitude for
whining and leisure blew me away. And heaven help me…Minato wanted to know everything. If I
started talking about one subject, sometimes he’d run away with it. It took everything I had to satisfy
that kid and shut him up. And, er…I suppose…Namba behaved himself. Kinda like Haku did, but
not as good looking.”

“Heh!” Naruto was amused.

“They were all pretty strong, but…I had a feeling about Minato. It was the way he asked questions
about the village, about our history, and the war…he always initiated those talks. He wanted to
understand and fix things.” Jiraiya smiled and folded his arms, “And he liked being around me even
though he couldn’t relate to my perverted ways. Gensu and Namba came and went, but Minato hung
around. Not much different from how you and I get along, Naruto.”

“I could kind of tell he liked you.”

“It was mutual. He ended up spending some time here on Mount Myoboku and brushed up on
summoning, after I taught him. And I need you to know something, kid.” Jiraiya gave him a serious
look, “I introduced Minato to Senjutsu, and while he certainly was bright, it didn’t come easily to
him. He worked for over fifteen years to figure it out…”

Naruto was shocked, “Did he really-!”
“Shush,” Jiraiya stopped him, “There are some aspects where, comparatively, you have him totally pegged. You pick certain things up quick, Naruto.” He amended, “But Minato was more learned, observant, and worldly; an absolute innovator when he noodled on things. Your strengths are different.”

Speechless, Naruto sat quietly and pondered his mentor’s admission.

“So, my knuckleheads became Chunin. It felt like I had only blinked and they grew up. Of course, those teenage years were challenging, what with them assuming responsibilities, finding their identities, the harsh battles, the women they loved, disappointments, and managing their finances… Minato was the only one who was not consistently broke, pretty much.” Jiraiya went on, “One fine weekend while I was out of the village, on a bout of phenomenal peeping, might I add…that was when Kushina had been kidnapped by Cloud shinobi. I only got the story after I returned home.”

Naruto was beaming at the subject.

“The Third Hokage was pleased with Minato, and simultaneously furious with our faulty border patrols. It was a misstep on their part. Regardless, I was proud too. Minato was a bit shy about explaining his process and the rescue to me, at first, but I got the truth out him. I just steered that kid in front of a ramen bar and fed him. Got a lo-ooong story. Later, when I felt he didn’t share certain details, I bought him a beer down the street.”

“What’s the matter with you? He was underage!”

“Isn’t everyone when they have their first beer?” Jiraiya snarked, “Anyway, he spilled his guts after that, going on about how he always wanted to be around Kushina, and that he was terrified when he realized she was gone. He had to follow a trail of her red hair through the wilderness to track that squadron. If she hadn’t been pulling it out in the hope that someone would spot it, Minato imagined she’d be long gone.” Jiraiya continued, “He said it felt great to beat the hell out of her abductors, but Kushina was exhausted and in bad shape when he reached her. She hardly recognized him. I swear; I watched that boy nearly weep just thinking about it.”

“What’s wrong with worrying about someone you care for, huh?”

“He admitted that he got a kiss afterwards.” Jiraiya recalled, ignoring Naruto’s delighted gasp, “And then I said: Well that’s all well and good, but she didn’t flash you for your trouble? Ha!” The man paused after Naruto lashed out with a kick, knocking him down to the mats, “Relax, kid! You’re gonna shatter me.”

“What do you have to ruin those moments, Ero-sensei?”

“It’s what I do. Come on.”

“Erg.”

“So where was I? Oh yeah. Things snowballed after that. Kushina’s opinion about Minato did a one-eighty, and the two became inseparable. I caught them sucking face a few times and I used to give them hell about it.” Jiraiya laughed to himself, “They were good for each other. It was the emotional support system they needed, and the both of them grew into outstanding shinobi while working together. Once they were adults, I think they finally got my sense of humor.”

Naruto yielded, “That’s hard to believe.”

“Don’t I know it.”
“So…you told me back at the Maple Village that…he and…well they…like, all the time?”

“Pretty much whenever they didn’t take a mission. They were doing it.”

Naruto shut his eyes and muttered; wondering if that could be his bright future, eventually.

“Now, now. They still had responsibilities. Minato became a Jounin Sensei, eventually, and Kushina was an administrator of the Sealing Corps. Not to mention the two of them played critical roles in beating back advances from Iwagakure…” Jiraiya elaborated, “They were heroes. Ah, I sure was proud, by then. Gensu and Namba were part of the common forces and did their own thing. Gensu perished on a mission, though he saved several comrades doing so. Huh, and I think Namba got hitched a while back…”

“Was Minato a decent sensei?”

“Better than I was.” Jiraiya crinkled his eyes in amusement, “His students adored him, and he loved them too. Now, if you haven’t already worked it out, the three youngsters he taught were Kakashi, Obito, and Rin. You’ve met two of the three.”

Naruto held his breath for a moment, frowning, “That team…is kind of a mess right now.”

“It could always be worse.” Jiraiya warned him before adding, “Kushina liked them too. She enjoyed doting on those kids. They were thrilled when Minato was sworn in as Hokage.”

The boy grinned, “Then?”

“Then what?” Jiraiya prompted.

“Minato and Kushina, what happened?”

“Well, they got married, obviously.

“Knew it!”

“Kid, it wasn’t like you had to divine the answer.” Jiraiya snorted, “Their was not a fleeting romance.”

“Then they…well…what happened was…” Naruto scratched his chin and thought aloud, “The Fourth Hokage…died…” His words faltered as he understood the vague parameters, “Fighting the Nine-Tailed Fox.”

“Yes.” Jiraiya nodded somberly, “He did. They both died.”

Naruto’s eyes dropped to the floor, unseeing with devastation. He clutched at his stomach, aware of the seal there that was restraining the Kyuubi. Surely he hated the Fox for trying to harm Jiraiya, but the beast had claimed other precious lives as well. The pain was intense. To overcome so much adversity only to be cut down…

“Why?” Naruto demanded, his eyes glossy, “Why did that happen to them? Kushina was a Sealing Master, you said.”

“I did say that.” Jiraiya replied almost inaudibly.

Naruto grew louder, “Was it an attack? Was it an accident? Why didn’t you stop it?”

“I wasn’t there.” He confessed faintly.
“What happened to her?” Naruto repeated, “Ero-sensei, how did the Fox get loose? From Kushina? Will it happen to me?”

Jiraiya fell silent, overwhelmed.

Impatient, Naruto slammed his fist on the table, clattering its settings. Kosuke awoke in bewilderment.

“You’re not telling me.” Naruto’s temper flared, “You can’t sweep this one under the rug! I need to know this. I need to know that I’m not going home just so I can fuck up everyone’s life by setting the Nine-Tails loose! That I’m not gonna end up dead!”

When his mentor’s lassitude persisted Naruto reached out and seized the man by his collar, “Hey. Why aren’t you saying anything? Huh? Was it your fault?”

“No.” Jiraiya assured him softly.

He gave his master a rough shake, “But it happened anyway! Goddammit!” Naruto violently hurled him aside, outraged, “That’s it then? You know the reason, but you won’t tell me? You’re afraid that I can’t handle the reality of it?” His chest puffed, “Or that you know that one day you’ll be burying me too?”

Jiraiya heaved himself up and raised a hand, “Stop.”

Naruto sat back again, boiling with anger. It took him a long moment to acknowledge the tears streaming down Jiraiya’s face. It extinguished most of the rage that made him act out.

Alarmed by his previous reaction, Naruto carefully touched the man’s shoulder, “I’m sorry… Sensei.”

Jiraiya shook his head, squeezing his eyes shut.

“I’m sorry. Did I hurt you?”

“Nah, kid.” Jiraiya choked out, “Don’t…worry.”

Naruto’s eyebrows sloped upward, devastated, “How can I not? How can I not worry about any of this? Or about you?”

Jiraiya cleared his throat, trying to settle down. After a moment he replied, “Naruto…I’ll explain. It won’t be what you want to hear. And I couldn’t even try to tell you now when I…keep blubbering like the joke I am.”

“Don’t say that! You’re not.”

His exhaling breath trembled with grief, “It’s awful. Just to think about it…” Jiraiya rubbed at his nose, “Give me a day. Let me get over hating myself for a little bit before I tell you. It’s going to make sense, for the most part, but…” His disconsolate eyes unsettled the boy, “It’ll hurt.”

“It already does.” Naruto conceded.

Jiraiya nodded in understanding, “I know.”

Without another word, Naruto snatched up Hinata’s correspondence and retreated to his room. Jiraiya turned his attention to the messy table, intending to clean it up before proofreading his book some more.
In the darkened bedroom, Naruto laid flat on the floor, his limbs spread wide as if they were antennae for the signals of the universe. His stared listlessly at the ceiling. The sound of heavy rain helped him breath more easily. He could not tell how much time passed before the dreadful thought came to him. The horrible thought.

Please no.

‘It was...probably them.’ Naruto admitted to himself, ‘I’m not a jackass.’

Certainly, his parents hadn’t disappeared. They hadn’t died arbitrarily in battle. The Fox had killed them. It explained why his infant-baby presence and subsequent sealing was necessary at the time.

Tingling in Naruto’s fingertips made him clench and flex his hands, ‘She was an Uzumaki just like me…and...I kind of look like that guy.’ He figured, recalling the formal portraits of the Fourth Hokage in the Academy and the Administrative Building.

While he lacked the details and an explanation of why the Nine Tailed Fox had been released, Naruto could safely assume that Minato and Kushina had been his parents. If Jiraiya was appointed as his god-father, no one else would be motivated to choose the Toad Sage other than his beloved, young friends. The infinitesimal satisfaction Naruto experienced as he reflected on this truth was overshadowed by anguish.

‘Why couldn’t I have just...met you? I wanted so badly for someone to care that I existed...and you were both the kind of people who would’ve...’ A warm tear slid down his cheek, ‘Totally got me. Loved me. Been there, every day.’

He sat up when his chest began to feel tight. ‘This stupid shirt and this stupid, stifling heat!’ Naruto stood and exited through the door of his room, aimlessly entering the rain. He walked across the deserted lawn, unfazed by the weather, and he continued for a long while before stopping at a far-off toad statue. Sheltering palm leaves had overgrown the effigy, providing some cover.

Naruto took a seat beneath the shelter and gazed at the gray rainclouds that had funneled into the valley. Water slipped from his bangs and onto his face, and he sat with his arms draped over his bent knees. ‘Ero-sensei will tell me when he can form those words without crying, but...’ It was mildly cathartic when he took a deep breath, ‘I’ve never felt...less like myself before.’ Oddly enough, his parents had been some very important people, if indeed that’s who they were.

‘Maybe this is research I shouldn’t put Hinata up to. I bet...she’d be pretty surprised. And I ought to get some confirmation first...’ Naruto wondered to himself, ‘Here I was looking forward to my future, being optimistic and all of that...but what if...? No matter how good I have it...what if it’s over in a second? Just like them.’

At the same time, many, many miles away, Gaara was having a productive day.

He had concluded most of the documentation and paperwork in his office before 10:00 in the morning, and so he left a Shadow Clone behind to oversee things while he trained with Matsuri.

Gaara ventured to the outskirts of the village, west of the sunken Buddha statue, and located his student practicing soft-weapon forms by herself. It was about the third time in 24 hours he thought to himself that the girl was very different now. Her metamorphosis had only taken two months, approximately, but the results were dramatic.

Since she had returned with Kankuro from the Tide Village, Matsuri had made no mention of her
experiences or friends there. She requested more intense training and guidance. Gaara could not fault her ambition.

They agreed to begin with her worst techniques, chiefly Taijutsu. For a week, Matsuri devoted herself to the drills that Gaara had once practiced in his early days of being a shinobi. Building muscle memory was critical, and Matsuri kept up for several consecutive hours without complaint before she began to wobble on her feet. Because she was not so inclined to take the breaks Gaara suggested, he mandated days off for her to recover. Stubbornly, Matsuri would make time for strength-training and increasing her speed on those days.

Her commitment to improve was tested after a few weeks when Gaara started free-spars with her. While he went easy on his student, Gaara was never the type to go *too easy* on anyone. Matsuri was absolutely clobbered for a few days. She returned every morning in bandages, concealing scrapes and bumps, making no mention if she was ever in pain. Her teacher was slightly worried that her determination was not entirely beneficial, but when Gaara wavered Matsuri would obstinately demand they continue.

After a time, she would no longer tumble and eat sand during the trials. She could stay on her feet, evade with speed, and counterattack after blocking. On the hotter days, Gaara would sometimes need a break, retreating to the shade to watch Matsuri dance around a summoned scorpion, dizzying it with her assaults.

She had also made a point of mastering the Jouhyou, and also gained proficiency with a chainscythe, as well as the three-section staff. While challenging other weapons specialists of the Sand Village, it was undeniable that her skill outclassed some of her Chunin counterparts. Hard work alone was responsible for that.

And so, as many shinobi that specialized in Bukijutsu often did, Matsuri relied on a tool-scroll to summon her prized weapons. When another scroll joined her inventory, she explained to her sensei that she was expanding her Ninjutsu on her own, “I don’t want you to see the jutsu quite yet, Sensei.”

He didn’t argue with her. Gaara would happily admit that Matsuri had found her own way as a shinobi, irrespective of the things he taught her. Her personal style shined through.

This morning, Gaara recalled a small warning Kankuro had given him before he sought Matsuri near the Buddha statue. “Listen, you’ve probably heard, but our village weapons-dispenser, Yirigama, took a liking to Matsuri. She talks to him a lot and she’s enthusiastic.” His brother spoke quietly, “So he gave her something special.”

“Special?” Gaara did not follow.

“As in, a Genin probably shouldn’t be using it, *special.*” Kankuro clarified, “Just make sure she doesn’t hurt herself during practice.”

“You worry too much.” The Kazekage replied calmly.

“Hey, I like that kid. I’m not saying I don’t have confidence in her; it’s just that she’s learned a lot in so little time. Don’t you think she could get ahead of herself?”

“No. I don’t, actually.” Gaara admitted.

“Either you know exactly what you’re talking about, or you’re a crap-teacher for saying that.”

“Agreed.”
After arriving at the statue, Matsuri concluded whirling around in an impressive display before acknowledging Gaara, “Ah! Good morning, Sensei.”

“Good morning.” His smile was small, “There’s some news I want to share with you, Matsuri.”

Matsuri looped her Jouhyou to her belt and walked over to him, “What kind of news?”

“It’s related to the Chunin Exam. I inquired with other officials, but it seems we are a special case when it comes to your participation. The committee in Leaf was not comfortable with me registering as your Jounin-chaperone, considering it would remove me from Hidden Sand for a time. In addition to that, it is mandatory that you participate as part of a three-man cell. I checked around Suna and found a team that can take you. Their third teammate is unable to participate this year, due to temporary disability.” Gaara explained, “I’ll introduce you to Hyoshigi and his students tomorrow. I recommend that you take a mission or two with them to build up rapport. Knowing and trusting your teammates is critical during the exam.”

“But I won’t be a permanent addition to that team, will I?” She asked.

“No. You’re my student. Once you are a Chunin, I’ll be appointing you to various teams anyway.” He reminded her, “We’ll adjust from there.”

She nodded happily.

“As for training today, I had something different in mind.” Gaara went on, looking south, “You and I will be visiting the coast today. We’ll pass the time training near the water until a tutor arrives.”

“A tutor? Is it someone who can help me?”

He chuckled softly, “It’s a tutor of mine, actually. You can stay and watch if you’re comfortable.”

“I’d love to!”

“We’ll see. You may change your mind.”

Shortly after that, they set out on an express route through the desert. The temperature was relatively mild. By the early afternoon they set foot on the white beaches of the south, where tall, rocky dunes overlooked turquoise waters.

The pair took a rest and after that, Matsuri chased her mentor around with twists and dives, nearly putting Gaara’s eyes out with the tooth of her rope-dart. He tested her defenses as well with blasts of sand, and she scattered the bolts with a whirl of her Jouhyou. After winding down, master and student concurred that it would be a waste not to enjoy the unspoiled beach. They stripped down to undershirts and shorts and waded into the rolling waves.

Gaara did not go in past his waist. He stood with folded arms, eyes closed, blissful in the warm water.

“Sensei, it’s not so deep over here. Won’t you swim out?” Matsuri wondered.

“No. My last experience with the ocean…” Gaara sighed at the memory, “I nearly drowned.”

“Oh!” She covered her mouth in surprise, “I didn’t know that…”

“It’s alright. My friend was able to retrieve me.”

Matsuri paddled around while her teacher lingered in the shallows. Overhead, a messenger hawk
was circling. Gaara supposed it had a communication that needed prompt attention. He splashed back to the beach and took a seat on a flat stone. The bird landed beside him and Gaara untied a small scroll from its leg. ‘Temari sent this…’

*Hi Gaara, I have an update for you,*

*I appreciate that you gave me some warning. Apparently, Tazuna didn’t need much help finding the jinchuriki that’s been hanging around the Tide Village. They’ve already met.*

*I spoke with some former Mist ninja (they’ve integrated here) who recognized a man who’s been working as a supplemental teacher for the Academy. His name is Utakata, and he used to be a shinobi in Kirigakure as well. From what they described, he had a bad experience with his Master some years ago that caused him to flee the village. Hunter-nin have been tracking him for quite some time, and he’s been avoiding detection while in the Land of Waves. No one has tipped off Hidden Mist yet, but I honestly don’t know how long that will last. The ninja who confirmed this for me said that Utakata is the container of the Six-Tails, and has remarkable control over it.*

*It seems to me that everyone is getting along so far. I explained what I found to Tazuna, but he either didn’t understand me or he doesn’t care. He told me that Utakata has earned his keep, and they’re on better terms than they were previously. I personally think that you’ll get along with this jinchuriki. He hangs around cafes and relaxes when he isn’t working. It may be worthwhile to make another trip down here when you have time to meet him. The Training Program is progressing steadily. Evaluations and wrap-up are predicted to go as scheduled, but if something starts to take a nosedive I will take care of it.*

*I hope Matsuri’s doing well. I was wondering if she was interested in coming down to the Tide Village again? Please let me know. I’ll be in touch.*

**Temari**

Gaara looked up from the parchment, bemused, “Hm.”

If Temari’s report proved anything, it was that they indeed lived in a small world. Provided that Utakata kept a low profile in Tide and did not attract unwelcome attention from Mist, he could become a boon to the fledgling village. Gaara did not personally know the man, ‘*But I might someday soon.*’ He already had a rendezvous planned for the day.

After a while Matsuri scuttled out of the water and retrieved a towel from her supply bag. She sat down across from her sensei as he scribbled a reply to Temari.

“Did that come from Suna?” She asked.

“Temari sent me this from the Tide Village. Just an update.”

Matsuri’s inquisitive expression dissipated, “Oh.”

Gaara’s eyes glanced toward the girl, “Aren’t you looking forward to going back to the Tide Village? You did the last time.”

“I…I prefer training for now. I’ve gotten a lot stronger.”

“You have. However, I want to rely on you as an ambassador. You made many friends there.” Gaara told her.

Her shoulders drooped, “It might get uncomfortable.”
“Did something happen on your previous trip?”

“Nothing terrible…but I…” The girl tucked the balled towel beneath her chin, “I was disappointed.”

“You don’t want to share it with me?” He asked.

“It’s alright, Sensei. I’m getting over it.”

“Good.” Gaara sealed his reply and tied it to the messenger hawk’s leg, “Then I don’t want to hear your complaints when I send you there again.”

Matsuri winced, but did not object. The courier bird took off.

The two dried in the sun, and though slightly damp, redressed when it was bearable. From their seat in the shade, Gaara created amorphous shapes with the white beach sand. He was struck by a thought before telling Matsuri, “I ought to prepare you.”

“For what?” She wondered.

“For what you will see.” Gaara elaborated, “You’re already aware that I am a jinchuriki. The reason that I am here today is for a private lesson from another jinchuriki.”

“Oh! Outside of the village?”

“I don’t want to be close by Suna if we start to cause damage. I am being advised on how to harness Shukaku’s power.”

“Right, that’s what it’s called.”

“Him.” Gaara corrected, “Shukaku is his name.”

“Oh.” She blinked, “You know a lot about…him, then?”

“We talk just about every day.”

“You talk?” She squealed.

“Yes. We’ve reached an understanding. Though, I won’t pretend to know anything about Shukaku’s power or how to control it. When I used it in the past, I did so in less than ideal circumstances.” Gaara explained, “He even recommended that I learn from more experienced jinchuriki. That’s why I’m expecting a visitor. You may…see things today.”

Gaara formed a likeness of Shukaku in the beach sand, scaled down, “This is what the Ichibi looks like.”

“Wow.” Matsuri tapped her lip, “He’s a bit tubby.”

Gaara sighed to himself.

“Ah, should I have not said that?” The girl amended.

“He’s saying that he doesn’t like others commenting on his figure.” The Kazekage relayed an internal message, “And a larger gut helps him facilitate Wind techniques.”

“Oh, I see.” Matsuri added, “I didn’t mean it like that, um…Shukaku. If you can hear me…”
“It’s fine, Matsuri. He doesn’t care that much.”

When a shadow appeared on the beach, the silhouette of a newcomer stalked along until Gaara and Matsuri turned around, squinting into the sunlight. A smiling woman stood at the top of a rock formation, with her hands on her hips, “It took me a while to find this place! I didn’t think there’d be two of you here.”

She hopped down lightly to the beach. Gaara rose to greet the kunoichi with a small bow and Matsuri mirrored the gesture, “Thank you for coming, Yugito.”

“Not at all, Kazekage-sama. I offered you my help, after all, and I am glad that I can make good on it.” Yugito’s eyes fell on Matsuri, “And who is this little one?”

“This is my student, Matsuri.” Gaara introduced, “Matsuri, this is Yugito of Kumogakure. She is the host of the Two-Tails.”

“It’s so nice to meet you.” She bowed her head again timidly, “I’ve never met a Cloud ninja before.”

“I assure you, we’re not as bad as everyone says.” The woman purred, “So, you have one student? I do not see such arrangements often, but I am sure that you picked the most worthy learner you could find, Kazekage-sama.”

“Gaara is fine.” The young man requested.

“Gaara, then.” Yugito agreed, “Today, your student will be a spectator of your efforts. I suggest you do you very best to avoid disappointing her.”

Gaara pursed his mouth for a moment, irritated, “Do you think that I will make a fool of myself?”

“Most likely. What I aim to teach you won’t be easy.” She grinned sidelong to Matsuri, “If you don’t mind, shall we find ourselves some space? We are due to get…much larger.”

Matsuri chuckled nervously as she followed after her superiors. Hardly a year ago, she knew virtually nothing about Biju, jinchuriki, and the relationships therein. While it was a relief to hear from Gaara that Tailed Beasts were more than just mindlessly destructive forces, Matsuri was still having difficulty reconciling the old tales about them. The fear lingered, but it heartened her to see Yugito and Gaara so relaxed. They would not likely choose to let her witness a confrontation that could jeopardize her life.

At the top of the adjacent sand dune, the tall, blonde woman halted them, “This is fine. Oh my…I should have remembered some sunscreen before I dropped in…”

Matsuri quickly snapped open her bag, “You can borrow mine! We take it everywhere since we…live in the desert.”

Yugito was amused by the mousy girl and accepted the bottle that was handed to her. “And you, Gaara? How do you maintain your pale complexion?”

“I bathe in sunblock most mornings.” Gaara injected a touch of sarcasm, “My sand armor protects me as well.”

“Hm, the Kazekage divulges his beauty secrets…”

Matsuri tittered at the comment, but swallowed her laughter when a frown tugged at her mentor’s face. Yugito concluded a hasty application of sunscreen before returning it to Matsuri.
“I’m going to tell you something just so we can all be sure that we are on the same page.” The woman announced, “What you are about to learn may end up saving your life. However, please remember that in the end, none of this training is for the sake of you staying alive. The Great Nations can all agree that it is of the utmost importance that we do what we can to prevent the Akatsuki from securing the Tailed Beasts. This isn’t about us. It’s about them.” Yugito placed her hand over her heart, “It’s about Matatabi. It’s about Shukaku. They were alive long before we were, and they have been hoping for a peaceful world for much longer than any of us have.”

Matsuri and Gaara fixed their attention on the Cloud kunoichi.

“The Akatsuki does not care that the Tailed Beasts feel. That they think. That they were born. Or that they dream…” Yugito elaborated, “That organization is singularly concerned with harvesting them for unimaginable amounts of chakra. With all of that power, they intend to bring about calamity that only ancient sages could contend with. The great skill of our predecessors has been absent for generations. Our only recourse is to prepare ourselves and deny the Akatsuki the opportunity that they wish to prey on.”

“I have been given intelligence that other jinchuriki have been captured already.” Gaara then asked, “Is there no way to retrieve the Tailed Beasts that were taken?”

“For now, that isn’t possible. In communications between the Raikage and Tsuchikage, they confirmed that there is no record of a current Akatsuki stronghold or base. Abandoned bases leave no trace evidence to track, and the method that is used to extract Tailed Beasts and store their chakra…no one has determined that either.” Yugito explained, “How could we rescue them when we have no idea where to look?”

“We ask a member of the Akatsuki.” Gaara resolved.

Yugito and Matsuri gave him curious looks.

Gaara elaborated on his statement, “My mentor is the Toad Sage. Jiraiya told me that he has a spy who has infiltrated Orochimaru’s hideout as well as the Akatsuki. This is the information we should be requesting.”

“That poor spy will not easily obtain it from either source.” Yugito warned.

“But what if the spy did?” Matsuri wondered.

“Then our villages should plan the retrieval of those Tailed Beasts accordingly. With that being said, there is nothing that can be done at the present time…other than safeguarding the Biju we are responsible for.” The Cloud kunoichi tossed her long braid over her shoulder, “I would like to address the best way to go about that now, Gaara, if you’d be so kind.”

The Kazekage nodded in the affirmative.

“I am one of the two jinchuriki of Kumogakure. The container of the Eight Tails has just as good of a bond with the Hachibi as I do with Matatabi, if not better.” Yugito went on, “He would have happily come here to assist with this training, but I felt that his personality…may not be a good fit for yours, Gaara.”

“I still would have done my best.”

She chuckled, “I’m sure. Perhaps some other time you can learn from him on the Island Turtle…but I will start you off.” Yugito folded her arms, “If Shukaku is willing; we will first work on controlling the chakra he provides for you. If you’re not prepared for it the surge will overwhelm you. After that,
we can explore techniques that Biju help us achieve…and maybe even the Tailed Beast ball in the future…”

Matsuri whispered sidelong to her sensei, “Would that turn you into…a ball?”

“Quite frankly, I am not sure what any of this will do to me.” He replied quietly.

Yugito tapped her chin thoughtfully, “Or, it may be beneficial for you to practice switching consciousness with Shukaku. In certain situations, his form and consciousness being at the forefront can change the tide of battle.” She added slyly, “He’s a bit older and more experienced than you, after all.”

Gaara nodded, “It’s happened before.”

“Oh?”

“With both good and bad results.”

“I see…” Yugito thought for a moment, “That is a project as well. The level of expression a Biju makes through its host depends on several factors. How easily can Shukaku get through?”

Gaara frowned, “Easily…is not the word for it.”

“Maybe it isn’t. A multi-lock seal often makes it difficult for Biju to express themselves when they please. I don’t know if you have one. Do you encounter such a buffer?”

“Not really.” He admitted.

She lifted her hand, “A demonstration, please.”

Matsuri smiled as she backed away, preferring to be safe than sorry if things did not go as planned. Gaara only sighed before turning his mind inward.

‘Did you hear that request?’

I did.

Can you do it?’

If you let me. The hefty beast shrugged, I’m here to learn too. It’s not typical for you and I to flip like we’re on a revolving door.

Gaara swallowed and shut his eyes, making a true attempt to relax, ‘Take it slow.’

Ha! Slow. Heh heh!

Gaara began to rumble with laughter.

From a distance, Matsuri notified Yugito, “He…doesn’t usually do that.”

“It’s alright.” The woman assured her.

The young man opened his eyes, revealing black sclera and tiny, golden irises. A pointy-toothed grin unsettled Matsuri from her position on the dune.

As Shukaku settled into his minimal influence over his host he laughed again, startled by the sound, and then covered his mouth with his hands, “I sound so weird.” Shukaku looked over Gaara’s body interestedly, “I’m like a toothpick. I feel so light!” He glanced all around, “And this place seems
bigger.”

“You get used to it.” The woman fiddled with her braid, entertained, “I find having this hair to be fun, when Yugito lets me visit. Mine is so unruly, but hers is perfection.” That cat-voice rolled the ‘r’ sound.

“That’s because yours is on fire, Whiskers.” Shukaku simpered at his Two-Tailed counterpart.

“Please do not call me that if you don’t wish to be aptly named yourself, Shukaku.” Matatabi warned.

“I want to feel my tail.” Shukaku decided, “It’s freaking me out to not…feel anything back there.” He patted his human bottom, “ Weird!”

Gaara commented from his subconscious place, ‘Do not touch that.’

“You can express it if Gaara is comfortable with it.” Matatabi explained, handily displaying a blue, forked cat tail that sprouted from behind Yugito, “Whatever the jinchuriki does not limit, we can do it. If he lets go completely, you’ll take your true form. It might scare Gaara, though, so be patient. Wait until he says that it’s okay.”

Shukaku titled his head back, inquiring loudly, “Well is it okay, Kazekage?”

‘A tail.’ Gaara confirmed, ‘Fine.’

Shukaku was thrilled to produce a sandy, tiered tail that wound behind his body. He gave it a welcome shake.

“Before we get too carried away,” Matatabi instructed, “We should let them practice drawing on our chakra. That won’t be as simple for them to do as it for us to express ourselves.”

“I just got out here. Do I really have to go back?” Shukaku grumbled.

Yugito shrugged, her features returning to normal, “I don’t know. What is he saying?”

Shukaku gave inner-Gaara a listen: ‘I’m switching back. I promise I will bring you out again when I can.’

“Ah, fine…” The tanuki muttered, surrendering his brief control.

While watching, Matsuri muffled laughter with the back of her hand. It was humorous watching her teacher (granted, an alternate consciousness) act surprised about buttocks.

Yugito rested her hands on her hips, “Well done. Both you and Shukaku will have no trouble with that exchange. Just remember to be courteous to one another. In battle, you may end up shouting demands to confirm who is in control. Remember it is only the heat of the moment, and to not take comments personally.”

“Right.” Gaara acknowledged. Somewhere inside, Shukaku echoed the sentiment.

The cloud kunoichi devoted over an hour to patiently guiding Gaara through what she described as the ‘proper way to adapt a Biju’s chakra.’ Her understanding was that, willpower and a healthy seal permitting, a shinobi could tap into the reserves of the Tailed Beast within. “Of course, the more you try to take it by force, the more you open the door to expression.” Yugito added, “And when they express themselves in this instance, Tailed Beasts are usually quite upset…or viciously angry.
Seizing their chakra without consent is not cooperation. It will hinder both parties.”

A blue halo of chakra began to emerge from the kunoichi as she spoke, “When you communicate with the Tailed Beast inside you, on equal terms, chakra is more readily given. As it stands, Biju are aware that the death of their host is a potential hazard. They are often recaptured and sealed again into an object or jinchuriki, following the demise of their host. It is uncommon for them to be free for long. Or, death can be a result if the Tailed Beast is bound in an active multi-lock seal. Such sealing jutsu are designed to deconstruct the balance of chakra within the Biju, as a...repercussion of letting their jinchuriki perish.”

“Would that happen to Shukaku?” Gaara wondered.

“I don’t know.” Yugito admitted, “Most seals are comprised of one lock, and they can vary in strength. Anything more is considered rare. It is essential that the Nine-Tails be kept in a multi-lock seal, for he can command the most influence over a jinchuriki in anything less.”

“I believe that to be true.” Gaara agreed.

Yugito asked him to reveal how much of Shukaku’s chakra he could accept before experiencing difficulties, “If your focus slips even for a moment, you can lose consciousness, your senses, or become confused. In a compromised state, jinchuriki who are overwhelmed by chakra will express the most negative emotions within themselves and their Tailed Beast. Only a poised mind can avoid such an event.”

The Kazekage made his attempt. He estimated that Shukaku had volunteered all but a quarter of his chakra, and Gaara held firm while his teeth rattled in his head as it flooded him. A rushing, red chakra cloak wrapped around him with a trashing tail. Yugito nodded and then turned to Matsuri, waving at her to retreat farther away.

“Let’s see how you handle that chakra under pressure.” The woman spread her arms, entirely calm, and was enveloped in a gust of energy. Her chakra cloak rapidly condensed until Matatabi stood on the dune in her true form. The cat titled its head, sizing up Gaara with mismatched eyes. Then Matatabi lunged with snapping jaws.

Gaara noticed almost immediately that he was disoriented. He could only manage two barrages of sand to slow the Two-Tails before his vision swirled. A giant paw nearly flattened him like a pancake.

_Come on! Don’t be a wuss, Gaara. You can handle it._

The Kazekage shook his head, clear for a few seconds, and then reared an unprecedented tidal wave of sand to hurl Matatabi several hundred yards. The cat tunneled her way up to the surface again and shook vigorously. She paced, side-stepping sweeps and spikes of desert sand. From a distance, Matatabi generated three bolts of energy and fired them at her target. Gaara’s sand shield was prompt, but his reactions were hindered by his wavering concentration. He slipped back into a space that was somewhere between his mind and Shukaku’s domain.

His surroundings spun. Gaara was able to produce the bulky arm of Shukaku from the coastal dunes, pinning Matatabi when she closed the distance between them. A sand coffin would logically follow, but Gaara was not present to witness the follow-up. The burden of chakra sent his stream of consciousness tumbling, and he found himself in a shelter made from a tree hollow. He could see Haku and Naruto beside him, savaged from their struggle against Orochimaru in the Forest of Death.

Inexplicably, as if beside his ear, Yashamaru’s voice was distinct, “Can you feel my pain?”
Startled, Gaara turned to look for the source. He saw people; the people closest to him. His father’s furious face was the first of many expressions of disappointment: Jiraiya, Sakura, Kankuro, and Temari were taunting him as well. Flinching away in shock, Gaara’s vision returned, and as his mind surfaced once more he could hear Shukaku’s voice calling him back, *Don’t look at that shit! You’re not seeing what’s right in front of you!*

With a sharp intake of oxygen, Gaara was fully aware again, lying flat on his back. A partial dome of sand was protecting him from the Two-Tail’s extended claws. A limb and tail of Shukaku were grappling with the other beast, *Shukaku took over while I was incapacitated…* It was a relief that his companion was reliable, but Gaara’s instant regret was that he wasn’t.

Before Shukaku could encourage him to hang tough and counter, Matatabi ceased her attack. The cat took a seat, licked her paw, and then briefly washed her face. In a swirl of energy she disappeared and was replaced by Yugito.

The woman gave a small wave to her tutee, “Enough. You were absent for over 60 seconds.”

Shukaku retreated, mumbling, and Gaara staggered to his feet. It was mildly embarrassing to fumble like he had when he was considered a competent village leader. Both Matsuri and Yugito returned to his side.

“Are you alright, Gaara-sensei?” The young kunoichi asked, pulling nervously at her bag’s strap.

“I’m fine.” He rubbed his head, “I hope I didn’t worry you.”

“Well…” Matsuri looked between him and Yugito, “There aren’t many ways to feel relaxed while watching what you two just did.”

“Certainly not.” Yugito agreed, “I may have jumped the gun a bit with this task.”

“No.” Gaara said firmly, “I will be prepared now that I know what to expect.”

“I know that you will. For now, let’s take a break. Meditation will help stave off negative emotions and slipping, like what you experienced.” Yugito told him calmly, “This practice isn’t meant to be completed in a day, Gaara. You’ll need a few weeks at least.”

“I don’t have much time to budget on myself.” He informed her, “I have obligations to my village and my student. The Chunin Exam is nearing as well.”

“You’ll have to make the time.” The woman insisted, “This training is an obligation to your village and friends.”

*‘On a grand scale, it is.’* Matsuri thought to herself.

Gaara closed his eyes and breathed deeply to calm down. It would be so much better if he could grasp the skill right away. “Then I will. How do you intend to keep training me?” He inquired.

“I have two days to myself. We’ll practice during that time before I return to Kumogakure. If I am not punctual, the Raikage will be very cross with me.” Yugito laughed airily, “But I will be given permission to return again. Your training is in the best interest of the Five Nations, after all. We can play it by ear.”

As Matsuri walked beside the senior shinobi, she winced after hearing Yugito’s last statement. It reminded her of Menma. She shook off the stab of heartache and kept up with her acquaintances.
“I have a close friend who will benefit from these lessons. He is the jinchuriki for the Nine Tails.”
Gaara mentioned cautiously, “Would this opportunity be extended to him as well?”

“Of course, however, your friend’s pursuit of mastery will be quite tricky.” Yugito smiled to herself, “Matatabi and Shukaku will be able to testify.”

**Yeah, Kurama will act like a glorified asshat in a situation like this! It won’t go well.**

Gaara replied, ‘Naruto can make a connection. He’s always does.’

“Here we are.” Yugito made them halt on a ledge overlooking the south sea, “Ocean waves are a fine background for meditation. Let’s have a seat.” She motioned to the small kunoichi, “You too, Matsuri, you’ll benefit.” They all settled down and Yugito added, “This will set us right.”

That same afternoon, in an east coast port of the Water Country, Haku followed Zabuza towards the mob-controlled underbelly of the city. Zabuza was drawn to the area for work with high risk, high monetary incentives. Haku tagged along as he was told, but had his own agenda in mind. Days before, his faithful messenger rabbit had returned with two highly unusual pieces of correspondence.

‘I can’t believe it!’ Haku had been stunned to find a short message from Temari. She had earnestly told him weeks ago that she ‘didn’t know what to say,’ and Haku had then replied with curt thanks, informing her that he was **still** alive. *Please let me know if there is anything I can do,* he had also written to her. Temari jumped on the offer in her second reply:

**Here’s what you can do. Because you’re in close proximity to the most depraved nukenin and criminals on a regular basis, try to collect information on the Akatsuki if you can. You said you wanted to protect Gaara and Naruto, so you might as well be knowledgeable about their enemies.**

**While you’re at it, find out what’s really going on in the Water Country. Gaara says that he’s had an intelligence black-out in that region, save for meager reports from the Black Ops. We don’t know what the Mist Village has been doing, or if it has ties to the Akatsuki or other criminals. Whatever you learn, send it to me or Gaara. I’m located in the Land of Waves for the next few weeks. Pua knows how to find the Tide Village.**

Haku had nearly thrown the scroll and dashed out of Hiroshi’s tea shop at the time, but he finished reading the letter.

**No. I don’t want to see you, so don’t come here. Oh, and props to you for showing your rabbit how to travel by boat to leave the islands of the Water Country. I was wondering how she got over here. And please, remember that we are pressed for time. If finding your clan is really your goal, then ask for adequate help and conduct a serious search. You’ll be disappointed, more than likely. Should Zabuza prove to be an obstacle when you try to return to us, just drop a hint of where you want your back-up. You said yourself that you need to be with your team. Don’t let a beast like him get in the way of that.**

**Temari**

She had concisely brought to his attention what should be his most imperative goals. Temari had also shut down Haku’s hope of reuniting with her, ‘I should expect as much…’

Discouraged, Haku moved on to the next piece of correspondence.

**Haku, saw your rabbit in one of my stopovers. Thought she’d bring you this. I didn’t learn much about your clan while I did business on the mainland, but I saw someone like you. With your Blood**
Limit. Quite the asshole. If you want to learn more I’ll be at the Moji seaport this week. I still owe you one. –Roga

As luck would have it, some thirty minutes later, when Haku inquired about the aforementioned port called Moji, Zabuza informed him that it was a great place to rustle up cash.

“Who’s asking?” The brute grunted suspiciously.

“No one! I just read about it.” Haku explained, and it was partially true.

“I’ll take you there. It’s time for you to get off your ass.” Zabuza decided, adding, “But don’t draw attention.”

Haku agreed and did not reveal his exchange with the ninja from the Land of Snow. He intended to keep Zabuza in the dark about his pact with the shinobi he had befriended. Haku was thankful that the swordsman was not a conversationalist, and neither did he wish to know much about Haku’s life. As a result, it was easy to keep secrets from a rogue ninja with a one-track mind.

Before departing, Haku warned Ranmaru and Hiroshi that he would be out for a few days. “Please tell Migawari-san I apologize. I’ll be back when I can.” Haku added, thinking of their mentor in Medical jutsu, “For all of our sakes, I shouldn’t object to Zabuza’s jaunts too often.”

Ranmaru nodded animatedly.

Pua tagged along as Haku followed Zabuza’s lead, taking the two-day journey to the eastern isles of the Water Country. Long silences stretched between the two and Haku pittered around in his private thoughts, growing more curious as to why Zabuza was anxious to complete tasks for rich gangsters. While the nukenin was undoubtedly a cold, selfish man, Haku did not see how he really benefitted from material wealth.

“Why do you take these missions?” Haku finally asked, “I can’t understand why you choose to earn beyond your…spare means of living.”

“Why do you care?”

“You live in an abandoned flat in a retirement town on the rural outskirts, where no Mist hunter-nin can find you, naturally. You take highly compensated missions with a frequency that, I estimate, has made you wealthier than most local lords…” Haku concluded, “What’s the point? Why aren’t you using your time or resources effectively, and rallying Mist shinobi to your cause? You want to retake the Mist Village, but you waste your time on meaningless tasks.”

Zabuza paused on a tree branch and turned to the young man, darkly amused, “You think someone like me is going to rally anyone to a cause?”

“You did, once.”

“They were swordsmen like me. We had something in common.” Zabuza told him, “What’s left of rebel-forces near Kirigakure won’t look to the Demon of the Hidden Mist for leadership. I’m the villain of the stories they tell their children at night.”

“Then why try at all? You can’t do it with just the two of us.” Haku pointed out the obvious, “And you’d be lucky to get Raiga and Ranmaru to help.”

“I don’t need those two shithoods.” The man growled, continuing on their route, “I can’t expect someone like you to see the big picture.”
“Then enlighten me.”

Zabuza chuckled wickedly, “The fact is, the shinobi who have rebelled against the current Mizukage have already banned together. Their base is hidden. They chose a leader who they believe in, and they’re formulating their own tactics and strikes to take Kirigakure.” He elaborated, “The only thing that makes desperate people like them more secure than hope and a brave figurehead…is money.”

Haku frowned at the thought, “You want to buy…rebels?”

“I can. A few times over. Their leader doesn’t seem to have a price, though. If I can’t buy her, then I’ll cut her out of the picture.” Zabuza huffed, “She’s not getting in my way.”

“Really?” Haku was agitated by the selfish notion, “And who is she?”


“I like her already.” The boy snarked.

“A lot of guys do.” Zabuza warned him, “But don’t get attached. She’s a liability; too afraid to risk the lives of her precious supporters. She’ll never get the job done.”

“She sounds entirely competent to me.”

“In many ways she is, and she’s mastered two Kekkei Genkai she was born with.” Zabuza took stock of his competitor’s talent, “But if she won’t take directions from me, I’ve got no use for her.”

“Have you tried contacting her?”

“Once.”

“And?”

“Most people need a very long pole before they decide to touch me. She’s no different.”

“Perhaps someone ought to advocate for you.” Haku proposed.

“They’ll think you’re on drugs if you try.”

“If you both have the same goal, why not cooperate?”

“She rejected the offer. We’re working two different angles.” Zabuza concluded, “We’ll see who makes it there first.”

Haku pondered the situation in silence for a while, descending from the forest tree tops to take a rocky path towards the coast that Zabuza had found. ‘So Zabuza had asked for help and was denied. It seems only right. Someone like him hardly deserves support…and he finds it fair to pay off rebels to have them fight for him.’ He shook his head in distaste, ‘It’d be a great shame if he overtook the Mist Village.’ Objectively, however, Haku could not assume that Mei was a safer bet either. He knew nothing about the talented kunoichi other than her surplus of Bloodline Gifts.

“Why are rebels necessary?” Haku asked at length, “Why did they break away from Mist?”

“That’s too long of a story.”

“Then summarize it.” Haku requested, “I’d be lying if I said I understood anything going on in this country.”
“Summarize, eh?” Zabuza snorted, “Then you ought to know that civil war has been in these lands for nearly one hundred years. No one can get along; cease fires failed. Nobles, the working class, the impoverished, blood gifted shinobi, and murderers…No one lives a wholesome life here. The majority of the war was fought by hired clans, and the devastation whittled their numbers down, as well as gave them a reputation here for being unapproachable, untrustworthy shinobi. They were treated with suspicion and hatred ever since.” The rogue ninja gestured vaguely at him, “Which is why oddballs like you are around. Shinobi from clans fled to where they thought they’d find peace and start new lives…but you’re all just leftovers scratching for some space.”

“Thank you.” Haku’s nostrils flared furiously, “That about describes my mother and I perfectly.”

“To a fucking-T.” Zabuza agreed callously, “The fighting continued, and a call for strong leadership in Kirigakure eventually landed us with a four-foot-six-inch, bloodthirsty, lunatic-Mizukage who was the jinchuriki for the Three Tails. He ran the show spectacularly.” Zabuza scratched his chin, “Made me kill everyone in my graduating class; that fuck. He looks like a kid…but that man’s atrocities outweigh mine and all the hunters of Mist combined.”

“Why would the Mizukage be that way, in spite of such turmoil?” Haku was alarmed, “He knew that wasn’t going to help the village, surely!”

“He probably did.” The man agreed, “But rumor has it…at least from what Terumi and the gang leaders told me…Yagura isn’t really doing it.” Zabuza’s sidelong glance pierced Haku, “His puppet-master instigated the animosity and fear. The killing. The waste.”

The young man took a breath of sea-salt air, trying to remain calm, “Someone was controlling the Mizukage.”

“Still is, I bet.” Zabuza declared, “Someone wants Mist weak and scattered. That’s some epic interference, I have to admit. But what it comes down to…is that the Mizukage needs to die. Whoever has him by his Napoleonic balls needs to die too.”

“I gather that Mist ninja who stay loyal to the Mizukage and the village…are only doing so in the hope that he doesn’t kill them.” Haku wagered.

“You catch on quick.”

“Who is controlling him?”

“Don’t know.” Zabuza admitted, “But Terumi probably does.”

“Then ask her! Clearly you need her.” Haku insisted.

“Sure. When she agrees to do it my way, I’ll ask.”

“Is it really impossible for you to cooperate with someone? If you had combined forces you may have succeeded already!”

Zabuza passed a roadside shrine, cresting the hill that overlooked the Moji seaport. He merely grunted at the idea.

“Zabuza.” Haku stopped where he stood, “You need to work with others. Nothing will change if you continue this way.”

“I don’t.”
“You overestimate yourself, and you underestimate the force you’re up against.” Haku spat boldly, “What if Yagura is being controlled by the Akatsuki? He’s a jinchuriki. That organization concerns itself with dominating all shinobi nations by way of possessing Biju; what if it already has sway over the Mist Village?”

“You are going out on a thin limb there, Haku.” Zabuza notified him, speaking over his shoulder, “Keep up.”

Haku leapt down the slope, returning to the nukenin’s side, “At least confirm it with Terumi-san. You can still contact her, can’t you? It’s critical.”

“What, pray tell, is so fucking critical about it?” Zabuza snarled, his hands thrashing, “I don’t give a single shit if the Akatsuki is involved in Mist or not. If it happens to be their influence that has that village bent like a pretzel, I’m going to set it straight no matter what. No matter who it is.”

“You’re no match.” Haku spoke gravely.

“Go fuck yourself.” Zabuza replied self-assuredly, “I don’t tell you that enough.”

“Hoshigaki Kisame. Uchiha Itachi.” The young man taunted, “Are you prepared for that? S-Ranked criminals against the likes of us? They won’t be unprepared. They won’t be surprised.”

Incensed, Zabuza drew the Seversword on his back and swung it in a mighty arc, nearly bisecting his mouthy apprentice before the boy ducked away. Haku maintained a healthy distance from his companion, aware that he had pushed a few key buttons.

“Even them.” Zabuza’s voice rumbled, “Kisame was never a concern. The Uchiha isn’t either. I’ll bring down anyone who gets in my way.”

“You won’t win. With me at your side, or a few others, at best…we can’t deal with a threat like that.” Haku warned him, “A mere brush with the Akatsuki has left my friends and me in dire straits in the past. I have reason to suspect they are involved in all of this, and I am telling you that you are misguided in thinking you’ll be victorious.”

Zabuza hitched his sword to his back again, “What makes you so sure it’s them? You’re the one who doesn’t know jack-all about this place.”

“The evidence is compelling.” Haku replied, “This issue is formulaic, and all my life I’ve had a knack for problem solving. Just ask Gaara or Naruto.”

The nukenin snorted in frustration, but kept the idea in mind. Haku, for his part, was rather bright. If he pieced together a potential identity of an enemy, it was favorable to learn more and prepare. Zabuza still did not wish to give him too much credit, ‘He can be so goddamn annoying…’

After entering the seedy city called Moji; Pua kept by Haku’s side as they traversed the streets. At the corner of a harbor warehouse and a line of brick buildings, Zabuza stopped.

“Stay close by. I’ll find us some local work to do and we’ll have cash by tonight.” The man added, “Don’t make a scene and attract any Hunter-nin that could be around. For diversion: women are fine. Alcohol is fine. Do not buy drugs here.”

“Are you serious?” Haku muttered, mortified.

“Tch. You’ll want something to do until I get back, and that’s all there is to do around here.” Zabuza retorted. “Try one.” With that settled, he entered a guarded doorway and the attendant waved him
along in boredom.

Haku stood on the sidewalk and exchanged a perplexed look with his white rabbit.

With a quiet sigh he turned to begin walking. “We should find Roga-san, if he’s still here.” Haku supposed, “Pua, can you track his scent? I need to speak with him.”

“Maybe.” The rabbit posed, twitching her ears. Her whiskered nose went wild for a moment, puffing air, analyzing, and then she hopped her way down the street in a southerly direction. Haku followed his pet through parts unknown and suspect, careful not to stand out among the coastal inhabitants.

Down a soggy alleyway and into another business district, Pua arrived at a closed door of a tavern and scratched at it, sniffing frantically. Haku opened it for her and continued to follow. The rabbit skirted the half-occupied bar and turned right, arriving at a booth table. Haku came to a halt beside her. Sure enough, the lavender haired Snow ninja was seated and having a conversation with a suited man. He paused when he noticed a visitor.

“Ah, Haku.” Roga was surprised, “I didn’t think I’d see you so soon.”

“I appreciate that you reached out.” Haku told him, “I can come back later, since you’re occupied.”

The man in the suit rose hurriedly, “No, no! We wrapped up our business. I don’t want to impose on a shinobi heart-to-heart.” He added as he left notes of money on the table, “Thank you, Roga-sama. It was a pleasure, as always.” The man bustled out.

Roga lifted a hand, motioning towards the free seat, “Join me.”

Haku sat down and gathered Pua into his lap, quietly thanking her for her assistance. Roga appeared pleased with the rabbit as well.

“She’s very quick, that little one of yours.” The Snow ninja told him, “So you recall what I told you; about what I found here?”

“Someone with the Hyoton.” Haku nodded, “How did you do it?”

“It’s quite simple, actually. You see, Moji seaport is a hub for nukenin and criminals who take advantage of business operations. I’m more involved with the business-side of things here, to be honest. Others act as hit-men for substantial pay, typically.” Roga explained, “Not too long ago, when I was here last to attract some funding…I didn’t mince words with a shinobi who was looking for work at the office. It sparked an argument. Later, we had a brawl near a loading dock since he was the...confrontational sort.”

“Fubuki mentioned that as well.” Haku recalled.

“Only because I lived to tell about it. I didn’t realize just how strong he was.” Roga confessed, “I took my leave after that fight when he tired of me, but I could never forget how his Blood Limit trumped my Ice Release jutsu. This past week I wondered if he still haunted these parts for work. I asked around the office before I set up appointments, and sure enough…” Roga unfolded a sheet of paper and pushed it across the table, “He’s one of the preeminent nukenin of Moji. Many mobsters have his details in portfolios they keep, which is where I got a copy of this.”

It was a black and white photograph of a man. He appeared pale and lean, with a face framed by dark, chin-length tresses. His mouth formed a thin line, and his eyes revealed a tempest of aggression. He wore heavy dark clothing and the helix of his left ear was pierced with numerous studs.
Haku’s heart sank. He could only detect minimal resemblance to the man, if that. It would be a long shot to determine what their blood relation truly was. Haku was unsure if he wanted to associate with another battle-hardened nukenin.

“He’s called Ikazai.” Roga told him in a low voice, “And he isn’t what you’d call nice. Not like you are…”

Haku sighed deeply, trying to tread a sea of disappointment, “Thank you for telling me this, Roga-san.”

“I wish I had better news to give you.” The Snow ninja admitted, “I don’t know much about this person other than how he fought. You can probably ask around employment offices and find if anyone recognizes him.”

“I doubt I will hear anything encouraging.” Haku supposed, folding the photograph up.

“Here.” Roga twisted a cap off of a bottle of beer and poured it into a glass, “Gomo-san didn’t bother opening this. You have it.”

“I’m not of age.”

The Snow ninja smiled wryly, “No one here cares. You just got bad news. Have it.”

Pua perched on the edge of the table and sniffed curiously. She allowed Roga to affectionately pat her head. Haku lifted the glass and tasted it, “Dry.”

“Yes. I always get this one.”

Haku set it down again, “I don’t think this will make me feel better.”

“Of course the first few sips won’t fix anything. You’ll understand when you get to the bottom.”

A short while later, Haku reminded Roga that he did not want to clue Zabuza in to their brief visit. The Snow ninja gladly made himself scarce. Haku returned rosy-cheeked and mildly dispirited to the roadside where he had seen Zabuza last. It was another ten minutes before his companion appeared outside and regarded him curiously.

“I half expected you not to try anything.” Zabuza commented, getting a whiff of him, “Ale. Huh. I bet you’d do better with wine.”

Haku shook his head in disagreement, “I don’t think I’ll need either in the future.”

“How many did you have?”

“One.”

“Good. You can still work.” Zabuza determined, “Follow me.”

They passed the afternoon acting as sentinels for a crew bringing in contraband from a docked ship. Occasionally, regulators from the Mist Village came by to inspect shipments and report any illegal activity. Such watchdogs were lenient on most days, but to avoid citations of obvious infractions, mobsters would have shinobi clandestinely cast Genjutsu or knock harbor supervisors unconscious. It was the better way to do business.

Their employer picked them just in the nick of time. Two straight-laced regulators stopped in the
yard, pulling open a wooden carton of stolen goods. Before they could point out the violation and begin an investigation, Haku flanked them from the side and cast a medium-strength Genjutsu. The two men were moved by a crew member from the shipyard to a bench, left alone in their stupor. Haku felt rather bad about impeding the law, but was glad the men did not have to pay with their lives.

Late in the afternoon when Zabuza returned to pick up their reward, Haku stopped into an office several blocks away. He took Roga’s advice and asked the workers present if they recognized the man in the photo.

“He looks angry.” A secretary at a desk assessed, “I don’t think I’ve seen this fellow.”

“Eh…I don’t know. I think he’s been around. I’m not sure who he is.” Another chimed in.

A portly thug in a leather jacket pulled the photo from their hands, looking it over. “Ikazai.” He said before handing it back to Haku, “That’s Yuki Ikazai. Not to be messed with around here. We’ve spoken before and he does good work.”

“Yuki.” Haku repeated the name in shock, “Is that a clan name?”

“Sure is. That’s where Snow Devils come from.” The man in the jacket told him, “You don’t see them much anymore, but they can be trouble. Watch your step, kid.”

Haku thanked them for their input and briskly returned outdoors. Something inside him felt lighter at the prospect of finally securing his surname. It was unfortunate that the relative in question was a dangerous criminal, but he had at least gotten a prominent lead on how to go about his search. ‘I need to find other members of the Yuki clan.’ He frowned to himself, ‘And I don’t think Zabuza would want me to do that.’

When the swordsman returned he handed Haku an envelope of money. Haku steeped in his thoughts as he trailed behind Zabuza along the avenue with a view of the sunset. Pua kept pace with them as they approached a traditionally styled building. Haku believed it was an inn.

“We won’t go back tonight.” Zabuza informed him, “I need a break first.”

Not objecting to the simple demand, Haku followed the nukenin into the bukeyashiki, removing their shoes before they entered. An old woman peered at them from a low table, “You staying the night?”

“Yeah.”

“My rates are different for two.” The spinster warned them, “Pay up front and then I can show you to a room.” She regarded Zabuza’s sword and added as an afterthought, “Since you’re shinobi, don’t forget: no fighting or any other nonsense. Your type have messed my establishment up before. I’ll have the top crime boss make you pay up for damages.”

Zabuza laughed quietly at the warning. The old woman was about to forbid the rabbit that was nestled in Haku’s arms before the nukenin handed her substantial payment, which she quickly accepted, and tucked it into the sash of her yukata. She scooted along, “This way.”

Down a long hallway with polished floors and screen doors, the old woman escorted them to a stately room and ushered them in. Upon entering, Haku had a quizzical feeling as he beheld the odd choice of decoration. It was a room with tall ceilings and an enormous window facing the ocean, blocked off with wooden bars. Futons were set up at the far end of the room, bathed in the light of the sunset. Throw pillows and floor cushions were scattered hither and thither, and the selection of traditional wall scroll artwork was scandalous. ‘Maybe nude paintings aren’t so unusual here in this
Haku settled on a floor cushion and rested his head on the wooden display case behind him. The day’s events had worn him out. Pua sat beside him and preened her fur.

The old woman hovered at the doorway and asked Zabuza pointedly, “Comforts?”

He set his sword down and replied over his shoulder, “Yeah.”

“Very well. I’ll bring those by shortly. Help yourself to the *kiseru* there, but be sure to use the tray.” The woman pointed a gnarled hand at a low table, covered with various items, “If you want to order something special that’ll cost you extra.”

“This is enough.” Zabuza replied.

The innkeeper observed Haku skeptically, “And for you?”

“I don’t need anything. Thank you.” He assured her. Peeved, the old woman slid the door shut immediately.

Haku closed his eyes and leaned back again, setting some tension free. Minutes later, he noticed Zabuza had undone the wrappings around his neck and face. He observed as the man handily took a pipe from a brass stand, inspected it, and then proceeded to prepare it.

“You smoke?” Haku wondered aloud.

Zabuza gave him a bored look, “There isn’t much I don’t do to pass the time.” He lit the pipe without further thought, “If you come to a place like this and they give you *kiseru*, you take it. Doing it once in a blue moon never got me sick.”

“Fair enough.”

“There’s a another one here.” Zabuza gestured to the stand, “You enjoyed one of Moji’s diversions today. Might as well try all three.”

“I didn’t enjoy drinking and certainly not those other things…” Haku admitted, “But thanks anyway.”

Zabuza stared at him for a long moment from across the room, exhaling a line of smoke as he thought. He asked abruptly, “How old are you?”

“Sixteen.”

“Pff.”

“Does that matter?”

“I guess it doesn’t. You look your age.” Zabuza added as he made himself comfortable on throw pillows, “But your brain is decades ahead.”

“Was that an attempted compliment?” Haku verified.

“You think too much.” The man told him, “Sometimes good can come of it, though.”

Haku smiled to himself, amused, “I hope so.”
Pua settled down for a nap on a cushion while the two men sat in silence.

Zabuza spoke up again as Haku began to drift off, “I’ll contact her.”

Haku blinked tiredly, “Who?”

“Mei.” His eyes were fixed on the ceiling rafters as he continued to think, “She’ll probably know something.”

“Would she tell you?” Haku wondered, “It seems to me that you are competitors.”

“She probably will.” Zabuza exhaled, “And I don’t have competitors. I just have hurdles to clear.”

“My mistake.” Haku conceded and then added, “Zabuza…if we can confirm that the Mizukage is being influenced by the Akatsuki…how do you want to proceed?”

He answered with certainty, “I’ll finish your training. We need to find the Master Scroll so I can get you Nuibari. That’ll get us ahead. I’ll buy out Terumi and her ninja. And before we commit to a coup…” Zabuza’s sigh was a rolling, aggravated growl, “We’ll need to contact villages that have dealt with the Akatsuki before.

Haku brightened at the prospect, “Would you request aid from Leaf?”

“I just need info. I don’t need their fucking aid.”

“You might, in the end.”

“Will you quit trying to cram me into your inter-village-friendship-box?” Zabuza snipped, smoke escaping from his nose in tendrils, “I’m doing this my way.”

“But…you took what I said into consideration.”

“It’d be much stupider not to.” The man replied evenly.

The arrival of dusk prompted Haku to light several of the lanterns throughout the room. Zabuza’s smoking reminded Haku of the days Jiraiya would laze about and light up his pipe. He longed to visit his sensei and teammates again. When there was a knock at the door, Zabuza extinguished the pipe in a tray and he grunted for the visitor to enter.

The old woman had returned. When she stepped inside she was followed by a line of relatively young women, and Haku was quickly perturbed. Earlier, he had thought that they were staying the night in a run-of-the-mill hotel. It rapidly occurred to him that Zabuza had picked a more sordid location.

Somewhat alarmed and intimidated, Haku shrunk in his spot on the side of the room while Zabuza approached the lineup. He folded his arms while the madam gave her suggestions.

“You three. Out.” She shepherded the novice girls away, deducing that Zabuza was interested in creatures of substance, “You’ll want someone your age. That’s what you ask for every time you stop by here.”

“Give or take a few years.” He agreed. His gaze stopped on a dark haired woman with a far off expression on her face.

Haku averted his eyes, flinching when Zabuza tugged the shoulder of the woman’s tunic aside. He wanted to flee, terrified of the environment; overpowered by his ethical opposition to prostitution
overall. Haku was stunned by his helplessness in objecting or interfering with Zabuza at that point. Beginning such a confrontation would be foolish, and not likely worth defending the honor of strangers.

Zabuza pulled aside the dark haired woman and a fearsome, grinning brunette. As they retreated to the back of the room the old woman droned, “Thought so. Consistent like always.” She motioned for her lineup to exit, but stopped a young woman, “You stay. For him.” The madam pointed at Haku, “You’ve been paid for.”

The young lady turned around and regarded a very out-of-place teenager near the smoking table. The old woman nudged her forward before shutting the door. The young lady stepped lively towards Haku, her smile reflecting some concern, “Good evening.”

“You’re a deer in the headlights.” Aosako said softly, “Don’t worry. I’m not like those two over there.”

“Even so, I want to make it clear I have no interest in this. I was tricked into coming here.” He repeated.

“I see.” The young woman peeked towards the trio as they began to disrobe, and then turned back to Haku, “If you’re uncomfortable in here, and I know I would be too, I’ll take you to a spare room.”

“For some sleep.” He established.

“That’s what I thought.” She nodded keenly, “Your name?”

“Haku.”

“Come with me please.” Aosako lead the way and paused inquisitively when Haku scooped up a rabbit before escaping to the hallway. “It won’t be as spacious as the other room.” She warned as she escorted him to a small offshoot at the end of the corridor.

Haku followed her inside to the dimly lit quarters. He set Pua down. There was space for a large futon, and a small table against the wall with a lamp and ashtray. The window had a clear view of the rising moon. He heard the door slide shut behind them, and he gave the girl a confused look, “You don’t need to be here.”

“I must, Haku-san. If I am caught not doing what Auntie told me to, I’ll be punished and have my pay docked.” Aosako explained, “You can do whatever you want. I have to wait here until morning.”

Haku held his face with one hand, mortified, “You really have nowhere else to go?”

“Don’t you?” She replied sharply, “I live here.”

“I could go home, but it’s a two day journey.” Haku took a seat and sighed heavily. Aosako sat beside him, smiling at the rabbit that explored the perimeter of the room.
“You might as well stay and rest, then.” The girl recommended. She truly was very pretty, Haku noticed. Pale and slender with a long neck, her hair was mint green, trimmed extremely short like a boy’s. It flattered her face and huge blue eyes. Her yukata was simple with green and violet designs.

Aosako sat near the edge of the futon, taking the second pillow for herself. The young woman settled sideways on the floor with a yawn and rested her head. She seemed genuinely pleased to not have to pander to a customer. Haku looked at her strangely from a few feet away, unsure if it made sense to let his guard down. Pua nestled beside him as he reflected, ‘It was kind of her to take me away from there.’

In the dark of the room Haku slowly lowered himself down; timid around someone he did not know. He lay on his back and watched the girl warily. Pua adjusted again to fit in the warm space between his side and arm.

With her eyes still shut Aosako spoke, “I won’t do anything to you. Relax.”

“That’s easier said than done.” Haku replied, “I’ve never been in a place like this before.”

“I can tell.” She smiled and batted an eye open, “You have some decency. And you’re a shinobi. I rarely see that.”

“Many shinobi have compassion the way I do. I imagine you haven’t had the good fortune of meeting any of them.”

“No. Never. People only care about themselves here in Moji. Everything has changed since I was a child.” Aosako kept her voice low, “Gangs took over. The university closed. Even after we begged for help and for the authorities to step in…no one took action. Not even the Mizukage.” She rolled onto her back and added, “No one is concerned for the lives of people like us.”

A lulling quiet filled the room before Haku said, “I am.”

Aosako responded with a curt, inaudible laugh. She turned her head towards him, “So one person cares. What can you do about all of this?”

“I’m not sure.” He admitted.

“Tell someone to change it. My city has been suffering.” Aosako demanded with narrowed eyes, “I have no choice but to leave it soon.”

“You’re leaving?”

“Yes. I have a man who says he can’t live without me, and we’re going to the Land of Waves together soon.” She smiled triumphantly, “I’m only here to save up extra money for the time being. I have family who will let us stay in the Tide Village until we get on our feet.”

“I have friends there too.” Haku noted, letting his eyelids droop.

“Do you?”

“Yes. And someone I love is there.”

Her eyebrows raised an increment, “Oh, a boy or a girl?”

“Girl.” He sighed with an afterthought, “Did you think…that was why I wasn’t interested?”

“Hm. I can tell you’re a little bit interested. Sometimes customers come here who like both.” Aosako
explained, “I never try to assume I know their preference.”

Haku shut his eyes and calmed down significantly. Simple conversation could do no harm.

“I think… I look less feminine than you do.” She observed with mild amusement, “Your face and hair…”

“I get that a lot.” Haku replied sleepily.

“I see. We have appeal, in our own ways.” Aosako decided, “Shinobi aren’t usually as attractive as you, Haku-san, at least from my experience.”

He laughed softly before drifting off. After a short while, the young woman settled down for sleep as well, stretching out on the opposite side of the futon. The moon’s journey across the sky filtered light into the room, stretching shadows across the compact space. Sometime in the night Pua stirred, circled around Haku, and then snuggled against her master’s warm back while he slept on his side.

A lark’s piercing whistle heralded the sunrise hours later.

Haku managed to disregard the arrival of dawn, bound by sleep, with a hand strewn carelessly behind a pillow. Pua, who by then was curled up on his chest, was gently lifted and set aside. Aosako patted the rabbit’s soft fur and then leaned over the dozing guest.

“You should wake up. Your friend is already out in the lobby.” The young woman warned, “If you stay much longer he’ll buy someone else’s company, I bet.”

Haku’s eyes opened a sliver, “Zabuza may have done that already. I’m in no rush.”

Aosako’s smile was sprightly, “I like you, Haku-san. I should teach you some things before you go.” She bent gracefully and pressed her mouth to his, startling him.

Haku quickly pushed back on her shoulders, “No, I said that-!”

“Calm down. You’re not paying attention.” She admonished, “You have someone you care about, you said, but I can tell you’re not good at kissing. Just let me teach you something good. You don’t have to thank me…”

A soft sound of unease escaped him before Aosako moved in again, fixing her mouth on his tenderly. His hands found her shoulders again, poised to roughly shove her.

The woman spoke, “Feel that? It isn’t forceful. That’s the kind of kissing you’ll like.” She sucked his bottom lip gently. Decisively, Haku pushed her back again.

Aosako shook her head, regaled, “You’re a boy. Acquire this skill and become a man, won’t you? I promise there are much more unpleasant ways to learn.”

He frowned, “I never said I wanted to learn.”

“When you see her you’ll be glad you did.” She assured him, tracing her fingertips lightly across his hairline, kissing him again. This time he did not resist as much.

Weakness coupled with inquisitiveness made him permit Aosako’s advances. To Haku’s relief, the young woman would pause and explain after she did something, “Are you getting this? It’s my specialty, after all. You’re quite the sheltered one.” She only asked him to kiss back once, which he did adequately, “Good.” She moved away and sat, stretching her arms over her head.
A crimson blush spread over Haku’s face, “Aosako-san, I wish you hadn’t done that.”

“You’ll forgive me.” Aosako raised a pointed finger, “Before you go, I’ll tell you some other useful things. I won’t let you peek at me because you are far too shy…but you really should know what to do.”

Curiosity willed him to stay. He sat across from the mint-haired woman and listened to a bold, salacious account of what love-making should be, in her humble opinion. Like with most subjects, Haku absorbed the information and committed it to memory.

“You can always ask your friend if you want to know about something.” Aosako reminded him, “He’s very experienced.”

“I’d rather not.” Haku smiled dubiously, “But thank you.”

“See? I didn’t hurt you.” Aosako stood and patted her yukata smooth, “Come along now. If you stay longer Auntie will charge you extra for spending time with me.”

Haku promptly stood, ignoring the popping sounds of his limbs, and followed the young woman out and down the hall. Pua bounced happily beside him, as if detecting his good mood.

The lobby in the front of the building was empty save for the madam of the establishment in the corner, reading a newspaper; and Zabuza seated on a sofa, staring catatonically in wait. Aosako accompanied Haku as far as the doorway before giving a polite bow, “Thank you for staying with us, Haku-san. Please have a safe trip.” She smiled impishly, “Maybe I’ll see you again sometime.”

“It was…nice to meet you.” Haku replied with a touch of embarrassment.

The old woman did not so much as spare a glance as the two men left. Pua kept pace with her companions, frequently chirping “Ramen,” indicating she needed to be fed.

It was not until they were a kilometer outside of the city, travelling in silence, that Zabuza made a comment to Haku, “You picked a good one.”

“Nothing happened.” His tone was sharp, “Don’t ever bring me to a place like that again.”

“No need. You know how to bring yourself there.” Zabuza answered casually, “I waited too long. Training you got in the way of my routine.”

Haku turned his nose up, asserting, “Someone like you needs to substitute a real relationship with a convention as despicable as that.”

“It’s simpler.”

“It definitely isn’t. That place should be burned to the ground.”

“Hey, it’s not my fault that’s a staple of the economy here. Don’t forget, a lot of them have no other means to survive or shelter themselves. This country isn’t fair to anyone, least of all women.” Zabuza countered, “Guys work there too, come to think of it.”

“So be it. But I’m never going back there again.”

“Yeah. Sure.”

“I’m serious.” Haku hissed.
“Look, you’re the one who woke up late, horsing around with minty-head-girl.”

“I didn’t! She kept trying to…” He huffed in aggravation, “I don’t need to explain myself.”

“You don’t. Me paying for that was a small gift to you, which you’re obviously ungrateful for. I’d expect nothing less from a square like you, Haku.” Zabuza grumbled, “From here on out, you aren’t getting any more handouts from me. We have work to do.”

Later that morning in the Leaf Village, Tsunade had spent some time pitching objects at Sakura in a private training yard, keeping the girl on her toes. Try as she might to accost her apprentice, the pink haired kunoichi was too quick to be caught. They threw equally powerful kicks and punches at each other. The Hokage take a breather when her empty stomach rumbled.

“We shouldn’t neglect breakfast.” She abruptly suspended the practice, “Come on, Sakura. Shizune will have something waiting for us at the office.”

“Right!” She hurried after her mentor, “And we have a joint check-up as well. It’s better if we’re early.”

“Oh, I nearly forgot about that.”

They returned to the administrative building and graciously thanked Shizune as the woman left rolled omelets on the Hokage’s desk, “Protein! I know you two are working hard.” Warm tea and pear wedges accompanied the egg. The two crammed them into their mouths.

Tsunade chewed as she looked over a new report. With a sound of annoyance, she chucked the documents into the trash bin. Shizune retrieved them and dusted the parchment off, “Wait, Tsunade-sama…these were relevant.”

“Nope.”

“But Gaara….”

“No.” Tsunade stood firm, “He’s not getting support for the Tide Village until this Chunin Exam concludes. I have enough to deal with right now.” She eyed her apprentice, “Make sure you remind him of that, Sakura.”

“Understood.” The girl smiled knowingly. She was not going to sway matters one way or the other, and she felt confident that Gaara could handle things on his own.

“Speaking of which, I want you to know that I believe you are completely prepared for the Exam.” Tsunade announced to her student, “Even now, Sakura, you are a shinobi I can always depend on.”

“Shishou…” Sakura set her tea down, appreciative of the proclamation.

“Don’t get mushy on me.” The woman chided, chomping on her last piece of pear, “Those are just the facts. You and all of your peers are ready.”

They finished eating and Shizune removed the tray, followed out of the office by Ton-Ton. While Tsunade discussed a recently-acquired technique with Sakura, two Chunin came and went with reports. Sakura reprimanded her teacher when she attempted to toss them straight into the trash again. Sakura salvaged the reports and read them over, “Tsunade-sama, these only need short replies.”

She pouted, “Once I respond then they feel entitled to send all of their other requests. It’s always the
same.” Grudgingly, Tsunade accepted the scrolls with a sigh, preparing ink and a brush.

“Good morning!” Lee’s greeting from the open doorway drew their attention. He was followed by Neji as they stepped inside.

“Good morning!” Sakura was equally chipper, “Are you both feeling better?”

“I most certainly am.” Lee declared, “I have never treasured music and the human voice half so much.”

Neji gave a small nod, not nearly as sociable as his friend.

Tsunade beckoned them over, “Both of you, let’s make this quick. You’ve made great progress in healing since that mission.” Lee lined up first, letting the Hokage pass her hands over the sides of his head and ears with a hum of chakra, “Hmm. You’re in better shape than most. I’ll clear you, Lee. If you have any problems going forward please tell me.”

“I will, Hokage-sama.” He stepped away so Neji could bend down.

From her seat, Tsunade inspected the Hyuga more critically, prodding, eventually pressing her palm flat to his forehead. She shut her eyes and sensed for any abnormalities or trauma, “Likewise…” She smiled, “You’ve also improved. It’s a good thing that you got to me when you did. The damage could have been worse.”

“Thank you, Hokage-sama.” He stepped away respectfully.

“Alright,” Tsunade rotated in her chair and stretched her arms over her desk, “All of you please be on your way. I’ll give out mission assignments later. Train hard in the meantime.”

The youngsters promptly evacuated the office and went in separate directions. Sakura was swift to locate the rest of her team, and Lee turned to Neji expectantly, “Tenten said that she had some work to do in the forge, but she should be done soon. Should we forgo training with Grandpa?”

“Just for today. There isn’t enough time.”

“I will return home and tell him, then.” Lee determined, “I will meet you both at our training field shortly!” And he was off like a shot.

Neji followed the peaceful streets toward the Hyuga estate in the daybreak sunshine. It boggled him that Tenten had already been up for several hours, crafting weapons for other shinobi of the village. He had a hard enough time waking up for his early-bird schedule. Of course, Neji imagined it was not an easy task for the Hokage either, who was up and about for some reason. She had been surprisingly alert for 7:30AM. He supposed that Tsunade was using her time wisely before the Chunin Exam arrived.

Neji was also grateful that Tsunade had mended what remained of the traumatic brain injury he sustained in the Marsh Country. She did not care much if he had any recall of events, since Tenten had given quite the lengthy report. Tsunade only asked for him to return if he experienced complications.

The only complication he was experiencing was prolonged embarrassment. He had not told either of his teammates or the Hokage, but Neji was able to remember a laundry-list of things that had happened in the wilds of the Marsh Country. While somewhat jumbled and rooted deeply in emotion, the flashes of memory flustered him at random points throughout each day.
Once back in Leaf after their mission, Neji was able to recall clearly how Lee beat the daylights out of him, trying to reacquaint him with Taijutsu. Lee had also been a capable hunter, a diligent guardian, and had even achieved the rare task of making Neji laugh. It almost made his skin crawl that such a thing had happened, but he was able to recover from it.

What made a most lasting impression was his time with Tenten. She had been very patient and considerate. He remembered her tying his hair up in a ponytail, her clever answers to his many questions, learning how to harness his chakra from her lessons, how Tenten had killed several enemies to preserve him and Lee without an ounce of regret. He also remembered staying close beside her each night, huddled for warmth and a brush of her skin.

And, in his naiveté, he asked if she cared about him on the seaside hilltop. Even today, Neji was surprised by how angrily Tenten had reacted. Though they had resolved their quarrel shortly after that, it still stung him to think about how they had screamed at each other. He believed their days of vicious disagreements were behind them, but maybe that was not the case.

At the Hyuga estate he sat in the tea room and ate a meal from the spread that had been untouched by Hanabi. These days, his younger cousin seemed to be moping about her lack of a headband. Hinata informed him of the girl’s plight. After eating, Neji returned to his room to dress in Wushu attire. He knew that Lee would be able to postpone their training with Wong Leung, but the old man always had them make up for it later in the day. Neji preferred being equipped for when the old man demanded their participation, swinging a switch threateningly.

He tied his hair slightly higher than normal. It was a habit that had stuck. Neji stepped out the sliding door of his room to the porch, stooping over to tap his shoes on. His eyes strayed over the vibrant green lawn of the compound, and then his mind jolted.

Grass on the knoll by the bay, a cool breeze. Tenten had laid still there, grimacing in discomfort from her injury. There she was, picturesque in an assembly of indigo butterflies, trying to catch her breath. Her back had been sliced open because he wasn’t fast enough. She had willingly stood between him and certain death. The feeling filled Neji as he stood upright, shoes on, stepping out onto the lawn in dumbfoundment. She was perfect. He was yearning. He could remember negotiating a relationship with her, anxious, his heartbeat drumming.

Neji stood stupidly in the morning light. Tenten had laughed at his brashness. She accepted. He kissed her several times. The journey wore on as she tried to introduce him to Jyukken, and while he had barely grasped it, he remembered Gentle Fist anyway when it was time throw down the last of their pursuers. It felt like an invisible barb in the center of his torso. He had been so happy. That feeling had not lingered by the time his team boarded the ship home. Strange, for the emotion inside him seemed big enough to fill three oceans full and was not likely to disappear.

What was most astounding, Neji thought, as he took a slow step forward; Tenten had said nothing. She made no demands and no searching remarks on the way back to Leaf. She had let all of it dissipate as if she anticipated he had not wanted any of it.

She still smiled, though. She didn’t look sad.

His breathing quickened. It was fortunate that it was early: few of his clansmen were around to see him rush out of the yard.

In town, Tenten had cleaned up from her work at the forge and set out on the road. She had put on a new white cheongsam with maroon embroidery. For the day, she only carried Hok on her back and side holsters with summoning scrolls. ‘Less is more. I hope we can take it easy today...’
She rounded the corner to the main avenue, seeing that it was beginning to bustle with morning traffic. Ino and Chouji stopped across the street from her, spotting her, and then bounded over together. Tenten greeted her friends warmly.

“Hey there! Hinata told me your team had one heck of a mission!” Ino had a spark of gossip in her eye, “You handled it all, Tenten. Did the Hokage give you a bonus?”

“No. I just did what I had to do.” She smiled sheepishly, “I think Tsunade-sama expects me to be a good leader, by now.”

“Yeah, I guess you’re right.” The blonde girl conceded.

“Are Neji and Lee doing better?” Chouji asked thoughtfully.

“They are.” Tenten was beaming, “You boys should spend some time this afternoon, if we don’t have missions. I noticed that it’s working wonders for the both of them.”

“No problem. Shikamaru should be free by then.”

“And how about you?” Ino inquired, “The girls will want to know about your heroics overseas.”

“Oh…” Tenten folded her arms and held her chin, “It’s not going to…delight everyone.”

“What does that mean?”

“You won’t like how it ended.”

“I won’t?” Ino was perplexed, “You’re all alive. Can’t complain about that, right?”

“My thoughts exactly.” Tenten agreed wholeheartedly.

Chouji interrupted by pointing to the top of a tiled building to their left. The girls swiveled, looking up at Neji who wore a concerning, stern expression. On the stone ledge he locked eyes with his teammate and called to her, “Tenten. You’re late.”

“I’m late?” Tenten muttered, glancing sidelong to her fellow kunoichi, “I swear I was ten minutes ahead.”

“You’re running on Neji-time. You’ll never be early now that you’re on his team again.” Ino grinned, “Good luck! We’ll see you later, Tenten.” She and Chouji proceeded on to meet with Asuma.

Tenten had virtually no chance to get a word in with Neji, trailing behind him as he hurtled over the rooftops towards their destination. ‘This is typical. Doesn’t he know that I just slaved over a furnace for a sword order? For three hours! Or that I left a Shadow Clone to work on it so that I would be on time? I thought Lee told him...’ She exhaled roughly. It was better having him be his normal, bossy self than it was to see him struggle without memory of who he was. It was what she had hoped for. ‘But I am setting the record straight: I am early.’

At the field, dew clung to plants and blades of grass. Neither Lee nor Gai had arrived yet, ‘Of course, because unlike some people, Neji doesn’t care what time they show up! Fuh.’

She rested her hands on her hips, irked, “Listen, Neji. Don’t give me crap about being late! I was working my-!” Tenten fumbled with her words when he charged at her from the side, reached, and in the same motion drew Hok from its sheath.
Tenten had the sense to duck before he severed her head with a sword-swipe. She skidded over wet grass and bramble, shocked, “Hey! What are you-?” He dashed again, nearly driving Hok’s point into her ribcage. She rolled, securing a kunai from the holster on her hip, “Are you nuts?”

Neji attacked again, his face ice-cold, and terror briefly flooded her, ‘Is this an imposter? Did I follow a fake across town just to get murdered?’ As she recalled, Neji did not know a damn thing about swords. Perhaps she was about to meet her maker.

She parried a strong blow that knocked her back. She took out a second kunai, wielding with both hands as she spun and rushed though the clearing. One of the frog-clasp ties of her collar had been cut, ‘This is new!’ Tenten parried again and kicked him viciously in the stomach. Neji folded backwards, rolled impressively, and was on his feet again.

“Just stop it!” She shrieked, “What did I do to you?” Tenten tossed one kunai vertically into the air and launched the second one at his hand, hoping to disarm him. He blocked with Hok. She suspected it really was her teammate, and that he had just reverted to his past asshole-tendencies.

“Can I not even get a ‘good morning’ before you pull this?” She roared indignantly. With her hands free, she summoned from a tool scroll and let loose a storm of weaponry. She did not feel guilty about it.

The onslaught nicked his arm and upper right leg harmlessly as Neji parried skillfully, running to evade, and closed the distance as Tenten landed on the ground after her jump. The kunai she had first thrown fell neatly into her hand as she executed an aerial cartwheel, aiming the knife for his hand again. When he deflected it, her rolling kick crashed into his chin and knocked him backwards. He fell with Hok still secure in his grip.

Tenten stood up, panting, and with wild eyes demanded, “Give that back.” She thought about sneaking a Shadow Clone behind him from the tree line to retrieve her prized weapon, but she supposed that he would spot it.

Neji rose slowly but had disengaged from the fight. With the jian lowered, he winced in pain and he rubbed his chin, spitting out blood.

Furious, Tenten repeated, “Do you hear me, Neji? Give that back!”

His eyes skirted over to her and he turned his head, still massaging the site of his injury, “Take it, then. That’s enough practice.”

Tenten marched towards her teammate, livid, “Practice? You put me through that just to try it out?” Her hands balled into fists, her arms held straight at her sides as she came within inches of his face, glowering, “If you don’t give me warning, then I can’t promise I’ll let you keep your extremities.”

He seemed much too casual in response to her anger, “Next time I’ll warn you.”

“Is it so much to ask? I’ve been working since four; then you complain about my perceived lack of promptness…and try to kill me.” Her expression was twisted with resentment, “I don’t put you through anything like that, Neji.”

“Yyou try not to.” He agreed, reaching around to steady the scabbard on her back. With his right hand, Neji returned the jian to its proper place. Tenten was a bit mystified when he made no motion to unloop her from the encirclement of his arms.

She regarded him as her anger began to ebb, “Sorry about your face.”
“I deserved it.” Neji said genuinely, “I wanted you to see that I remembered what you taught me.”

“You-?” She blinked hard, teetering on the edge of confusion and further annoyance. Tenten peeked left and right, intrigued by the odd embrace as Neji held both ends of Hok. It contradicted his usual personal-space-bubble rule that, she had noticed, he stopped enforcing lately. Indeed Neji did remember some swordsmanship, from what she could see. ‘That’s…probably not the only thing he can recall.’

A spike of excitement kicked neurons on faster than a direct injection of caffeine, which she probably needed. Suddenly, Tenten was aware that Neji was subtly communicating with her. As Lee had once said, she was very good at picking up signals. ‘There’s half a chance I’m wrong about this, but…’ She fought the urge to grin, ‘I think he remembers it all.

Beneath his chin an ugly, purple-gray bruise had appeared. She gently slipped her hand over the battered skin as if to apologize. Neji shut his eyes for a moment, sedated. The young woman had an internal conference for a few seconds, ‘Ah. I definitely should. More importantly, I want to.’

With half-lidded eyes, Tenten indulged the impulse and leaned forward, adroitly kissing the ornery man who still had not let go. In fact, the grip he had on the sword at her shoulder tightened. She could hear Neji take a cleansing breath before pulling her in. Her well-intentioned gesture was veiled by his reaction, kissing fiercely, his hand quickly finding the side of her face.

A blip of rational thought may have stuck with her briefly, but Tenten lost track of it as they tousled. Open-mouthed and burning, honesty had prevailed, and she moved her hand from his chin to the back of his head without thinking. The two stayed there for quite some time, taking advantage of the privacy of the early-morning hours.

While studying her lips and the small of her back simultaneously, Neji detected a radiant heat coming from Tenten’s skin; a thin layer of sweat. He halted halfway through another kiss, inspecting her with concern, “Should I have waited?”

Tenten struggled to regain satisfactory brain function, “Waited? To be honest, you never should have, Neji. I mean, even before we set sail you had the-”

He interrupted, “I meant this morning. You were in the forge.”

“Am I sticky?” Tenten peeled back in distress, evaluating her state, “Oh, a little bit. It was hot in the workshop but I was feeling fine when I closed up.”

“Then I did it.” Neji assumed, kissing her earlobe where a red tassel earring swayed.

“You did.” She confirmed, unable to stifle a new sound that came from her throat. He tilted her head and kissed his way down, trying to coax the sound out again.

All of it was very nice, Tenten yielded, but she was trying to decipher if Neji had some knowledge of loving touches or if it was just instinct. She felt flimsy and unskilled when she kissed back, pushing back on his chest to make an announcement, “I think we should…not surprise Lee. He’ll be here soon.”

Neji acknowledged her with a nod, stealing another lip-lock before taking a step back. He let a heavy, gypsum gaze settle on the young woman. Tenten’s smile had a touch of caution in it, “You probably would have done better by just talking to me.”

The pull to touch her again was difficult to resist, “There was no way to accurately express it.”
“But with fighting? We wasted ten minutes with that, Neji.”

“It could have been longer.”

She shrugged lightly, “Yeah, I suppose.” Tenten flinched at his intense stare, “What?”

“What we established is still in effect, Tenten.” Neji informed her.

“If you’re referring to me being your girlfriend-”

“And no one else’s.” His said with an apical tone.

“Exactly.” She confirmed, “I wasn’t going to look elsewhere whether you remembered or not.” Tenten restrained a chuckle when he nodded seriously, “You should take me out somewhere to spend some time. That means no work or training can be involved.”

Neji filtered the idea through his customs and substrata of willingness before he replied, “Is that what you want?”

“Yes. It’s a rather typical request.” Tenten explained, “I just want to be around you.”

He wrestled a smile but it inched into his features anyway. Tenten captured the extraordinary expression in her mind’s eye and then turned on her heel, crossing the field that was still littered with her weapons. She shouted over her shoulder, “We should probably break this gently. Don’t look too happy in front of Lee or he’ll figure it out.”

Lee’s impeccable timing allowed him to stroll onto the scene and overhear the comment, “I am supposed to figure something out?” He glanced Neji’s way, seeing a scowl was firmly in place. ‘Normal.’ Lee deduced. He then observed Tenten as she retrieved scattered weapons. It appeared to be a classic day of training that was about to begin. He crossed over to Tenten first.

“Hey, Lee, what I meant was…” Tenten scrounged for a substitute answer, “Look at Neji’s chin. You’ll be able to tell.”

“Ah.” Lee exchanged a stare with his good friend, who seemed to be in an emotional flux. What was plain to see was the purple patch on Neji’s jaw, “He misbehaved.”

“He did, actually.”

“Did he apologize?” He asked quietly of the kunoichi.

Tenten fought a smirk, “He did. Sincerely.”
Into Adulthood! Primed Exam Participants

Chapter Soundtrack: “Thousands” by Kenmochi Hidefumi

Obito followed the stone steps up the side of the mountain towards the town’s shrine. A friend and fellow father, Mister Hirano Seike, had handed him a crinkled paper advertisement before Obito began the hike. He read over the flier as he walked distractedly, remembering Seike’s upbeat greeting on the roadside.

“I picked that up while I was in Ine. A lot of laborers in the harbor were handing these out.” Seike told him, “I thought because you’re a ninja that you might like to watch it, Tobi.”

“Thank you.” Obito smiled wistfully, having forgone his mask that day, “I probably won’t be able to make it, but I’m happy that you gave me this.”

He re-read the advertisement while he climbed:

Announcing the annual Chunin Selection Exam, hosted by Konohagakure and its esteemed partners! Last call for registering Genin is April 30th, no exceptions. Three-man cells only with valid identification may enter. Stage One of the Exam will commence on May 20th with subsequent stages concluding within one week. Mandatory one-month-layover for Stage Three participants spans May 26th to June 26th in preparation of Final Rounds and Stadium opening.

Visitors and guests from far and wide are welcome! Valid photo ID and security check compulsory upon admittance. Arrange your accommodations in early June! Hotels will be overbooked. Some reservations are non-refundable. Tickets sell out fast, so contact your local agent today!

Only the most worthy, young shinobi will be chosen to compete in the Third Stage Tournament! Do not miss this year’s clash! Betting booths open June 26th promptly at 8:00AM.

“Hm!” Obito said to himself, “This one sounds like it’s a big deal.”

He would regret skipping it, but he had little choice in the matter. Obito followed the forested staircase to its top, where a well-kept shrine sprawled over the plateau. Every time he ascended it he recalled the day he got married, scaling the old stairs in the blistering heat of summer, years ago.

Across the courtyard he could see Rin and Yuma washing their hands at the cold water scoop. Obito had fallen behind them while he read. He stayed to the right as he passed beneath a torii gate, picking up the pace.

“What took you?” Rin asked in amusement. Obito was rapidly rinsing off his hands at the purifier.

“Seike gave me something.” He explained, pointedly not mentioning what it was. Yuma would have a fit if he learned that he would miss such a spectacle in the Leaf Village.

The boy had hopped up wooden steps to the shrine bell, urging his parents to hurry up. On the way, Obito explained quietly to his wife, “It was an advertisement for the Chunin Exam.”

“Wow. That time of year already?”

“Yeah, several weeks away.”

“Do you think anyone will try to take advantage of it again?” Rin wondered.
“I don’t know.” Obito admitted, “But I’ll find out.”

He would be leaving soon to check in with the Akatsuki. Thankfully, he had useful information to share with Jiraiya, including three out of the five Akatsuki hideout locations. With that in mind Obito thought, ‘Now we just need to figure out where Jiraiya-sama went to… Sesshu’s been tracking him for quite a while.’

A niggling feeling in the back of his mind feared that Sesshu had been hurt or apprehended during his search. Losing their faithful ninken would not only shatter Rin, but he would be devastated as well. Each day they waited was another drop in the pail of Obito’s uncertainty.

What was becoming clearer to him, in light of recent events, was that his little family had an unacceptably fragile support system. He and Rin had maturely discussed the unknown watchman’s visit and how they had been observed. Naturally, Rin had demanded that they take proper measures by informing other residents, setting traps around the property, and even preparing Yuma for the worst. She was anxious for her dog’s return as well; hopefully Sesshu would arrive with some good news.

‘There aren’t many ways we connect with the outside world now.’ Obito thought, ‘Some townspeople. Sesshu. Jiraiya. We really are cut off… We’re not equipped to deal with emergencies or threats.’ It was this vulnerability that had him seriously considering a communication to Leaf, or at least, to the people who may wish to help them.

‘Maybe for Rin’s sake, Kakashi would try to help. Even if he decided to hate me for playing dead for so long. And…I don’t know how my clan would react to learning that I’m alive…’ His optimism spurred another idea, ‘Jiraiya’s students will help us. Naruto was every bit as friendly as Sensei was when I met him. Rin said that she met one of his teammates, Gaara. Maybe we aren’t as alone as I thought.’

“Ready?” Yuma’s voice snapped Obito out of his contemplation. He reached up to a thick rope and rang the shrine’s bell.

He gestured for his parents, on either side of him, to simultaneously bow twice. They did as Yuma directed in easy synchronization, although the two sets of claps that followed were slower than their child’s. They bowed once more together, with wishes in their hearts. Rin and Obito, of course, had implored the shrine’s god for the same thing.

“Keep us safe.” Rin whispered, as she was the last to turn away from the altar. She descended the steps with a worried look. Obito discreetly laced his hand with hers as they walked.

“Don’t worry.” He smiled sidelong at his wife, “We came up with a good plan. And we’ll ask Jiraiya about it when we get back in touch.”

“I’ll try, but when you and Sesshu are both gone I always feel…” Rin sighed, “Like the world is a much scarier place. We’ve taken a lot for granted.”

“I know.”

They walked slowly as Yuma trotted ahead, reveling in the late-Spring colors of the mountainside.

“I don’t think a prayer will protect us.” Rin’s expression had become stern, “If that stalker comes back while you’re gone…I’ll be ready to end him.”

“Rin, you probably won’t have so much as a mouse squeak by our house these days. It’s been a few weeks since it happened.”
“That’s not enough time to put me at ease. If anyone goes near Yuma…” She repeated in a severe voice, “I won’t hesitate and I won’t regret. The nice, little girl inside me is gone.”

Obito nodded in understanding. In the years they had been together, he had witnessed Rin undergo a transformation into a much tougher, more skeptical person. She had a lot of qualities that her older sister Tsume did, as he recalled. While Rin maintained her intrinsic compassion and dedication, Obito conceded that, these days, Rin was the wrong person to pick a fight with.

The family followed a path through sloping woods back to their home. They popped into the house, hopeful that their beloved family dog had returned. There was neither hide nor hair of Sesshu. Deflated, the family ate lunch together before Obito changed into his disguise. He and Yuma squeezed each other in a loving hug before Obito stepped outside to the porch, followed by Rin.

His mask was tilted to the side of his head, exposing his face as he grinned, “Are you going to miss me?”

“Yes.” She smiled and folded into his embrace, “I just want to know…how much longer do you think you’ll need to keep this up?”

Obito looked at her, his mouth pursed, reluctant to answer.

Rin went on, “Something’s got to give, Obito. One day, those criminals you are watching are going to be on the move again. When that happens, does Jiraiya-sama expect you to chase after them and keep track of it all? You doing that may not help the Leaf Village as much as you want to believe it will.”

“Someone has to.”

“Let Jiraiya do it.” She insisted, “He put you up to this. He has his act together now, you said. His students are growing up and will be out on their own…Jiraiya can make the time to follow the Akatsuki.” Rin lowered her eyes, adding, “If you were here…it’d be safer. We could spend time. Yuma and I would be happier…and…”

“I know, Rin.” He touched his forehead to hers, “I know that I’ve got to talk to him about it. It’s taken up a lot of our time…since I’ve gone away. It’s something we never would have chosen to do on our own.”

Her voice was quiet, “Don’t you…want more children?”

“Yeah, I keep thinking about it.”

“We’ll never get around to it, at this rate.” Rin replied somberly, “And what’s the point of having a family who’s going to miss Dad all of the time?”

“You have a point.” He conceded, “I need to tap out and switch with Jiraiya-sama. This isn’t fair anymore.”

“Be careful, please.” Rin pecked his lips before reconsidering, and she leaned in again for a second, longer kiss, “I’ll keep everything under control until you come back.”

“You always do. Say…” Obito’s expression was mischievous, “Do you want to try again when I come home, Rin?”

She slowly composed her answer, “That depends. The quicker you can get Jiraiya-sama to take over your watch…” Rin smiled again, “I think I’d like to try all day, every day.”
Thrilled, he kissed his wife full on the mouth again, chuckling wildly, and then Obito set out into the rolling green of the forest. Rin stood and let out a long breath, folding her arms as she thought, ‘I hope I don’t regret making that offer! Knowing Obito, he’d probably want five or more kids if I didn’t stop him. Sheesh! Where would we put them? This tiny cabin…’

She tapped her chin as she turned around and entered the house, ‘Of course it’s just a long-shot wish. We would probably have to return to Leaf before our family could grow. It isn’t wise to stay out here in the middle of nowhere and expect security. Things have gone wrong before we were watched…’

Yuma was waiting patiently at the kitchen table beside a spread of herbs and tubers, “So you’ll teach me to make medicine now? You said you’ll let me watch.”

“Yes. If you’re careful with the knife, I’ll even let you cut some of these up.” Rin offered, taking a seat beside him, “Let’s work on the big roots first. We need to grind them up.” She reached for a worn mortar and pestle.

The two began the painstaking process of smashing tubers into goo on top of wax paper. Yuma seemed to genuinely enjoy it. Rin’s mind wandered as they worked.

“We were nearly dead a few years ago. It’s funny that we can get over these things so quickly.’ She shut her eyes for a moment, ‘A watchman? Well, that’s fine. I can beat a person up. But there are some enemies we have that we can’t really fight. Even when I tried my best…we nearly lost everything.’

Rin glanced sadly at her son, still thinking, ‘I’ve been selfish. Staying here. Hiding. If Obito and I die here in Shincha, where will you go, Yuma? I could only hope Sesshu comes back. That he’d help you get to Konoha. That you’d persevere and thrive in the place you always wanted to be…’ Her mouth curved upward, ‘With all of those talented Uchiha to call you one of their own. I want you to have a vivid, adventurous life…even if one day we won’t be in it.’

While she and Yuma worked on preparing herbs from their garden, Rin was swept back into a memory from nearly four years prior. It had been winter. Back then, Yuma was a toddler learning how to speak and express his wants and needs. She remembered how Obito had delighted in bundling up the child and romping in snow drifts with him. How Yuma had obsessed over snow and even brought it into the house by concealing it in his coat pockets. His parents could tell what he was doing, of course.

Rin recalled the sound of Yuma’s soggy boots squishing down the hall as he tried to outrun his father. He screamed shrilly when Obito caught him, promptly turning out his pockets.

The memory progressed vividly. Then Rin was by herself for house-calls, discovering multiple families with seasonal influenza. At the end of the day, more than half of Shincha had been infected, by her estimate. Though Rin scrambled to produce vaccines in her small office in town, after three straight days of work, even she and Obito were not spared from the epidemic.

Rin continued to chop up a handful of herbs, lost in the terrifying feeling of being too sick to move. It still haunted her. She had despaired. Fifteen people died within three weeks. She had supposed the vaccine she distributed to townspeople was ineffective. Though immunized, Obito had fallen ill anyway. Only Yuma had been spared, thankfully. She and her husband had drifted in and out of consciousness, barely able to care for the baby, relying on Sesshu to fetch them trivial things like water or food to eat. They had been prisoners in their home, crippled with fever, unable to tend to Yuma properly.

When Rin wondered if death was certain, Obito was fortunate enough to bounce back. He regained
some strength and nursed his family as best he could. By the skin of their teeth, they recovered, weak and underfed; they returned to the village to find others had survived.

‘To this day, I still don’t know where that virus came from or how it spread so rapidly.’ She added to Yuma’s pile of crushed tubers, ‘It was like a dream; waking up in the hallway of our house, too sick to move. Collapsing anywhere. Obito thinks it was a miracle, like we were destined to make it…’

Rin shuddered at the thought. Danger always felt like it was lurking. Back then, it had been an aggressive strain of the flu. Now, it was a mysterious ninja watching their home. ‘And while Obito’s away, I’m on the front lines fighting. I want to protect my family, but is it going to be enough?’ Part of her constantly feared that her efforts would come up short, and her family was going to pay the price for it.

“Am I helping?” Yuma asked curiously, gesturing to his work, “Mine look messier than yours, Mama.”

Rin glanced over to her son’s handiwork, realizing she had lagged behind. He had prepared almost all of the plants spread out on the table.

She smiled wearily, “You’re doing great. You know…I’m going to need you to help me a lot more from now on, Yuma.”

“No problem!” He grinned back at her confidently.

When Rin was about to begin scooping morsels into her mortar, a sound caught her ear. She quickly stood up from her seat, rushing to the front of the house without a word. Baffled, Yuma hurried after her.

Rin flew out the door and across the lawn, greeting her tired ninjens as he trudged up the hill. She ran to the bulky hound and kneeled down. Sesshu wagged his tail in greeting as Rin flung her arms around his neck, hugging him fiercely, “You’re alright! Oh, Sesshu!”

“Yes, I am. And so is Jiraiya-sama.” Sesshu reported happily, “I found him in a very peculiar place…”

Recently, a few members of the Hyuga clan had noticed that Neji was in a good mood.

As to why that was, most were unsure. He didn’t smile or talk much more than he normally did, but his eyes were clear and he seemed more attentive to the people around him. While it was a subtle change, members of both the Branch and Main families quietly agreed that it was easier to be in his presence nowadays.

And certainly, Hinata noticed the change but could not put her finger on what had caused it. Neji’s routine was as unassuming as ever: going out early in the morning with his teammates, occasionally stopping home for mission supplies, training with Lee’s grandfather later in the day, and then joining his family for an evening meal. ‘Well, no matter what it could be, Neji-niisan deserves to be happy.’ Hinata thought to herself. She couldn’t shake the feeling, however, that it was not merely her cousin feeling arbitrarily content; it was that it seemed someone was making him happy.

She chose not to jump to conclusions, but Hinata was hopeful that Tenten had something to do with it. ‘I want to ask Onee-san about it. Oh…I haven’t seen my friends in a few days. I’ve had two missions back to back. I’d like some company…’ Hinata decided it was high-time to make plans with her fellow kunoichi. There was plenty to discuss.
While Hinata prepared for an evening visit with her friends, elsewhere in the Hyuga abode, her cousin has chosen to stay in.

Down the corridor in the Main house, Neji had retired for the night in his bedroom. He had finished a bath and redressed in simple clothes. His wardrobe, since he had gotten older, had adopted many whites, blacks, grays and teals. Hiashi had said those were the same colors his father always wore. Coincidentally, they had the same taste.

Training with Wong Leung that afternoon had been particularly challenging, Neji thought to himself. Tenten had dropped by briefly, making an attempt to mimic the exercises he and Lee performed. It was a tremendous effort for her to last thirty minutes in a prayer-crouch. After Tenten gave up she muttered under her breath to Neji, “Now I know why you hate those…”

Wong Leung clearly had a soft spot for her. He made idle chit-chat in Hanwen with Tenten before she politely departed and returned home. He then seamlessly resumed his brutalizing of Lee and Neji when she had gone. While his body’s ability to maintain balance teetered, Neji’s mind was calmer. Overall, he felt much better; about anything and everything. Free.

Now in his room, laying stomach-down on his bed, Neji thumbed through the old novel that Tenten had given him. Lee, a more avid reader, had already finished it. On their past mission to the Marsh Country, both of his teammates had brought up the book out of curiosity. ‘I gather it contains more pertinent information than any of us would have thought…’ Lee and Tenten had briefly discussed the unusual sword she could summon from the ground, explaining it to him.

Neji cracked the book open at the page he had saved, and then, after a moment, he let it rest parchment-down on the bed as he groaned quietly. It seemed foolish to try to learn more about Tenten by reading an old legend. It was more satisfying to speak to her and ask her things in person, anyway. He was better at talking than he used to be, and he very much liked talking to her. Except that, lately, Neji could not hold a conversation with Tenten long before he was compelled to place his hands or mouth on any part of her within reach. The latter was, by far, the most unusual behavior he had ever exhibited in his life.

And by some normal humans’ accounts, his behavior would not at all be regarded as “strange” or “inappropriate.” That was, if anyone knew that he was attracted to his trusted friend and teammate. Even Lee had not been made aware of their relationship yet, and Tenten promised that Lee would be the first person she would tell.

He felt. He felt so much all at once that it became a chore to make sense of his actions or crazy thoughts. Tenten had seemed so calm about it. She didn’t gush or swoon when he became that… that vulnerable, affectionate being that would appear in sporadic bursts. She didn’t criticize him for any of the unfamiliar things he did. She consciously kept her cool, even now that, sometimes, he wanted to watch her get excited. It did occur to him why Tenten was not prone to overreacting to his changes.

Neji made her that way. Their years as a team had installed him as the de facto leader. When he chose not to be openly callous or unkind, Neji had to admit that he was strict, aloof, and officious. He was in charge, and there was little time for friendship or any other soft things that many of his shinobi brethren succumbed to. Tenten settled into the arrangement. She was a harder, more threatening ninja than any of her kunoichi peers. She did not burden the team with weakness or sensitivity.

And then he grew up. He became more insightful. Neji sensed that Tenten did feel tender things; that they were buried, soft-spoken, unacknowledged emotions. He was smart enough to take notice when she interacted with Lee, how she was gentler and more outgoing with him.
She had grown up too. Tenten wanted to go out with boys, mingle with her friends, and generally be social in ways Neji was unable to. He watched from afar, never quite sure how he could learn to do the things that Tenten seemed to do effortlessly. Indeed, Neji recognized the time he became aware of her affection for him. After the first Chunin Exam, he presumed, was when he detected it. That too, of course, was something he could scarcely understand.

Then, at a crossroads, after enduring compromise and change, Neji discovered that it was no good to be apart from her; that there was no use in asking her to suppress feelings now that, truly, he wanted them all to himself and wanted them all of the time. At last he could appreciate those things that he once thought were weak or ineffective. Yet…Tenten dutifully remained cautious. She remained professional and even somewhat skeptical of what had happened. She had not yet let her guard down completely. Neji had to confess that he had not done so either.

It would take more time to learn how to be entirely carefree, he was sure. She must have known that too. It was not a hopeless situation, thankfully. Early morning trysts on the training field had revealed to Neji that, despite her cultivated exterior, Tenten would still walk away trembling after intense kisses.

With a low grunt, Neji rolled onto his back, remembering what it was like when she shuddered and made those pleased little sounds. Moments like that. When her eyes opened and she looked at him; and she looked at everything there was inside of him, good and bad, and adored it. It was a pleasure to think that he did the same when he looked at her, though his powerful eyes could drink her in faster.

Just thinking about it made him hard. He rolled over again, face-down on the mattress, and from the corner of his eye he glimpsed the novel at the edge of the bed. Neji exhaled roughly. He would be lucky if he could ever focus properly again. His brain was constantly trying to re-negotiate how to concentrate on mission details and shinobi business…as well as making sense of the blurred territory of deep affection and sexual desire. He was surprised by how much these qualities blended, in his case.

Like most men his age would say: he would figure it out. Neji steadied his breathing and relaxed; then he reached for the book again. He resumed the tale of The First Shinobi.

In the time after Tian Tian had rediscovered her student, Yuanjia, they discussed the political climate and how quickly time had gone by.

While Tian Tian had been withdrawn from the world, sulking from country to country, Yuanjia had been in frequent contact with her father as well as his own tribe. He explained that many of his relatives had travelled from the Kingdom of Han and settled in the free lands surrounding Ukigaru’s estate. The arrival of these exotic and talented people had been generally well-received. And, naturally, Yuanjia learned many things from them in his teacher’s absence. He was just as skilled a warrior as any veteran ninja in her father’s service, but with a few oddball tricks to use against practitioners of Ninjutsu.

“How is my father?” Tian Tian asked. “I would imagine that he is disappointed with me.”

“Ukigaru-sama only wishes to see you safely home, someday.” Yuanjia told her, “My impression was that he does not believe in smothering your fire. Even if your travels take you far and wide, he wants to see you glow on the horizon.”

“How terribly poetic you are.” She chided, “My mother and sister most likely do not feel that way.”

“They do not.” Yuanjia confirmed, “They are the sheltered, fearful sort.”
“I have no interest in returning.” Tian Tian said flatly.

“Understood. However, if you do not see fit to return to your homestead in the mountains, my people have settled close by in the steppe. I beg that you consider meeting my tribe, and grace the stories of my master with truth, Sensei.”

“Do not call me that.” She objected, “You are grown and taught. That time is behind us.”

“That may be so, but you imparted on me the most valuable lessons. My respect for you is chronic at the least, Tian Tian.”

She only replied, “That’s better.”

The swordswoman entertained the journey to the prairie lowlands where the Han people had joined the people of the Land of Earth. Tian Tian was keen to notice how the students of Ninshu had increased noticeably all throughout the lands. Clans of “ninja” were plentiful and, on occasion, combative. She snickered at such posturing, “Surely they known that their internal squabbling is the exact thing the Sage condemned? My father told me that Rikudo Sennin created Ninshu as a way to accept the chakra that is in the world now, as well as how to accept each other.”

“Not every student completely understands what they are taught. Ninshu can be interpreted many ways.” Yuanjia supposed, “They don’t wish for war, but for distinction. Many such ninja admire the Sage’s children and aspire to be like them.”

“Why is that?”

“They were born with his greatness and inherited his power.” He explained, “Juranda has many friends now. His elder brother, Tasaisha, is an esteemed prince of his country. He is so powerful, it is said, that he needs no guards, no friends nor a clan. He relies only on himself.”

“What brazen falsehood.” Tian Tian laughed, “No man truly exists on his own. I’ll bet he pays someone for the food he puts in his mouth…that fat-headed prince.”

“That is certain, but madam, do not speak so profanely of an honorable young lord.”

They continued to speak while crossing grasslands.

“Yuanjia, look carefully for when the profane overlaps with the truth.” She warned, “The lords Hamura and Hagoromo were only men, after all. You can see their descendants everywhere these days, like those white-eyed fools, or the wood-keepers. Ninja are merely people, in the end. Don’t let anyone think otherwise of that man called Tasaisha.”

“Your father knew him, is that right?”

“When he was young, yes, my father met that boy. He was quite the talent.” She added, “And as stuck-up as they come. I have heard that Hagoromo-sama trusted little Juranda with his will instead.”

“Yes. That action has chafed many. Although…I do find it a sensible choice. Just as you have said, Juranda feels quite firmly that all ninja are foremost people, and worthy of friendship.”

“Why all of this attention on them? Have I really missed so much gossip during my sabbatical?”

Yuanjia was surprised, “Do you not know? The Sage of the Six Paths had passed on.”
The kunoichi was taken aback by the news.

“It’s true. Not long before he died, the Sage released the Juubi’s energy from his body and created life. That chakra took the forms of beasts with many tails; just as innocent as children, all named and cared for until the Sage’s life expired.” Yuanjia explained, “The Tailed Beasts are roaming peaceably and learning about the world…but Tasaisha and Juranda can use the chakra inside of them, if they so wish.”

“Well of course, that power was once a part of their father. They should not tamper with it; after all, the Great Sage would not have done such a thing so that fools could interfere with new life.”

“Sometimes princes feel entitled.” Yuanjia observed, “We mustn’t turn a blind eye to their decisions. If they choose poorly, they can tear apart this prosperous world that we enjoy, thanks to Rikudo Sennin.”

Tian Tian wholly agreed. She was pleased that her beliefs corresponded with those of her former student’s. Believing that Yuanjia made a fine companion, she was more than happy to be introduced to the people of his tribe. Though they seemed strange at first; with queues of long black hair on their heads, colorful silk clothes, and their whimsical goods…Tian Tian felt the tribe was authentic and charming.

They were welcomed into the village on the plateau and stayed there for many months. It was there that Tian Tian was shown that Ninshu was not as new a concept as it seemed. An analog of that “way” existed in the Kingdom of Han for over a thousand years, and they called it the way of the Tao. When they spoke of chakra they called it chi. When they spoke of jutsu they called it shoufa. And when they spoke of dumplings, it was a food so delicious that it negated any food that Tian Tian had ever eaten in her homeland.

What she absorbed from everyday life with Yuanjia’s people was that balance was essential. The balance of light and shadow. Male and female. Life and death. They spun stories and doctrine that Ninshu had yet to employ. The great masters of Tao Arts did not make an attempt to teach Tian Tian anything until they saw true appreciation and humbleness in the woman. It was not long before she had adapted the new way of life, becoming a neighbor to Yuanjia in a small cabin, as well as a fellow disciple of the Tao.

She learned that the relatives of Yuanjia, masters of binding spells, elements, and Wushu, referred to themselves by the family name Sa Gou. Emblems and crests they had brought over were emblazoned with a dog surrounded by peonies, the foremost symbols of honor and loyalty in their culture. Tian Tian enjoyed learning about their lives, and, over time, was taught about their techniques as well.

She and Yuanjia trained as equals, participating in tasks as meaningless as drawing water, and sometimes learning the complexity of Yin and Yang techniques that Tao Arts emphasized. As their efforts wore on, Tian Tian had no choice but to accept that Yuanjia was not the clever boy under her mentorship she had once known. He became a scholarly warrior who stood taller than she, gentlemanly-mannered, and swifter with a sword than her on most days. She was no longer too proud to admit it.

While living with the Sa Gou people calmed her restless spirit, Tian Tian’s ambitious, outspoken nature remained intact. She enjoyed teasing Yuanjia during lessons to see if he could keep his focus. She criticized food he cooked even when she found no fault with it. He was quietly abashed by her attention, but every so often retorted with his own quips. Tribesman poked fun at their inseparable friendship, but after nearly a year they asked Yuanjia to send the shinobi woman on her way. She was scaring away potential wives who had interest in him.
“She taught you many things, but there is nothing left you can learn from her.” His auntie advised, “Don’t remain ineligible just for her sake. She burns a bit too bright for the Sa Gou people, and she might scorch us into the ground if she stays.”

Yuanjia stubbornly refused to dismiss Tian Tian, keeping his relatives’ wishes to cast her out a secret. His timidity had made it difficult for him to express the great love he felt for his once-teacher. More than that, he was troubled that she might consider such romantic feelings unacceptable, and if Tian Tian learned of it, that she would excuse herself from his company.

He persisted, ignoring complaints from impatient family, and would watch with great admiration as Tian Tian mastered stepping through shadows. Her skill with bending light and shadow was the talk of her mentors. As she excelled with Yin and Yang abilities, she had noticed a small melancholy that had overcome her companion. Though Yuanjia denied it, Tian Tian had begun to suspect that she had worn out her welcome. Washer-women were not shy about telling her that she was a distraction to a fine young man.

The revelation made her restless. It was quite plain to her how Yuanjia felt, despite his modest manner. Aware that he feared social stigma that villagers were already circulating, Tian Tian thought that her impetuous demeanor could bring about a favorable solution. She had few qualms with telling the young man that she returned his sentiments.

She stepped through shadow one evening to confront Yuanjia behind his home, as he poured water into a trough for livestock. He was startled by her abrupt appearance.

“I was told you would be under the master elder’s tutelage tonight.” He then asked, “Was I required for a lesson as well?”

“No, the elder does not feel well.” She wore a small smile.

“How unfortunate.”

“How unfortunate.”

“He politely did so, mildly nervous, and was further alarmed by her straightforward remarks.

“I’ve been told I should leave.” Tian Tian announced, “A man your age needs to consider building a future and family. You should not be accompanying a vagabond shinobi.”

“Pay them no mind.”

“For your well-being I must respect what’s being said.” She stated as they sat near a hearth, “Yuanjia, you should give your attention to Sa Gou women and let me travel again. I am better-informed than I was. You needn’t worry.”

“I have no desire to give my attentions to them, most especially when I am forced to.” Yuanjia replied sharply.

“No desire? Then do you mean…that you desire me?” She was a cunning wolf of a woman, coyly smiling.

His countenance wavered at the suggestion, “That wasn’t my meaning, Tian Tian. And surely you would find such a passion to be entirely incorrect.” To prove his point he bowed his head to the thatched-grass floor, submissively, “You who I called teacher…should not be affronted that way.”

“How old do I seem? How
worthy of respect do I seem, to you? Eh? One who shirks responsibility and fights ruffians on the moorland, homeless and ungrateful. Do not think so highly of me.’

“But I will.” Yuanjia insisted.

“You are much too devoted, it would appear.” Tian Tian observed, “Any true student would be wiser than you and agree with what I said.”

“But I am no longer that.” He acknowledged.

“We are no longer that.” She agreed, “It was only for a short time. And as I am an individual well-acquainted with things incorrect and obscene…you ought not to be surprised that I feel as you do.” She shut her eyes with a soft laugh, “That I love you in a way that maybe I shouldn’t.”

Eyes wide with astonishment, Yuanjia accepted the words in silence. Excitement and uncertainty filled him when the woman reached to touch his face lightly with her fingertips.

“I won’t deny it. I do not want you to leave, no matter how the Sa Gou feel about it. Or what they think…” He took a kneeling step towards Tian Tian, “We can always leave this place. I love you and I want to please you.” He held her hand firmly to the side of his face, “That is what I have been thinking all along.”

Tian Tian pressed a long kiss to his mouth before informing him, “Good. But you don’t know how to please me yet. You are too inexperienced. Han people are so formal and strict with relations, and here in these lands men roll in haystacks long before finding a wife.”

“That isn’t our way.” He admitted in embarrassment.

“Then I’m going to teach you the way.” She decided, “And it will be the last thing I teach you.”

Neji slipped a page marker into the book and shut it. He was a tad disoriented by the passage he had read.

If he recalled some time ago, Lee had warned him about the plot twist. He expressed that it was a curiously honest depiction of a relationship, for ancient times. Lee said he had liked it.

He stood and snapped the light off in his room. Neji settled on his bed again, letting the back of his head fall heavily on a pillow. Just as soon as he had begun reading, the story felt a little too personal. If merely by coincidence, Tenten had been teaching him all she could in the Marsh Country a short time ago; by extension, so had Lee. Like Yuanjia, Neji was also learning the way of the Tao from an old master.

He thought he could be relating to Yuanjia because he was a more reserved, formal kind of character. ‘Like myself.’ Maybe it was because the young man was simmering with deep emotions that he wasn’t sure how to express, or it was as simple as Tian Tian being so alike to the girl he knew.

Whatever the case, it had tipped the scale of resemblance more than what Neji was comfortable with. It would be better to stop reading for now, even if the protagonists were about to fornicate in a scene too sensational for historical storytelling. Neji did not often read; least of all gratuitous romance.

There were other things to think about to drive the imagery out of his mind. For instance, Tenten had told a ‘white lie’ to Lee and their Sensei the day before. It was something she did every once in a blue moon in order to secure herself extra free time. Neji and Lee tended to forget that Tenten devoted a large portion of her day to weapon-making and sales, and consequently she would remind
them that she “wanted a life,” even if it meant robbing time. Business was better than usual, thus decreasing any leisure she could enjoy.

She had told Gai that she would be negotiating with a material vender who could become a supplier for her shop, and maybe even help her open a second location. Before Gai could happily excuse her and wish her luck, she added that Neji would not be available for team training either. He had an obligation with his clan. Gai granted their time away without question. All of the excuses were completely false, of course. Tenten was obtaining an opportunity they could use to get to know each other.

Neji was not entirely sure what they planned to do yet. His mind automatically went to training, missions, and other serious matters. Then he recalled how he had relaxed and spoken with Tenten on the deck of the Fog Skipper, and that seemed more like what she had in mind.

It was also inconvenient that they had to substitute truth with plausible fiction, primarily because they were unprepared to make their relationship known to the world. Without a doubt, it would garner attention from their peers and perhaps even family. A defiant, minuscule voice nested in Neji’s ego protested that even if people did learn about it, that they should have the decency to keep their opinions to themselves. More than anything, if felt good to acknowledged by Tenten. It satisfied him in ways that nothing and no one else could come close to. That was all that should really matter.

At some point, while his thoughts slowly spun, his eyes had drifted shut.

The next morning Neji went about his normal routine, minus his early arrival to their training field. He had agreed to meet with Tenten for 9:00 at the corner of the Main Avenue and the Jounin Standby station. He dressed and ate, and then took advantage of the vacant inner courtyard of the estate.

Neji did light forms to wake up. After a while a pre-teen boy from the Branch House also stopped in the courtyard. He began Jyukken forms rigidly from the opposite end of the plot.

For one exercise, Neji held a low horse-stance, his arms parallel, straight, and poised in front of him. He was facing the Branch youngster, whose name he knew was Hirokazu. Neji’s facial expression softened as he realized the boy had stopped and was watching him curiously.

“Good morning, Neji-sama.” The boy greeted quietly, “I did not ask permission if I could share this space with you.”

Neji broke his stance and stood, “There is no need to ask for my permission. This is a shared yard.”

“I understand. It’s just that…I’m in the presence of the clan heir.” Hirokazu pointed out.

“I’m just a person.” Neji chided, thinking of the moral from the book, “Use this space regardless of who is in it.”

The boy nodded shyly.

Neji added, “I appreciate that you’re here. I have seen you at clan meetings each month ever since you were small, but I know that we have never personally spoken.”

Hirokazu brightened, “Yeah. Mom said she didn’t think it was appropriate for us to inconvenience members of the Main Branch, even though you, Hinata-sama, Hanabi-sama, and Fujita-sama never use the Seal on us.”
“We never will.” Neji was aghast at the idea.

“Mom told me that when Hiashi-sama was young he said that he wouldn’t either. But when he grew up he started to…”

“Circumstances are different. I don’t know why my uncle chose to subjugate Branch members. I would sooner die than do such a thing.” Neji vowed, “I cannot speak for my cousins in the Main Branch, but I promise that you can trust me.”

Hirokazu smiled, “Alright.” He took a Gentle Fist stance once more, “Why are your forms so different from mine? Is that a style taught in the Main House?”

“It isn’t.” Neji clarified, “I receive supplemental training from a Wushu expert; my teammate’s grandfather. He is a master of an ancient form of Gentle Fist.”

“You don’t say…” The boy was star-struck, “It seems so…fluid…when you move.”

“Do you want to learn?”

He was startled, “I…I mustn’t impose on a member of the Main Br-!”

Neji raised his chin and interrupted him, “I offered.”

When Hirokazu nodded hesitantly he came to stand beside the young man who, many Branch Members had said, was one of the few champions of mercy in the Hyuga clan.

Neji calmly gave the youngster a demonstration of Baguazhang that morning.

Later, when he was off to meet with Tenten, he thought that his willingness to spend time with Hirokazu might have assured the boy that he indeed was able to access the expertise and courtesy of the Main House. ‘Contrary to what most members of the Branch believe. It isn’t surprising that they are too wary to let their guards down, but they still feel that even I cannot be completely trusted.’ Maybe because of his entitled behavior in the past, or his public brawl with Hikune, the Branch was uncertain of his dependability.

As Neji walked down an alleyway lined with tall wooden fences, a strange, sudden thought struck him like a flying dart.

He had not thought of Hikune in a long time. Since his elder cousin had perished, he had maybe remembered him in passing once or twice. He too had been someone the Branch looked up to, yet had still resorted to activating the Caged Bird Seal. Hikune had been a respectable shinobi and a loving older brother. And though Neji had not believed it at the time, back when Hikune had verbally belittled him, he had in fact been a rival for Tenten’s attention. What was concerning was that this doubt felt more real now. It hurt today far more than it did many months ago.

‘Because she…had the option not to choose me. She was persuaded not to choose me.’ Neji considered. Several feelings welled up that he was utterly unfamiliar with, but they resonated with stings of guilt and heartache.

Some anger was leftover, he realized. Jealous anger. He did not want her to socialize with other men who were interested in her, not then and certainly not ever. However, the real crime was that he never bothered to explain that wish. Neji could not fault Tenten when she had no concept of how he honestly felt; that he had been mentally and emotionally too far removed to voice something so important. Neji came to grips with the reality that he was not the only one who looked at her and saw something incredibly precious.
The anger and regret was not focused directly on her anyway, he noted. But now these prickling feelings made him question what and who she had experienced before him. Nowadays Neji was perfectly willing to kiss her but, oh, what if she had enjoyed that with someone else? With Haku or Hikune? Someone he never learned about? What if she had done more serious things? While he had bumbled away time and energy, frustrated and chasing his own tail, Tenten had gone out and lived a life. Neji, nearly an adult, still hardly understood the most prized social functions that his companions did. How could he ever blame her if those things had happened?

Neji nearly walked head-long into a metal flag pole strung with advertisements. He side-stepped it at the last second. ‘I am thinking too much. I’m close to sabotaging a day that I may actually enjoy…’

No. It would not do to think about Hikune again. Or the possibilities, or anything negative that could shed an unfair light on Tenten today when all he truly desired was her. Good or bad, that was what he was asking for.

The side street let him off about a block away from his destination. He rounded the corner and continued without appearing too suspect to the people crowding the main road. Neji stopped beneath the awning of a stationary shop to wait, leaning against the stucco wall of the building. He was early, as was his nature. He made sure to stay beyond the line of sight from the windows of the Jounin Standby station. Neji had no intention of letting Gai learn about their deception from a passing comment made by a Jounin associate.

He watched villagers go by as he waited. So this is what was happening back in civilization while he trained with his team. Sometimes Neji felt detached from the life-rhythms of Konoha when he was too wrapped up in his own business. Today, he felt as if he had been pulled back down to earth again by a string.

A strange walking-tour of foreigners went by, following a guide from the Akimichi clan. The visitors had white t-shirts on with abstract, red-rectangled flags on the front. They were almost all blonde and pale, wearing sunglasses, and wielding cameras; disrupting the flow of foot traffic.

On second thought, maybe he was not missing much while he was out training every morning.

Neji’s gaze moved to the right, looking down the line of shops on the side of the road. Still a distance away and slightly obscured from view by other villagers, Tenten had appeared. He continued to watch as she drew closer, and almost immediately he was alerted to something quite different.

First, he noticed an utter absence of weapons, tools, and other shinobi paraphernalia on her person. It was nearly sacrilege; however Neji conceded it made more sense for her to be unarmed for a friendly rendezvous. His eyes trolled over her standard white cheongsam trimmed with red, dark pants that stopped at her calves…but those clothes, today unadorned by weapon-holsters, made her seem smaller and delicate as she walked.

Her hair was in its new style, but had obviously been tied by someone else. The braided chignons were too intricate; her fingernails painted an oxblood hue. He wondered who had taken the time to prepare her, and was unexpectedly glad that someone did. These small details were not flamboyant, but he could notice and appreciate them. There was a green jade ring on the middle finger of her left hand. Neji stared and deliberated its significance.

When Tenten came within range of hearing she smiled uncertainly at him, noticing his thinking face. It had close resemblance to a frown. “Hi, Neji.” She greeted as she came to a stop, “You beat me here, like you usually do.”

Neji nodded as her eyes scanned him from top to bottom. Of course he had not tried to doll himself
up, and Tenten was glad that he hadn’t. It was the same, sleeveless teal gi he often wore in the
summer with black pants. She did immediately notice he had not wrapped his hands or arms in tape.
It was a rare, welcome sight.

He was aware that he was being ogled, although he suspected his simple appearance may not have
impressed her much at all. Neji lifted a hand and gestured for them to walk. The tourist crowd was
starting to get noisy.

“It’s busier here close to the summer time, especially on the main street and near the stadium.”
Tenten observed, “Maybe I should have picked a quieter place for us to meet up?”

He gave a small shrug, “It’s fine. It was geographically the mid-point between us.”

“I’ve already been thinking about a place I want to go.” She announced in a tone that was more
excited and playful than normal, “Unless you had something else in mind, is it okay if I take you
there?”

“Lead the way.” For now he would remain passive about decision making. Tenten had a better idea
of what she was doing than he did.

She carefully chose a route downtown so that they did not stick out like sore thumbs. A short time
later they arrived at the Han Ethnic Quarter of the village. Neji was neither surprised nor off-put by
the location, and he followed Tenten around as she flitted about the not-so-densely packed
storefronts.

“Have you been here before?” Tenten asked curiously.

“I’ve been here with Lee a few times.”

She grinned, “Did he speak Hanwen?”

“Consistently. He’s very good.” Neji looked at her critically, “Can’t you speak it?”

“I’m awful.” Tenten insisted, glancing over a produce stand, “Lee tries to engage me in conversation,
but I’m not as good as I used to be.”

“Who taught you?”

“My parents.” She replied simply, turning over a large ginger root in her hands. She decided she
wanted it and picked up a woven basket beside the stand, dropping the ginger into it as she continued
to shop.

Neji had an indistinct memory of when Tenten described her parents to him in the Marsh Country,
but it did not paint much of a picture. While she added thin, dangerous-looking chilies to her basket
Tenten said, “I’ll tell you more about them…some other time. They’re not easy to talk about.”

He nodded again and then began to pay attention to what she was doing, “This is where you get
food?”

“Most of the time. They have all of the things I’m used to eating.”

“Did you eat this morning before you found me?”

“No, I thought it’d be more fun to go out to eat. All of this is for later.” She explained.

When Neji gave her a pressing _I-don’t-get-it_ look Tenten clarified, “I’ll cook this afternoon.”
Gawking, he was stupidly and wonderfully shocked. She felt she was within her rights to laugh at his reaction.

“I’ll let you decide if you want to eat anything I make. It’s probably different from the fare the Hyuga clan eats.” Tenten raised her eyebrows as another question occurred to her, “Hey, don’t you have all of your food served to you, Neji?”

“Yes.” He admitted stiffly.

“Have you been taught how to prepare or cook anything?”

“I can boil water.”

“Then I guess you can’t make me any meals.” She teased.

“I can if I’m taught.” He protested.

Tenten reached for a bottle of five-spice powder, intrigued, “If you want that to be a part of your quest for knowledge, then I don’t mind showing you a thing or two.”

Neji thanked her and then glimpsed over the top of her head, noticing a shop keeper who was analyzing the two of them. Neji steered Tenten along until she took a hard right towards a meat vendor. She seemed completely unaware that a host of Han expats were now watching them instead of minding their own business.

Tenten shuffled around a head of cabbage, eggplant, and black soybeans in the basket, hoping to make room for a package of chicken feet. Neji gave her an incredulous look after she had chosen it.

“It’s not for us.” She assured him, “Wong Leung loves these. He has an obsession with my mom’s recipe.”

“Ah.” He was relieved.

“And they’re not so bad, you know.” She smiled impishly, “I eat them from time to time.”

Neji privately thought of how the mouth he wanted to kiss, occasionally, dined on the feet of poultry. It brought about fresh perspective. Tenten really was worldlier than he, and Neji had yet to find out just how much more.

She added a whole duck to her basket along with oddities in jars, and then paid for her purchases. The cashier told them to have a nice day when he finished sorting the goods in a smiley-faced plastic bag.

It felt like wandering through another world as Tenten showed him around. There was a verdant, unusual garden fenced-in by chicken wire. Supposedly, Tenten said, it was used to grow the most uncommon vegetables people liked in the ethnic quarter. There was a hat store, a book store that sold absolutely nothing he could read, a store devoted only to selling sets of chopsticks, a shop for lacquered furniture, and then a store full of things Sato might like: like cameras and skateboards.

When they were too hungry to keep talking and wandering, they exited the lower district back into the heart of the Leaf Village. Tenten deliberated on where to eat out.

“You like herring.” Tenten stated brightly, “Let’s have herring soba.”

“Only if you want to.” Neji said, wondering how she knew what his favorite food was. After a
moment, he reckoned that he should never again be taken aback by the things Tenten had noticed about him.

If Naruto had been around, he definitely would have scolded them for giving their business to a noodle shop other than Ichiraku Ramen. Tenten merely chose the eatery because it was a block away, and she was a bigger fan of convenience than brand loyalty. The bar was empty and so they took two seats side-by-side, giving their orders to the chef.

“This is kind of nice.” Tenten decided aloud, “I like not having to throw things at you in the morning.”

“Likewise.”

“Was there anything you wanted to do today?” She asked.

“Nothing in particular. I’m not very imaginative.” Neji took a sip from a tea cup, “And I like that you are.”

Tenten blinked twice, and then a wide, pink-lipped smile spread on her face. Neji regarded her and somehow, though he could not fathom how he did it, he absorbed her feelings just from that expression.

He reciprocated with a small smile and then turned his head away quickly; baffled by the weird things he was doing. Tenten was kind enough to banish awkwardness by resuming the conversation. The chef set bowls and utensils in front of them and they thanked him for the food.

They ate and talked, unaware that they were being scrutinized from across the street.

“So…” Ino whispered, “Tell me how this happened again? How we’re seeing this?”

Shoulder-to-shoulder with the blonde girl, hiding behind a stack of wooden crates near an alleyway, Hinata shed some light on the situation.

“This morning after I ate breakfast, I was ready to find Shino-kun and Sato-kun…but I noticed that Neji-niisan was still home.” She explained, “He was training with a member of the Branch family, a nice boy name Hirokazu. After onii-san had left the compound, I wondered why he was not early to meet with his team like always…”

“You followed him?” Sakura asked quietly from the opposite side, “That’s not very like you, Hinata-chan.”

“I was curious. I noticed how happy Neji-niisan has been lately, so I suspected something…had happened.” Hinata admitted softly, “I watched him cross town and then he stopped in front of the stationary shop for a time. I nearly left without realizing that he was waiting…for onee-san…” She covered her mouth and squeezed her eyes shut, muffling squeals of joy.

“The other day when Chouji and I were talking to Tenten, Neji came by and interrupted us. I had a feeling something was up.” Ino agreed.

“Did you see where they went before this?” Sakura continued, “I mean…I can hardly believe my eyes. Maybe it’s some kind of elaborate prank?”

Hinata shook her head, “It isn’t. They walked downtown together and that’s when I hurried to find you both.”
“And by the time we got here, the two of them are cozy eating noodles for lunch, talking up a storm. It definitely isn’t their typical routine.” Ino live-reported what she was observing, “Whoa! He just, like, smiled at her! A real-person smile!”

“She did it first.” Sakura noted in delight, “Ugh! We’ll get diabetes if we keep watching this.”

Hinata tapped her friends’ shoulders as she stood between them, ducking down lower behind their cover. Ino and Sakura followed suit as Hinata told them, “I believe…onii-san just used his Byakugan.”

*He did?* Ino mouthed.

Hinata nodded solemnly.

“Then he knows we’re over here.” Sakura peeked over a box, “A-aaand…now he’s telling Tenten right this moment.” She quickly ducked down again when, from across the road, Tenten’s head snapped around on high-alert for spectators.

In the moments before the spying trio could make an escape via the alley, the pile of boxes they were hidden behind was burst apart by an inorganic gust of wind. They shrieked in terror, retreating briefly, and Hinata was the first to grasp that her cousin had only spooked them with his Wind Affinity. When they looked back across the street, notes of money had been left on the counter beside half-empty bowls.

The seats were vacant.

Many miles away in the Toad Valley, Naruto had spent a few days reeling from the story Jiraiya told him. He had spikes and dips in productivity when he tried to train; at times his laser-point focus helped him draw Natural Energy in, and sometimes he was a hopeless mess, lacking the energy to even sit upright or go about the day.

That morning, Naruto was experiencing an uninspired slump. He had basked in the sunshine out on a wide lawn in the hope it would make him feel better, but his thoughts tinkered obsessively with the possibility of his parentage. He would feel sickened and happily thrilled all at once.

Jiraiya had yet to confirm anything, Naruto noted in annoyance. He had sulked and asked Fukasaku and Shima to supervise Naruto’s training near the Toad Oil pool. At meals or other such activities, when Jiraiya would open his mouth as if to confess it all to his godchild, he quickly clammed up. There had been multiple opportunities for him to speak truthfully, and each time Jiraiya had hesitated. Though Naruto found it incredibly hard to be patient, he chose not to pressure his mentor into providing a story he could barely articulate.

When the grassy lawn no longer felt relaxing, Naruto stood and set out to find distractions. He easily spied Gamabunta near the shore of a large lake, seated across from his children: Gamakichi and Gamatatsu. The young toads were growing rapidly, and were also learning how to play cards from Gamabunta.

Naruto greeted them with less enthusiasm than usual, but they still asked him to join them. He scaled Gamabunta’s mighty back and then settled on top of the Toad Boss’ head.

“How is Sage Training going, boy?” The giant toad asked, “You’re starting to look worn-out.”

“I’m getting there. It’s Ero-sensei who has me stressed.”
“Really?” Gamabunta replied, and after winning a hand began gathering the house-sized playing cards to be shuffled.

“Fukasaku-sama says that you two get super emotional.” Gamakichi pointed out.

“Well, that’s because he keeps bringing up my…” Naruto trailed off and then amended, “Minato.”

“Oh.” Gamabunta made a sound of understanding, “I see; we all miss that boy, you know. He was the Hokage when I saw him last. I gave him some help when the Kyuubi was ransacking the Leaf Village.”

“Say…Chief Toad…” He was sprawled on the behemoth’s head, relaxing, “Do you remember seeing me that night?”

“I remember. You were in Minato’s arms for a little while.” Gamabunta amended, “But I didn’t know who you were until Jiraiya later told me.”

“Yeah.” Naruto agreed, “I didn’t know who I was until Ero-sensei told me either.”

“Ah, so that’s what this is about.” The boss toad acknowledged. He drew out his trusty pipe and lit it, “Jiraiya is a storyteller, but I’ve come to learn there are some tales he’s too afraid to share.”

Gamakichi and Gamatatsu clamored for their father to deal the next round of cards.

When smoke began to waft up and condense around Gamabunta’s head, Naruto took to a coughing fit. He slid down the toad’s back to get some fresh air, reached the ground, and then bent double to inhale deeply. Gamabunta’s yellow eye rolled down to look at him, “Naruto, go to Jiraiya now and have a talk with him. Make him tell you exactly what you need to know, with no substitutions or delays.” The toad asserted, “Or I will bring you before the Great Toad Elder so you can learn about your past and future all at once.”

Gamakichi was startled, “Wha-? Dad, didn’t you say that no one is supposed to disturb the Great Elder without being summoned first?”

“That’s the rule, but if we bring Naruto there it will at least give the Great Elder something to do, for a change.” Gamabunta puffed smoke from his nostrils, “And a proactive threat is the kind of thing that always gets Jiraiya to cooperate. I know him.”

“Thanks, Chief Toad.” Naruto expressed his gratitude before setting out in the direction of smaller toad residences.

When he approached Fukasaku’s house, Naruto spotted his teacher on the porch with a stack of books at his side. ‘I guess this time I’ll probably get my answer.’ Naruto supposed, ‘Gamabunta knows how to deal with Ero-sensei.’ He came to a stop in front of Jiraiya and said nothing, trying to resist the moody frown creeping onto his face.

Jiraiya looked up and regarded his student, “Uh. You okay, kid?”

With a soft sigh, Naruto took a seat beside the man, “Not exactly. Chief Toad sent me over here.”

“Oh, did he?”

“He told me to tell you that you need to explain it all to me now.” The young man announced, “Or else he said he’d bring me to the Great Toad Elder to have my questions answered.”
“Whoa now, that’s unnecessary.” Jiraiya waved a hand, “I already planned to tell you,” He patted the pile of books beside him, “I just wanted to get my facts straight. I didn’t want to skip over details that might matter.”

“Details?” Naruto quirked an eyebrow, “How much is there to say?”

“I don’t want to give you a one-liner and think that it’ll suffice. Like I’ve told you before, you need context.” The man elaborated, “But you caught me at a good time; I think I’ve worked out just how to put it…”

Naruto folded his legs as he sat, “Then I’m listening.”

“Let’s see. Try to use your imagination for this, kid. Back when Leaf was winding down from the Third Shinobi war, but still not quite in peacetime…Sarutobi-sensei started bitching a lot about arthritis, his hips, this and that…” Jiraiya recalled, “He was real subtle about how he wanted to look for a successor. When we talked about it, he immediately counted me out. I wasn’t reliable. Then he went into his existentially conflicted diatribe of why Orochimaru had not inherited the Will of Fire, and was for all intents and purposes a psychopath…the Sandaime did not want to consider us. Period. I totally understood.”

Naruto nodded in agreement, “It was a great call.”

“He was looking towards a younger, more hardworking group.” Jiraiya went on, “While he had a few people in mind, he asked Takaharu first. He was an ANBU captain at the time and a good friend to the Sandaime. That idea didn’t fly. My sensei told me that Takaharu quickly declined, saying that while he loved the village and he would always protect it, it probably wasn’t the best idea to make him a leader. He had plenty of enemies, and he and his wife were expecting a baby at the time.”

Naruto had a brief moment to imagine what could have been if Tenten’s father had become Hokage. ‘That would’ve been cool. But sheesh…those are the shoes I’m in, aren’t they? It feels so unreal.’

“Sarutobi-sensei’s next and most fitting choice was Minato. He was just as skilled of a shinobi, and thankfully, less shy than Takaharu was.” The man held his chin and smiled, “Minato was in a good state of mind to accept the position. He and Kushina had just gotten married, and he was feeling pretty confident with his abilities.” Jiraiya glanced sidelong at Naruto, “But he still asked me to stop by, now and again. It made him feel better to know that I was there, and that I would be honest with him when I thought he was going off the tracks.”

Jiraiya lifted a thin novel up and handed it to his student, “Here, Naruto. Take a look at this.”

He accepted the old hardcover and inspected it. ‘The Tale of the Utterly Gutsy Shinobi.’ Naruto frowned to himself and then asked, “What’s with the title?”

“It was my first published work, okay? Cut me some slack. This was before I realized my calling was for smut.” Jiraiya explained quickly, “I want you to know about it because Minato said it was his favorite book.”

Naruto’s eyebrows jumped, “He said that? He must have read a lot in his lifetime, so…I doubt it.”

“Shut up and look at it.”

The young man made a gruffing sound before turning to the title page. The formatting and font were simple, unlike the flashy, provocative stories Jiraiya worked on nowadays. Naruto settled into the third-person narrative, propping up his chin with his hand. He relaxed as he gradually gave his
attention over to the story, and Jiraiya watched his face without a word

Time passed as he read in silence, and Naruto kept his surprise contained as he was introduced to the protagonist of the book. ‘His name is...Naruto.’ He rubbed his temple as he paused to think, ‘Ero-sensei named a character “Naruto” years ago, in his debut book...’ He concluded a scene in which the main character defeated an opponent in a one-on-one duel with cunning and a Shadow Clone.

He folded the book shut over his thumb, feeling anxious, ‘Is this...about me? It could be a coincidence. The guy in this book seems smarter and more put-together...’

While Naruto stewed over the possibility, Jiraiya slipped the book from his hand and slapped him over the head with it.

“Don’t think so hard!” The man barked, “Minato loved this character. He told Kushina all about it and convinced her that it was a good name for you, before you were born.” Jiraiya smiled warmly, “They were so excited that they were going to become parents, and I was honored that they thought of me. They asked me to look after you, if anything ever happened.”

Naruto exchanged a long stare with his mentor, unable to speak, until finally a film of tears threatened his eyes. Jiraiya laughed softly, feeling relief as he finally shared an integral bit of history. He tapped Naruto’s head with the novel again before setting it aside.

“I kind of...named you.” Jiraiya went on, “I didn’t mean to. I had no idea what to call the hero of my book, so I just thought up that name when I was eating ramen one afternoon. Minato didn’t care, though. He insisted on picking that name. As for the book, about the character’s life and accomplishments, all of that came from my heart. That’s a longer story and we’ll talk about it with the Great Toad Elder.”

“So they...” His mouth felt dry. Naruto wetted his lips to speak, “They were my mom and dad.”

“Absolutely. And they were cool.”

“Do I look a lot like Dad did?”

“You’re about, oh I don’t know, kind of an even mix of the two? Fifty-fifty. Sixty-forty? In favor of Minato, I guess. If you had your mom’s red hair you’d look like a typical Uzumaki.” Jiraiya squinted his eyes and imagined it, “You’re just you, kid.”

“Yeah.” Naruto shut his eyes. His mouth bobbed between a smile and a heartbroken grimace, trying to accept that the truth, while tragic, had some beauty to it. Knowing where he came from made him feel more grounded and substantial as a person.

“Now, I recall how you were trying to get me explain last time; about what went wrong the night you were born...” Jiraiya continued, “But the problem is I don’t know exactly what happened. The Sandaime and I did not have many clues to work with, and no one who witnessed the events is alive today.”

Naruto cleared his throat, calming down slightly, “Er-hem...you said that the Fox escaped, for one thing. How would you explain that?”

“Ah, well it’s a problem you, fortunately, won’t have to deal with in your lifetime. A jinchuriki’s seal that restrains a Tailed Beast will deteriorate when a woman-host goes into a labor. There’s a very technical explanation of it authored by Uzumaki Mito, and her treatise was passed down for posterity so other jinchuriki would know what to expect. Anyway, Sarutobi-sensei told me that Minato was familiar with the danger and had studied up on it. He shouldn’t have had any problem with keeping
that seal in check while your mom was trying to give birth. The Sandaime’s wife, Biwako, was also there to keep everything under control. As was her disciple…”

Jiraiya sighed heavily and rubbed his neck, “My sensei told me that ANBU guards had been found murdered nearby. Biwako and Taji were killed as well. It had occurred before the Kyuubi was freed. With all of those things considered, he and I agreed that someone had interfered that night, hoping to take advantage of Kushina while she was weakened.”

Naruto was wide-eyed, “But they never caught anyone?”

“No, they never did catch anyone, but officials did try to blame someone.” Jiraiya recounted, “The Uchiha clan was accused of releasing the Fox in an effort to revolt against the Leaf Village. You see, there were some political controversies that kept the Uchiha clan segregated from everyone else. I won’t get into that right now. And don’t think I didn’t research and interview damn near every last one of them to catch even a whiff of foul-play. But Naruto, I swear, they just didn’t seem to be involved.”

“Why would they want to blame the Uchiha?” Naruto asked.

“The Sharingan, when strong enough, can control the Nine-Tailed Fox.” Jiraiya elaborated, “And I’d bet all of my published-work earnings that it can control other Bijuu too, when given the chance.” He made a gesture towards the sky, “In ancient times, Sages that possessed doujutsu were powerful enough to do just that. The ancestor-trait of the Sharingan is the Rinnegan, the ability that the Sage of the Six Paths had. However, that power no longer exists in modern times…” He trailed off.

“What if Itachi did it?” The boy muttered suspiciously.

“Hell no. He was…what? Maybe ten years old at the time, and, I have it on sworn record that Itachi was babysitting his younger brother that night.” Jiraiya shot the idea down, “It was someone old enough to coordinate; to know who and when to strike. The facts point to someone who had the Sharingan, probably, but it wasn’t a member of the Uchiha clan. You follow me?”

“How is that even possible?”

“Kakashi has the Sharingan.” Jiraiya gave an example, “That’s because Obito gave it to him. Do you understand? I’m trying to keep the door of possibility open, for this case.”

“I get it.” Naruto nodded solemnly.

“I guess you could say…Obito and I are hoping that we’ll find a clear lead. That we can find out the truth about who attacked Minato and Kushina.” Jiraiya added darkly, “And neither of us would be shocked if the Akatsuki had something to do with it. Of course, it’d be ideal to find the one responsible…and tear that guy open from the asshole-up.”

“It’s been a while.” Naruto pointed out keenly, “If someone has avoided you for this long…and they could ambush my parents and everyone else that night…” His eyes locked with Jiraiya’s, “Do you think that you’d want to face someone like that? That’s no pushover.”

“Eh…well, no. That doesn’t sound like a pushover, you’re right.” The man groaned softly, “Sounds like I’d be on the losing-end of a fight if I picked it with the shinobi who could take down Black Ops sentries, the Fourth Hokage, the Jinchuriki for the Nine-Tails, and then leave everything in tatters.”

“Exactly.” Naruto agreed, “That’s why you’re gonna leave it to me.”

“Pfft!” Jiraiya laughed, “Look, Naruto, I know how strong you are. But this isn’t an enemy you could
deal with on your own either. Just by looking at the facts, we have to know better than that.”

The young man stared out over the yard, brooding, “It’s not easy to do.”

“Easy or not: play it cool. If you get swept up by the desire for revenge, you and Sasuke can be neighbors in psychoville when all is said and done.” He added, “You’d never get anywhere by taking that route.”

Naruto refrained from speaking after that, and Jiraiya’s hand fell heavily on his shoulder, holding tight.

“We’ll get justice for them, Naruto, and you can count on that. We’re going to do this the practical way, and we’ll know our enemy before we take action. Please don’t assume I’ve been alright with letting this sit. I wasn’t alright with it. I am still not alright with it.” Jiraiya explained, “I was a depressed alcoholic for years after that, at a time when you could have used a caretaker. I was the most heartbroken fuck-up there ever was, and I felt like I could never get anything to change. Like I’d never improve anything again.” He brightened, “Now look at me: I’m training up a new crop of Kages. I’m a well-known author and I’m aging gracefully!”

An incredulous laugh escaped Naruto, “Heh heh! They’ll put you on a magazine cover sooner or later, right? Pft…”

“It’s gotta be soon. I am so goddamn amazing.” Jiraiya put his hands on his knees, excited, “There is a lot I can do. Have some faith in me, this time, and I promise I’m going to get you right where you need to be.”

“Sheesh, I never doubted that, Ero-sensei.” Naruto assured him, “Even when you were a disgusting schlub.”

“Thanks. I hope Gaara and Haku feel that way too.”

“I’m sure they do.”

They sat without speaking, serenely smiling, happy to be in each other’s company on a day in late spring. Naruto gave a curious look to his teacher after a while, “Ero-sensei?”

“Yeah?”

“Do people know?” He asked, “Who I am? Do you think…I mean…I honestly feel uncomfortable about who my parents are. Well, Mom’s fine. Dad…”

“Relax. Minato was Hokage, so what? Some people are accountants. No matter what they do for a living it should not affect the fact that your father is your father. Before anything else, he was just a half of you. A human being. He was really nice and intelligent. He was the type who’d throw on an apron and bake you a special birthday cake every year, kid. You know why? Because that’s the kind of thing that would make him happy. His job was only a job.”

“But I…I feel like I’m…” Naruto gestured with his hands as he identified a word, “I’m not representative of the people who made me. They were awesome. I’m just a-”

Jiraiya clapped a hand over his mouth, “Quit talking like that. Take it from someone who can actually testify: you are. You’re just like them, Naruto. Feeling inadequate? It’s okay; you’ll get over it.” He added, “I don’t know who in the Leaf Village is actually aware; save for a few people like Tsunade and Kakashi. Namba might know, but he’s never around.”
“Do you think it’s alright if I tell Gaara-kun and Haku-kun?”

“Sure it is. They’re your friends and they’ll be thrilled about it.” Jiraiya stood from his seat on the porch and stretched, “But…you’re kind of the status-quo, now. Gaara never cared or maybe even hated that his dad was a Kage. He may not give much of a shit, in your case. Not to fret, though, Haku will happily congratulate you.”

“Yeah, maybe.”

Jiraiya looked down at him and extended an arm. Naruto reached for his hand and was pulled to his feet, and then wrapped in heartfelt hug. It was a parent-like hug. The young man breathed out and felt at ease after many days of distress.

“There you go.” Jiraiya smiled and released him, “You’ve got your identity all sorted out, and please, don’t dwell on it, Naruto. It’s time to get your butt back to the Toad Oil Pool.”

“Fine! I’ll need a spotter, though.” Naruto set out across the lawn briskly.

Jiraiya’s limbs made creaking sounds as he tried to keep up, “Yep, I know. I’m movin’…"

The following morning in Nanakusa, Haku had been asked to assist around the tea shop. Travelers were headed northwest towards the Fire Country to spectate the Chunin Exam, and many had chosen to take a stopover in the small town. Hiroshi was up to his neck in customers at his café, and had kindly requested that Migawari postpone Haku’s medical tutoring for later.

“For you, Hiroshi, sure.” The retired medic-nin allowed it, “You’re a good soul, feeding all of these lousy tourists!” He turned to Ranmaru at his side, “Come on, Shorty. We’re going to take a closer look at soft tissue injuries today.”

After they had left, Haku had thought to himself how it might have been better not to be conscripted for tea shop work. His head was spinning as he tried to serve the noisy folk crowding tables. In the kitchen, Haku was about to ask Hiroshi why he had not considered hiring at least a temp-employee when he devised a simple solution. ‘If there’s no time to hire someone new, I can have Kage Bunshin transform to make it seem like we’re better-staffed.’

He sent several disguised shadow clones out into the dining room, all featuring different appearances. Thankfully, it helped streamline orders, and Hiroshi was quietly grateful his young companion was clever under pressure.

When the morning rush calmed down, Tomo dropped by with her children, “Good morning!” She arranged the youngsters politely at a table as she greeted the tea shop owner, “Hiroshi-san, I only need about an hour. Do you mind watching the kids while I go to speak to a new patron? This is a big-time pottery company that could be a career jump!”

“Certainly, do what you need to do!” He ushered her out the door, “Do they need breakfast?”

“Yes, if you don’t mind. Let me pay you when I get back!” She hurried off.

No sooner had she walked out the door, the children began to fuss. Sachirame and Pua had appeared at the table, sharing a seat, also sniffing around for food. Hiroshi sighed softly to himself before calmly assuring anxious Katsu, the youngest, that his mother wouldn’t be gone for long. A shadow clone came by and set food out for the children. It then plucked up the two mischievous, white rabbits and brought them into the back room.
After eating, the three adopted siblings began to fidget with boredom. A few more travelers filed into the tea shop for morning meals, and as Haku exited the kitchen to see how he could help, he found Hiroshi sweeping broken pieces of porcelain from a teapot that had shattered.

“Sorry.” Hotaru was shame-faced, “Nagisa pushed me and then it fell over.”

“It’s alright.” Hiroshi picked up the last specks of ceramic, “Do you kids want to stretch your legs outside for a while, until your mother returns?” He gave a sidelong look to Haku, begging: Please take them somewhere.

Knowing the shadow clones would be enough help in the shop; Haku quickly wrangled up the antsy children and led them outside.

“It’s busy. Hiroshi-san just needs some time to serve customers.” Haku explained to them, “So, what would you like to do in the meantime?”

“Don’t know.” Katsu replied dimly.

“Everyone’s been so busy today that there’s no time for us.” Nagisa, the eldest, noted sadly, “I know mom needs to work, and Hiroshi-san too…but even you’ve been gone a lot more these days, Haku-kun.”

“That is true. And believe me; most of what I’m doing is not enjoyable.” Haku admitted.

Hotaru proposed that they observe the stream from the footbridge in the forest. Katsu seconded the notion, “Maybe the frogs are out so we can catch ‘em!”

A few steps beyond the town they had entered the majestic woodland, where many trees were still flowering vibrantly. Pua had apparently escaped the tea shop’s kitchen through a backdoor and caught up with them, plodding innocently beside Haku as they walked. The children ran ahead when the wooden bridge came into a view. They peered over the rail, alert for any kind of wildlife they could chase after.

The clear water trickled past stones and pond-grass. Katsu ticked off a list of animals he wanted to see, but his siblings concluded nothing was around, not even a single fish. Disappointed, the small boy scooped Pua into his arms and stroked her ears. He muttered about “his frogs.”

“They may yet be tadpoles. We should wait a few more days.” Haku suggested.

“But that means there’s nothing to do today...” Hotaru mumbled, hanging lethargically from the bridge’s handrail.

Nagisa continued up the path a bit further and stopped to pay her respects at a small shrine. Her brother groaned in boredom as they paced the footbridge.

Haku took a moment to consider how difficult it was to be a kid with nothing to do. At that age, he had never run out of things to keep him occupied. He had Naruto and Gaara and all of their friends. The Academy and the Leaf Village had been a vast playground.

Here in Nanakusa things were slow, discreet, and isolated. Children did not have as much to look forward to in a retirement haven.

Haku made no comments as he stood at the center of the bridge, smiling to himself. He watched Katsu and his older brother sit with the rabbit between them.
“Maybe we can sneak into something…”

“Oh! Let’s have ice cream. The old lady will give it to us.”

“Mom said it’s too early. She’ll punish us if we try that again.”

“She won’t know. Nagisa won’t say anything.”

“Haku-kun will tell her.” Hotaru surmised blandly, “He doesn’t break rules.”

“Oh yeah.” Katsu furrowed his brow and patted Pua. He then touched his hand to the top of his head, surprised, “It’s cold.”

“No duh ice cream is cold, Katsu.”

“No. My hair…” The boy mussed the top of his head and beheld as snowflakes fluttered free.

“Whoa!” Hotaru jumped up, glancing around at the mysterious snowfall that had begun. He turned in a circle, “This doesn’t happen in spring…” He hoisted Katsu to his feet.

Haku pretended as if he hadn’t noticed the phenomenon, watching from the corner of his eye as the boys regrouped with their older sister, trying to make heads or tails of the weather. After a while, though, enough snow had accumulated for a wild play-fight. The children stopped questioning their good fortune and began chasing each other, hurling snowballs.

The morning progressed and Haku’s technique had allowed a sizable snow drift to build up in the forest, making sure it did not extend past the bridge into town, ‘The older residents would not appreciate it…’ By then the children had attempted to construct a figure out of snow, but the torso slid off and fell apart on the ground. Haku assisted them with fortifying it.

Nagisa had been wondering about their strange luck and eventually asked their babysitter, “Haku-kun…is this a kind of ninja technique?”

He raised his eyebrows, “The…snowman?”

“No. You made it snow.” She corrected.

“Oh, well…I did.” He scratched his cheek, “I wanted you all to enjoy yourselves.”

Nagisa smiled as she fitted a patch of moss on the snowman’s head like a hairpiece, “Thanks. Hotaru and Katsu would have complained all day, otherwise.”

Haku took a step back to frame the creation with his thumb and index finger, advising the boys on where to fit twigs for the arms to look right. As Katsu and Hotaru followed directions, a steel dart shot through the back of the snow sculpture and straight into Haku’s thigh.

His eyes moved up towards looming branches as he quickly removed the knife, speaking calmly to the confused children, “You need to go back to the tea shop, now.”

Nagisa was concerned about his bloodied leg, “Haku-kun, did something-?”

He pushed her and her brothers down to the ground when several more knives were thrown at them. Haku raised a dome of ice to deflect a supplemental volley of darts that came from the rear, some interspersed with senbon needles. Judging from the directions the attacks came from, and the variety of projectiles used, Haku concluded he was being targeted by more than one shinobi.
The children squealed in wonder and fright, seeing their reflections in the planes of ice that shielded them. Though it consumed a costly amount of chakra, Haku derived two Ice Clones from their shelter and sent them out to contest the assailants in the forest. He then parted the dome and shepherded the children out, ‘I have no idea what kind of enemy this is, yet…’ He thought, hurrying after the youngsters towards Nanakusa, ‘And that dart was poisoned.’ He noticed a stinging pain creeping upwards that made it difficult to move.

He had no weapons at the moment. Haku resorted to blocking the rain of weaponry with ice shields, making sure his charges were properly defended, ‘These ninja have no qualms with hurting children!’ It disgusted him. At the border of the town he witnessed two shinobi, still yards away, drop from the tree tops.

One was wrestling with an Ice Clone, and the bunshin shifted its shape into a spiked mass of ice, urchin-like, and impaled the Hunter-Nin before he could react. The second ninja was approaching fast, the swirl of a white and red mask tipping Haku off that these were certainly Black Ops ninja of Kirigakure.

Haku wanted to thank heaven above that the children were fleet of foot. The brothers had ducked into the long rows of a covered produce stand, however Nagisa had continued racing out in the open down the street. The Mist-hunter threw a poisoned dart at her which sunk cleanly into her shoulder. The girl dropped with a shriek. Haku had enough speed to pick her up and roll to the side when their assailant followed up with another barrage of darts.

Haku had rolled beneath a picnic bench, speaking quickly, “Nagisa, go around the block and tell Migawari-san you’re poisoned. He can heal you right away.”

“Poisoned?” She squealed, “The thing in my shoulder!? What about your leg?”

“I can take care of myself. Hurry.” Haku lightly tossed her into a pile of burlap sacks filled with buckwheat.

Not a moment later, the Hunter-Nin bore down on the picnic table with a palm strike and snapped it in half. On his back, Haku lashed out with a kick that knocked the tanto from his enemy’s hand, rolling to his feet as he did so. Their melee exchange was witnessed by residents nearby who scurried to the edges of the street to safety.

One of Haku’s comet-punches sailed through the Hunter-Nin who seemed to have vaporized into mist. Before he could counter the strange jutsu, Haku felt a small blade stick deeply into his back between two ribs. The enemy had repositioned behind him. Haku braced himself as he tried to block, and was ruthlessly pummeled in the side of the head by a ninja who, he conceded, was stronger and faster than he. Hunter-Nin were professionally brutal.

Haku managed to pull the dagger from his back before a right-hook to the face knocked him to the ground. He lost his grip on the knife and it skidded across the stones on the street. Adrenalin and instinct built up in him, desperate for survival, and he had nearly enough chakra to manifest a carousel of ice pillars before the Hunter-Nin pounced. The masked ninja sat on his chest to flatten him and, like a viper, seized both of Haku’s hands in his own. He pinched the space below the middle finger of each hand, holding tight, and eliminated the possibility of using jutsu.

“Listen up.” The Hunter-Nin spoke in a gravelly voice, “I don’t want to waste time on a goat like you. Where is Momochi Zabuza?”

With a bloodied lip, Haku replied pleasantly, “Who?”
He was promptly head-butted for the dissatisfactory answer.

“You were sighted twice in Moji by our Intel officer. You’re an unknown. Captain assumes you’re an apprentice to be trained as a Swordsman. I’ll tell you one thing: quit while you’re ahead. I don’t need to kill you. I’ve got an antidote and I’ll hand it over as soon as you tell me what I need to know.” The masked shinobi offered.

Haku felt his limbs getting stiff from the poison. He scowled up at the Mist ninja, “I don’t know how inclined I am to speak when I saw that you intentionally poisoned that little girl.”

“All the more reason you get the antidote off of me, right?”

“The information you seek is not worth an innocent life!”

A shadow fell across the pair as a third Hunter-Nin stopped beside them, peeved, “He’s not quacking? He impaled Number Five, back there. Five will be alright. He’s taking some time to recover.”

“Huh…I hurt a kid.” The Hunter-Nin reported, “Captain, could you give the antidote to her? She’s probably down the street.”

“That was your error, Number Three.” The captain answered, “We focus on the task at hand.”

While the Hunter-Nin called Three tried to negotiate with his squadron leader, something miraculous happened. The thoughts of one of Haku’s dissolved Kage Bunshin in the tea shop reached him. He had witnessed Hotaru and Katsu screaming at the top of their lungs to Hiroshi, alerting the shop owner and the working clones to the peril. In response, two shadow clones were now en-route to their originator’s location, while a third had gone to warn Zabuza.

Haku kept calm as blood flowed in a steady stream from a cut above his eye. The injury to his back was severe, and he had doubts that he would be able to resist Hunter-grade poison for much longer.

A voice sounded from a storefront to their right, “Hey! I think you’ve got the wrong guy!” The villager spoke up bravely, “He just works in a tea shop! He’s Hiroshi’s kid.”

Without turning his head to look, the Hunter Captain pointed a single finger at the man, “Stay out of this. Our target is not mistaken.”

“He’s a tea boy!” The man insisted finally before retreating into his store.

Across the street was the fish market, and a tank of fresh-catch was blown apart when a Water jutsu was used. One of Haku’s shadow clones had directed the glass-flecked attack at the Hunter-Nin on the street. They evaded it handily, but Haku was able to race away and take a much needed breath. His second shadow clone was assisting with the distraction while he hid and attempted to heal himself, ‘I hope Nagisa is alright...I need to buy more time. Zabuza is likely to confront this situation...but I wouldn’t put it past him to run away either...’

With his Kekkei Genkai, Haku plunged the temperature of the town, observing frost crinkle across the windows of residences. Haku was prepared to use the most vicious jutsu he could muster against the Hunter-Nin. Steeling his nerves, Haku and a shadow clone abruptly broke cover and rushed from opposite directions to combat their adversaries. The Mist ninja evaded as lithely as dragonflies in flight, timing their own jutsu to counterattack. Haku was able to shield fleeing townspeople from a water bullet that had gone astray, but the Captain took advantage of the kind act.

Using an odd technique, the Captain manifested a water-whip that was several meters in length. The
Mist nin lashed his weapon and it wrapped securely around Haku’s neck. He pulled the young man down to the dirt again. After a brief struggle, Haku was able to nullify the whip-jutsu with a twinge of Water Affinity chakra and free himself, but he could barely muster the strength to get to his knees. It was difficult to see and breathe as the poison’s effects worsened.

“You put up more fight than I’d have given you credit for.” The veteran hunter noted, “You don’t see Yuki ninja anywhere these days. Did that clan sell you to Zabuza for his rebel force? How desperate are they?”

Haku did not reply. With the last drop of chakra he could part with, he opened an Ice Mirror portal beneath him on the road and slipped through it. He exited about a block away to the east where a barrel of water had frozen over, tapping it as a secondary mirror. He collapsed in the space between two houses and coached himself to inhale through his nostrils. His insides were burning.

Haku then heard a clamoring from the street. He turned his head toward the end of the alley where a tornado tinted with red dust flew by. Haku shut his eyes thankfully, ‘Ranmaru.’ Bolts of lightning shook the road a second later, amplifying the Wind jutsu that Ranmaru had used, ‘Ah, so Raiga isn’t pleased with our visitors either...’

He passed in and out of consciousness for several consecutive minutes, unsure of exactly how much time went by. He was flat on the ground beside garbage cans, utterly incapable of moving. His head swam. Haku felt the whiskers of Pua’s nose tickling his face and he smiled weakly. A moment later, he could hear Migawari’s irritated voice. The retired medic-nin rolled him over, stuck him with a syringe full of something, and then applied both hands to his chest to commence healing.

When Haku’s hearing improved he could unravel what his medical tutor was prattling on about, “The girl will be fine. Your bunny showed me to this dumpster and I said, Well maybe Haku is just trash, but then you were actually lying over here like a hobo…”

“Is Ranmaru...fighting them?” Haku asked tiredly.

“Sure is. I never knew that munchkin was a scrappy son-of-a-bitch. I told him: Even if you go out there with your tall stooge to fight, those Hunters will kill you. Then Ranmaru shot a windstorm at them from his hands that, quite frankly, looked like a natural-disaster.” Migawari concluded, “Young ninja sure are surprising.”

Haku was able to sit upright, beginning to feel well again, “Migawari-san, those hunters are here for Zabuza.”

“No kidding.” The old man nearly rolled his eyes.

“They knew that I was connected to him.”

“It’s the job of a Hunter-ninja to know exactly who is affiliated with rogue-nin and snuff all of them out.” Migawari chastised him, “It was going to happen sooner or later. Zabuza isn’t the company you want to keep, if you don’t want those brutes from Mist haunting your every step!”

“It may be too late now.” Haku rose shakily to his feet, “Thank you for helping me.”

“It was only a patch-job. I didn’t completely fix you, yet.” The medic-nin warned, “Here’s some advice: if those hunters kill you, well sure that’d be bad…but if they escape and take intelligence of this village to Kirigakure, we are all going to have major problems.”

Haku nodded, “I won’t let them.” Significantly recovered, he moved to flank the Hunter-Nin on the main street from the rooftops.
He flitted across a power line and looked below to where Zabuza had cornered the Hunter captain. Raiga and Ranmaru were keeping Number Three divided from help as well. Haku formed a dome of Ice Mirrors around Zabuza and the Captain, sequestering them, and though Zabuza’s Seversword swung with wicked purpose, the Hunter-nin was too quick to be caught. Haku dove into a mirror from above, prepared to attack, but the Captain was aware of his arrival.

After rapid hand signs, “Ninpo: Pressure Boil!” The Captain used a technique that drove atmospheric pressure up to an insane level, temporarily. It shattered the Ice Mirrors surrounding them and Zabuza was hurled back, singed, but leapt to his feet. The Captain made a dash towards his subordinate.

As shards of ice continued to fall in a curtain, Haku realized he was still in the “white dimension.” He charged recklessly through the rain of ice, through which he could see the physical world, and he shot through the curtain like a phantom. Haku was unable to judge the speed of the attack, or understand why he could move through ice portals that small, but Haku caught the Captain by the shoulder. His high-speed, vaulting flip flung the startled ninja face-first into the edge of Zabuza’s waiting sword. Shortly after that, the Captain had half of a face as he collapsed on the street.

From a distance, Haku witnessed the other Hunter-Nin keeping both Ranmaru and Raiga at bay with a breath of poison. The noxious gas cloud filled the lower half of the avenue, forcing many to retreat, but before Number Three could escape undetected he began acting erratically. He lunged towards empty air, snatching at nothing with his arms. Haku determined that Ranmaru had created some kind of illusion.

Three snapped out of the Genjutsu just in time for Zabuza to cut his legs out from under him. The Hunter-Nin fell and attempted to use seals for a jutsu in anticipation of his demise. Raiga quickly stuck the hunter’s forehead with the point of a sword and channeled lightning into his brain. Number Three crumpled in the street after that.

There was a long silence as Zabuza and Raiga looked at each other. Raiga broke the stare first, clearly irritated by Zabuza, “Tch!” He stowed his swords at his back and returned to Ranmaru’s side as the boy carefully used gusts of wind to part the poison fog.

Zabuza turned back to Haku, “Were there others?”

“There’s one more hunter in the forest. I injured him.” Haku reported. Before he could say another word, Zabuza bolted for the woods with his sword drawn.

He took a step, wondering if he should follow and assist with the clean-up. Haku noted the stinging stab wound on his back and other various injuries would not permit it. He limped towards Ranmaru for a few seconds before he felt winded, then gave up and sat on a public bench. Haku rested a healing hand on the puncture wound in his leg and leaned back.

’I’ve done enough. Those hunters wanted Zabuza, then let it be his responsibility…’

Haku took shallow breaths and let his mind fall quiet. As townspeople poked their heads curiously out of doorways, Migawari advised them to return inside. “That ninja scuffle may not be over yet… and the less you know about it the better off you’ll be.” He added.

‘If I’m lucky… that hunter-nin will get the better of Zabuza.’ Haku chuckled darkly as he thought, ‘Then I’ll be free. There won’t be anyone who would use my friends in Nanakusa as leverage if I tried to return to Gaara and Naruto. Zabuza can’t hurt anyone if he’s dead.’ But a small voice reminded him, And if he’s dead, that will be one less person to fight against the oppression of the Mist Village.

“Ugh.” Haku groaned with a mixture of pain and resentment. What difference could one, miserable
rogue ninja make?

“Haku!”

He turned his head slowly and saw Hiroshi bustling towards him. The large man flinched at the sight of bodies on the road. He stopped beside the bench and caught his breath.

“Thank goodness… the kids were shouting their heads off when they told me…” Hiroshi patted his shoulder and Haku winced in pain, “Oh! Sorry, it looks like you took a beating.”

“Better it was me that got hurt instead of the children.” On that note Haku asked, “Are they all safe?”

“Yes. Tomo picked up Hotaru and Katsu. They’re staying with Nagisa in Migawari’s office right now.” Hiroshi shook his head, “I can’t believe Hunter-Nin would try to drag them into this! Isn’t the point of capturing rogue ninja to secure the safety of citizens?”

“I should think so, but I don’t know at what price they are willing to achieve that goal.” Haku nodded towards his defeated enemies, “They paid dearly for it.” With his leg mended, he then began working on his stab wound, “Overall, Zabuza is less of a threat to these people than the Mist Village is.”

“For now.” Hiroshi agreed gravely, taking a seat on the bench.

Haku observed Migawari exchange words with Raiga and Ranmaru. The three of them then approached Haku, although Raiga did not seem entirely pleased.

Concerned, Ranmaru pressed his fingertips to Haku’s face to seal up several cuts, “Are you alright, Haku-kun? When Migawari-san said you had been ambushed I wasn’t sure if I’d make it in time.”

“I’m fine, thank you.” He smiled sheepishly, “I didn’t know that you can use Wind techniques like that, Ranmaru.”

“It’s how I spread my dust.” Ranmaru replied.

Haku exchanged a puzzled look with Migawari, wondering if he heard correctly. Migawari shrugged and sat in the space on the bench beside Hiroshi, taking off his spectacles to wipe them clean.

“We need to move and dispose of those bodies before townspeople think we’re murderers.” Migawari announced and then looked at Raiga, “I don’t suppose you know if Hunter-Nin go missing often? When they do, does the headquarters of Mist Black Ops send out an alert?”

“After a few days, it will. If this squadron was told to come here directly, they’ll look here first. If they were doing an island-wide sweep… then it might take longer.” Raiga drew upon his former experience in the Black Ops, “It might be smarter to go elsewhere before they come looking again. Next time, we’ll all be six feet under.”

“I don’t want to leave Nanakusa.” Ranmaru protested.

Raiga frowned in disapproval, “You will when they do to you what they did to him.” He pointed to Haku, “If you want to stay here then we should hand over Zabuza when they come again. He’s not good for much anyway.”

“Are you?” Haku countered pithily.

“They want him dead before they want me dead.”
“They want anyone dead who defies the Mizukage.” Haku clarified, “And the Mizukage is only a puppet.”

Silence punctuated the conversation. Everyone present gave Haku looks that were a mixture of incredulity and fascination.

“Zabuza and I have evidence that the Akatsuki may have taken over Kirigakure without anyone realizing it.” Haku explained, “The village itself is a hostage. Rogues who leave Mist who may realize what’s going on…are strategically being eliminated.”

“Even if that’s true, not all of the rogue-ninja from Kirigakure care about the well-being of that village nor are they trustworthy. Some of them ran away and never looked back.” Hiroshi critiqued.

“There’s no disputing that.” Haku acknowledged.

“Hidden Mist has been crippled by violence for decades.” Migawari pointed out, “Until you have a bona fide indicator that the Akatsuki has anything to do with it, don’t assume anything. No matter what’s happening in that village, it won’t matter at all if those hunters return and mince us for dinner.”

It fell quiet again and Haku looked at Raiga uncertainly, who had crossed his arms.

The man glanced at Ranmaru and patted the boy’s head as he spoke, “I believe it. I knew something was wrong when I was there, but I couldn’t figure out what.” He added, “The Akatsuki contacted me twice and tried to get me to do some work, a few years back. I guess that’s how they recruited Kisame when he left.”

Haku’s gaze travelled to the road’s end where Zabuza had reappeared. The Seversword was neatly stored at his back and there was not a scratch on him, although he did look severely annoyed. He stalked over to the oddball group near the bench. For the moment, it seemed as though his hostility with Raiga had been conveniently dismissed.

“First of all…” The man’s growl was directed at Haku, “Someone snitched on you in Moji, obviously. Good fucking job. I appreciate how sociable you are, it really keeps a low profile.”

“Did you get the hunter?” Haku pressed, sitting up straight.

“Yeah. I was too polite; cut his head off before he noticed me.” Zabuza recounted, “How did they locate you? Did you use a jutsu?”

“They may have noticed when I made it snow.”

“Why the fuck would you do that?”

Haku regarded his companions and saw that they too wanted an explanation. He replied in defeat, “It won’t happen again.”

“Fine. Whatever.” He grabbed a fistful of Haku’s shirt and pulled him from the bench, walking him towards the bodies that had bled out on the street.

“What?” Haku hissed an annoyance, feelings his friends’ eyes at his back as they watched him interact with the belligerent nukenin.

“This is probably going to happen again in the future, so I’m going to show you mop procedure.” Zabuza told him as he procured a summoning scroll, “Everyone in the Black Ops is expected to
destroy evidence efficiently. They collect heads sometimes, but they get rid of everything else. I don’t want Hunters to be able to trace what’s leftovers here.” He cut his thumb on the edge of the Seversword and then thrashed the scroll open. It spun like a tendril as he swiped blood across seals, and with a puff of smoke, a murder of crows erupted and fluttered about the area.

The cawing birds swooped over the bench and Hiroshi ducked down with a panicked yelp. Migawari muttered for him to settle down.

With a short whistle, Zabuza directed the carrion-eaters towards the bodies they had left. The crows immediately landed and began disassembling their lunch.

“They usually leave bits of clothing and other junk. You throw that out or bury it.” He explained to Haku, “I’ll make a copy of this summoning scroll for you so you can mop next time.”

Haku did not object, but he was not overtly thrilled about it. It would be a practical tool.

“Now we start a moratorium.” Zabuza decided, “We keep our heads down and stay put. Don’t talk to anyone who might be connected to Mist. Don’t take a mission or do anything to tip off hunters on alert…don’t even fart too loud. We can wait it out.” He looked over his shoulder and amended, “And tell them not to attract attention either. They’re at risk too.”

“I will.” Haku nodded.

“Haku, just so we’re clear…If we deal with Hunter-Nin again, you take them down first, no matter what. They won’t kill you right away because you aren’t a primary target. But people in your position get interviewed and they will extract information from you by any means.”

“One of them tried that.”

“He was being gentle.” Zabuza warned him, “When they’re serious, they tote you off to a hideout and begin removing things from your body until you cooperate. I don’t want you squealing on me. Make sure you kill them, or there’s always hell to pay if you don’t.”

“I understand.”

“Good.”

The crows had finished up and Haku took a moment to rinse off the street. The town was restored to normal, more or less, and Raiga and Ranmaru followed Hiroshi into his tea shop for a meal. Haku was flabbergasted to see Zabuza enter the café as well, ‘I didn’t think he wanted to be in their company…but maybe after today’s incident he feels they’re worth keeping close.’

Before Haku could follow suit, Migawari inclined his head, “Not so fast! Come back to my office with me, please.”

He obliged and followed the retired medic through town as villagers began peeking out into the open again. As expected, he followed Migawari through the back door of his house and straight into a treatment room. With a sigh, Haku took a seat and allowed the old man to mend his back.

“That needle I stuck you with before didn’t neutralize the poison.” Migawari said as he worked, “I’ve got to give you a medication to follow it with for the full effect. Made it myself while I was in Kusagakure! We know our poison, over there.”

“Thank you.” Haku murmured.
“Ah, don’t thank me. That medicine will probably make you crap and vomit for the rest of the day, but it’ll keep you alive…”

Haku’s shoulders sagged in distress after hearing the side effects.

“But let’s just say, hypothetically…if you were to get this badly injured and there was no help in sight for you…” The old man posed, “What would you do?”

“That’s what they call a loaded question.” Haku pointed out.

“Well, knowing how deep in shit you are right now, because of Zabuza and these other barbarians…there’s no doubt that you’ll get into a brawl again. Then you were talking about the Akatsuki, and I just thought to myself: Haku is asking for it.” Migawari bounced with laughter, “You want to help too much. You’re going to make too many enemies.”

“Do you mean to say that I should stand by and do nothing while terrible things happen here? Things I could help stop?” Haku was frustrated by the implication, “If it weren’t for the deplorable condition of the Water Country, I would not be an orphan. I would not have had to travel to another land to avoid persecution. How can I ever ignore what’s going on here?”

“You don’t have to ignore it.” Migawari told him as he stepped back, “You just need to prepare to get throttled.”

He motioned for Haku to follow him across the hallway and into the sitting room. “Hold on a moment…”

Puffing, Migawari used a stepladder to reach a high shelf and pulled down a basket. He riffled through it before procuring a scroll. He dusted it off and handed it to Haku, “Here.”

Haku stared at him for a long moment, “What is this?”

“It’s your Hokage’s Yin Seal.” Migawari enlightened him, “Remember when you told me you wanted it? Well here you go. If you can master this, there’s a better chance you’ll survive some nasty battles.”

“But you-!”

“You’ve earned it, Haku. I know that you’re not just another scrub only looking out for himself. You want to end the suffering of the people here, and you’d rather die than see little kids get hurt.” The old man’s tiny eyes crinkled when he smiled, “I like that about you. And I’d bet…that you really can make a difference around here.”

Haku nodded silently, lowering his eyes. The statement stirred a feeling in him that reminded him of Jiraiya’s heartfelt talks.

“Also, use that wisely. It’s quite the rigmarole to create and apply the seal to your head, and then you need to devotedly charge it with chakra.” Migawari cautioned him, “You’re smart enough to figure it out.”

“Thank you,” Haku said with a small smile, “I will return this to Tsunade-sama as soon as I am done studying it.”

“You might as well.” Migawari agreed as he exited the room and walked down the corridor. Haku followed him out to the lobby where Tomo and her children were relaxing in armchairs.
At the sight of Haku, the family jumped up and surrounded him in a group hug, animatedly thanking him for his bravery. He assured them that he needed no thanks, considering he created the danger in the first place.

Abruptly, Katsu broke away from the embrace first and rushed over to the window, “My frogs! Hey! My frogs did get to come out today!”

Hotaru and Nagisa craned their necks to look at their brother, baffled by his excitement. “I thought there were only tadpoles in the forest?” Hotaru muttered.

They crossed over to the window and were shocked to see a red toad the size of a cat pressed against the glass. A pair of goggles was strapped to the creature’s head. It said suddenly, “Hi!”

“Ah!” The three children fell back and onto the floor, startled.

“It’s alright!” Haku assured them as he crossed the waiting room and opened the door, “This is one of Naruto’s toads.”

In marched the red toad, followed closely by Pua. The rabbit stopped in front of Haku and tapped her hind foot.

“Oh, so this is Haku,” The toad spoke to Pua, “Thanks for showing me the way, pretty lady.” The toad hopped forward, “Hi! I’m Kosuke. Naruto would have sent Gamakichi to find you, but he’s been training with the Chief Toad a lot. And he’s too big to fit in this room…”

Haku bent down to give Pua an appreciative pat and said, “It’s good to meet you, Kosuke. Thank you for coming here. I know I probably should have sent Pua off to get mail, but Naruto beat me to it.”

“He did. The boss had something important to tell you.” Kosuke handed a scroll to Haku, “Here you go.”

‘Everyone has impeccable timing today.’ Haku thought. With a scroll in each hand, Haku looked between them and felt mildly overwhelmed. Hadn’t he nearly died twenty minutes ago? The exhaustion that he tried to resist finally walloped him, and he resorted to taking a seat in a waiting-room armchair.

Tomo took the cue, as did Migawari, and she herded her children along and out the door for homeschooling. Katsu stubbornly stayed behind and solicited a hug from Kosuke. Though confused, the toad let the little boy squeeze him like a stuffed toy. Satisfied, Katsu then ran out the door after his family.

“He likes animals.” Migawari explained to the toad as he too sat down in the lobby, “So I suppose it’s true that Haku trained with Gama-sennin, if I’m seeing toads appear in my office.”

“Of course it’s true.” The toad said and then gestured to a seat, “Can I rest here? That was a long trip.”

“Sure, small fry.”

Kosuke bounded up onto a cushion. He and the old man noticed Haku had gone quiet. His head had drooped tiredly and his chin rested on his chest. Pua was nestled comfortably on his knees. Migawari snickered, not surprised the young man had dozed off after such calamity.

He inquired of Kosuke, “Well…it seems you and I have a wait ahead of us. Are you any good at
Gaara was also napping.

He had taken time off from overseeing the village and training with Shukaku. That day, he had personally escorted Matsuri to the Tide Village. He did so expecting to catch up with Temari, as well as uncover why his student was reluctant to visit the village she had once adored. Upon his arrival, Gaara was welcomed into the barracks of the Sand training program and offered a spot on a break room sofa.

He took a seat and almost immediately drifted off. He was a little tuckered out from all of the running around.

*Good grief. You just got here, you useless sod. Don’t say that you can handle office work AND a cross-desert trip all in one day, and then crap out when you get here!*  

Gaara was not even present for a snappy reply. Sometimes this happened, Shukaku noted.

*Gaara*…

Matsuri gently shook her teacher’s shoulder. She pursed her lips in slight apprehension when Gaara’s eyes snapped open, but they were gold and frightening.

“Is something wrong?” She asked quietly, “Temari-sama will be here for a briefing soon…” She knew who she was speaking to.

“Your Kazekage is asleep. He works like a dog and then makes a fool of himself.” Shukaku replied.

“Can’t you wake him up…” She whispered, “Shukaku?”

“He’s ignoring me. Gaara doesn’t always hear me.” He shut his eyes and was silent for a long moment.

Matsuri’s shoulders sagged in dismay. Ever since Shukaku had become an “ally,” to use Gaara’s words, he had become a part-time babysitter whenever Gaara tired himself out. The Kazekage’s ambitious work ethic had a high correlation with burn-out, and as a result Matsuri had already had several awkward conversations with the frustrated Biju who took the reins.

Suddenly, Gaara jerked awake with an uncharacteristic snort.

“Ah!” She smiled, “The One-Tail is so helpful.”

Gaara wiped his lower lip, “I did it again…”

“You shouldn’t try to do so much in one day. This visit could have waited, Sensei.”

“Nonsense. I want everything to be concluded before I begin Chunin Exam preparations. It’s only a few days away.” He informed her, “That work will be on top of my regular duties. I also want to test you one last time before you’re escorted to the Leaf Village.”

“I understand.”

Many subordinates and Sand ninja of all ages dropped by and bid a quick hello to their village leader. It was not long before Temari jogged into the break room, looking contrite.
“Hi Gaara, Matsuri…” She took a breath and adjusted her hair, “I had to run over here from a drill I was overseeing. I didn’t think you’d come by today.”

“Gaara-sensei insisted.” Matsuri said as she matched Temari’s bemused expression.

“I really just couldn’t stand looking at my desk anymore.” Gaara admitted, “I didn’t mean to rush you, Temari. How have things been going?”

“Great, actually. Every division is on schedule. We’re just doing a statistical analysis of the first-approved Jounin and Black Ops. The average age of both groups is nineteen, which surprised me.” Temari continued, “They’re working with what they have around here, but Shiogakure won’t be a village to cross once it’s functioning on its own.”

“I am pleased to hear it.” Gaara crossed his legs while he sat, “I hope you haven’t been missing home too much.”

“Are you kidding?” She sniggered, “I wake up in a luxury cabana and then lay out on the beach every morning.”

“Point taken.”

“How has Inari’s training gone?” Matsuri asked curiously.

“Very well. He passed the Genin Graduation Exam. Once the stat recorders complete the analysis of all the Tide Jounin, the new trainees will get matched up with Jounin-sensei. There will be five teams.” Temari smiled, “It’s just like in Suna, except that everyone here is shiny and new.”

Matsuri made a peep of joy.

“Have you spoken to the jinchuriki here at all?” Gaara wondered.

“I have. Utakata is not nearly as temperamental as he used to be.” Temari told him, “If you’re willing to part from the couch, Gaara, I can take you over to him right now.”

With unusual enthusiasm, Gaara stood up right away. He motioned for Matsuri to tag along, and the three exited the barracks and set out for the bustling promenade. The damage that the town had sustained during the Shin clan’s attack had been beautifully repaired, and Gaara could at least be grateful the money Sunagakure had allocated was put to good use. He and Temari made small talk as Matsuri followed a few paces behind them, somewhat distracted.

Several blocks away from the Academy, a dense congregation of people had gathered at a flea market. One person separated from the crowd after spotting the visiting Sand ninja. Inari squeezed himself between the browsers and hurried over to Matsuri when he spied her, “Hey! Where have you been, Matsuri?”

The girl stopped as Gaara and Temari continued on without her.

Matsuri rubbed her elbow nervously when she greeted her friend, “Hi, Inari. I apologize; I’ve been busy with missions.”

“Yeah, but I thought you said you’d try to come back as often as you could!” The boy pointed out, “You missed my graduation ceremony. This stinks!” Inari flipped his thumb beneath the navy blue headband on his forehead. The etching in the metal depicted a retreating wave.

“I’m very proud of you.” Matsuri smiled genuinely at the sight of it, “I wish I had been there Inari!
Please know that I’m sorry.”

“Ah, it’s alright.” He waved off her concern, “I knew you’d get back here when you could. But poor Menma’s been freaking out this whole time…”

As Inari glimpsed over his shoulder to observe the crowd of market-goers, Matsuri felt a fearful tingling in her fingers and toes. Menma punctually appeared from behind a booth, removing an apron and handing it back to a stand attendant. Another part-time job, probably. *He must have seen us…* Matsuri’s suspicion was proven correct when the blonde young man started running towards them.

Her knees quaked. ‘I don’t want to talk to him. I didn’t even want to see him.’ She turned her head and observed a long stretch of empty pavement on the far end of the street, ‘He’s only going to keep pretending...so why should I have to?’

Turning back to his friend, Inari halted mid-sentence when Matsuri bolted across the boulevard and skirted around a public water fountain. “Hey!” He held out his hand and raced after her, “Matsuri, wait! Menma asked me to find you!”

It was at about this point, from a block away, Gaara noticed the bizarre commotion. Before he could look back and consider an intervention, Temari made him face front and continue.

“I didn’t want to bring this up to you, but…” She spoke quietly, “Matsuri has been avoiding her friends. I know they’ve missed her and want to make things right. Try to stay out of it so they sort it out, Gaara.”

“It does not look like they are sorting it out.” Gaara replied matter-of-factly.

“I haven’t gotten involved and neither should you. There’s no way we can fix it.” She stated, “Matsuri needs to build up some confidence and stop running away from the things she’s afraid of.”

Gaara attempted to piece it together, “If she is avoiding her friends, then I take that to mean she isn’t getting along with them?”

“Sort of.”

“Elaborate or I’ll dismember them.” He issued a mild threat, “Then my student can concentrate on other things.”

“Cool your jets, you maniac.” Temari chided in annoyance, “She has a crush on Menma, one of Tazuna’s favorite ninja. He’s the taller one. He was made a Jounin for the Tide Village, and you should know that he likes Matsuri too.” She added, “But he has...something on the side.”

“I have no idea what that means.” Gaara told her, “Unless he has a deformity.”

“Eh, never mind. Matsuri is timid and doesn’t know how to talk to him about all of this.” Temari said as they arrived at the Academy training yards, “If you want her to build a thick skin and be prepared for the Chunin Exam, the least you can do is let her work this out on her own.”

“Very well.” He agreed and then shut an eye, resting his hand over it, “I won’t interfere, but you have not given me a reason to trust the deformed person.” From a distance, he created a Third Eye from sand and positioned it over the walkway his student was running towards.

“Just call him Menma.” Temari insisted tiredly.
“Menma.” Gaara repeated.

“Good.” She guided him along by his arm while he was half-sighted, “Let’s go meet with Tazuna and the teachers, little brother.”

Matsuri hoped that her sensei would excuse such uncouth behavior. She ran at top speed down the main street before coming to an area dense with people, and then she propelled herself up an awning and onto a rooftop. She could hear Inari yelling frantically for her to stop.

‘I’m sorry, Inari.’ She rationalized her desire to flee, ‘I don’t want to leave you alone too, but when you’re always talking about Menma like that…I can’t stand listening.’

Ahead, what she supposed was a Water Clone of Menma had appeared atop the bricked edge of a building. It held out its hands, its facial expression confused and dismayed. Matsuri palmed the Jouhyou at her hip and, with a whirl, cut the clone in half as she ran. She leapt the gap to the next rooftop, noticing that Menma was trailing below, still trying to get her attention.

She pressed on as far as she could until the melody of Menma’s ocarina began to sap her strength, ‘He’s slowing me down!’ Matsuri felt as though a block of lead had been laid across her shoulders. She wisely descended to the street again and made it to the entrance of the Great Naruto Bridge, eventually coming to a sweaty halt, ‘I need him to undo this jutsu…’

Matsuri waited for Menma and Inari to catch up. She stood in silence as Inari began to scold her, yet his words were drowned out by the heartbreak and frustration buzzing in her ears. She kept her dark eyes trained on the ground until Inari gave up with a huff.

Menma used two hand seals to relieve the heavy sensation the girl had endured. He then worriedly held her shoulders, “Why did you keep running? You know how badly we’ve wanted to see you, right Matsuri?”

“I know more than that.” She muttered.

“Come on, you’ve been gone for too long and you ran off! That’s just plain insulting!” Inari puffed his chest.

“I am sorry.” Matsuri spoke woodenly, “Inari. I’m sorry I wasn’t there to see you graduate; or to visit you. I just can’t stand being around Menma.”

The boys shuddered in a shared moment of ultimate surprise. They stared and tried to make an assessment of what could possibly be upsetting the Sand kunoichi.

Inari turned slowly to his friend, “Did you…do something, Menma?”

The young man was still completely mystified, “I have no idea…but if I have done something…” He gently prodded Inari, “Would you please excuse us for a short while? If I have offended it’s up to me to address it.”

“Right, right…” The Genin nodded in understanding and then pointed at Matsuri, “Now stop running away! You’re one of my favorite friends, and if I haven’t made you angry then I think you should spend some time with me, for crying out loud!” He stomped off to give them space.

Beside them on the bridge railing that overlooked the bay, several seagulls perched. Menma stood in front of Matsuri, patient and attentive, knowing that she would find the willpower to speak. The breeze swept a strand of her hair and she uncomfortably tucked it behind her ear.
“I just don’t want to see you anymore.” Matsuri said with finality.

“I don’t know why that is. Matsuri, I don’t understand what I could have done to warrant any of this.” He objected sadly.

A frown pulled so hard on the corners of her mouth she feared it would stick until the end of her days. She had always been the type to get discouraged and clam up. To retreat. She had already proven to Temari and Kankuro how she lost the ability to articulate when on the verge of tears, but today was a rare exception. Indignant anger broke through remorse like an eggshell and freed her to speak her mind.

“I stood up for you when no one would have been willing to trust you.” She said at length, “But that’s all I did. You were the one brave enough to defy the Shin clan, and to work with Sand ninja you hardly even knew. I was just skating by so I could be around you. I couldn’t have helped anyone if you weren’t with me.”

He smiled at the memory, “No, you accomplished far more than I did.”

“We nearly got killed.” She sounded morose, as if she regretted her choices.

“It’s alright. I’ve thanked Utakata-san for saving us. I’d like you to meet him, Matsuri.”

She shook her head in solemn silence.

“I…decided I was in love with you the day after you took me on a date.” Matsuri announced calmly, “That’s why I was so excited to come back here.”

The bewildered expression on his face slowly morphed into elation, “You…? I was hoping…oh Matsuri, I wanted to tell you-” She batted his hand aside when it brushed her cheek.

“Don’t misunderstand me.” She corrected, “That’s how I felt that day. Today I only have questions.”

“Questions?” Menma was perplexed, unsure if he had to raise or lower his guard for the conversation.

“Do you work for a bubble tea shop?”

“I did for a few weeks.” He replied quickly.

“And do you still spend time with coworkers from that place?”

“Of course I do.”

“The waitress.” Matsuri got to the point, “I was served by her when I visited.”

“I see. I couldn’t find you that day, but Inari said you were looking for me.” He recounted, “What happened? Did Rika tell you I wasn’t at the café?”

“Her name…is Rika.” Matsuri noted dolefully before asking, “Do you see her every day?”

The young man was quiet, stewing over the question before he said, “Almost every day.”

“And you and I have only met a few times.”

“I’m not happy about that.” He took her hand, “I’ve missed you and I’ve wanted to talk to you.”
“But I’m not the one you care about.” Matsuri reasoned.

“When you say something like that…it sounds as if someone wanted you to believe it.” Menma drew a conclusion, “That’s not true, Matsuri. I feel the same way as you.”

“It’s pointless. I’m in Sunagakure. I’ll be taking the Chunin Exam soon, and I’ll be busier than ever. I watch Gaara-sensei mope every day about how Sakura-chan is a whole country away, and I wondered what good I’d be if I tried to live like that.” Matsuri shook her head, “I’m not special enough to wait for. I’m a mouse. Everyone here is new and vibrant, like you. You’ll pick someone better.”

“No, I won’t.” He lifted her hand and pressed a kiss to the back of it.

“You’re a Jounin.”

“Because this village needs me to be one.” Menma clarified.

“All my life I’ve finished last. My parents coddled me and kept me cooped up, and then they died. I was pathetic in the Academy, and everyone in Suna has used me as the butt of a joke at some point. They still don’t care. They look at me and only see Gaara-sensei standing behind me. I’m clear as glass.”

“Is that what you think I see?”

She pulled her hand back, “I’ve done my part here and I don’t need to come back. You should just keep spending time with Rika.”

“If she said something to hurt you, please know I won’t let it happen again. I don’t want you to deprecate yourself like this. I think you’re the one who’s mistaken…because I’m not special at all, Matsuri. I’m homeless. I won’t be forever, but you see someone better than who I really am.”

“Even if that’s the case, we’re too far apart. It’s not worth it.” She stood a bit straighter, “It’s all water under the Great Naruto Bridge, Menma. Please don’t worry. You need to do your best to help the Tide Village.”

He spoke with an edge of panic, “Matsuri, I care about you more than Tide!”

“That’s not something you should be saying. You have too much responsibility.” Matsuri said firmly, “Please don’t talk to me anymore. I have my own responsibilities to take care of.”

She feinted left to pass him, and as he reached out an arm to catch her, Matsuri ducked to the right. The seagulls on the rail spooked and took off with piercing squawks. Menma chased after her down the stone path, aware of the strange looks they had drawn. The girl did not slow even for a moment as she charged headlong into the barracks of the Sand Training Program.

Menma stopped short at the gate where two Sand shinobi were watching him. It was clear that he had upset Matsuri, and he would not be let by without being questioned.

He waited for a long while and stared blankly. How could sincere feelings fail to reach someone? Someone who so badly needed to hear that they were loved and needed, ‘A person can still fail to accept it. Matsuri, I don’t want you to be afraid of me no matter what it is that you’re thinking. I am never going to hurt you.’

He smiled wanly at the guards before turning away, walking back towards the center of the village. ‘I will wait. I don’t believe you when you say that you want to stay away from me. And if you
"take some time to think about what I said, you’ll understand that there’s no one else. Matsuri…when you’re feeling less frightened and small…” Menma quietly resolved, ‘I will be right here.’

Tazuna twitched his mustache.

“Good to see you, Gaara.” The old man commented with a hint of sarcasm. He was irritated by the Kazekage’s blatant distraction; almost staring off into space while keeping one eye covered.

Temari was at her brother’s side, having brought him to a pavilion where Academy students had lunch at picnic tables. Tazuna and Utakata were seated side by side on a bench.

From the corner of her mouth Temari gently warned, “Gaara, Utakata and Tazuna are here. You need to stop watching Matsuri now.”

“Hm. I have no idea what she and that boy are arguing about.” He mused aloud, “I should take some time to develop the audio-equivalent of this jutsu.” With a hand still on his face, Gaara turned to Tazuna, “Hello, Tazuna-san. I apologize. I’m monitoring potential conflict between the Sand and Tide Villages.”

“The only conflict I can think of would be either a financial crisis, or you offending the hell out of me.” The old man gruffed.

Gaara made a move to stop the technique, but suddenly balked at the sight of Menma kissing his student’s hand.

“What?” Temari hissed in aggravation, “Did they kill each other?”

“I can’t watch anymore.” Gaara concluded. If two youths were going to shamelessly profess love and quarrel out in the open, he was never the recommended audience for such a thing. He cleared his throat and gave his full attention to Tazuna, “You’re now the official Head Elder and Councilman of Shiogakure. I would prefer to send correspondence only to you, Tazuna, but keep me informed if you have shinobi counterparts who need to contact me.”

“Will do. Now, there’s someone I’d like for you to meet,” Tazuna gestured to the man who was bent over the table in boredom, “This is Utakata. He’s a former Mist ninja who was sub-contracted by the Sand Training Program to teach. He’s still mostly a bitch-and-moan nukenin, but he’s taught our kids a lot. Also, he’s asked that we do not tip off Mist to his whereabouts.”

Gaara nodded politely, “It’s good to meet you.”

Utakata’s head moved a fraction so he could get a look at the red-headed Sand ninja, “Excuse me, Lord Kazekage. I was denied a day off today because of your visit. I guess it’s nice to meet you too.”

“Is that so?” The man cocked an eyebrow, “The Fourth Kazekage murdered his own child when he deemed the power of the Biju too great for him. So I’ve heard…”
“Father made an honest attempt to do that, yes.” Gaara acknowledged, “But I’m still here and he isn’t.”

Mildly amused, Temari took a seat at the table to watch the exchange unfold.

“So you became a village leader just to spite him?” Utakata observed, “What a coincidence. I became a teacher to spite my old Master…” He put his pipe away, deciding that there was no danger, “The man who taught me everything I knew had me dragged into the chambers of Mist’s Sealing Corps and tried to extract Saiken from me.” His face twisted into a scowl, “I suppose I should’ve thanked him for demonstrating what fate awaits me if the Akatsuki stop by.”

“Is that why you’re such a diva?” Tazuna felt more informed, “It’s time to bury that hatchet.”

Utakata rested his chin on the heel of his hand and sniffed at the old man, “That’s easy for you to say. Even though Harusame-shishou is dead and I survived, the Black Ops have been after me for years. Do you think I want to return to a village where life is cheaper than dirt?”

“That’s not what I mean.” He corrected, “I just want you to be nicer to kids. Stay here if it makes you happy, but don’t take your bad attitude out on students.”

“I’m trying.” Utakata sighed.

Gaara chimed in, “His name is Saiken?”

Utakata blinked in surprise when Gaara had picked up on the detail, “Yes.”

“I think you and I will have plenty to talk about.” Gaara allowed Shukaku, who was listening gleefully to the conversation, express his rattling tanuki-tail. It thrashed behind Gaara as he folded his arms, “Rather, we have a lot to talk about.”

A tiny, incredulous laugh escaped Utakata and he mussed his hair, ‘So I’m not the only one. Saiken, do you see this? There are other Bijuu and jinchuriki who understand each other!’ He suspected that this meeting with another jinchuriki would be a beneficial experience.

Tazuna frowned in thought at the sight of the raccoon-like tail whipping around. Temari had to affirm that this transformation was not a herald of imminent peril. When she decided that it wasn’t, she chuckled nervously, “Ah, that’s new. He doesn’t usually do things like this…but maybe we should excuse ourselves before this conversation gets weirder.”

The following day in the Hidden Leaf Village, the tempo of life had sped up. More visitors were crowding into the city by the hour, store owners hustled for business, and anything related to the Chunin Exam captured the people’s attention. As for Konoha’s preeminent Genin group, something unusual had sidetracked them from exam preparations.

Not long after Hinata and her kunoichi compatriots had caught her cousin on a date, Tenten presumed the news had become a ticking time bomb. To avoid unwanted scrutiny from the people closest to them, Neji agreed with her that it would be prudent, at the very least; to inform Lee of what was going on. Of all their friends, Lee deserved to be made aware first.

After trying to keep everything as normal as possible, from their style of dress to the timing of their arrival on the training field, Tenten pulled Lee aside. Gai had challenged him to a push-up contest as a warm up, but Lee graciously excused himself to have a word with his friend. They stood off to the side of the clearing, Neji casually did forms near battered tree stumps while Gai brushed up on handstands; both respectfully minding their business.
"Yes, Tenten?" He leaned in and lowered his voice, "You seem very pensive. Is anything the matter?"

"No. Everything’s good, Lee. I’m just going to ask that you keep what I am about to tell you confidential." Tenten gave a preliminary caveat.

"Yes, of course!" He spoke quietly.

"I don’t want you to be surprised, and I don’t want you learning about it from anyone else, so…" She cupped her mouth and whispered, "I’m in a relationship. I meant to tell you sooner because I knew you’d actually be supportive."

"Ah." His lips turned into a frog-like pout as he thought about it.

"With that guy." Tenten added for clarification, pointing her thumb over her shoulder at Neji in the distance, "There’s no way he’d ever tell anyone about it, but he did say he wanted you to know. Neji remembered most of what happened when we came back from the Marsh Country."

"That is right…” Lee concurred in a low voice, "Neji has been acting differently, most especially around you. I was unsure if he would ever find a way to act on how he felt…”

"Well, when he did act on it I ended up kicking him in the face. He was a bit rude about it."

"That is what I would expect…” Lee raised his eyebrows and smiled, "I am happy for you, Tenten. I was trying to help him, you know."

"Sure I know, Lee! I know what you did for him.” She smiled back, “And truly: thank you for everything you’ve done. For being there for Neji…and for me too…”

"It is thanks enough to see Neji return your feelings.” He held up a hand modestly.

As they parted to begin their training routines, Tenten did notice the widening, wobbling grin on Lee’s face as returned to Gai for a warm up. It was a look of restraint and delighted shock.

Tenten approached Neji and he paused in his practice, somewhat dubious, “He must have taken that well.”

“He did, Neji. Lee seemed happy about it.” She rested her hands on her hips, relieved, “Can I take you up on that offer to work on Taijutsu?”

“You may.” When he said it, Tenten noticed his head did a strange little tilt, like he was getting a better look at her.

‘He must be happy too. Or maybe I look good today. Possibly both…”’ She mimicked Neji’s posture and arm positioning as he demonstrated.

He went through the motions of basic Wushu exercises that Wong Leung had ingrained in him and Lee. Neji had slowed it down for her, figuring that was preferable to smacking her in the head if Tenten did not get the stance perfect. That was Wong’s method. There was a solid three minutes of peace before the shouting began.

Dreading what the commotion was about, Tenten and Neji about-faced, watching as Gai covered his face with an arm. He was grinning and blubbering simultaneously. It was hard to distinguish Gai’s emotional blatherering, but they could get the gist of it. Lee faced them with an expression of both guilt and joy, and Tenten speedily deduced that her friend had not been able to keep a secret for more than
five minutes.

She shouted across to him, “I said confidential, Lee!”

“Forgive me! I was so excited…I thought it was alright to share it with Gai-sensei!”

TenTen pressed a palm to her temple and shook her head in disappointment. Gai’s volume rapidly increased until he was shouting, and he made a running charge toward his students. TenTen only had time to think, ‘I guess he doesn’t disapprove.’ Before Gai collided with her and squeezed her in a hug that was fit to be an illegal wrestling move. Neji wisely kept his distance.

“Lee tells me that this is a day for celebration! My two students, for whom I was perpetually concerned by your lack of enthusiasm and enjoyment during your Springtime of Youth…” Gai took a deep breath and thundered, “I am assured that you have found love!”

Airless, TenTen could only mouth the words: let go of me. Lee continued being innocently unhelpful by cheering in the background.

Gai went on as he set TenTen down, “Darling girl…you beautiful, deadly flower…you have gotten through to the most cantankerous young man I have seen in three generations. That is heaven’s work!”

Neji was scowling from a few meters away. Maybe it was only natural that TenTen be given credit for inspiring change in the Hyuga heir. It wasn’t as if it had taken any effort on his part to reciprocate or communicate or anything.

TenTen nodded absently as she got her breath back, pressing down her clavicle as if she had just escaped a stranglehold. Neji certainly was not going to join the conversation and so, to remove himself from it, he went on with forms and tuned the banter out. Their sensei took this as a cue to keep talking.

“I want to extend heartfelt congratulations to you, my pupils, on achieving such a momentous landmark in your lives! May your passions remain stoked, your success mutual, your sorrows shared, your pockets heavy, your children many-!” At Gai’s words, Neji slipped with a Wind-charged Air Palm and accidentally cut down an oak tree, “Your family be distinguished, your grandchildren accomplished-!”

TenTen stomped her foot and waved in front of the shouting man’s face, “Hey! You’re getting ahead of yourself, Gai-sensei!”

“Oh.” Gai stopped, “Pardon me. Perhaps that was more congratulations than what was due…”

Even after TenTen had managed to reel in Gai and Lee, and Neji turned his red face away to calm down, the day deteriorated from there.

Everyone knew. Of course everyone knew.

Hinata had probably not been responsible for circulating the news, but there was no doubt that Sakura and Ino had immediately informed their respective teams. Sato would definitely have learned of it from the girls thanks to his tattletale disposition, and Shino may have heard of it because Sato never shut up around him.

After training with Gai that morning, TenTen joined Lee and Neji for a training session with Wong Leung. Even the old grandfather was suspicious of something, although he could not put his finger on what exactly was out of place. That was the last semblance of privacy they had, for after Wong
Leung dismissed his disciples, Tenten was forthwith kidnapped.

By friends, thankfully. Ino had commandeered Tenten’s body by way of Mind-Body switch-ambush, and offered her up to the rest of the kunoichi congregation as a new source of gossip.

“Why are you leaving her?” Lee asked quietly as he followed Neji down the street, “Should we not try to help?”

“If we attempted to stop them now, they’d find other opportunities to interrogate Tenten later. It’s better to get it over with.”

“How cold.” Lee observed.

“The same could happen to me.” Neji informed him, “But I will be taking shelter to prevent such a thing.”

“Meaning you expect that our brothers-in-arms will have questions for you?”

“They’re worse than washerwomen. Shikamaru and Sato have proven that.”

“I suppose that is true.”

He and Lee promptly made for the Hyuga compound, and at the gate Neji had the great misfortune of having his shadow captured.

“I’m sorry.” From a lateral position, Shikamaru spoke, “Hope you’re not busy or anything...You’re needed at a conference, Neji.” He looked to Lee, “You can come along if you want, Lee.”

Lee exchanged a look with a frozen Neji, wherein nonverbal thoughts were conveyed.

Lee: *Now do you want me to help you?*

Neji: *Help me.*

Lee: *Maybe I should not. You made no effort to assist Tenten. Perhaps, as you said, it is “better to get this over with.”*

Neji: *How dare you.*

Lee smiled, “Please continue without me, Shikamaru-kun.”

“Suit yourself.” Shikamaru walked Neji like a shadow-bound dog down the side street to where Chouji and the others were waiting.

At that point, Lee had to decide what to do with the sudden abundance of free-time he would have that day. While he rubbed his chin and deliberated on it, Fujita came up the walk and brightened at the sight of him.

“Lee-kun!” The younger boy dashed up to his role-model, “How are you? Were you with Neji-sama this morning?”

“Fujita!” He gave the boy a thumb’s up, “Yes, but I heartlessly abandoned him a few moments ago.” Fujita gave him an odd look but accepted the answer.

Lee continued, “Did you just return from a mission?”
“Yes, and now Sawako-sensei is going to confirm my registration for the Chunin Exam.” Fujita pulled on his backpack straps excitedly, “Because I have no formal team I was arranged as a substitute to Asuma-sensei’s team. I will report to them tomorrow.”

“Ah, I see. How fitting.”

“You know, as a treat before the exam I was going to visit Sancho-baachan’s Curry Shop.” Fujita recognized the opportunity, “Usually no one wants to go with me, but you like that restaurant, don’t you Lee?”

“I do! And it just so happens I have no other obligations today, as my teammates are being catechized this very moment.” Lee grinned, “Fortuitous!”

He waited on the porch of the Main House as Fujita put away his belongings and changed. Shortly after that they set out for the curry shop just beyond the Fire Country’s border in the Land of Rivers. By the early afternoon, they were seated and warmly welcomed by the tiny old woman.

“Welcome back, Lee-kun! Fujita-chan!” Sancho chirped, “Ah, it’s so good to see you. It’s been far too long! Are your teammates not joining you today, Lee?”

“They have both been confiscated by our friends this afternoon, but I am sure they would have been delighted to drop by.”

“Ah, well, next time then. Would you boys like to try today’s special?”

They gladly accepted the offer and the old lady poked her head into the kitchen to set Karashi and Rishan to work. Sancho returned and took a seat beside her favorite customers for some chit-chat.

“Business has gotten so much better since you drove the Kurosuki family out! I cannot thank you enough.” She sighed happily, “I have a new employee who is quite the innovative chef, I must say. And now that the Chunin Exam is a day away, there have been droves of travelers stopping here to enjoy curry!”

“That’s wonderful, Baa-chan. I’ve been telling lots of people in the Leaf Village about this place.” Fujita asked her, “Have any Leaf ninja dined here on my recommendation?”

“Hmm, let’s see…” She adjusted her spectacles, “Not recently. Oh, but some months back I remember a Leaf ninja who came by and talked about your team, Lee. He was a bit funny.”

“How so?”

“As I recall he ate that day’s special. When I spoke of how your team had helped me, he said that he was only familiar with Tenten-chan.”

“Really? How old was he? Perhaps I know him.”

“About thirty years old, by the look of it.” Sancho estimated.

Lee frowned in confusion, quite certain that Tenten did not know many people that age. Hayate was a potential candidate, but the man was not the outgoing sort who would want to talk to chefs.

“All of that was not out of the ordinary. It was when Karashi pointed out that patron had been dishonest with me.” Sancho went on, resting her hands in her lap, “Karashi had injured himself in the kitchen, so he went outside to the ice box. Hit his head and foot…He said he saw the Leaf ninja release a disguise.” The old woman tilted her head back, “He was considerably more handsome than
what I saw in the restaurant.”

“Why would he do that?” Fujita wondered.

“I don’t know.” Sancho admitted.

Rishan came by the table with plates of curry and set them down in front of the guests, “Enjoy, gentlemen!” The young woman stood by to watch.

“This is a new recipe. She likes to see how customers react to it.” Sancho informed them, “Dig in!”

The boys did as they were advised. Fujita promptly started sweating as he ate, but Lee was thrilled by the unconventional, spicy-sweet flavor of the dish. He looked up at the young woman, “I would like another order please. What do you call it?”

“It’s the Curry of Heaven.” Rishan smiled, “The Curry of Life energizes people, but this recipe can make anyone happy. It will be our new specialty!”

“That is marvelous!”

“I know! I worked so hard.” She darted back to the kitchen, “I’ll return with some more!”

Fujita had to take a break and sip his glass of water. He exhaled to cool off and then asked, “So did the handsome man return to the Leaf Village?”

“Oh no. He said he had a mission. Curiously, he came back the next morning without a disguise. We knew who he was, of course. He ordered the same thing.” Sancho explained, “I was cooking that day so I had Karashi take his order, and…Karashi said his headband changed.”

This got Lee and Fujita’s attention.

“Was it from Iwagakure?” Fujita asked quickly.

“I think so, if that forehead protector has stones on it. Of course, why would I question it when he knew about you children? Surely he was a friend.”

“That was not a friend.” Lee told her gravely, “Months ago, a rogue ninja was hunting my team.”

“My word!” Sancho clutched at her apron.

“That must be the person who killed Hikune-niisan.” Fujita’s eyes glazed over, “It was about the same time…”

“Goodness, I had no idea I was feeding a killer!” The old woman lamented.

“Baa-chan,” Lee pushed himself up from the table, “Would you object if we escorted you to the Leaf Village? Any information you can give in a statement to the Hokage may help us find this shinobi.”

“I…I suppose that would be my civic duty.” She agreed gloomily, “Forgive me, boys. I never meant to cause trouble.”

“It isn’t your fault.” Fujita stood after leaving money on the table, “I am glad that you told us about this.” Sancho informed her son and Rishan that she would be gone for the evening, and then followed the two Leaf ninja out of the restaurant.

“It’s alright, Baa-chan.” Fujita reassured her, “This won’t take long. And you know, I think that new
curry was the best I’ve ever had.”

The following morning, prior to the First Stage of the Chunin Exam, Hiashi had asked Neji, Hinata, and Fujita to line up at the central porch of the Main House. He wanted to have a word with them.

They gathered as instructed and Hiashi ventured outside a few minutes later, sizing them up in the morning light.

“At some point, this test may pit you against each other as enemies. Never forget that before you clash as competitors, you are family. You are the pride of the Hyuga clan.” Hiashi told them, “I believe in you all.”

Hinata covered her mouth to restrain a joyful cry. She gave her father a light squeeze and then waved to Hanabi at the window, who had just woken up. Neji and Fujita thanked Hiashi before they set out for the Academy. On the way, Fujita told his older cousins about what he and Lee had discovered at the Curry of Life shop.

“Sancho could not help but be trusting of anyone who claimed to know us.” Neji deduced, “Going forward, it may be wise for us to advise acquaintances from missions that they do not speak about who they contracted from Konoha.”

Both Hinata and Fujita agreed, as they did not wish tragedy to strike twice by the same mistake.

Outside of the school building, they followed other entrants through the open double-doors. The Hyuga participants sincerely wished each other luck before filing off towards their teammates.

Neji fell into step beside Tenten and Lee. His girlfriend playfully nudged his arm, “I can hardly believe there will be three people from your clan competing this year! Just make sure you’re nicer than you were last time.”

“I will be more considerate.” He then lowered his voice teasingly, “And what am I to do if I face you in the Third Stage?”

“Surrender.” She grinned.

Lee added on, “Ah, a good recommendation. Tenten, Neji; be sure to surrender to me if either of you are pitted against me in battle!”

They told him fat chance.

Security was stricter than it was at the previous exam. At the end of the hallway, each Genin was stopped at a table and compared to photo credentials on file. Predictably, every person continued on, having no need to falsify their records. The young ninja then passed into a newer, much larger lecture hall with an abundance of free seats. There would be a few minutes of time before Chunin Evaluators would give them assigned seating.

Neji found an open space on a wall and stopped to lean against it, staying huddled with his teammates. He peered over at Hinata’s team, where the mischievous look on Sato’s face suggested they were fully prepared. Sakura and Ino’s teams also appeared rather carefree. Fujita was sharing a bag of chips with Chouji.

“Leaf will have the strongest competitors during this exam.” Neji expected, “And I am sure other villages are aware of that.”
“Is there anyone you think that we should look out for?” Tenten asked softly.

Neji scanned around for any oddities. There was a team of all strawberry redheads from Hidden Grass, possibly triplet siblings. Plenty of Grass ninja competing. Plenty of Sand ninja too. Nothing overtly unusual, save for one team with aesthetically pleasing, light armor that bore an unusual village symbol.

“Look there.” Neji directed his teammates’ attention to them, “Those are Dream ninja.”

Tenten and Lee studied the headbands with a ‘ZZZ’ mark. Lee was impressed, “I had no idea that Yumegakure was a real village, or that they would qualify to compete!”

“Maybe Tsunade-sama encouraged them to. A lot of the more isolated villages are represented here, today.” Tenten supposed, “I was kind of hoping that we’d see Star ninja…”

“I see none here.” Neji reported.

“That’s a shame.” Tenten sighed, “So Neji…thanks a lot for leaving me to the wolves. Those girls are the noisiest, most tactless people I know! I would have appreciated it if you stepped in.”

“My apologies,” He frowned, “Likewise, I too was cross-examined.”


“No. By force.”

“Men can be surprisingly meddlesome too. Didn’t Lee ward them off?”

Lee just smiled.

“He made no attempt.” Neji recounted miserably.

“Our friends were curious about this new development in your life! It was good for you to talk about it with them.” Lee figured.

“I was told and asked things that I can never un-hear. What was interesting to those fools was detrimental to me.”

Tenten nodded, “Well said.”

Exam evaluators began herding Genin to seats and dispersing groups. Neji was planted in the second from the front row, aware that Tenten and Lee were several rows behind him. He discreetly checked the room for any giveaways or weaknesses that could be exploited. Nothing seemed obviously out of place. Once all of the entrants were settled down and hushed, Shizune scurried to the front of the room.

The Hokage’s assistant set down a tall stack of papers on the front desk, “Oof! There we go.” She motioned to a few Chunin Evaluators on the side of the room to give her a hand. They began distributing written tests face-down in front of trainees. Pencils were already provided on the tabletops.

Shizune turned around and smiled at the congregation, “Good morning everyone! Welcome to the Chunin Selection Exam! I’m Shizune and I will be your proctor for the First Stage. Please give me your full attention as I explain the rules and conditions of this test.”

Her friendly demeanor was surprisingly effective. All eyes faced front.
“The first stage entails Genin taking a written test. Questions on the test have point values from 1 to 3, and there are 100 questions on this test. Each question will denote how many points it is worth, so you can strategize on which ones you want to prioritize answering. Unanswered questions do not deduct points, but incorrect answers will deduct points based on the 1 to 3 scale.” Shizune elaborated, “Every team must have a combined score of 280 points or more. 279 points or below will make you ineligible to proceed to the next stage. If you are caught once copying someone’s answers, you will automatically be disqualified.”

Neji noted to himself, ‘This test demands that an entire team coordinate and pay attention. Unlike the first exam, this is not about gathering information from other test-takers.’ He had a hunch there was something that needed to be noticed, though. He continued to look for it.

“Good news! Simply writing your name at the top of the test paper awards you three points.” Shizune added sunnily.

An overeager Genin to the far left flipped his page over. A Chunin Evaluator hurled a sharpened pencil at him and pinned the paper to the desk top, “You’re out, buddy.”

Shizune wore a remorseful expression, “And…if you look at the test before I tell you…you will be disqualified. Sorry.”

The Genin was bad-mouthed by his first-timer teammates and the three were ejected from the room.

“There is no talking during this exam. You may not ask supervising evaluators any questions, as that would constitute an unfair advantage. If you need a restroom break raise your hand so you can be personally escorted to and from the lavatory. I will announce how much time is remaining on the test as we progress.” The woman put her hands on her hips, “And now…you can begin!”

A cacophony of flipping papers filled the room. Shizune stood serenely with her hands behind her back, watching Genin begin to devour the test.

Neji had almost immediately calculated in his head that he would answer thirty-two of the 3-point questions, as it would allot his third of points needed to pass. It would also save time and give him a chance to look for clues. He still did not buy that a piece of paper was actually standing between them and the Second Stage. Within ten minutes, he had all 32 short-answer questions completed, plus his full name, for 99 points. He expected Lee and Tenten’s sharp math skills would also indicate to them the minimum points they needed.

When Neji glanced up in boredom at that time, he finally did notice something peculiar. There were three clocks spaced out on the frontward wall. The time was synchronized. It was when he watched an evaluator look up at them, and then another evaluator take a gander, that he pondered why one clock was not good enough. He spied three clocks on each side of the room, realizing that the evaluators were keenly watching the time, not the test-takers.

‘While I did notice some significance, time will be a big factor. I do not know the reason yet, but it will affect the test somehow.’ He wanted to pat himself on the back for being smart enough to do the minimal amount of work on the test.

Not a moment later, Shizune piped up in an apologetic voice, “Excuse me everyone, but I was just informed that we are not on schedule…an evaluator noted that the time in this room is ten minutes slow. Right now, a watch confirms there are only ten minutes left to complete the test. The Second Stage will begin as planned in fifteen minutes.”

A twitter of panic erupted in the room. Most Genin had no hope of accumulating points or correct
answers in so short a time. Pencils began to scratch more fiercely.

With his eyes shut, Neji took a look at Tenten with the Byakugan. She appeared calm and deep in thought. She was also trying to derive the meaning of the time element. Lee was finishing up a few more questions and did not look as perturbed as the people beside him.

Neji decided that the unthinkable was the solution hidden under their noses. Squander the time for one task to prioritize time for another. He raised his hand for the restroom.

An evaluator nodded to him and allowed him to leave his seat, guiding him in silence back towards the hallway. Neji found it was a little too obvious, and that maybe others would come to their senses. The points on the test did not matter nearly as much as getting to the true objective. On his way down the corridor, he used his blood limit to watch Tenten and Lee quickly be excused as well. Other privy ninja raised their hands when they decided what was most important as well. They drew judgmental looks from test-takers, as if they had given up.

Near the entrance of the men’s room, an evaluator waved him along, “If you don’t want to use the bathroom you don’t have to. Just follow the signs to the next stage and keep quiet.”

Neji exited the Academy and waited out front, where he was joined by Lee and Tenten shortly after that. Sakura popped outside next, smiling to herself.

“Well, would you look at that…” Tenten commented snidely. Dead ahead on a bench, beside a folding sign with an arrow pointed towards Stage Two, Hayate was eating a boxed lunch.

As they walked by he motioned with his chopsticks at her team, “Go. Don’t mind me. I’m just doing part-time supervision to make sure all you dumb-shits look at the signs. Some who make it this far can still screw that up.”

“It was nice seeing you too, Hayate.” Tenten told him cheerfully as they left.

Moving along, two teams burst ahead in a run to get to the next stage first: the Dream ninja team and a Rock ninja team. Signs were periodically placed along the path.

“I do not think there is any added benefit of being the first team there.” Lee assumed.

“There isn’t.” Neji affirmed, doing one last check with his Byakugan, “These boards indicate that we will be gathering at the restricted area at the Forest of Death.” He could see the other Leaf teams catching up behind them.

“Huh, you’d think Tsunade-sama would try to arrange something different from the last exam.” Tenten folded her arms, “Unless budgeting was a concern. Hokage-sama did say that she wanted to make a profit on the Chunin Exam.”

“We shouldn’t assume it will involve the same requirements as the previous exam did.” Neji replied, “Traditionally, the Forest of Death is the favored locale to test Genin seeking to become Chunin, since the founding of this village.”

After a leisurely but not-too-long stroll, they arrived at the tall, intimidating fences of the restricted wood. “Please proceed to Gate 1 and await instructions,” the signs said.

There was a tent over a folding table with an attendant relaxing in a chair. As time went by, all of the thoughtful teams had gathered on the grass in front of the primary gate. A digital clock readout situated in front of the tent indicated that time was up for the First Stage.
Sakura’s team stopped beside them, looking smug.

“There was no way that you would use the bathroom. It was a giveaway.” Sakura said lightheartedly to Neji, “I had thought of taking a bathroom break at the beginning, but at that point I wasn’t sure if Tama and Kiba would follow my lead.”

“Sakura, if I saw that you weren’t coming back I’d figure it out.” Kiba assured her.

“I feel bad for all of those Genin still trying to answer the questions…” Tama added.

“Shizune-san is most likely explaining the point of the First Stage to them right this moment.” Lee suspected.

The teams were alerted by a new exam proctor’s shout. A man garbed in black stepped in front of the gate and slid a pair of black glasses further up his nose. He wore a bandana hitai-ate and was a Jounin, by the look of it.

“Congratulations on making it to Stage Two.” The man spoke, “I am Ebisu, and I will be your proctor for this stage of the Chunin Selection Exam. This will be considerably more difficult than leaving behind a piece of paper, I assure you, so prepare yourselves.”

The gathered teams edged closer to hear out the new proctor.

“Each team will be required to make it to the center point of the Forest of Death and enter the tower. Once inside the tower you will be given further instructions. You will have five days to reach it. Every team will be given one scroll, most of which provide an invaluable clue for completing the Second Stage. Some teams will discover that they have been given dummy-scrolls, which provide no valuable information at all.” Ebisu explained, “You may not open the scroll your team is given until you are inside of the forest. If you do so before that time, you will sorely regret it…”

“The Forest of Death is a challenging place to navigate. The vegetation is dense and dark, with many plants that are both safe and unsafe to consume. There are wild beasts of sizes and shapes that can put you mortal peril, but there is also an abundance of fresh water to drink and safe places to rest. Those with adequate skill will not falter here, and those with exceptional skill can move on to the Third Stage in less than 24 hours.” Ebisu estimated, “Before this stage, each team must sign a waiver at the registry tent. You will not hold the managers or associated providers of the Chunin Exam responsible for any injury you sustain beyond this point.”

He tapped his chin thoughtfully, “Oh, and lastly, bear in mind you must enter the tower before five days pass. If you cannot do that you will fail. I ought to mention that you may not enter the tower by using any of the doors or windows, or rather…you’ll find that impossible.”

Many of the Genin gaped at the warning, perplexed with how they were supposed to succeed.

“Very good.” Ebisu clapped and then pointed to the tent, “Line up and provide your signatures. You will receive a scroll and be assigned a gate to report to. When the buzzer sounds you will be permitted to enter the Forest. Good luck!”

All of the teams began moving again.

‘Neji seems…more enthusiastic than usual.’ Tenten thought to herself as the de facto leader lead the way to the tent to sign away their lives. ‘I bet it’s because he’s focused on Stage Three, and all the rest of this is redundant.’

She turned to Lee who was behind her in line, “What do you think, Lee? Did any of that proctor’s
pep-talk make sense to you?”

“I wonder if maybe the scrolls we are given will tell us more. We are allowed to read them, this time.” He answered, “I was prepared to come to the Forest of Death, so I am not in the least concerned.”

“Me neither.”

Each team that signed up was then ushered along by supervisors and sent to the far reaches of the perimeter fence. Neji lead them around the circle to Gate 6. They had a brief discussion of who should keep the scroll to open and assess it. Neji would need to concentrate on looking out for other teams and threats, Tenten wanted her hands free for fighting, and so Lee volunteered to take it. He could still make use of his legendary kicks while he read the scroll, if need be.

It took longer than expected for each team to be situated at their respective gates. Team Gai waited calmly until the horn of the fence-mounted megaphones blared and the access points rolled open. They rushed inside with Neji at the head.

Lee dutifully opened the scroll and kept up as his team ascended to the tree tops, moving towards the center of the thick wood.

Lee’s voice carried a tone of concern as he observed the parchment, “I would like to ask you two a question…”

“What?” Neji growled back toward him.

“What do you suppose a dummy-scroll is? Something that lacks… information? Sense?” Lee held up the scroll to them as they halted on a branch.

The paper was adorned with whimsical, six-year-old scribble drawings in delightful crayon colors.
"Of course, it is very important to be sober when you take an exam. Many worthwhile careers in the street-cleansing, fruit-picking and subway-guitar-playing industries have been founded on a lack of understanding of this simple fact." — Terry Pratchett

"Now, just to be clear." Tsunade rapped her red nails on a tabletop, "You are all cleaning this disaster up."

Sai nodded, wholly unperturbed from his place at a work table. He was eating a lunch of grilled fish from a carry-out box. Tenzo was across the table from him, working out a hand cramp before he too could take a break and eat with chopsticks.

"Thanks for all of your help, gentlemen." The Hokage smiled, "I would have hired someone else to make the clues for the Second Stage of the exam, but it would have been expensive. The framework didn't leave much for a labor budget."

Tsunade returned her smile tiredly, "We are always happy to provide you with cheap, part-time labor, Hokage-sama."

"I know. It's your honor and privilege. Can you believe the Sealing Corps clerks wanted double-time for this project? Pff."

"They allowed us to use this work room for free." Sai noted.

"Yes, so long as they didn't have to help." Tsunade snickered, "That's a criticism I'll save for the next administrative meeting."

The Hokage stood by watching as Tenzo and Sai began their lunch.

Across the room, Ebisu's new Genin students were struggling with winding up scrolls that had spilled from a shelf. Long lengths of blank parchment crisscrossed the floor as the children scrambled to clean up the mess. All manner of art supplies, childish and professional, still covered the work table. Tsunade figured clean-up for a Chunin Exam-related project was worthy of a D-Rank mission.

"I wonder why you called me in to help at the last minute, Hokage-sama." Tenzo mused while he chewed, "Sai was perfectly capable of drawing clues for every team, don't you think?"

"That's the point." Tsunade folded her arms and sighed, "His artwork was too good. He made it too clear what each participant should do in order to move through the stage."

Sai reflected on her words and then decided to smile, "Thank you."

"Well, that would be ideal if not for the fact that teams are supposed to question the material they've been given." She held up one of Sai's meticulously drafted clues, "Anyone would trust this." She flicked the paper, "I don't need ninja who blindly accept what they are told and then march to their deaths." Tsunade set down the ink drawing, "Likewise, I don't want ninja who assume important info, no matter its source, is worthless."

"I agree that each team should be able to make critical decisions like that." Tenzo frowned to himself, "But... why ask me to draw these clues?"
"You're the most miserable excuse for an artist I know!" Tsunade cheered, "No one will trust the junk you drew! Even if it is accurate, your work, Tenzo, is the most abominable thing I have ever seen."

His head bowed in shame above his lunch box. Sai felt a strange tingle of what could be the fabled feeling "humor" and it widened his smile just a bit.

"Now, now, don't feel bad." Tsunade attempted a bit of sympathy, "That's why I wanted you to work on this. It serves a purpose. Just the other day I had my own personal example of this sort of thing. I had no idea if I should or shouldn't take the word of a tiny old woman that Rock Lee brought into my office…but if I ignored her testimony I might've regretted it." She rubbed her chin as she remembered, "That lady did have a strong odor about her. Like curry."

"So a person who has an unpleasant odor is considered untrustworthy, by common standards?" Sai was looking for a teachable moment.

"No. Not necessarily." Tsunade replied, "It just makes it difficult to stand by and listen properly."

The socially inept ninja nodded in understanding.

"When you finish eating and cleaning up here," The Hokage went on, "I would appreciate it if you two reported to the Tower Passage next. As you know, that is the hidden route that Jounin chaperones take to enter the tower in the Forest of Death and observe preliminary matches. Please make sure it's clear before tomorrow morning." She fussed at the sleeve of her jacket, "I have to send Shikamaru through there tomorrow and he specified he doesn't want to see any garbage or cobwebs."

"Yes ma'am." They answered in unison.

"Good. Now I'm off to ask Shizune how the First Stage went." Tsunade turned towards the door and then called back to the Genin, "Oh! Konohamaru and friends."

Konohamaru and his teammates, Moegi and Udon, stood bolt upright when they were addressed, "Yes, Tsunade-sama?"

"When you finish cleaning here please come to my office for your next assignment." The Hokage smiled, "I'm going to keep you all busy today."

It was early afternoon on the same day that the Second Stage of the exam had commenced.

On a lofty branch in the canopy of the Forest of Death, Hinata stood sandwiched between Sato and Shino as they examined the scroll they had been given. The girl grimaced and then rested her eyes, reporting, "There is nothing revealed that I can see with my Byakugan. I'm sorry."

Shino added, "My insects have confirmed it as well. There is nothing unusual about this scroll." Kikaichu insects retreated from the parchment and back into the young man's sleeve.

"Then it's for certain," Sato concluded quietly, "This scroll...is useless."

And that was because it was completely blank. Clean, white, and unmarked.

Sato's expression was the most foolish-looking, dubious frown that had ever graced his face. He was thinking on it. Hinata and Shino were also deliberating in silence about their plight.
After rushing into the dark woods to begin the next phase of the test, the team had never suspected that they would be unfortunate enough to get a dummy-scroll. Moreover, that they would have no information whatsoever to guide them on how to enter an entry-less tower.

"We could...just go there." Sato proposed hesitantly, "March right up to the building and figure out why no one can supposedly get inside. Right?"

"That is far too reckless and would waste time." Shino disagreed, "Is it important to learn what kind of impediment stands between teams and the tower? Of course it is. But the answer will be in a scroll. It is better to find a clue before we go anywhere."

"We will have to take a scroll from another team." Hinata deduced.

"Looks like we've got no choice." The Hatake folded his arms behind his head, "Maybe there's a better way to do this so that we don't squander time." He looked sidelong to Shino, "Why don't you have your insects look around? I'll send some owls towards the tower to see if they spot anything of consequence."

Shino nodded silently.

"There could be a key or password that we need to collect before we can enter." Hinata wondered aloud, "We would not want to miss a detail that could be out here beneath our noses."

"In the meantime, we will track another team." Shino reminded them as he loosed a small cloud of insects. They scattered in all directions to begin reconnaissance of the forest.

Sato summoned two pint-size screech owls, Aree and Aroo, and asked them to kindly scout ahead for obstructions. After the birds took off, both young men looked at Hinata expectantly.

She activated her Blood Limit before about-facing, bracing herself against the trunk of the tree with her hand. Hinata frowned to herself as she scanned around.

"The team of Sand ninja is about half a kilometer away from us." She reported, "But there is a team even closer than that. We should move to the southeast, ahead about 90 meters, and then wait. They will pass right by us."

"They're in for an early surprise..." Sato chuckled, "What village are they from?"

"Hidden Grass. They all have the same color hair." Hinata tapped her chin thoughtfully, "Maybe they are siblings?"

"Good. In the event they also possess a dummy-scroll, we should bear in mind that another ambush may be required in the future." Shino advised, "We need to conserve our energy and gather as much information as possible."

They all agreed that is was the best course of action. Hinata lead the way as she leaped into the leafy thicket towards the bowels of the forest.

On the far, opposite side of the wide circular enclosure, Sakura's team was also formulating a plan. They had stopped in a tight clearing hedged by overgrown hawthorn shrubs. The team's scroll was laid flat on the ground as all three shinobi looked it over. Akamaru sat in dutiful quiet beside them.

"I would just like to say that this brushwork is amazing." Tama was the first to speak.
"Yeah, it looks like something out of the books my grandpa keeps in his study." Kiba noted, "Old school."

Sakura's eyes scanned critically over the black ink drawings. After a few minutes of silence she stood cupping her chin, deriving the meaning, if any, of the traditional forest scene.

"At first glance this means nothing." She began softly, "Going on what we already know; that we're going to have problems getting into the tower, we could assume that this may be a clue for a scavenger hunt or something like that. We would possibly need to locate an item or key to get us inside. That's what we're supposed to think." Sakura pointed a finger skyward when she announced, "But I can personally vouch for that being completely wrong."

Tama and Kiba stared at her in bewilderment.

"The second proctor made it clear we would find it impossible to get inside the tower by traditional means." Sakura went on, "And I know Tsunade-sama would not want a test to be something as obvious as a dime-a-dozen scavenger hunt. I'm confident that there is zero chance of us getting into the tower. I don't know if they physically eliminated the doors, or if they put up a barrier we can't take down, but it isn't going to happen. It is impossible."

"What are you saying? We were warned that anyone who doesn't get inside fails!" Kiba reminded her.

"Right," Sakura smiled, "That's why we won't try to enter the tower the way we normally would. We're going someplace else. Look here." She lifted up the scroll and brought their attention to the drawing.

The illustration was set in a forest, framed by tall trees. The tiny body of a person was juxtaposed to the massive body of a burrowing centipede, which was proportionately the size of a train. The locations of the tower and sun above, in the drawing, gave a reference of space and location. To the 'east' of the giant bug was a curtain of dense jungle vines dotted with flowers and kunai.

"This wants us to find a huge bug, from what I can tell." Kiba surmised grimly, "I'm not really going for it."

"The clues here will at least help us find it." Tama noted optimistically, "But after that."

"I have a hunch." Sakura assured them, "Wherever this thing lives is probably the back door that we want. It has to be a way in...or an alternative arena for the next stage, whatever the case may be." She angled the scroll to catch light filtering down through the treetops, turning about twenty degrees west of their position, "Let's start looking for our hints."

Tenten stood across from Neji and Lee, who were shoulder-to-shoulder and examining their odd scroll. She was not one prone to overreacting to things the way her teammates were. Neji had taken personal offense to a scroll so poorly illustrated and lacking sense. Lee, on the other hand, was disappointed and quietly trying to interpret anything that could be gleaned from their clue.

"There is nothing relevant in this." Neji determined firmly, "We cannot use it."

"Neji, try not to be hasty." Lee chided, pointing out details on the parchment, "These forms on the ground and hanging upside down from tree branches, are most certainly human bodies. Notice how they appear to be the meal of this large, hunch-backed bear. This is a rock formation and these are pine trees, see? Distinct."
"You are advocating for a clue that suggests we sacrifice ourselves to a bear that stands four stories tall."

"Well, I do not condone the suggestion so much as the clarity of what we are looking at." Lee illuminated.

Tenten had her arms folded and watched in silence as the young men had a tense but harmless argument. She turned their situation over in her mind and tried to be objective about it. Neji was being completely subjective, judging the content of the scroll, deeming it unreliable based on appearance and crudeness. Lee was abstaining completely from forming an opinion, but was reluctant to cast aside what they had been given.

"Can you two stop analyzing that for a second?" She asked, finally making eye contact with them. "Thank you. You're both trying to establish the value of what we've been given. The problem is that it may only be a matter of opinion. What if there are other teams worse off than us?"

Neji nearly contested the notion but stayed silent, humoring the idea.

"Do you think we should take the time to find out, Tenten?" Lee asked, "To compare what we have against the scroll of another team?"

"That could work, but what if they have the exact same clue that we do? I'm just saying that before we decide to waste time, maybe we should pretend we have exactly what we need and go from there." She took a crack at pragmatism, "The worst thing a team could receive...is it nothing? Or maybe a childish or deceptive clue? We are being tested on how we judge information."

Neji took a moment to reflect on how she had indirectly labeled him a "poor judge." That was an accurate description, at least for now. Maybe he was a bit too wound up about proceeding to the final stage that he was far less aware of the present. He exhaled softly and then turned to Lee, who seemed to be in favor of Tenten's idea.

"I think we should trust what we have been given." Lee agreed, "At least until we learn more. Although, I do not think this clue makes it clear why we cannot enter the tower."

"Maybe we aren't supposed to know that yet." Tenten came to a stop beside them to look at the illustration, "Yeah...this is pretty bad. What is that behind the bear?"

"It could be..." Lee stopped himself. The mound behind the beast in the picture, drawn with suspicious amounts of brown crayon, could pass for either stone or fecal matter.

"More than likely it is a land formation or cave." Neji interjected, "The next course of action should be to find this place. The information that we need could be there."

"Or it could be nothing...or not even exist." Tenten smiled, "But chances are that we'll come across something that resembles this."

Before Lee closed the scroll he memorized the pictures, finally forming a complaint about it, "I doubt we will see bodies or human flesh that is blue like this...though I imagine that was creative license."

Sakura was cross with herself that after traveling most of the afternoon with her team, they had more than likely gone off course. She had stopped to re-affirm their route based on the position of the tower and giant insect in the drawing. Cardinal directions were barely evident, but she had made some educated guesses.
"I thought we might have found it by now." The pink haired girl muttered.

"Don't worry about it, Sakura-chan. I don't think we really believed it could happen that fast. It is a pretty big forest." Kiba crouched down, "This was probably skewed a bit. Could have been northwest, actually."

"It's just a bit farther. We've covered a lot of ground." Tama passed around a canteen of water, "And there haven't been any incidents."

Sakura knocked on the bark of a tree to prevent her friend from jinxing it, "I'm glad about that…but the longer we're out here the more likely we are to run into other teams."

From the portion of sky visible from a break in the tree tops, sunset was hastening into night.

"Now may not be a bad time to make camp. We can try again in the morning when we have the light again." Kiba suggested, "Let me and Akamaru scent around to make sure it's clear, and then we can eat and get some rest."

While Kiba and his ninken prowled off to make sure they were alone in their section of wilderness, Sakura and Tama rustled up twigs and kindling for a fire. The two girls also concurred that some mushrooms they discovered were perfectly safe to eat. Sakura playfully nudged the older kunoichi as they foraged.

"Even when we're all the way out here, Sato managed to say hello." She grinned at Tama, "That was adorable."

"He didn't send those owls specifically to find me." Tama replied, fighting a small smile.

"I'm sure he didn't, but he'll be happy to know that you're safe and well during your first time in the Forest of Death." Sakura imagined, "When those little guys swooped down and landed on you…I almost screamed. And I don't startle easily."

"Me too. But they're so soft and they just nuzzled my cheeks." At the memory, Tama held her face, "Aree and Aroo are his cutest birds, by far. I like when he sends them."

"For what?"

"Sometimes Sato will send me a message from across town, before we go out somewhere." She explained, "They come straight to my window."

"Aw!"

"Sakura-chan, please. You should see how enthusiastic he is about things he used to have no appetite for." Tama restrained her laughter, "Sato shops and cooks now. I think I eat more frequently with him than my own family these days. He asks to go with me when I have somewhere to be. He even got his own membership with the dance studio too. Though, he prefers to wait for classes to let out so it's just him and me."

"Hmm. Sato certainly is more involved than he used to be." Sakura observed shrewdly, "Does Sato ever, you know…sneak over?"

Her cheeks reddened.

"Oh, so he does."
"Sakura! We don't do anything..." Tama relented and said, "Like that. I don't go too far because...I really do want to wait. You know what Uncle Gai and my parents are like. Honor is at the core of their mantra, and I guess I can't deny that I'm the same way."

"There's nothing wrong with that." Her friend assured her as she located a new patch of mushrooms.

"It's still hard to believe that Sato finally...noticed. You know? It took a while, but he looks at me now and suddenly he wants to touch and kiss." She sighed, "It's such a relief. I was afraid that he would never want me that way."

"Of course he would, he just needed some time to grow up a little." Sakura acknowledged with a nod, "From what Ino tells me, most of the boys our age are that way now. And try to remember." She gestured at Tama from top to bottom, "Sato does have one of the most beautiful women in this village to go home to. As dumb as he can be sometimes, I'll bet he at least realized that."

"Thanks, Sakura-chan."

Sakura stopped and handed off the mushrooms she had collected to Tama. She ran her hand over the spindly green top of a plant before pulling up a super-large scallion from the ground. "Ah! Who wants a wild onion for dinner?" The pink haired girl draped the plant over her shoulders as they walked back to the thicket.

The two girls settled on the spongy forest floor, careful not to sit and flatten wild orchids. Before any preparations, they agreed to wait for Kiba's "all clear" first. The woods grew dimmer as the last sliver of a magenta sun surrendered to the blanket of night.

"I'm really happy for you." Sakura spoke quietly to her friend, "I know you've been waiting for Sato. You're in love with him."

Tama tucked her chin to her chest, smiling again, "I am. I'm much happier than I was. Things are so much better now."

"I can tell." Sakura shrugged so that the giant onion stalk slid from her shoulder, "I try not to talk about you and Sato in front of Kiba."

There was a silence as Tama gave the girl a strange look, her dark eyebrows furrowed, "Why not? I know that Kiba-kun doesn't really get along with-"

"Don't worry about it!" Sakura covered her tracks, surprised that Tama lacked even a faint inkling of how Kiba felt.

After a sharp rustle of foliage, Akamaru came bounding out of the darkness. The happy dog circled the girls twice before laying down between them. Kiba appeared after a moment, "Looks and smells good. I set up a couple of traps, too."

Sakura and Tama greeted him and dropped their findings, setting up a space for rest with near automatic motions.

"You found some things to eat too? Akamaru helped me dig up some potatoes." Kiba contributed four spuds to the pile, "We're pretty lucky this time around!"

"Oh!" Tama was intrigued, "You two never really told me what it was like during your first Chunin Exam."

Kiba exchanged a wordless glance with Sakura as he helped arrange twigs and kindling for a fire.
The pink haired girl smiled tiredly when she turned to the other kunoichi.

"It was...a good experience, in some respects. It also had its low points." Sakura conceded, "We always hesitate to tell you about the time Sasuke was with our team. But if you're really interested in knowing, I see no problem with telling you what it was like."

"I would like to know," Tama confirmed.

"Well then," Kiba skewered the potatoes on pointed sticks, "At first it was great. When we started the Second Stage, which was also in the Forest of Death the last time...Sasuke was a thoughtful leader. We worked very well together." He chuckled darkly to himself, "I think we were all feeling pretty confident after we promptly collected a Heaven and an Earth scroll."

Sakura used a breath of flame to light a fire and then sat back. She rested her arms on her knees when she spoke, "But that Exam coincided with the Invasion, if you remember, Tama. Orochimaru was already here in the forest. From what I know, he was trying to test Sasuke...but he tormented all of us. He burned our Heaven Scroll. He threatened to kill us. We were too scared to move." She corrected herself sheepishly, "Actually, I was too scared. Kiba somehow got his nerve back and so did Sasuke."

"I didn't put up much of a fight." Kiba recalled glumly, "Sasuke nearly did, before that freak bit him on the neck."

Tama raised her hands to her mouth in shock and Sakura elaborated, "He put the Heaven seal on Sasuke, hoping to control him with it. He was unconscious for a long time after that. Kiba needed some time to recover too...and I had to fight off Sound ninja while they were out." Sakura shook her head, "I could have done better. It was a close call and I was lucky that other Leaf teams passed by to help me."

"Sasuke wasn't the same after he woke up." Kiba added, "Something was definitely wrong. And when he saw how hurt you were." He looked at Sakura dolefully, "It was like he needed to kill someone. He was furious and maybe a little sad too. Sasuke really loved you a lot and that was the first time I was able to tell."

Tama gasped, "So that's how it was!"

"Not like it helped any." Sakura remarked scornfully, "After the Exam he drove our team straight into the ground and disgraced us all."

"It's not like he intended to make us suffer." Kiba defended as he watched the potatoes and mushrooms crisp over the fire.

"Kiba, he was unable to empathize with us. He was so obsessed with his own suffering and getting even with Itachi, that he was utterly incapable of seeing how much we were hurting." Sakura wrung her hands as she spoke, "I could have died trying to follow him when he left. You could have died on the Retrieval Mission; any of our friends could have! He was never sorry about the damage he caused as long as it meant he could get revenge."

In dead quiet, the teammates avoided each other's gazes uncomfortably. Tama removed the food from the fire and distributed it, "It was very hard for you both. I wish you didn't have to go through that pain and doubt when you were desperately trying to be his friend."

Kiba's wane smile was illuminated by firelight, "You are a much better friend than he ever was. You've only ever tried to help us feel better, like we're a real team." He looked at her with sincerity,
"Thanks for everything, Tama. You make things so much easier."

Sakura nodded in agreement, "I couldn't be more grateful that you're here, it's true. Sorry to make you listen to all of this…but I prefer if you knew what it was like. Why you're so important to us."

"Thank you. But I know he's still a part of you, even if he's hurt you and Kiba. When Sasuke comes back I hope that you'd accept him as your true teammate." Tama requested, "He's going to need friends when he returns. He'll need you both."

Sakura shook her head solemnly, "He's not a true teammate. That's the problem. We'll always care about him, but I honestly don't know what I would do or say if he ever came back." Her breath trembled as she exhaled, "All I can ask for is that he never hurts anyone again. Except for maybe his brother, I won't ever let it happen. I won't let him."

"Tama, I think we want you to stay. Permanently." Kiba clarified, "If Sasuke does come back to Konoha he probably wouldn't even have the clearance to participate on a team or missions. I'd try to help him, but I know nothing would ever be the same."

"I see." Tama murmured. She blew on the potato before taking a bite.

They ate dinner and talked about happier things, or rather, the subjects Sakura was most comfortable with. She clammed up and nearly had a bout of depressed introspection, but Sakura snapped herself out of it and marveled at what an incredible listener Tama was. They reduced the fire to a low smolder of cinders and then huddled up to sleep.

With Tama at the left, Sakura settled between her and Kiba in the cover of darkness. Akamaru had stretched out at their feet, only half-alert to the sounds of the woods. After a length of time passed, only Tama was able to fall asleep. Kiba spoke softly to Sakura.

"He really was sorry." Kiba assured her, "When I saw Sasuke in the Lightning Country…I could tell that if he had the chance to save either of us, he would."

"No he won't. He would leave us high and dry again."

"Sakura, he will." Kiba pressed, "I think I reminded him that he can't do it all alone."

"I don't want to talk about him anymore." Sakura lowered her voice, "Go to sleep, Kiba-kun."

And somehow they slept.

At an unknowable, pre-dawn hour, Aroo the screech owl returned by himself. He landed beside Tama's head and fusses at strands of her hair until she stirred. She was not waking quickly. Determined, the owl hobbled ungracefully over the forest floor and arrived at Akamaru's muzzle. Aroo nudged the dog and then proceeded to walk across the large canine's body like it was a bridge. The owl thought it important to inform the group that a shinobi was watching them from the bushes.

Akamaru roused in time to hear the near inaudible crunch of a footstep, and with a murderous growl, alerted his human companions to the danger. There was a piercing screech before Aroo darted into the undergrowth and hooked his taloned feet onto the face of a lurking Genin.

"Wuh-holy-shi-!" A rustle and crash followed, "Get offa meee!"

By then Kiba was fully awake. In elegant synchronization, he was flanked by his two teammates as they dove into the tangle of ferns and orchids beside their campsite. They quickly apprehended the
foolish spy who hoped to take advantage of a sleeping team.

He collapsed to the ground with a bloody face, and the young Genin sputtered his surrender.

"I just don't know what we're supposed to do!" The Rain ninja raised his hands submissively, "My teammates and I have never been in a Chunin Exam before, and our scroll was blank…we split up to find someone else's."

"You picked the wrong someone. I'll break your legs." Kiba warned, grasping the collar of the ninja's shirt in his fist, "We have done this before and we eat newbies like you for breakfast."

"It's almost time for breakfast now." Tama pointed out innocently, "I just mean that it's morning. Oh. No, we'd never eat a person!"

"Please let me go." The Rain ninja peeped, "I barely got out of a fight last night…and I've got no chakra left. I've got nothing."

"He's full of it." Sakura chuckled, "I can tell he's perfectly healthy. He's just wasting time so his teammates can catch up to ambush us."

"Look for another team's scroll if you're having bad luck." Kiba told him, "But you won't get anywhere by challenging us." With fearsome strength, he hurled the chirping wimp of a shinobi into the thorny tangle of a juniper bush.

The Genin wailed as he retreated.

Kiba then elected that they should get going since they were already wide awake. Orange light began to saturate the dim edges of the forest. Akamaru was happy to receive praise for his quick reaction, and wagged his tail wildly as they began another trek. Aroo remained perched on Tama’s shoulder.

"I think…Sato wanted Aroo to watch over us. Aroo must've told him that he found our team." The girl surmised.

"What a guy." Kiba grumbled.

"I couldn't be happier that he did that." Sakura folded her hands in thanks, "Thank you, cutie pie! We might have been robbed in our sleep!"

"Akamaru would have stopped him." Kiba insisted, patting the dog's head.

At daybreak, they continued on a northerly route through the forest.

By the shreds of light infiltrating the Forest of Death, Team Kurenai would occasionally stop and read the new scroll they had absconded with. They had to confirm their position a few times before feeling confident in the direction they had chosen. In order to obtain the clue, the team forsook sleep and hunted by night for unsuspecting Genin.

The triplet siblings from Kusagakure that Hinata spotted had somehow, purely by accident, eluded them until nightfall. In the darkness, the youngsters woke with shrill, petrified screams to find Kikaichu insects clambering over them to feast on chakra. Hinata and Shino both had identified the brother rolling in the dirt as the carrier of the team's scroll. Sato pounced on him and ruffled the ginger's hair as he pulled the scroll from the Grass nin's hip pouch, "Sorry, Carrot-Top!"
Sato leapt away in the dark, and the Grass team tottered around the clearing in bug-covered distress, unable to do anything about the theft. The Leaf team put considerable distance between themselves and their victims before examining the scroll they had taken.

"This looks about right." Sato murmured as he rolled it open, "Huh. Kinda looks like what Sai paints."

Hinata blinked at him curiously, "Who is Sai?"

"Oh yeah! I forgot to tell you guys that I have a new neighbor. He's an entry-level ANBU agent, but you didn't hear that from me. It's supposed to be classified." The Hatake rambled, "Shino, do you remember when Lee and Neji were talking about their artistic, obnoxious, substitute team mate? This is the guy! He really is that bad."

"I recall." Shino stated as he slipped his glasses up the bridge of his nose.

"Yeah," Sato turned back to Hinata, "He' adapting. You should meet Sai sometime, Sunshine. I'm trying to help expose him to nice people. He may say weird things, though."

She clasped her hands in thought, "Maybe after the exam."

"You've digressed." Shino warned Sato, "What is on the scroll?"

"Oh, uh...it's still kind of dark."

The three of them squinted to get a look. Picturesque trees and deer in the scene surrounded a large circle with markings. Eventually, they agreed it was a clock. It seemed completely out of place in the wilderness. Something seemed off about the circle and its symbols. A tiny, ink footprint was just below ten o'clock.

"Ha! I'm stumped." Sato laughed, "What is this supposed to mean?"

Hinata accepted the scroll when he handed it off to her. She pursed her lips and deliberated, "Its meaning could be figurative or literal."

"It is literal." Shino confirmed simply. His team mates gave him surprised looks.

"Rather, it's physical. The main arm of that clock is sloped and there is a shadow beside it, so one can infer that it is set by the time of day." Shino went on, "A sundial. Why should we expect it to be physical? Someone has stepped on it." They looked back to the footprint in the drawing, "We will find one in the forest somewhere."

"And when we find it...maybe the time of day reflected on it will tell us something important." Hinata tried to build on the idea.

"Perhaps." Shino agreed.

"Then it's a good thing we're getting started at dawn. If that thing goes by the height of the sun, then there's a chance we might miss something and need to wait for the next morning." Sato observed, and he wilted as he added, "But that means...we'll be awake for a whole day again..."

Hinata sighed softly in disappointment, "It may not be wise to rest even when we need it. At night we can, but until then we have to search."

"We can rest inside the tower." Shino asserted.
"You really think we're going to get there that quick?" Sato snickered, "Shino if I gave you a whip I'd bet you'd crack it at us!"

Shino said nothing while he and Hinata giggled. Just then, Aree landed on Sato's head.

"Hey girl." He held out his arm for her, "Where's your brother?"

The tiny owl hooted as it perched on his sleeve.

"No way! Tama's team? Good!" Sato nodded happily and held a conversation with the bird.

Hinata whispered sidelong to Shino, "How does Sato-kun understand?"

"He doesn't."

Somehow, the language gap was a non-issue. Sato had learned that Aroo was escorting Tama and her team, that Aree had witnessed several nasty fights, and had even learned that a high-level barrier was surrounding the tower and preventing anyone and everything from getting within five meters of it. As she was the inquisitive type, Aree tested it by dropping a rock on the barrier and watched it bounce off. She turned back to find Sato after that.

"I think he does understand." Hinata whispered.

Sato let Aree glimpse their scroll, "Seen any areas with deer or a sundial? That's where we're headed."

The owl tooted an affirmative and then took off.

"Alright then," Sato spun on his heel and ushered his team mates along, "We may be tired, but at least we know where to go!"

They started out strong, but as the morning wore on and they followed the bird zipping through leaves and bramble, the lack of sleep began to catch up with them. For fear of exhausting herself, Hinata only used her blood limit sparingly. At one point during the hike, Shino asked them to halt and take cover.

A coat-tail of moss that hung over a toppled tree concealed the Leaf team briefly as they watched a trio of Dream ninja race by. They also appeared to be searching for something.

"Hmf, looks like they got some rest..." Sato muttered enviously, "They're hauling ass in that armor of theirs."

"A confrontation with that team would have been unfavorable." Shino noted, "Once they are out of range we can continue."

Aree waited patiently until it was clear again, and then pressed on to guide her shinobi companions.

By noon, Shino estimated that the owl had brought them a quarter-way down from their position in the circular forest. They were standing exactly halfway between from the surrounding fence and where the central tower was located.

Although the deer from the drawing were nowhere in sight, the owl did deliver them to a clearing that was ringed with pine trees. A huge and conspicuous sundial was fitted to the ground. The team took a moment to catch their breath. Aree flitted from Sato's shoulder into the underbrush after a mouse.
"So now what?" Sato rested his hands on his hips.

They walked around the circumference of the time installation, which was about five meters wide. The thing was littered with pine needles and cones, dirty and weathered, as if it had sat there untouched for decades. The noon shadow was nearly at its peak.

Shino allowed a few Kikaichu insects to explore and see what they could learn about such an oddity.

"I don't see the point of something like this being all the way out here in the wilderness." Sato announced as he began to sweep debris off of the sundial with his foot.

"It isn't something that would be especially helpful to Genin." Hinata agreed, "But surely it was put here for a purpose."

"Genin are not the only ones who enter the Forest of Death." Shino reminded them.

"Well yeah, Kakashi did say that Jounin are permitted to come here whenever they want. They can train and participate in secret drills." Sato folded his arms, "Do they use this thing?"

"Maybe...but sundials only stay in one place and are not extremely accurate with time." Hinata added.

"This one is." Shino noticed, "It has been maintained, possibly reset this past spring."

"Why bother?" Sato gruffed as he began walking around the circle again.

Hinata observed the fixture with her Byakugan, hoping to rule out the possibility of hidden messages. Instead she saw an off-center hole hidden beneath the stone slab. It provided an entrance to a dark space far below ground, which, she could only assume, was a place they ought to get to. There was a track beneath the sundial that facilitated the movement of a hidden door. Finding the means to open it would be their next goal.

"There is a passageway beneath it." Hinata reported, "But I am not sure how the door opens."

"Whoa! This thing has got some inner cogs or something?" Sato was excited.

"A few of them." She concluded her analysis, "I think we'll need to move the arm."

They gathered around to look for grooves and other structural hints. After brushing aside a blanket of pine needles they discovered divots in the stone. From what they could tell, they would need to push the sloped gnomon arm from its position at twelve towards ten. That detail had also been alluded to in the scroll, as they recalled the footprint at that position.

Sadly, the gnomon would not budge. It trembled and resisted with a squeaking whine. Hinata puffed tiredly after pushing on it. She backed away to let the two young men ram it with their combined strength, but the arm stood unfazed. Frustrated, Sato wrestled with it for a short time before giving up. Shino inquisitively poked around the decorative support bar beneath the gnomon.

He decided to pull it loose just as Sato leaned back to rest on the arm. Abruptly, the narrow appendage collapsed without its support, and it fell almost flush into a groove on the stone face. Sato landed hard and bumped the back of his head.

"Shino…would it kill you to warn me?" He pouted up at his friend.

"It will move now." The Aburame assured them.
"Everything lined up!" Hinata confirmed, stealing a peak at the mechanism below with her Byakugan.

Hopeful once again, Sato rolled over and got a grip on the exposed tip of the arm. Slowly, it slid with a squeak towards "ten" as he pushed it. A grating sound of stone rumbled behind them, and Hinata and Shino turned to watch a quarter of the sundial slip aside to reveal the passage below.

"Phew!" Sato stood up and wiped his brow, "Secret Jounin tunnel!"

Hinata peeked over the edge into the absolute dark that lay underground.

"I will be able to see very little." She admitted, "There are no torches or overhead lights."

"I'll give us some light." Sato assured her. He turned to his best friend with a grin, "So Shino, why don't you lead the way? I bet there's nothing down there that can scare you."

Without a word, Shino plunged into the hatch without a second thought.

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Team Gai was mildly discouraged. After doing a sweep of a whole third of the Forest of Death, their search yielded nothing. By nightfall they had stopped to hunt and gather food. Near the bank of a stream, Lee had constructed a lean-to with some assistance from Tenten.

They built a fire and tried to look on the bright side. While they had not found a single crumb of a hint that related to their scroll's drawing, the team was in good health. They'd had no encounters with other teams or perils of the forest. It had been rather boring, actually.

By evening of the first day, Neji's frustration had been made clear by his sharp comments and frantic, scowling survey of each area they passed through. Lee counteracted his negativity with suggestions and cheerfulness, and Tenten had made a few attempts at optimism before she went quiet for the rest of the day. Neither Neji nor Lee understood what Tenten's silence was about.

That night as they ate grilled fish off a fire, Lee asked how she was feeling.

"I just lost confidence in our group today, that's all. It seemed like every time I made a suggestion, at least after the idea I had this morning…I was ignored every time." Tenten replied bluntly, "The both of you sometimes…I don't know. You go into this frenzy. Like you couldn't waste a single second in order to find the way ahead! You both try to solve a problem while practically orbiting each other."

Neji and Lee exchanged a bemused glance.

"You need to learn how to back off and breathe; the both of you." She scolded, "And try listening to me more. We might have found that stupid bear if you took some of what I said into consideration."

"Please know that I am very sorry." Lee apologized sincerely from his seat, bowing slightly, "I never meant to exclude you, Tenten!"

"It's alright."

Neji looked at her with the same expression he always wore when he believed he was not at fault. But slowly the reality sunk in. He was aware that Tenten had been trying to communicate with him since the start; that he was not behaving nearly up to the standard she expected. He was back to his irritable, hair-trigger ways. He sighed heavily. It was Neji's hope that he had vastly improved since the previous exam, and even if he had, his attitude certainly hadn't. Tenten would not let it stand.
"Your input will not be ignored again." Neji promised her.

Even when he said it, she still looked severely annoyed. Tenten chomped on skewered fish and made no effort to talk to him.

As the night grew deeper, Neji had the distinct feeling that Tenten had taken his behavior personally. She responded to Lee when he discussed a plan of action, but her shoulders were tightly shrugged and her mouth pursed. If he'd had some foresight, Neji may have curbed his cynicism a bit more to avoid his girlfriend's disapproval. Never mind that he could not afford to have poor team communication at a time like this; he had actively been trying to please Tenten and become closer to her. But her having to spend the whole day with a pessimist had probably curdled the romance, he guessed. It was quite the stumble on his part.

When it was time to sleep, leaves and moss had been arranged beneath the lean-to as a cushion. Lee dozed off with ease. At the center of their huddle, Neji laid flat on his back and stopped thinking about the Second Stage for the first time in eight hours. He turned his head slightly to the left where Tenten was bunched in a ball. Her weapon-scroll and sword were piled beside her and within reach, in case of an attack.

He looked at her like that for a while and felt calmer. Neji reached out and touched her back.

She grunted in annoyance at him.

He replied quietly, "I know that I disappointed you."

"Well that's good." She snarked.

"I won't continue to." Neji added helpfully. "Since the Second Stage began I have been thinking too far ahead. I've been impatient." His hand relocated to her side, "Before the exam began you could already tell that I wasn't concentrating enough, and you tried to warn me."

"I did." Tenten agreed.

Neji shut his eyes and said, "I will only listen to you from here on out."

She rolled over, surprised, "Uh." She felt his head, "Are you well?"

"I will be. Tomorrow you can expect better from me."

"I think I already knew tomorrow would be easier, it's just...don't worry too much, Neji. I understand. I know what's going on in your head." Tenten said quietly.

He nodded and then stretched out his arm. She got the idea and shifted over to rest there, closer to him.

"I didn't like what you did before."

"What? When I wouldn't talk?" Tenten smiled slightly, "To you?"

"That." Neji confirmed, pulling her closer.

"I was only a little mad. I would have gotten over it."

"I don't want to make you feel that way." His voice was the softest she had ever heard it. Neji's mouth was level with her forehead, touching the cool metal of her hitai-ate.
"I know, and I don't want to make you upset either. Especially not out here." Tenten acknowledged, "And remember we've been much, much angrier at each other in the past...on some occasions. Those were knockout fights."

Oh, of course he remembered those. The biggest fight had been over Hinata, after the previous Chunin Exam. His poor treatment of his younger cousin had incensed Tenten, resulting in a violent duel and then a furious reprimand from Gai.

Neji carefully slipped up her headband and kissed the skin there. He was sorry. He would always be sorry about that. How Tenten had been completely right about Hinata, about standing up for her, and Neji was entirely insulted that she had not sided with him instead.

He felt her fingertips trace the side of his face, and her other hand pressed into the warmth of his shirt. She murmured indistinctly before fitting her lips to his. Neji only remembered kissing her for a long while before falling asleep.

At dawn, Lee shook them awake. He had found his teammates entwined and snoring softly.

"Neji! Tenten! It is light out and I think we should spend as much time as possible on our search." He had a hand on each of their shoulders, "Please wake up and try not to fight today."

Tenten raised her head up, fussing at the crust in the corners of her eyes, "Lee...of course. We won't fight, promise."

"Neji is squeezing you." Lee observed innocently.

"I know. I think he'll be in a better mood today." She pried her boyfriend off and gave his cheek a light pat, "Hey fearless leader, up and at 'em!"

Neji made low sounds of reluctance. While he stirred from a deep sleep, Lee notified Tenten that he had packed a few pieces of dried fish and replenished their water stores. She thanked him for his thoughtfulness as she pulled on the sash of her sword and weapon-scroll. They took a short while to prepare and then set out.

As Tenten had expected, Neji was far less irritable than he had been the day before. While using his Byakugan later that morning, he could see that they were on a collision course with a team of young Sand ninja. Not interested in a scuffle that could delay them further, Neji led his teammates along a small ridge to avoid the other team.

On the opposite side of the land formation, the Leaf team dropped down into the tawny cover of a sequoia grove. No sooner had their feet touched the chips and mulch of the forest floor, a piercing, otherworldly scream rang out and was silenced. The three ninja paused and attempted to identify the sound.

"I think we may have avoided a puny team only to walk into something worse." Tenten speculated, "Can you see anything, Neji?"

He was already on the lookout, holding his head very still as he regarded the forest ahead of them. "A lot has been going on here." Neji reported as he began to walk forward, "And I recommend the two of you be prepared. I don't know if the danger has passed yet."

Without questioning Neji's assessment, Lee and Tenten followed him without speaking, tense, and carefully approached a battle site laden with mangled trees. Towards the center of the forest glade, a singular, gargantuan sequoia tree still stood, complete with a huge nest in its topmost branches.
Everything surrounding it had been bent and cut, providing evidence of an earlier fight. Near the edge of the tree line, Neji held out his arm and stopped his team. He pointed out a pool of hours-old blood and the spattering that led away from the clearing.

"Someone retreated." Neji supposed, "With extensive injuries. If not one Genin, then probably the whole team."

"Looking at this." Tenten gestured to the mess, "I'm thinking wounds like that would force any team to retire early from the exam. It'd be a death sentence otherwise."

"Yes, though it seems as though this attack happened long before we got here." Lee observed, "If that is so, then what was that sound we heard a short time ago?"

Tenten gave him a mystified look.

"A second attack which occurred recently." Neji said as he turned to look towards the opposite side of the grove, "And some carnage is left over from it."

They followed him towards a heaping mess. The team discovered the once-resident of the lofty nest in the sequoia tree: an enormous eagle had been cut apart.

"This beast may have attacked another team." Lee rubbed his chin, "And...they retaliated savagely."

Tenten stared into the open, glassy eye of the recently decapitated eagle, "The first team was chased away by this lug and then the second one..." She shuddered, "So now we should worry about who did this?"

"Maybe we don't have to worry." Neji ventured, taking steps towards the central sequoia. He laid his hand on the trunk and stared in silence. "This tree is hollow." Abruptly, his head snapped up and he made a chakra-fueled leap to reach a branch, "This way." Neji prompted his team.

Lee and Tenten followed him for the ascent. Near the top, the team paused beside the empty nest and noted a conspicuous, person-sized hole in the bark of the tree. It was not a natural feature. Neji finished determining the strange phenomenon as a breeze swayed the highest branches.

"This is an entrance to a hidden passage." Neji explained, "The trunk leads down into an unlit chamber, with a tunnel that continues underground. The team that was here shortly before us is now proceeding through it."

"Can you tell which team it is?" Tenten wondered.

"I cannot."

"Now that we have arrived at such a critical juncture...is it wise for us to keep searching for the clue in our scroll?" Lee asked, holding up their scribble-drawing, "It may save time to use this passage, provided that we do not come to blows with the team ahead of us."

"I would rather not do that." Tenten agreed gravely.

"We will use this chute. The tunnel's end will feed into the basement of the Forest's tower." Neji announced, scrutinizing with the full strength of his Byakugan, "Considering that we're already here, there's no point in searching for another entrance. However, it would be best to avoid the other team and let them stay ahead of us."

They agreed it was the best course of action. Lee tucked away their scroll, silently apologizing to the
poorly drawn clue they were unable to locate. It only made sense to take advantage of a path directly in front of them.

Lee lined up first to squeeze through the gap in the bark into the hollow of the tree.

"Do you suppose the bear's cave was the entrance we might have used?" Lee pondered, bracing with his hands and feet as he shimmied down the cylindrical space.

"It might have been." Tenten figured, "That, or it was the bear's stomach."

Neji followed after Lee, making sure the descent was stable as they carefully made their way down. After he had climbed down several meters, he asked Tenten to follow. Though Neji kept it to himself, he preferred Tenten having a cushioned landing in the event of a fall more than her being the cushion. It was a tiresome task to clamber down the chute, growing darker as they went. They took their time with the climb.

Lee yelped in the blackness and, by the sound of it, slipped and fell. A moment later he informed his team that he was fine.

"Ah, I lost track of the wall. The opening widened! Please mind your step." They could hear Lee's footsteps on a floor below, "I have made it to the bottom but it was quite a drop!"

Neji was able to anticipate it as he felt the tree hollow sloping away from his hands. He took a calculated leap from the funnel opening and landed successfully on concrete. He nearly toppled onto Lee in the dark. The tunnel was uncomfortably narrow. A minute later, Tenten shrieked as she lost her footing.

During the fall she propelled herself blindly in the dark and latched onto the tunnel wall with chakra. They could only hear her ragged breathing before she spoke, "I think…I'm out. Where's the floor?"

"You are not far above it." Lee assessed unhelpfully. He had his hands out in the pitch, trying to get an idea of where the tunnel would lead.

Neji located her with an outstretched hand, inadvertently brushing her thigh. Tenten made a small sound before realizing that there was no danger of breaking her neck if he could reach her. She sheepishly hopped down and identified Neji with her hands, prodding his shoulder, hair, and face, "Ah, I thought that was you. So what do you think, Neji? Stay in the dark, or not?"

"For now," Neji gently tugged her along to where Lee was patting stone walls, "The dark. It's better not to alert the other team."

"I wonder how they got through here?" Tenten mused, "They were quick."

They bumped into Lee's back and all folded like an accordion.

"This space may not be booby-trapped if they passed without difficulty." Lee speculated.

"From what I glimpsed, it isn't." Neji assured them, "It is a long path, however."

Tenten linked arms with Lee as he continued his wall-crawl through the passage, "Then we don't need to rush." She laced her free hand with Neji's and pulled him forward, "Being blind isn't so bad when you're ahead of schedule, huh?"

By the afternoon, Kiba's tracking skills had allowed his team to locate what could be their desired
location. He and Akamaru had stopped in a patch of forest littered with burrows.

"This doesn't have a giant-mammal smell to it, so it's more than likely an insect." He assessed, "Now we just need to figure out which of these is our way into the tower."

"It would be a shame if we have to check each hole." Tama lamented.

"It would." Sakura agreed, referring back to their scroll, "Or maybe the centipede in this clue will point us towards the one we want."

"Well, where is that thing?" Kiba leapt down into a hole and his voice carried up to his team, "Akamaru and I don't smell it. It's either way underground or it's gone on vacation."

Tama pointed out the thicket of vines depicted in the scroll, "This is the only other feature we can look for. Maybe the bug won't go beyond this point?"

"I'd rather check there first before we begin diving into every burrow we see. Just to be thorough." Sakura agreed, "The area we want should be just over that hill, due east."

Kiba returned above ground to help them search, and Akamaru's nose worked overtime as they began to pick through dense vegetation. It was not the scents so much as the sounds that coaxed them onward. It began to get noisy as they entered a jungle-like grove, its curtain of vines cascaded down from the canopy as the scroll depicted.

"That," Kiba recognized, "Is shouting."

It was another team. Akamaru confirmed it as they skirted around creepers and roots. They took a good look at the team that had accidentally come across the mammoth centipede before them.

Fujita looked infinitesimal beside the gigantic creature, scurrying bravely through brush. The burst from his small Rotation knocked the bug face-first into Chouji's Human Bullet Tank technique. With a clicking screech, the insect was thrown across the clearing and tangled in tree vines. Kiba's team was noticed after a few moments.

"Hey guys!" Ino called down to them cheerily from a tree branch, "Want to join us for some exercise? I let the boys have at it first."

"Ino!" Sakura leapt up to join her, frantic, "We need that thing! It's part of the clue in our scroll."

"Oh?" The blonde kunoichi immediately accepted the idea, "I see. Right, I'll tell-"

They watched in horror as Chouji effectively squashed the giant insect with his Multi-Size Technique.

"Chouji!" Ino roared, "Sakura's team needed that bug! You just killed it!"

Chouji and Fujita turned around slowly to face her, abashed. Ino gnashed her teeth at them, "We just ruined their clue for the exam, so now we're going to owe them. What do you have to say about that?"

Chouji and their first-timer companion returned to the gathered teams and apologized sincerely. Kiba merely shrugged, "Eh, it's alright. We know where to go. We wanted to use it to narrow down which path was the right one."

"There's a path, Kiba-kun?" Fujita asked curiously. He nodded calmly and patted the boy's shoulder.
"Yes, Sakura-chan determined that we will find an alternative entrance to the tower somewhere."
Tama informed them, "Ours is most likely in that insect's burrow. One of them, anyway."

"Oh…we didn't quite figure out what our clue meant yet." Chouji admitted.

"Well," Sakura gave them a proposal as she tapped her chin, "If you three don't mind helping us look around, I don't see why you can't use the tunnel we're looking for. How about it?"

Team Asuma happily agreed to the terms. They returned to the field of endless burrows to begin the hunt for the correct hole. After perusing, the teams determined that some holes were shallow and interconnected. Akamaru loped about with his nose pressed to the dirt, and began turning in odd directions. Kiba and Fujita followed the hound closely.

The path they chose began a downward slope into darkness. Fujita took a gander with his Byakugan, "There is a passageway further down! We won't have any light, but it's paved and empty."

"Good enough for me." Kiba grinned before calling back to their friends, "Get over here, everyone. We've struck pay dirt!"

After a time the large group assembled again. Kiba and Akamaru headed the expedition as the rest followed behind with slight apprehension. Other than the scent-driven leaders guiding them, Tama was the least afraid. Ino had taken her and Sakura by their wrists and held tight, making sure Chouji was no more than a step behind her in the pitch black.

A short way into the underground stroll, Sakura admitted that there was no way of knowing if danger awaited them in the dark, "Other teams could be using the same route as us…and we don't know if traps were set up."

Further into the newly discovered passageway, Ino considered aloud, "Could you imagine if we had to fight down here?"

"I don't want to." Fujita replied timidly.

"It wouldn't go well." Sakura agreed, "Then again, we probably outnumber any threat that we could run into."

"Don't jinx it, Sakura-chan." Tama was laughing softly.

"Oh great!" Ino whimpered at the notion, "Now we're going to get a swarm of who-knows-what or a pack of rats."

"That would be the least of our worries." Kiba said from the front, "I'm only trying to sniff out shinobi. We'd be in trouble trying to not take friendly fire down here. We could beat the hell out of each other and not realize it."

"Or to avoid that, I could plug up the tunnel and mow enemies down." Chouji suggested.

With that, Fujita and Ino pushed Chouji ahead to be positioned beside Kiba. The Inuzuka-Akimichi pair seemed the most capable of dealing with an unseen threat.

Sakura sighed at the chicken-livered maneuver, "You do know that leaves our rear unguarded, right?"

"I'll protect everyone." Tama assured her friends, "I've never been afraid of the dark, and I know Kiba-kun would smell a problem in advance if there was one. I will cover the rear if there's a threat."
"You're too brave, Tama..." Sakura chided her. Ino and Fujita were clinging to Tama's arms by that point as they proceeded.

And they discovered, after picking up the pace, that their walk would be a long one. Sakura took a guess that it would be nearly sun set above ground. They all elected to make a run for it when several people reported needing a restroom, "And we probably shouldn't do something like that down here." Tama noted.

Kiba deemed the way clear and then asked Akamaru to hurry ahead. The group began a race towards the end of the tunnel. For a time they continued without interruption. When something dropped from the cavern ceiling onto Ino's shoulder, a riotous, echoing-scream-conniption ensued.

"Ino-chan!" Fujita managed to locate her in the dark and corralled her towards the group.

"It's okay!" Tama and Sakura restrained her. Everyone came to a screeching halt.

Whatever had landed on Ino leapt away in fright and began circling Tama's feet. In the dimness Tama could barely make it out, but the kunoichi bent down to scoop up a field mouse, "Ino-chan...it's just a-

"Don't say it." Ino cut her off, "I humiliated myself enough. Let's just...keep going."

Tama set the mouse free and they moved on. Kiba and Chouji chuckled about the ordeal for the rest of the way until a shred of distant light became visible. Motivated, the group nearly sprinted towards an exit which was, surprisingly, underwhelming when they arrived.

They were in the bottom-most portion of the Forest of Death's tower. Torches blazed on the walls of the room and support pillars, casting long shadows on the floor. The musty air was stifling. The group walked into the atrium in silence, somewhat confused by the environment.

"Look." Sakura spoke up, pointing to another tunnel exit further away, "I had a feeling there would be other passages that would lead here."

Kiba bent down and rubbed Akamaru's flank, frowning to himself, "Other teams got here before we did. Smells like it, anyway." He stood upright and gestured his head towards a staircase wedged between pillars, "I bet we'll see them on the next level."

Both tired and determined to find the restroom, the combined Leaf teams trudged up the long flight of steps to the ground floor. Akamaru perked up and excitedly bounded over to familiar faces. Welcoming hands patted the dog’s head, mussing at his floppy ears.

Hinata and Sato were relieved that their comrades had made it. They clamored for their friends to join them while they pet the happy ninken. Shino stood nearby and did not say a word, but he was vaguely amiable as well.

"So you beat us!" Sakura marched up to Hinata and embraced the girl happily, "I want to know how you did it! Were you the first team here?"

"We were." Hinata confirmed it with a nod, "Our team began with a blank scroll, so we needed to consult with another team’s clue."

"No way!" Kiba was dumbfounded, "We had a clue from the start and it still took us forever."

"We put in double-overtime with our tracking. We even skipped sleeping." Sato informed them with a grin, "Shino only let us get some rest after we made it here."
The Hatake warmly regarded Tama as she pointed Fujita and Ino towards a doorway marked “lavatory.” She turned around with a soft sigh and caught Sato winking an eye at her.

Kiba refrained from gagging at the sight. He folded his arms and glanced around. He noticed Neji, Lee, and Tenten seated a few paces away and eating what looked like leftover fish they had caught in the forest. Chouji had noticed Team Gai as well and also decided to check on them.

“How did it go for you guys?” Kiba wondered, “I’m not surprised that you were on the early side.”

“We are glad that you made it, Kiba-kun, Chouji-kun!” Lee greeted his friends with a wave, “We were the third team to arrive. Your teams are tied for fourth place, I suppose.”

“Third?” Chouji was puzzled, “Who was Second, then?”

Neji inclined his head, ushering them to look at the far side of the room. On the wall opposite them were three young men standing clustered together, seemingly repulsed by their Leaf ninja company.

“They’re the team from Iwagakure.” Tenten kept her voice down, “We actually used the same tunnel that they did.”

“And judging from the amount of damage they inflicted on one of the Forest’s beasts, it would be wise to avoid them.” Neji recommended, “They are dangerous.”

Lee added, “Yet we say this in spite of the fact we have not properly introduced ourselves. I remain hopeful that they are a civil team.” He dusted his hands of crumbs, “I will introduce myself now.”

“Lee, you can’t seriously want to talk to them!” Tenten was mortified, “They didn’t try to approach us. I’m sure they have their reasons.”

Kiba’s smile was cocked and he rumbled with laughter, “If anyone should try saying hello to them, Lee is the only emissary fit for that job.”

Chouji politely inquired if they had any leftover fish to spare and Tenten handed him a skewer. Lee stood up and began to cross over to the second-place team. Tenten merely shook her head as Neji calmly continued eating. There was no point in trying to talk their teammate out of it.

Lee stopped a short distance away from the Rock trio and raised a hand in greeting. “I wanted to extend congratulations to you for making it into the tower so quickly! My name is Rock Lee.”

The team stared at him suspiciously.

“Why not introduce yourselves? We may be waiting here for a few days before the Second Stage terminates. You could join me and my friends if you like.”

With a heavy foreign accent the shortest Rock ninja replied, “Ga-Fen.” He extended a hand to shake and Lee delightedly did so, “Kuang Ga-Fen. This is my big brother, Qin.” He gestured to the taller, brawner young man beside him, “We won’t be joining your group, sorry to say.”

“That is alright. I wanted to tell you that you were welcome.” Lee replied, noticing the dark quality of the third member of their team who stood behind them.

He stared back at Lee, resembling a regal leopard with his narrow face and posture. Oddly, the Manchurian hairstyle of the last team member was highly characteristic, if antiquated, of Han customs. The front of his head was shaved bare, and jet black hair was left at the back in a long, tight braid. It was all too familiar. Lee took a chance and asked in Hanwen, I am sorry, but I did not get
your name?

The unnamed ninja stared at him for a moment before a sly smirk spread on his face, *And I am Huo.*

*It is a pleasure to meet you.*

*If you say so, Rock Lee.* Huo’s smile widened.

Ga-Fen cleared his throat to excuse the testy remark, continuing the conversation in their mother-tongue, *Are you a descendant of Iwa’s Han people?*

*No, in fact my family came directly from the Middle Kingdom.*

*So you must be a weak ninja.* Huo supposed, *The Kingdom’s vagrants always struggle to learn Ninjutsu. What a waste they are…*

Qin added his two-cents, *It’s better to be born here in the shinobi nations.*

*I was born in the Fire Country,* Lee defended politely, *And I do not agree with your assessment.*

*Qin, you fuckhead, Mom is from the Kingdom of Han.* Ga-Fen muttered angrily, *You respect her as a ninja, don’t you?*

*Everyone should respect their mother.* Qin concurred, *Just not this dumbshit in front of us. I can tell he’s a wuss by looking at him.* Huo could tell right away.

*It’s his name.* Huo determined, *It is profoundly stupid.*

Lee gently clasped his hands and drew upon the last semblance of dignity in his soul, concluding, *I seem to have made a poor impression. Please excuse me for now, and best of luck to you…*

Huo folded his arms and sniffed, *Where do you think you’re going?*

*To return to my team.*

*Ah, well if you’re going to do that, ask all of your Leaf comrades what they will miss the most. I would like to know.* Huo requested.

*Why do you care to know that?*

*Is it their eyes or their heads? Their fingers? Before I kill each of you in the next stage, it’s only prudent to collect mementos.* He said it in all seriousness.

Lee looked from Huo to the two brothers standing beside him, marveling at their undisguised malevolence. Perhaps they did share a degree of patriotism, if he squinted, but Lee felt as if he was having an interview with barefaced sociopaths.

He turned smoothly on his heel and crossed back to the safe side of the room. Surely, Lee thought as he walked, shinobi from Iwagakure were not so bad. These Genin may have been outliers among their population. He had found it strange that they were all speakers of Hanwen, a discovery which went from happy coincidence to catastrophe in a matter of seconds.

By then, Neji and Tenten were standing and extremely aware of the horrified look on Lee’s face. He stopped beside his teammates, making sure to keep his back facing towards the Rock shinobi. Lee could feel them watching.
“What happened?” Tenten asked softly.

“That went far worse than I ever could have expected.” Lee announced.

“You didn’t have to talk to them.” Neji pointed out.

“I know, but they spoke Hanwen. I believed we had something in common.” Lee admitted, “But we could not be more different.”

“It figures. There is something about them, at least the long-haired guy…” Tenten muttered, “He looks familiar to me, but he…has a vibe.”

“A vibe.” Neji repeated to himself, half-amused.

“I’m serious.” The kunoichi grumbled, “He’s the one who killed that bird. Probably.”

Lee nodded somberly, “I think he is the one. Huo. He was astoundingly unkind and threatened to kill all of us in Stage Three.” He added flatly, “He truly meant it.”

“He has no weapon that could have sundered an animal so large.” Neji noted the gaping hole in the theory.

“Some people don’t need weapons to cut things.” Tenten poked Neji in the ribs, “Remember, Wind Nature prodigy? We don’t know what kind of jutsu any of the foreign teams can use yet.”

“Forgive me for not wanting to give them any credit.” Neji replied, “When do I ever?”

She chuckled at the notion. Lee was still having difficulty returning to his light-hearted mood. Tenten walked him over to the other Leaf teams to cheer up, patting his back gently. Neji watched as they departed and stayed in his place on the wall. His eyes strayed towards the Rock team again. They were loitering and he could see their lips move as they conversed. Then, the one Lee had called Huo began staring across the room. His gaze rested on Lee and Tenten, and then it remained on Tenten as she parted from the group for the restroom.

Neji would have liked to have thought nothing of it, expecting other teams to size up Leaf competitors while they could…

But when Tenten returned Huo was watching. When she stopped to speak to Sakura and Hinata, when she squeezed past her group of friends and returned to Neji’s side…Huo looked at her as if she had a neon sign glowing above her head. There was no explaining it. Disturbed, Neji stared back and mustered as much intimidation as his reputation and lineage could afford him. It seemed as though the Rock shinobi did not notice. Even when Huo’s teammates took their turns for the restroom, leaving him alone, he stared with the same tenacity that a guillotine blade had when regarding an exposed human neck.

After ten minutes of relentless scrutiny from the hateful Rock shinobi, and a poor attempt at conversation with Tenten, Neji felt a body-block might at least deter the awkwardness a little. In a businesslike manner, Neji held her by her upper-arms and swiveled Tenten, flattening her against the wall. Then he leaned over her like what he saw men do in those sappy magazines, bracing an arm above her head.

There. The rotten Iwa nin could stare at the back of his head for all he cared. ‘Feast your eyes you degenerate.’

“Noji-?” Tenten snapped him out of his inner spiral of anger, “Not like it’s an issue, but I don’t find
“this very like you.”

“What?”

“Standing like this.”

“Endure it. You’re being watched.”

“Oka-aay. Care to explain why that’s bothering you so much?” She raised her eyebrows a margin.

“The Rock Genin.”

“Oh.” Tenten understood, “So you finally felt that vibe? I told you.”

“He wants to kill you.”

“Hm. Lee said he wants to kill us all.” She reminded him casually.

“But he will start with you, Tenten.” Neji cautioned her, “And I cannot determine why that is.”

“Well I hate to make this a pissing contest, but I bet I could kill him faster.”

He did not want to smile so he only let the corner of his mouth slant up a little. Sometimes, Neji acknowledged deep down inside, he found Tenten’s sense of humor absolutely essential.

“And never mind that,” Tenten went on, still completely relaxed, “He’s outnumbered, he’s being cocky, and I have never seen you this protective before. You could wind-chop him just by blinking too hard at him.”

“I am being protective.” Neji agreed, decided he could dial it back a bit. He moved to lean away from her but she shook her head.

“No, no. Stay where you are or you’ll ruin it.”

He didn’t understand what she meant until he glimpsed their friends from the corner of his eye. There was Lee, along with Team Kakashi, Team Kurenai, and Team Asuma rivetedly observing him in his magazine-ad position with his publically acknowledged girlfriend. It had become a spectacle.

Sato cupped his hands around his mouth and shouted, “Shit, Neji, don’t just stand there leaving us in suspense! We want to see you ki-!”

The Hatake ate a full-force Air Palm.

By nightfall, only one additional team had arrived in the tower and trudged up the stairs. It was a team of young, worn-out looking Sand ninja. Neji watched the group enter the restroom to splash their faces with water at the sink. After that, they too settled down to sleep for the night.

The Leaf teams had circled the wagons and huddled together to rest. Earlier, Lee had kindly warned the other Leaf teams to be wary of the team of Rock ninja. After that he had told Neji and Tenten of the deranged things that Huo had said. They took the warning to heart.

While the group slept, Neji stayed awake and alert. He was a naturally vigilant individual, but tonight his utmost attentiveness was required. Neji was not about to let his guard down just because they had arrived in the tower early. They were, after all, accompanied by some very unsavory competitors.
Diagonal beams of moonlight shined down through overhead windows. The Leaf groups breathing and snoring arranged a sort of symphony. After a long while of peace, Lee had woken twice in the night, highly anxious. Neji reassured him without a word, pressing the heel of his hand against Lee’s shoulder until his friend settled down again.

Neji sat in silence beside Tenten in Lee, his arms lax at his sides and his head heavy. The errant tip of his finger traced the skin of Tenten’s arm while she slept. In the late hours past midnight, Neji felt the atmosphere of the place change. The stillness in the air and traces of light shivered in the room. On the far side of the hall where the team of Iwa ninja lay, Huo’s eyes had opened. He stared in silence at the same objective he had fixated on that same evening.

‘I wasn’t imagining a murderous lunatic on the lookout after all.’ Neji thought to himself, ‘And what Lee said was not comforting…’ He had been as protective and cautious as he needed to be, Neji assessed. He had no way to tell if the prowler had been feigning sleep or not, or had actually gotten some blessed shut-eye before resuming his disturbing watch.

The night dragged on and so did the staring match. Neji’s stubborn disposition may have won out. Huo looked away a few times and skimmed over the other sleeping occupants of the tower. Eventually he seemed to fall asleep again, but Neji refused to buy it. When the sun rose again and shinobi began to stir and awaken, he was not feeling nearly as stalwart.

Tenten quietly reprimanded him when she woke up, “Neji, you should have rotated with someone if you were going to keep watch all night.”

He shrugged it off.

She sat up beside him and stretched, “You don’t do well without beauty sleep. You’ve got two black eyes and no one punched you.”

“Are you sure?”

“Quite.” Tenten smiled, “Why don’t you get some rest now? Everyone else is up so we should be fine. You don’t need to be the watchdog.” She pointed over to Kiba and Akamaru, “I mean we have enough of them as it is.”

He considered it before he nodded, adding, “Wake me if anything significant happens.”

“Sure. Here,” She positioned him so that he was leaned comfortably against her. It was not long before Neji’s head lolled, hair falling in his face, and he was fast asleep.

Lee came by with a soundless thumbs-up so as to not wake their teammate. Then he pointed to the staircase where non-Genin shinobi had appeared. Tenten’s mouth dropped open at the sight. Shikamaru appeared and was joined by a few other Chunin who were carrying boxes of supplies. Lee joined the rest of their Leaf peers, sans his teammates, to learn more about the development. Shikamaru sighed and rubbed the back of his head when his friends surrounded him excitedly.

“Yes, I’m here. Teams got to the tower earlier than expected, so the Hokage supplied rations while you wait for the rest of them to show up.” He explained, setting a box down, “Jounin Chaperones don’t need to report here until tomorrow.”

While food and water was handed out, Shikamaru mingled with his teammates. He even patted Fujita’s head after seeing his pint-sized replacement, “Thanks for looking out for my teammates, kid.”
“Oh, I…didn’t do much.” Fujita confessed, “I feel like Chouji-kun and Ino-chan were looking out for me, mostly.”

“Sure they did; it’s your first time taking this exam.” Shikamaru simpered at Ino beside him, “But Ino needed some saving down in that tunnel.”

“How-?” Ino puffed her cheeks, “You saw that? Don’t tell me those paths were under surveillance!”

“They were under surveillance.” He shut his eyes and restrained a grin, “You and your little mouse…”

Ino whacked his chest while Chouji chortled.

Shikamaru slipped an arm around her back and held her nonchalantly, “It’s not like those cameras caught anything damning. Everyone who got in wanted out of those tunnels fast. That’s why they were designed to be dark and uncomfortable.” He added, “And I was the only person in the control room watching the progress of teams. It got boring.”

“So if you’re here who’s watching those cameras?” Ino asked.

“The proctor for the Second Stage took over. We were told to swap so I could oversee…” Shikamaru trailed off, “Well, I shouldn’t mention that yet.”

“We already know Shikamaru.” Chouji reminded him.

“Yeah, I know. Just don’t go broadcasting that I’m the proctor for the next stage.” He kept his voice low, “Right now I’m just doing food delivery and tower inspection. I can’t make an announcement until all of the required Jounin chaperones are present.”

“Ah, got it.” Ino grinned, “So if that’s your only task, deliver my breakfast. Please.”

Shikamaru’s pout wavered before he turned back to the distribution line to find something for her. While shinobi gathered around to be fed, Sakura noticed the Sand team at the side of the room and Matsuri was waving at her. She had an urgent look on her face.

The pink haired kunoichi excused herself from her team and trotted over to Gaara's student. Ino had crossed her arms and tossed her hair, disgruntled by Sakura's promptness when it came to helping the team of Sand ninja.

"What's up, Ino?" Chouji was perceptive, "You huffed at her."

"Oh, I didn't mean to. I do that sometimes when I think too hard."

"About what? Sakura checking on the Sand Genin?"

"It just makes me worry a little." Ino shut her eyes and shook her head, "Not that Sakura is doing anything wrong, of course, or even that those noobies are competition for us, but..." She gave Chouji a sidelong look, "I suspect that she's been thinking. Sakura's been thinking about Hidden Sand."

"Well, Gaara's there. It makes sense." Chouji accepted a bowl of delivery-food from Fujita and then the boy scurried off to sit with Hinata while they ate.

"Yeah, it does. It just scares me that she's invested. That she works so hard." Ino covered her mouth with the back of her hand and added shakily, "I will not handle it well if Sakura decides...to go there to be with Gaara."
Chouji snapped chopsticks apart to begin eating and then stopped, giving his teammate a long, severe look, "You think she would actually do that?"

"Call it intuition. It freaked me out a little. And I think Gaara is somewhat, you know," Her eyebrows waggled with emphasis, "Persuasive, in his way. They'll want to be together, even if she has to stay in Hidden Sand." Ino huffed again, "I would hate not having her at my beck and call every day."

"Hokage-sama would too."

"I may have taken it for granted that I've had her for so long." Ino managed a smile, "But I've been trying to look at the big picture lately, and it won't behoove Sakura to stay away from the guy she's crazy about."

"Don't start saying your goodbyes just yet. Even if that's what Sakura-chan is planning, it has got to be pretty far down the line." Chouji gently bumped elbows with her, "Ino, if it's bothering you that much, just enjoy your time with her now as much as possible. That's what best friends should do, right?"

"I will." She muffled a sniffle, "Chouji, I don't know how you got so good at talking about these things. You should charge by the hour for therapy."

"Nah. I need to keep it free otherwise no one could afford me."

Shikamaru returned to find the two of them rumbling with laughter, "What'd I miss?"

The day dragged on and by afternoon only one new team had arrived; a team of Grass ninja plodded up the stairs and straight towards the station set up with food. Shikamaru supposed that some teams had more difficulty finding things to eat in the Forest. Chouji shuddered at the notion.

As they had been advised to do so, the Leaf teams grouped together and kept their distance from the Rock Genin. Sakura moved back and forth between Matsuri’s team and her own, troubled by the Sand team’s misfortune.

“Her teammates aren’t doing well.” Sakura explained quietly to the other kunoichi, “Whatever they’re sick with is going to need strong medication, and there’s nothing I can do about it right now. I healed some of their injuries. Matsuri seems to be healthy.”

“Why are you so worried about her?” Ino whispered, “She’s just a little Sand ninja.”

Sakura raised pastel pink eyebrows, “She’s Gaara’s student. I can’t just leave her hanging.”

Ino made an incredulous sound while Hinata chirped in surprise.

“I didn’t think Sakura-chan was arbitrarily helping a team.” Tama confirmed, “But this clears it up.”

“So you wouldn’t want Gaara to be disappointed if his student didn’t make it to the Third Stage?” Tenten concluded, “You can’t interfere too much, Sakura. She has to make it there on her own power, like we all did.”

“I absolutely agree,” Sakura nodded, “And I know she can do it. I’m just saying that it’s likely her teammates are going to have to drop out. They will not be fit to fight.”

“They aren’t her official teammates, then?” Ino gathered.
“No. Gaara is only training her. Matsuri was filling in as a substitute, like how Fujita is with you and Chouji.”

“Ah, I got it.”

“She looks so small. It reminds me of the first time we competed here.” Hinata remarked distantly.

“We really had no idea what we were doing.” Ino added, “The great shame was that only Tenten was able to make it to the Final Rounds at the last exam. All of us need to represent this time!”

The idea stoked Tama and Sakura who were both wild-eyed and clenching their fists. Even Hinata frowned with determination as Tenten laughed quietly at them, “Yeah…I get the feeling none of you will sit out this year’s Finals…”

“There’s no way I’m going to miss it. Tsunade-shishou and Gaara are going to be there.” Sakura was beaming.

“Right. We should all do what we can to make Tsunade-sama proud.” Tenten agreed, “At least from what she’s said, she is trying to make this exam her crowning achievement. She’d be upset if any of us flaked on her.”

“It does seem inevitable that we’re going to end up facing each other as opponents, or at the very least our teammates.” Tama pointed out, “But I don’t think that’s going to stop me…”

The girls discreetly looked over their shoulders to where the men of their teams were relaxing together. It was food for thought.

“Not even if you have to fight Sato?” Ino teased Tama, “Or Kiba or Sakura?”

“Not even you, Ino-chan.” Tama grinned, “We don’t pull punches in my family.”

“She’s not lying.” Sakura confirmed.

“I’m glad, then…that Naruto-kun isn’t here.” Hinata spoke softly, “I might not find the willpower to fight him in the Third Stage, if I had to. Or Gaara-kun or Haku-kun, if they were here.”

“Yeah, that’s true. Well, Gaara-kun couldn’t even if he wanted to. And Haku’s so polite he’d probably surrender.” Sakura imagined, resting her chin on her knuckles, “But Naruto does not and has not yielded in battle, as far as I know. Any of us would have trouble with that match up.”

“And he’s learning Sage Arts.” Hinata added with a smile, “It’d be scary!”

All of the kunoichi present nodded collectively, disliking the disadvantage, imaginary though it was.

“I would actually love the chance to fight Neji.” Tenten mused, “Since he’s so focused on the last stage of this exam, I know he wouldn’t go easy on me if it was an official match. Lee would be a great opponent too…”

“Do you hear yourself, Tenten?” Ino hissed, “They are your teammates! And by the way: you are dating one of them. Are you aware that they can level buildings with their fists?”

“I know. That’s exactly why.” Tenten assured her.

“Then I sincerely hope you get your wish, because I certainly don’t want to face them.” Sakura concurred.
The conversation was interrupted when Shikamaru stopped over to bid them farewell. He had to report to the Hokage once more before returning as proctor of the Third Stage.

That evening, the team of Dream ninja arrived in the tower. They were a pop of color and glamour among plainer-looking peers. Like most teams had before them, they used the restroom and then helped themselves to rations of food. They strolled over and sat down in an empty spot to the left of the Leaf ninja group, where others were settling down and preparing for sleep.

One of the Yume ninja glanced over and made eye contact with Sato. They smiled stupidly at each other.

“This is a good sign.” Sato whispered directly into Shino’s ear, “I think that guy is friendly!”

“Lee thought that of the Rock team as well. We are now informed otherwise.”

“Jeez, Shino, quit killing my buzz.” Sato pushed up on his knees and stood, adding to Hinata and Tama, “I’ll be right back. I’m gonna talk to the guy wearing pink over there.”

The girls made no objection, but watched as he made his way over and stopped by the newcomers. The Dream ninja had a fur-trimmed, ornate gi of bright red and pink. He had red markings beneath his eyes, probably permanent, because they crinkled when he smiled again.

“Your team is unique to say the least. It’s a good thing you made it here.” Sato told the stranger, “You’re gonna make this exam interesting.”

“Thanks, man. We’ve never done something like this before, so we didn’t want to screw up.” He replied.

The kunoichi beside him, in intricate armor, added glumly, “We almost didn’t figure out our clue.”

“But you were still in time and that’s what counts. Oh,” Sato held out his hand, “I’m Hatake Sato.”

The Yume nin put his boxed meal down and stretched out his hand to shake, “Uh…like the Copy Ninja, kind of Hatake?”

“That kind.”

The Dream ninja grinned, “Sick. I’m Tenro Masugama,” He turned to his girl teammate, “Here’s Amagiri Eifa,” Then to the hooded ninja beside him, “And Hirasaka Agehanto.”

“Those names sound familiar.” Sato noted.

“That’s because we’re from famous clans too.” Eifa updated him, “We just don’t trifle in international matters much. It was great that your Hokage let us participate. My father nearly fell out of his chair when he heard about the Chunin Exam being hosted in Konohagakure. We haven’t entered a team in decades.”

“Same.” Agehanto commented, “My parents thought it was all a joke until we were registered.”

“So does your village have anything like a Chunin Exam in-house?” Sato wondered.

“We have promotion trials but we failed them last year. Enzo-sama said it would be good for us to participate against shinobi of other villages and find out how much we’ve grown.” Masugama explained, “Our Sensei also thinks we can pass.”

Sato nodded, “Probably. Or just show up and look good.”
They twittered happily at his assessment.

Within the congregation of Leaf shinobi, Kiba scooched over and remarked to Tama, “If you don’t pull back on his leash Sato’s going to befriend all of our competitors.”

“Let him. He’s a social butterfly.”

“More like a social lemming.”

“Hey, don’t be so critical, Kiba-kun.” She chided him, “Sato being outgoing and social is one of the things I like about him most.”

“And what about the part of him that unnecessarily tempts danger?”

“No one is perfect. Besides, those Dream ninja seem nice.”

“It’s totally an act.”

“If it is,” Sakura interjected, “I’ll take that over Rock ninja openly threatening to kill us any day.”

Tama nodded in agreement. A short time later, Sato returned and sat down with his friends.

“The Dream ninja are great! They’re nervous because this is their first time in a foreign village.” Sato brought them up to speed, “They also want…my uncle’s autograph.”

“Tch. See?” Kiba snickered as he leaned back onto Akamaru like a pillow, “I told you it was an act.”

Overnight, Team Gai slept in shifts to keep watch and even traded off with Team Kakashi. No incidents occurred and the environment was copacetic well into the next morning when more food and another team arrived. It was a team of Cloud ninja. They were rather irked that so many teams had reached the tower before them.

The day passed and teams had begun to get antsy. The health of Matsuri’s teammates was concerning, as Sakura assessed them periodically. Huo watched other teams in stony silence from behind his teammates. Lee’s mood had improved as he and Sato chatted up the friendly “Dream Team,” Sato labeled them. Tenten did have to admit that they had great style.

Things remained peaceful but the influx of Genin teams reduced from a trickle to nothing. Not even a whisper of spelunkers came up from the underground tunnels after the fourth day. By the morning of the last day of the Second Stage, no one new had appeared. Around noon, Jounin sensei popped up one at a time from the basement staircase, and then met with their trainees in the atrium.

The first Jounin had been Hyoshigi, the sensei of the Sand team. He quickly darted over to his ailing students, Koji and Tamsen, and looked them over. Sakura watched from afar as he patted Matsuri’s shoulder and asked her not to feel guilty. They were not quite as “tough” as she was, he said. Hyoshigi shared a laugh with the two wheezing boys, imagining that her training with Gaara had made her superbly sturdy. Matsuri blushed in embarrassment.

Kurenai and Gai appeared consecutively, and Kurenai was especially proud that her team held the record time for entering the tower. She flashed a smug smile towards Gai, but it did not discourage him in the slightest. He was too busy rejoicing with Lee and patting Tenten’s shoulder. Neji avoided being touched.

The sensei of the Rock team was a stern-faced kunoichi is the deep burgundy garb typical of her village. She joined the three malicious boys at the edge of the room and began speaking to them
quietly.

Asuma arrived a short time later and was immediately spotted. Ino and Chouji rushed over to him and were quick to praise their little Hyuga companion. Fujita denied most of the accolades blushingly. Asuma commended him anyway as he lit a cigarette.

A tan-skinned, handsome man emerged from the staircase minutes later, and was loudly met by his Grass Genin, “Ah! Mahoto-sensei!” They scurried over and overwhelmed the Grass Jounin with their harrowing tale of the Second Stage. By the look of it, these Genin were older and near their Leaf peers in age, close to sixteen or seventeen.

Simultaneously, a hideously bedraggled Genin team had clambered up the stairs. Groaning and stooping, three Rain ninja made their way into the room. Kiba prodded Sakura and Tama to look, identifying one of the Rain genin who had once attempted an ambush on them.

“I can’t believe those losers made it!” Kiba snickered.

“They look exhausted and filthy.” Tama nearly sympathized, “That’s probably what they deserve.” Sakura agreed, “I highly doubt they’ll last long in the Third Stage.”

Time passed and the jounin joined their students for lunch. Some discussed the challenges of the Second Stage while others strategized about what lay ahead.

As teams ate their meals and conversed, a violet-hooded jounin ascended the stairs in silence. An intricate outfit of orange and oxblood red made him stand out, and Sato muttered to his teammates, “Maybe that’s…a Dream Jounin…”

“They are colorful.” Hinata acknowledged.

The Jounin’s piercing eyes scanned around before settling on Masugama’s group. The Dream students met their teacher half-way and bowed with respect. Curious Leaf ninja watched as the colorful team brought each other up to speed. Eventually, the Genin led their teacher towards Sato’s group.

Masugama was eager to introduce their mentor, “Sato-san, this is our sensei, Hirasaka Yomito.” Sato gave a wave of greeting to the grave-looking man, “Much like you are a relation of Copy Ninja Kakashi, he is Agehanto-kun’s uncle.”

The two hooded ninja exchanged a peaceable glance with each other before regarding the young Hatake.

“Small world.” Sato gestured towards Sakura’s team, “And my uncle is actually their sensei. These fine people are Inuzuka Kiba, Haruno Sakura, and Maito Tama.” He muttered behind the back of his hand, “Tama is going to be my bride someday.”

“Leaf ninja…have many connections to each other.” Agehanto observed.

“Kind of like how it is in our village.” Masugama agreed.

Eifa seemed to be hitting it off with Tama and Sakura as the girls inquired about her armor. Hinata politely introduced herself as well. Kurenai stood beside Shino and was highly amused to see ninja of a once-isolated village mingle with Leaf genin.

Kakashi did not bother showing up until late in the day, for he seemed to be allergic to schedules. It
might have killed him to be on time for the close of the Second Stage. He and the sensei of the Cloud and Rain teams were the last to show up.

“I did not believe you at first.” Yomito told Sato upon seeing his uncle apologize to his annoyed students, “Though Kakashi of the Sharingan really is here. You bear a slight resemblance to each other, I think.”

“Thanks! He may be famous, but I hear I’m better-looking.”

The Jounin stayed until dusk and then departed for the night. They would come again in the morning and herald the beginning of the next stage. The strange fullness and noise of the atrium made it difficult to sleep.

Team Gai continued to keep watch in shifts throughout the night. Lee claimed that they were used to it, and so everyone else was encouraged to relax and get rest.

While Hinata tried to find a way to sleep comfortably on the hard tile floor, she shut her eyes and wondered how the end result of the exam would affect her life. She had confidence that she would pass. It would be almost outrageous, in her opinion, if she had not improved enough to be promoted to Chunin rank. But what then? She rested her head on folded hands.

What expectations would her father have of her when she became a Chunin? Her clan and the Hyuga clan elders? What types of missions would the Hokage task her, Sato, and Shino with? And how odd would it feel to know that she had pulled ahead, even for a brief time, of her own very talented boyfriend?

It would be better not to invite that stress in, for the time being. ‘All of that will come later. I still need to concentrate.’ She acknowledged, ‘I don’t think it will be so bad to have more responsibility…and I know that my friends are here by my side, going through the same trials.’

After what felt like an age she finally began to feel sleepy. Behind her, she could hear Sato whispering in a near inaudible voice to Tama. It sounded positive. They were sharing fortitude in preparation of the next day. Hinata then heard the soft peck of lips meeting. Embarrassed, she tried to ignore the sound by covering her ears with her arms.

The next thing she knew, she was being woken by friends shortly after sunrise.

“Sunshine! Time to get up. The Jounin are already here…even Kakashi.” Sato informed her, astounded that his uncle was on time.

She batted her dry mouth as she sat up and rubbed her eyes. Her neck felt sore.

Sakura was chuckling at her, “You slept funny! Almost like a contortionist. Are you okay, Hinata-chan?”

“Um…I-I…” Hinata remembered curling in a ball to block out sounds, “I think I will be fine…”

Sakura muttered to her, “I had to ignore them too…”

Teams had wobbled to their feet and hastily crammed breakfast into their mouths. Before long, the teams filed off with their Jounin chaperones and proceeded through a corridor towards the central room of the tower. At the far end of the auditorium was a large shinobi statue with hands folded in a Ram seal loomed. Railed walkways were positioned above along the perimeter of the room.
The Jounin parted from their students to stand near the statue, where Tsunade was waiting with a hand on her hip. Each Genin team lined up single-file, parallel to the teams beside them. The room was hushed into silence to listen to the Hokage’s announcement.

“Welcome to the Tower; and to those of you from other villages, I bid you a sincere welcome to Konohagakure. I am Tsunade, the Fifth Hokage.” There was a twinkle in the woman’s eye, “I must admit it is unheard of to see ten teams successfully pass the Second Stage of the Chunin Exam. There is no denying the aptitude and strength of Genin teams competing this year…so let that serve as your warning. This is no ordinary competition. The opponents you will face here, from this moment on, will challenge you more than any test this Exam can throw at you.”

Sakura realized after a moment she was holding her breath. She was hanging on Tsunade’s every word.

“Look around you. Note the fantastic diversity of shinobi standing to your left and right. Ninja from the Leaf Village may be the most abundant contenders, but there are shinobi here representing an impressive range of nations.” Tsunade pressed on with rhetoric, “This is the essence of the Chunin Exam. No matter your walk in life or where you come from, nor the adversity you’ve faced, divides you…you join us here as up-and-coming ninja. Equals. There is a unity here that you must never forget as you continue to forge your careers as excellent shinobi.”

Tsunade added to the speech, “With that said, there are far too many of you to host a streamlined Final Stage. Because of this, I have mandated that preliminary matches will take place to determine which ninja are qualified to proceed to the Final Rounds. These matches will randomly select from the Genin present and pit you against each other in one-on-one duels. It goes without saying that your dependence on teammates, at this point, is not a determining factor of success. Accordingly, you are permitted to drop-out individually at this point if you believe you are unable to continue to fight. You will not be penalized or prevented from participating in another Chunin Selection Exam if you do so.” She looked at them expectantly, “Any takers?”

With sad reluctance, both Tamsen and Koji of the Sand team raised their hands. Hyoshigi nodded to them from the front of the room while Matsuri stood in silence, beginning to tremble with anxiety. As the feverish boys walked off to join medic-nin at the back of the room, the girl stood all alone, sandwiched between a Leaf team on her left and the Rock team on her right.

One of the Iwa nin, Ga-Fen, scoffed quietly at her, “What are you still doing here? Just give it up, you wimp.”

“Someone as pathetic as you is a free win for another ninja.” Qin whispered.

Matsuri swallowed and stared ahead, feeling beads of sweat streak down the side of her face. She would not raise her hand. She could not quit. Not only had she promised Gaara that she wouldn’t, she had promised herself.

Tsunade quirked an eyebrow at the whispering ninja, “Hey, the chatters over there! Yes, you. I am addressing you.” The Iwa Genin gave the Hokage their attention, “I trust you aren’t trying to intimidate a gutsy kunoichi now, are you?”

They fell silent but smirked at the village leader.

A voice suddenly came from behind Matsuri, directed at the Rock ninja, “Anything you have to say to Matsuri can be said to me as well.”

The Kuang brothers (and not the unshakeable Huo) turned their heads and gawked at the sharp-
looking, black-attired Kazekage. Gaara’s arms were folded and he was scowling furiously.

Matsuri nearly jumped out of her skin when she noticed him.

“Sensei!” She peeped softly, “What are you doing here?”

“Technically, I am a member of your team. I can stand here.” Gaara elaborated, “And Tsunade-sama demanded that I be present for the remainder of the Exam. Public relations, and all that…”

Gaara’s Leaf shinobi peers gave a rolling cheer of excitement to see he had joined them. Sakura’s grin was particularly wide. He couldn’t help a small smile when he informed them, “I cannot compete. I can only watch.” He gave them a small, Kage-like wave, “Good luck to all of you, my friends.”

Matsuri bent in a tiny bow of respect for her teacher before he parted from her to join Tsunade at the front. As he passed the chuckling Leaf jounin Gaara grunted at them, dismissing their entertained reactions.

“Be it resolved, then. The remaining twenty-eight Genin here are consenting to randomized, preliminary duels for the chance to proceed to the final rounds.” Tsunade announced, “Even the finals will be substantial…” She muttered to herself, “But that’s how we’ll make good money…”

She motioned for the next proctor to take over. Shikamaru removed his hands from his pockets and stepped forward, giving a long look to the Genin teams in front of him, “I am Nara Shikamaru. I will be the proctor for the remainder of the Chunin Exam, as well as the referee for all of your matches. Listen closely to the rules of one-on-one duels.”

Shikamaru went on with the narration, “Genin are permitted to surrender at any point during or before their match. Any activity that constitutes cheating, such as the assistance of a teammate or other ninja, will immediately disqualify you. You will fight until you are unable to continue. While in the arena, it is against the rules to flee or kill your opponent. I, as referee, will judge when a match is over or when a Genin cannot go on.”

There was quiet acknowledgment of the rules.

“Right. If you got all of that…” Shikamaru turned and pointed to a doorway, “Jounin, please escort your teams to the top floor.”

Tsunade made for the doorway of a staircase at the side of the room. Gaara followed after the Hokage quietly once Matsuri was by his side, continuing on.

Quizzical Genin bobbed around, inquiring of their mentors about what was to come.

“Wait. What?”

“This isn’t the venue for duels?”

“Where are we going?”

Kakashi pointed a finger at the ceiling when he told his students, “Up. This room was not approved for preliminary matches this year. We’re taking you to the chamber that is.”

Teams marched behind their teachers to parts unknown, highly confused. And it was almost a disappointment that there were ten minutes worth of winding staircases to climb. There was heavy breathing and annoyed moaning along the way. The air was thin by the time they scaled the tower to
a circular room in the topmost area.

Like the ground floor, this room had a railed walkway around its circumference to watch matches on the floor below. The round room’s floor, however, was unusual. The architectural design had cut-outs of slim, acute angles that allowed light to pass down to levels below. And, of course, any ninja who missed a step or slipped could take a plunge to the next level, which was stories down.

Above, glass panel skylights allowed light to pour into the room. Pale, metal support beams arched along the ceiling. The blue sky above served as a reminder that there was little to hold onto and nowhere to hide. A sophisticated, digital screen was mounted below one of the high windows on the wall. Tsunade and Gaara stopped to stand below it. Matsuri peered over the rails to examine the strange and treacherous layout of the floor.

Teams settled for a few minutes and spaced themselves out along the walkway. Team Kurenai was situated between Team Gai and Team Kakashi, not far from where the Hokage was located.

Hinata examined the room with awe, amazed that the location was so dramatically different. She turned to Neji and Tenten, who were also glancing about.

“Neji-niisan, Tenten-nee-san,” They both looked at her with the attentiveness of parents, “I hope we…don’t have to face each other. Not here, I hope. I want you both to watch me get to the Final Stage. This time I know I can do it.”

Tenten bit her lip and reassured her, wrapping an arm around her shoulders, “Hinata…you will. Neji and I definitely won’t get in the way of that. You’ll be in the Final Rounds.” She turned to Neji, “Isn’t that right?”

He nodded confidently, “If we should be pitted against each other again today, however unlikely, you can be sure that I will not be an obstacle for you. The same must be of Tenten. We will not surrender, but neither will we be a hindrance to your advancement.” Hinata sort of understood what he was hinting at. Neji wanted her to go all-out and wreck them, or anyone, if the occasion called for it. It was a bullet he and Tenten, at least, were happy to take.

Shikamaru stood off-center on the floor of the arena, gesturing to the screen above, “The preliminary bout will now begin! Direct your attention to the screen for the contestants of the first match.”

All eyes followed the screen’s readout as it flashed rapidly, tumbling over twenty-eight names over the course of a few seconds. It abruptly clinched the name Kuang Ga-Fen. Below, it had also stopped on the name Tenten.

Tenten sucked in a small breath, surprised. She felt the tension radiate out of Neji beside her. Lee and Hinata were looking at her in wordless shock.

“The first match will be between Kuang Ga-Fen and Tenten.” Shikamaru announced in a clear voice, “Competitors, please meet down here in the arena.”

On the opposite side of the room, Ga-Fen cackled happily and leapt down from the rail. He landed lightly on his feet and his Jounin sensei, Sekiema, was smiling with confidence. Ga-Fen’s teammates remained impassive, as far as others could tell.

Tenten glanced over to Gai. His serious expression melted away and then he grinned at her. For some reason, it began to feel completely fine. Tenten could only think to say, “Watch me.”

She did not need words of encouragement. With a swift turn, she proceeded down a narrow stairwell that led to the arena floor. ‘Neji and Lee are here. All of my friends are here, and Tsunade-sama is a
spectator.’ Tenten’s mouth was pulled taught, gearing up mentally for the duel, ‘I bet they’ll want a good show.’
New Exam: Genin Takedown!

Chapter Soundtrack: “Freaks” Instrumental by Timmy Trumpet

She exhaled.

‘Calm down, girl. Lee had the first match at the previous Chunin Exam. He won! That sets a pretty good precedent for my team.’ Tenten considered as she descended down the private stairwell, ‘And it’s probably best to get this out of the way…’

She was surprised by the number of thoughts that were drag-racing in her head. The clop of her heeled sandals echoed in the narrow space.

‘I’ve dealt with Rock ninja before.’

Well, if bisecting them and blowing them up counted, she definitely had.

Tenten frowned thoughtfully, ‘I don’t know if that’s the tone I want to set in the first match. Killing is against the rules anyway. The quicker he folds the better.’

It probably mattered that Lee had reported the Rock Genin team to be “highly unstable and dangerous.” Even Neji had been overly concerned about it and that, of course, never boded well.

But hell, after the year she’d had Tenten would bet her opponent might think better of pushing her too far, if he had a clue. She survived a great multitude of things. Like rent. Working hand-to-mouth. Small business operations. Orphanhood and ill-advised romance. Teamlessness. Clashing with nukenin in the Marsh Country while Lee and Neji were disabled in ways only a comedian could envision, and perhaps worst of all, she shuddered; the interrogation and demands of her kunoichi friends. It didn’t get much scarier than that.

‘He’s toast.’ She decided as she stepped through the doorway.

Tenten squinted in the bright light of the arena, timing her breaths calmly as she entered. Shikamaru looked bored and she took that as a good sign. Ga-Fen stood a few paces away from him, a leg tapping anxiously for the word start to be spoken. His crazy eyes locked onto Tenten and he grinned again.

Something about him seemed big for his britches, Tenten estimated.

Shikamaru glanced between the two competitors, “If you’re both ready,” He raised his hand for a signal, “You may begin!” He was prompt about darting away and returning to the safety of the observation area.

About as fast as Tenten could snap open the large scroll at her back, Ga-Fen was flashing through hand signs, ‘We’re starting with Ninjutsu, eh?’ The kunoichi made an acrobatic flip to avoid the… I hope that’s dirt. Mud. It was surely mud that the puckish Rock Genin was spitting out in a stream. Tenten summoned a volley of kunai and shuriken, clipped his shoulder once, and watched the rest of the projectiles stick into the Earth Release debris.

Ga-Fen took a breath and then unleashed another jet of earthy muck. Tenten leapt with nearly the full stretch of her scroll in an arc, letting a barrage of weaponry slip from paper and off her fingertips. In the same moment her opponent spat and hardened a shell of rapid-drying mud, Tenten tapped a seal for a chain-net bomb, ‘Good luck trying to hide from this!’ She let it drop, bounce on the top of the
crusty dome, and it detonated with a rumble.

The rattling *tink tink* of empty chains warned her ears that Ga-Fen had not been caught. As the smoke settled, Tenten landed on her feet and braced a fold of the tool-scroll over her arm. The dome was reduced to rubble, but Ga-Fen had crafted several wall-like structures and paths with his spitting technique in a moment of distraction. He charged from the blind spot on her left, too close, and as he lashed down with an axe kick Tenten let a point-blank burst of razor darts loose from her scroll. The young man was shredded like a doily, but a second later loped over into a pile of sludge. *He’s quick with Earth Clones…’*

From the cover of a dirt wall behind Tenten, Ga-Fen sprayed a length of scroll parchment with mud. Before she could attempt to salvage her prized encyclopedia of weaponry, he dove in with merciless Taijutsu in the next instant. She backed off with a frustrated cry and abandoned it, pulling Hok free at her back, ‘Oh he is SO paying for that! That compilation took a month to seal and two-thirds of my arsenal!’

“Heh!” The Rock Genin’s grin was simmering with satisfaction.

He held a *Seal of Confrontation* as he gathered chakra and it was then Tenten noticed the steel-tipped claws on his hands. They were not the decorative rings she recognized from dance performances of the *Thousand Hand Guan Yin* at childhood festivals. They were anchored firmly to the knuckles and each wrist, equipped specifically for ripping, *‘Those sure could hurt…and I know he put those on while he hid behind me…’* She frowned in concentration, *‘But I have longer range than him using my sword.’*

The footing and evasive maneuvers between the earthy structures Ga-Fen had created was treacherous. Tenten easily outmatched his attacks with her jian, the red hilt-tassel whipping widely as she slashed. When the Rock nin lacked space to counter her he continued spitting jets of mud to keep her at a distance. *‘So much for my range advantage…’* He was fast. Faster than most of her peers, save for Lee, she estimated.

Ga-Fen had gotten behind her in the Mud Labyrinth and nearly stuck his claws into her like a rake in a leaf pile, but she was thinking of Lee and his first match. His victory and his quickness. *He’d set the precedent,* so surely she could honor her team and do equally as well. Tenten deflected the strike she sensed from behind and fell into a backwards somersault. She kicked a foot up with force, barely missing the young man’s groin, hitting the hip bone, and then stabbed the tip of her sword neatly into the back of her opponent’s calf. While he screamed she continued to roll, *‘Be proud of me, Lee!’* so her second kick knocked him off balance. Tenten almost had him splayed out, miserably caught by the acrobatics, but he defended against the next thrust of her jian. His steel nails *krang’d* off of her blade.

She did not dare to look, but could tell that Gai was crowing excitedly from up above. She’d cut a line across Ga-Fen’s cheek as he ducked frantically away from her, cursing in Hanwen, and then she was tackled. The Mud Clone’s ambush sent her headfirst through a dry earth wall, crashing through it, and the kidney-punch that followed made her eyes water in agony. The real Rock Genin and his bloodied leg were hastily closing in. *‘Ugh. Nostrils. Breathe. Can’t mouth-breathe, too much dirt.’* Another kidney-punch. *‘Air! Now!’* Somehow she inhaled and bucked free from the hold.

Tenten punctured the Mud Clone’s stomach with Hok and hauled herself to her feet, spying her ruined tool-summoning scroll a few meters away. Oh mercy, what a waste… Such a shame she couldn’t use that new fleet of morning-star spike balls to rain down on him. *‘It would’ve been beautiful.’* The clone dissolved and Ga-Fen came barreling at her with a new bombardment of Earth jutsu, folding the walls and collapsing them around her. A jet of pressurized mud nearly took her
head off, but she tumbled out of its way.

As Tenten skidded, she realized she had played into exactly what he’d been hoping for. At the edge of the arena, one of the acute-triangle gaps in the floor was a mere step away from her. She had been corralled by Ninjutsu towards the hole. Before she could oxygenate enough to leap away, jets of mud careened for her, and the painful, filthy splash shot her off the ledge.

*Be aware of your environment, bitch.* The Rock Genin scolded in Hanwen, *And we thought you Leaf shinobi were the biggest threat!*

From the railing above, Gai and Lee were fit to burst with indignant howling (Lee especially, having heard the comment.) Neji held up an arm to them while he watched with his Byakugan, “Easy now. Falling does not constitute loss.” He reminded them and they deflated a little, calmer, so he added, “She’s going to make this very painful for him now.”

And on cue, Tenten had swung up from the gap on the opposite side; as did three Shadow Clones from each of the arena’s gaps. She certainly did *look* angrier. Ga-Fen did not immediately understand that her clones were solid replications and not a Supplementary farce, that was, until they began to dash and swirl around him. Blades *caromed* against his steel claws and his heart began to pound, *‘They’re real! I got stuck in a match with someone who can use Kage Bunshin?’* With proper timing, he severed the head of a shadow clone with a deadly claw-strike.

Unfortunately, he stepped right into a counterattack as her Dance of the Crescent Moon concluded. Two shadow clones stopped their swords at the front and back of his neck. Tenten stood in front of Ga-Fen, expecting his surrender, but he had prepared another jet of mud to spit at her. She ducked away from it. One of her clones prudently pinned Ga-Fen with a blade through the foot. He screeched and swung at it, foolishly, as the second clone’s sword cut in an upward motion beneath his right hand. Three of his fingers were severed and *plopped* to the floor, the steel rings falling away uselessly. Right about then his fighting spirit evaporated.

Very appropriately, Shikamaru had returned to the messy arena floor with his thumbs jammed in his ears to block out a 101 decibel scream.

Ga-Fen had fallen to his knees and Tenten dismissed her Shadow Clones, wondering if she had perhaps disqualified herself. *‘I don’t know…Shikamaru said nothing about maiming in the rules. And all of us did sign those waivers a few days ago…’*

The referee squatted down beside the crumpled Genin, “Yo…I’m going to call it unless you get up and defeat her.” Shikamaru inclined his head towards Tenten, “That was legal, by the way.”

“Oh. That’s good.” She kept Hok ready in her hand.

Ga-Fen tilted his head to look at Shikamaru, rasping, *Get fucked you ugly motherfucker, you and this bitch. If it wasn’t against the rules I would have killed her at the start!*

Shikamaru blinked at him and then stood, “Great. Didn’t know we’d have to call in a translator for any of these matches. What’s he speaking?”

*‘Hanwen.’* Tenten informed him, “He called you ugly. And some other things…”

“Eh?” He was mildly surprised, “Right. You and Lee speak that, I’ve heard. Got it.” Shikamaru raised his hand towards Tenten, “Tenten is the winner of this match.”

Ga-Fen’s wailing grunts got the attention of the uniformed medic-nins rushing into the arena, but not the attention of his team. His sensei, Sekieima, and his brother Qin watched him from the rails but
made no move to go to him. Huo was too busy staring at Tenten to give a damn about what had happened. One medic collected the discarded fingers and the other escorted Ga-Fen away.

Tenten stowed Hok at her back and retrieved her now useless tool-scroll, ‘Well I did it…but I kind of had to. He wasn’t the type to give up without some serious persuasion.’ Her back ached from the brutal punches, ‘God, what an asshole. I don’t feel that bad about it…but I wonder if they can reattach his fingers?’ She was genuinely curious if it could be done. Tenten climbed the staircase back towards the top floor, dusting dried mud from her white cheongsam, ‘This probably won’t wash out.’

She emerged at the observation deck to the loud, excited utterings of her Leaf compatriots. Lee, of course, was the loudest as he squeezed her shoulders happily.

Hinata was tugging on her sleeve and looked to be near tears, “Onee-san, your back…”

“I’ll be fine, Hinata.” She smiled at the younger girl, “But do you mind looking at my head? I hit it pretty hard.” Tenten bent to let the Hyuga princess press healing hands against her scalp. ‘Ah, that’s better. No more wall diving for me.’ The fall had also messed up her chignons and her hair was all over the place, half-tied, ‘I’ll put it up again in a little while…’

Gai probably did not realize he had stepped in front of Neji and cut off his comments. “Excellent form and showmanship, Tenten! That was precisely what I expected of my student.”

“Thank you, Gai-sensei.” She said as Hinata worked.

The man took the muddied and destroyed scroll from her hands, “Hmm. I will have this replaced prior to your final matches.”

“I’ll replace it sensei, it’s expensive.”

“Accept my gesture or I will take it as an insult!” He warned.

Tenten gave in, “Fine.”

Gai moved on to gloat directly in Kakashi’s face (The first match was my team’s triumph once again!) and Neji finally got a word in edgewise to his girlfriend, “Let Hinata-sama examine your back as well.”

“There is damage.” His tone got stern.

Tenten let her shoulders sag and she gave an imperceptible nod to Hinata. The younger girl finished her work at the crown of Tenten’s head and moved to her lower back, laying her hands over the area gently.

“He throttled me a little.” Tenten admitted quietly, “He was faster and stronger than I expected.”

“He adapted quickly to your style and tried to sabotage your techniques and ranged attacks.” Neji shrugged, “He was outclassed, regardless.”

“Thank you. Did I look beautiful crashing into things and getting covered in mud?”

He grunted, “Hardly.”

“Yeah.” She sighed, mentioning, “Thanks, Hinata. That’s a lot better.”
“I’m glad. Let me know if it starts to bother you again.” Hinata straightened and patted the older kunoichi on the arm, whispering, “I saw Neji-niisan flinch when you were struck.”

“Did he?” She kept her voice low, seeing that the Hyuga heir had turned back to lean on the rail and watch the screen as names cycled.

‘It’s been a long road, but here you are, Neji…letting people witness empathy we never thought we’d get out of you. Not even Naruto could make you do that.’ A smile tugged at Tenten’s lips, ‘Thank goodness your improvement has been cumulative; otherwise you’d probably think people combust when they kiss. Now you know better, don’t you?’

Over the top of Hinata’s head she could see Sakura, Ino, and Tama down the length of the walkway, waving and pantomiming congratulations to her. ‘We can do it girls. We may have to castrate some people today, but we are going to the final rounds.’ She grinned back at her friends.

Shikamaru’s voice drifted up from the arena floor, “The second match will be between Akimichi Chouji and Korekiyo Kimori.”

Tenten squeezed herself between Neji and Lee at the hand rail, all craning their necks to watch Chouji hand off a bag of chips to Fujita and give assurance to his team. Once he entered the closed stairwell, Tenten looked across the room to the team of Cloud Genin. It was evident that the toothpick-thin boy, Kimori, was nervous, likely more because of stage fright and less because of the appearance of his portly opponent. ‘Watch out there, Chicken-Neck, Chouji can pick you up and play croquet with you.’ Tenten thought to herself.

Beside her, Lee deduced as he held his chin, “Chouji-kun will win.”

“You seem so sure, Lee.”

“Attitude reveals much about a match. That Genin has been sulking since his team arrived. The Forest must have given them difficulties.”

“Hm. I suppose you have a point there.” Out of curiosity she asked, “Hey, how was my attitude before my match?”

Lee turned to her with a smile so wide it crinkled his eyes, “Courageous.”

That did it. Tenten hugged his arm tightly and thanked him. On her opposite side Neji spoke, “There was no one better to lead us into these matches. Even I did not feel prepared.”

“Now that I don’t believe. You’ve got…they’re like…carbon-steel nerves.” Tenten insisted, “You’d have been fine, Neji. Shikamaru just announced it abruptly, was all.”

He made a soft sound of disagreement before they turned their attention to the arena floor.

Chouji had arrived first, and though Shikamaru made a valiant attempt to restrain himself, he smiled at his best friend. A low chuckle rumbled from the hefty young man. They had both deduced that the wafer-thin Cloud Genin was a first-time participant. Kimori had lollygagged and hesitated all the way down the stairs, eventually turning up to stand face-to-face with his older, larger Leaf ninja opponent.

‘Seems to me…’ Shikamaru thought to himself, ‘This kid’s biggest threat is his own nerves.’

He flagged his hand down, “Begin!” And then he returned to the observation area to enjoy Chouji’s imminent thrashing of the inexperienced twerp.
Chouji waited for Kimori to make a move, grimacing in confusion when the boy slipped his hand to a thigh holster, palmed a kunai and then froze. His knees were quaking as he stood.

‘Shit, Chouji’s not that scary is he?’ Shikamaru glanced over to Asuma and then Tsunade, noticing that they were plainly puzzled too, ‘The Cloud kid has stage fright to the max…’

Chouji took a moment to reflect on an appropriate way to handle a terrified first-timer in a fight. As he was a compassionate soul, he wanted to end it mercifully, ‘I don’t exactly want to snap his fingers off like Tenten did earlier…’ But waiting for an awkward signal to attack was going to draw out a tooth-crinklingly bad match. ‘I’ll give him a free shot. Yeah. Poor kid could probably use it…’

“Hey,” Chouji waved at the other genin, whose eyes had glazed over, “It’s your first match ever, right? I totally understand.” He pressed his thumb against the swirl on his cheek, “Go ahead and try to hit me. I won’t make a move until you do.”

He heard Ino groaning reproachfully in the background.

In response, Kimori went wide-eyed with shock. A moment later, as if it were an involuntary action, he hurled the kunai with force and it pinged off of Chouji’s armor chestplate, clattering to the floor. Chouji stood there and glanced at the wasted weapon, discouraged. ‘He just squandered a free shot…’

Shikamaru covered his face with a hand, beginning to feel embarrassed by watching, ‘If he can’t capitalize on Chouji letting his guard down then he deserves to lose…’

While the proctor was chagrinned by the young Cloud Genin wobbling and sweating in the arena, other spectators had a healthy dose of schadenfreude. The older Grass team was hooting in delight.

“Grow some balls!” The Grass team’s tallest young man jeered.

The Grass kunoichi chimed in, “Need a change of pants down there?”

They guffawed wildly until their sensei, Mahoto, angrily shushed them.

Many of the Leaf Genin were sympathetic but watched in respectful silence. By the time Chouji made a running charge towards Kimori and prepared his Multi-Size technique, the infectious laughter of the Grass team had spread to other spectators.

Kimori was on the verge of tears as he hurled a full barrage of kunai, which Chouji blocked as a true professional blocks; with a giant arm bracer. The Leaf ninja was now over six meters tall and it appeared hopeless.

“For fuck’s sake! You’re faster than him, Kimori!” One of his teammates shouted down from the rails, “Don’t think about what you saw before—look at what’s in front of you!”

That encouragement was the spark of sense that motivated Kimori to dive out of the way of a sweeping, meters-wide palm strike. It stamped a hand-shaped crater in the arena floor, crumbling the last of the Earth jutsu debris from the first match. Kimori rushed hand signs and produced a crackling static field that stretched the length of the room. All it seemed to do was stand Chouji’s hair on end.

Kimori’s teammates were hollering encouragement, trying to combat the laughing of other teams. When another palm-strike came careening down the Cloud Genin leapt like a grasshopper, grew a spine, and ran up the giant’s arm, ducking beneath another behemoth hand swiping at him. Shikamaru was impressed that some bravery had mobilized the newcomer.
Chouji got a grip on Kimori a mere moment after two paper-tag nodes were slapped on his mammoth neck, and the resulting Lightning-Style shock stunned him. Kimori slipped out of his grasp and fell to the floor, retreating as his enormous opponent toppled. Chouji’s Multi-Size jutsu wore off, and as he shrank he was still clearly in control of his faculties after Kimori’s attack. The zap had not been strong enough to stop him. Chouji rolled forward in an effect of his Bullet Tank technique, built speed, and then propelled himself behind Kimori.

The younger Genin was swiftly contorted into an arm-lock at his back (the next shock-tag fluttered to the floor) and Chouji flattened Kimori, pressing his face into dirty tiles until he wheezed. Actually, Shikamaru thought, Chouji looked quite elegant right there; having pinned Kimori as he waited on bent knee, holding a kunai in warning to the boy’s throat, ‘Stylish! Chouji’s obviously been working on his flourish while I’ve been away. I don’t give points for that though.’

Kimori slapped the floor with his free hand, turning blue. His teammates above were clamoring in frustration while Shikamaru called the match, “The winner of the second match is Chouji.”

Chouji stood and released the toothpick-Genin who rolled over, gulping down air. The laughing spectators had quieted, and that was probably because Kimori had at least tried, in spite of his predictable defeat. Of course his team was going to be disappointed he lost to a fat guy, but as Kimori trudged out of the arena he noticed a friendly wave from his Leaf opponent as he returned to the stairs. Maybe there were worse people to fight, he figured. Chouji had not wanted to humiliate him, and Kimori planned to keep that in mind.

Shikamaru’s mood elevated slightly. It was a bit of an ego trip to see his best friend have a fast and flashy win. He caught Asuma grinning and muttering excitedly to Ino up above. Fujita was still clapping. ‘These matches will probably all be relatively one-sided, I bet. Leaf has the strongest competitors.’ Shikamaru tapped a small remote in his pocket to cycle through participant names again on the screen.

By the time Chouji and Kimori had reappeared on the floor above to spectate, two new names were selected on the digital readout. Shikamaru made the announcement, “The third match will be between Tenro Masugama and Rock Lee.”

The “Woo!” of excitement was piercing, and immediately followed by Lee and Gai shouting words of fortitude at each other. Tenten watched them with a sheepish look as Neji tuned out the youthful warbling, looking across the way to where the Dream Genin, Masugama, was calmly adjusting his belt and bracers. Shikamaru could tell by the look on Neji’s face that, more than likely, Masugama was not among weak candidates of this round.

‘I don’t know much about Dream ninja. They obviously like bright colors.’ It was a very private and secluded hidden village. Shikamaru had heard a statistic prior to the First Stage stating that the chance of encountering a Dream shinobi on a mission within the Fire Country is about 3 percent, and outside of the Fire Country, less than 1 percent. ‘They don’t get out much.’

He watched tepidly as Lee did an acrobatic, vaulting somersault off of the rail and landed neatly beside him. “Shikamaru-kun, I hope to be representative of our village’s distinction in this match! Please wish me luck.” Lee was making a fist, wide-eyed and hyped.

Shikamaru sighed softly, “Lee…you probably won’t need it…but good luck.”

Masugama descended the stairs in a red and pink, fur-trimmed gi. He was a rather handsome fellow; brunette, pale-skinned, and amber eyes with red paint swiped across the bottom lid. His Yumegakure headband was fitted on a black, happuri-style face plate, with the top prongs rising above his head as if they were animal ears. Masugama smiled amiably at Lee for all of one second before the
expression vanished completely.

Shikamaru was quickly getting impressions and making predictions, ‘This guy likes Leaf ninja, probably. He’s happy to be here. And...he definitely is not afraid of this match.’ He seemed tough and intelligent, but Shikamaru had noticed Masugama the day before having animated conversations with Hatake Sato, of all people, ‘So what the hell does that mean?’

Lee faced his opponent with calm confidence and a tiny smile on his face, like always. Shikamaru kept his eyes on them as he retreated from the arena, “Begin!”

And they met like two battering-rams an instant later, vibrating the room with force.

‘Well shit.’ Shikamaru thought. Lee had gotten himself a serious opponent.

He observed Lee’s full-powered punches and kicks, which were the stuff of legend these days, be countered blow-for-blow. Masugama was a Taijutsu expert.

The regulation leaf whirlwind was aimed squarely for Masugama’s head, but the Dream ninja took the blow, buffering it with an arm, and as he tumbled his own kick caught Lee’s shoulder. They parted, recovered, and then resumed their mirror-like brawl. There was a long period of exhausting, bone-crushing blows that made the less experienced Genin spectators cringe in fright. The techniques used told the Leaf and Dream combatants a lot about one another.

Ah, this one is strong. He has trained for a long time!

Wow, great kick.

He has a youthful spirit!

He’s fought someone like me before. He isn’t making mistakes...

I can already tell he wants to use Ninjutsu! He looks stressed!

Yeesh...this person needs a shower. Or...is that me who stinks? Damn that Forest of Death.

Without warning, Lee assessed that the match up was unfavorable, and thusly swapped his Iron-Fist style for something far less conventional. Shikamaru gawked in shock when Rock Lee bent almost 90 degrees to avoid a wall-shattering punch. He flattened, rolled, rose up on his shins, and then spun the Dream genin like a top with a twin-knuckle strike. Masugama was spread-eagled on the floor for a moment and his teammates gasped. Surprised, Masugama leapt back to assess his now-tottering opponent, who swayed as if intoxicated.

Shikamaru was somewhat privy to what was happening, ‘Ino told me about this. She said Lee and Neji have been training with Lee’s grandfather...who is a master of the most bizarre martial arts this side of the world has seen...’

His ear perked up when he heard a titter of laughter from Tsunade, who was not expecting Drunken Fist to be employed while sober. ‘She better not offer Lee that sake flask in her back pocket or I’ll expel her from the tower...’

Unfortunately for Masugama, none of his attacks came close to landing after that point. Lee shimmied and whirled around him with ease. Masugama’s teammates roared in a fury from above, demanding that he “make mincemeat” of the silly Leaf ninja.

Neji was watching with a smug expression, as if he knew something that no one else did. Tenten’s
grip on the handrail was tightening, and she tried not to blink for fear of missing one of Lee’s gymnastic miracles, ‘Holy-! He’s like rubber! And Lee didn’t even drink anything.’ She chuckled excitedly to herself, ‘Wong Leung…I wish you could see Lee in action right now...’

Masugama was twice bashed in the face in quick succession after Lee capably evaded him. It stoked his anger. After being tripped, kicked, face-planted, and nearly getting trapped in Lee’s attempted chokehold, Masugama let out a cry of rage, “If I’m gonna fight a noodle then prepare to get eaten, you scrub!”

Masugama pricked his thumb on the sharp edge of his armor and swiped a blot of blood onto Lee’s jumpsuit. The Dream ninja then snapped a scroll off of his belt, and front flipped away from his Leaf opponent as the parchment unfurled. Lee rapidly deduced it was intended for a kind of Ninjutsu. The notion was reinforced when he heard some chattering erupt between Kakashi and Gai from the observation area.

Lee kept his distance, but made Masugama dance and evade with well-aimed kunai. Of course, by then, Masugama had added blood to the scroll’s parchment. It swirled and then rolled shut as the Dream ninja pressed it to the floor, “Doton: Tracking Fang jutsu!”

There was a soft rumble, and the way the tiles of the arena floor cracked and displaced was surely a sign that something was on its way up from below. ‘Troubling! But I will try to avoid it!’ Lee could have sworn he heard something about “it’ll bite you” from the rails above before he made a circus-leap away from the eruption in the floor, where a set of jaws shot up in an effort to catch him.

A tawny, white-footed wolf exploded onto the scene and locked-on to the scent of blood on Lee. It raced on a path parallel to its master’s, synchronized with Masugama as they charged.

Lee was reminded of Kiba’s combined efforts with Akamaru, albeit the wolf was wearing a vest with two large axe-blades secured to its back. Pretentious, Lee wanted to call it. He could guess why Masugama had not strutted around with a weapon-strapped companion canine throughout the Exam, ‘It would have left very little to the imagination...’

Lee evaded with all of the speed and flexibility he could muster, bending away from Masugama’s furious punches and the wolf’s spinning blade attacks. For all of his grandfather’s training and guidance with Drunken Fist, it was no longer enough to avoid his opponent completely. He was forced into close-quarters against two threats. Masugama finally landed a punch to the stomach just as Lee dropped a heel-kick on the Dream ninja’s head, watching with slight satisfaction as the happuri face plate was knocked akimbo; the headband slid down over Masugama’s eyes. In the embarrassing moment Masugama retreated to clear his vision, he got a mouthful of Lee’s second kick. Masugama skidded over the floor, bloodied, but made a yip sound to his wolf.

He could tell Masugama was on his feet again and ready to take advantage of his entrapment. With precise timing, Lee fell to his back and somersaulted; the wolf still attached to his hand, and let Masugama run headlong into the blades on his wolf’s back. All fell in a tangled, bloody heap, devoid of elegance. The Leaf ninja had to smash the wolf between the ears once more before he was free. Bleeding profusely, Lee staggered away. At that point, the wolf was suffering some significant cognitive damage.
“Beppu!” Masugama was snapping his fingers in front of the wolf’s face, “You okay boy? Oh man, just stay down! I’ll finish this!” The dizzied wolf stayed on the floor, whimpering.

The Dream ninja stared at Lee furiously, “I’m not letting you get away with that! You hear me?” He flashed through hand signs rapidly, chakra flaring, and began to undergo a transformation.

Lee turned inward for a moment to reflect on his foolishness. The first two matches he had watched had lured him into a false sense of security, thinking he would not have to expend too much energy in his own fight. He had felt confident that the new skills he’d acquired would be sufficient for a preliminary match, ‘I should not have underestimated an opponent I have never faced before. He is a tremendous shinobi!’ Lee meant that literally too: Masugama had expanded his form and bulked up into a pink-and-purple wolf beast; ears, teeth, muzzle, tail and all.

It had been a good call to open two of his Inner Gates by that time, as it afforded him just enough speed to avoid the wrecking, colorful hulk that came baying for him. Lee bent and slipped through the beastly Masugama’s legs, lashing out at his ankles with nunchaku, and then rolled away when deadly claws thundered down beside him. Lee wrapped a leg around the transformed ninja’s beefy arm and sidled up, Drunken Fist grace sparing him from harm, and pulled the threshing chain taught around his enemy’s neck. It was a very thick neck and Masugama was not struggling to breathe at all. Not a wise move in this instance, Lee determined too late.

The man-beast rolled, squashing Lee flat on the floor on his back, and then reached to pull the winded Leaf ninja off. Masugama snapped his pink and super-powered arm, hurling Lee across the room like a play thing. He hit a wall and slid down slowly to the floor, barely staying on his feet. Lee’s vision was blurry. He remembered to breathe, pushing past physical pain and threw open the Third Gate, his skin flushing red. ‘I must push back against this opponent! Like Tenten did before, she could not expect to be handed a victory in her match! I must take it.’

When Masugama came loping, closing the distance between them, Lee took off at an untraceable speed. He zipped along a wall, flitted to the opposite side of the room, and then came crashing back, using Masugama’s head as a springboard. He rocketed off, knocking the wolf-nin sideways, and Lee scaled the height of the room towards the tower’s ceiling. Growling, Masugama made a mighty, pink-furred leap, ignored the terrified squeals of the Rain team as he passed them at the rail, and climbed after Lee.

Neji still knew what few others in the room knew. He had a good idea of what Lee planned to do next, and that was because he had spent many weeks with Lee as they honed their skills without Tenten’s company. Gai had provided several melee weapons for Lee to reward his practice in their handling. Accordingly, Neji had sealed a few of those new tools into a scroll for his friend, which of course he was prohibited from providing Lee with in a one-on-one match. But Lee was not using a standard-issue nunchaku, Neji recalled. He had packed a modified version for the first day of the exam.

While monkeying around in the top rafters, too fast and nimble for the lumbering Masugama to catch, Lee tenderized his opponent with aerial kicks. As soon as a retaliating claw came swiping for him, Lee made his move. He extended the chain between the nunchaku’s bars, and snared the Dream ninja’s large wrist in it. Lee vaulted from a support beam, too slippery to catch, and secured the beast man’s other arm. Half a moment later, they were flying into a Drunken-Fist-Front-Lotus as Masugama thrashed, and just made his entry into the tiles of the floor more painful. The impact rattled the room again, and a cloud of dust and crumbled plaster wafted up.

Sounds of awe punctuated the quiet of the dusty room. Below, one of the combatants was still moving.
Lee untangled his weapon from Masugama, his transformation broken, and stumbled away from the small crater. Shikamaru descended curiously and fanned the dust cloud from his face. Lee bent double and caught his breath. Nearby, Masugama was unconscious. Shikamaru noted the wolf named Beppu a few meters to the right, panting tiredly on the floor as blood trickled from its ears. ‘I hope Lee didn’t hurt that thing enough to end its life…he’d be morally devastated. Better hurry this up.’

He crossed over to Masugama and crouched down, speaking loudly, “You awake?”

No answer.

“Hell of a fight, though.” Shikamaru conceded to the colorful ninja, then stood and announced, “Lee is the winner of this match!”

Lee laughed jubilantly. Many Leaf ninja were cheering with residual excitement, all except for Neji. With folded arms, he was watching his friend with a look of approval.

A medic-nin checked Lee’s bitten hand and took a minute to doctor it up. Two other medics scurried over to Masugama and used smelling salts to wake him. He jerked into a sitting position, sputtering, and a medic-nin braced his neck and asked him to hold still while he was examined. Beppu was taken out of the tower to receive treatment for severe head trauma. Once the third match’s combatants were cared for and cleared, they both returned upstairs to the observation deck.

Shikamaru frowned at the disheveled and chipped arena floor, ‘They’ve made a mess already. By the time these matches are over we’ll have to do a complete renovation…’

He cycled through names on the screen again and waited before making the next announcement, “The fourth match will be between Yanagisawa Aota and Paik Minho.”

Shikamaru paused and glanced around. They were obviously the names of newcomers and not Leaf ninja he recognized. He could see one of the older Grass Genin moving towards the stairwell and, a short distance away, another of the Cloud Genin was also preparing to make his way down. From what he could glean with a superficial look, Shikamaru guessed that the Cloud team were trainees that had only just left the Academy maybe eight to ten months ago. The Grass team, on the other hand, looked as though they had the same amount of experience as Leaf genin participants, or potentially longer than that. ‘They’re cool as cucumbers. They were kind of acting like assholes to the younger Genin too, which means they probably have the chops to back it up.’

The Grass ninja, Aota, arrived first. He was tall and olive-skinned, dressed in a dark forest-camo gi, black pants and boots. He had an easy smile and odd pearl-pink eyes. At his back, Shikamaru noted, was a stack of four different tool scrolls, ‘Yeah. That’s no Academy graduate…’

The younger genin, Minho, descended with a determined look on his face. To his credit, he was not as wimpy-looking as his teammate Kimori had been, but he wasn’t much bigger. His pale hair stuck out under from his bandana. Minho’s track suit was the typical black and white of Kumogakure.

Shikamaru looked between the two as they stared each other down, assessing, letting ego flood them with resolve and adrenaline. Making sure he would not trip over a dislodged tile on the floor, Shikamaru signaled to them, “Begin!” And then took his leave of the arena.

Minho immediately hurled a smoke bomb. He disappeared into a dense cloud of black gas that consumed the entire arena floor. Some spectators complained about the visual blackout that lasted for over a minute, but the faint chinks of kunai clashing could be heard. Neji reported sidelong to his teammates that “nothing interesting” was happening.
When the smoke cover had cleared, the Grass genin, Aota, was still attacking wildly with a long dagger. Any spectator would guess that he had been ensnared in a Genjutsu, and that Minho had used his cover to layer an illusion within it.

Before Aota had the chance to snap himself out of it, Minho had been able to slink up behind him. The smaller boy plunged two kunai into his opponent’s back with a war-cry. When he pulled his knives free, the older boy fell to his knees and crumbled into a tower of pond lilies. Within the smoke distraction, Aota had left behind a Flower Clone.

A sharp whistle sounded from across the room.

Mouth agape, the Cloud genin whirled around when he was addressed. Aota was standing confidently and poised to strike, “It’s Minho, right? Weren’t you paying attention, Minho?”

The older genin leapt high from his hiding place in a floor gap. He thrashed open a tool summoning scroll and let weapons fly down en masse at the youngster. Minho blocked a fair portion of the barrage, but weapons that scattered down all around him were wrapped with small green buds. The buds burst into sprouting, thorned vines, and wound quickly up Minho’s legs. The Cloud team was hollering its concern, futilely, as the young Cloud ninja fumbled in his next attempted jutsu.

With a playful laugh, Aota leapt again, clearing out the full volume of a second, crueler tool scroll. A variety of expertly aimed weapons shredded the helpless Cloud nin. The room was hushed into silence after witnessing the decisive attack. The jounin sensei of the Cloud team gave a pointed look to Shikamaru, imploring that he step in. Below, sounds of pain squeaked out of Minho as he fell at an awkward angle, stuck-full like a training dummy in a weapon practice yard.

Aota walked calmly across the room, rolling the scroll shut, “Kid, that’s what happens when you get into a fight over your head. You ought to know when it’s better to surrender. You’re lucky I wasn’t serious…”

Shikamaru held an arm up in front of him, “Stay back for now.” He approached Minho who was groaning, slouched over, “Can you continue?” He got an eeerg in response.

Shikamaru supposed, “Guess that’s a no.” He turned around and extended a hand towards Aota, “The winner is Aota.”

Aota waved up at his grinning teammates while proceeding to the stairwell. Medic-nin carefully guided Minho from the arena, who just barely had strength left to walk.

On the observation deck, Tenten had pressed her thumb to her lips, thinking hard about what she had just seen, ‘He’s…well, he’s obviously a Weapons Master like me. AND he modified his weapon summoning with some kind of plant jutsu…’ She tapped anxiously at her mouth, ‘That was inspired. Great…maybe I need to work on my own technique, which was honestly sub-par today. I don’t want to lose another scroll because of a competitor again. It was careless and stupid! Aota made it all look so easy.’

Neji nudged her silently, coaxing her out of her contemplation. She noticed his knowing look, with a single eyebrow arched, advising her to not fretfully compare herself to another Weapon-Expert. Tenten let out a cleansing breath, muttering her thanks to him.

Shikamaru had begun the selection for the next match’s opponents. As soon as Sato’s name blinked up on the board a huge smile spread on his face, and he patted Hinata and Shino’s shoulders on either side of him. “I’m gonna look hot.” He decided.
Hinata replied in a soft reprimand, “Sato-kun, please focus! You might have a difficult opponent like Lee-kun did.”

“That’d be even better, Sunshine, honestly.”

Shino indicated who his competitor was with a turn of his head, “You are fighting that foreigner over there.”

Hinata and Sato followed his line of sight back to the Grass team, who had gotten a consecutive match to compete in. The genin who had just parted for the stairs looked to be a capable ninja. Maybe what Shino meant by “foreigner” could have had something to do with the genin’s unusual name; simply, Noé. No surname was visible on the digital board beneath the characters reading Hatake Sato. Or maybe it was that tall Grass ninja’s appearance: light hair and eyes, strong and lean, with clothing that was oddly reminiscent of a pirate. In any case, Sato was excited.

Kurenai stood behind her three pupils, exuding a tranquil energy, “You’ll be just fine, Sato. Bring back our team’s first victory.”

“I will, Sensei!” Chipper, he hopped over the handrail and into the arena below.

Upon his arrival, Shikamaru gave Sato a: don’t do anything unnecessary look, as he often did. Though he had discovered in the last few months that he got along well with Sato, and on some days even had the same sense of humor as the Hatake… ‘He has a way of putting his foot in his mouth if he isn’t careful. Do NOT disappoint me here.’

“Gotcha.” Sato breathed quietly. He got the message.

Noé stood tall and sturdy in the arena, with a vertical sword scabbard on his back. One could make an educated guess about how he liked to fight. Likewise, Noé had the same consideration of Sato while spying the two short chakra-sabers tied at his hips.

Shikamaru looked to them both briefly before raising his hand, “Let the fifth match,” And dropped it, “Begin!”

Noé pulled a zip-string from his leather coat that shot a clip of small razor kunai at the Leaf ninja. Typically, Sato took evasive maneuvers and elected to fight passively. He was better at responding to attacks than initiating them. He blocked and rolled as projectiles came soaring for his head. With two hand seals and a sneaky finger-waggle suggestion, Sato had cast a subtle Genjutsu, letting it steep slowly into Noé’s consciousness.

Afterducking beneath a deadly sword swipe, he spared a hint of chakra to summon Aree and Aroo. The two tiny owls hooted in greeting but did not put themselves to immediate use. They circled around and swooped, aware that Sato would signal when he needed something. Noé initially paid them no mind.

As ranged attacks with weapons had gotten him nowhere, Noé drew his worryingly long sword and charged. His Grass teammates were barking reminders at him from up above. Sato accordingly parried with a short sword and let his illusion strengthen. White, downy feathers began to float in a swirling storm around the arena. Noé could see them fluttering down from the ceiling like snow, and also puffing up in tufts from gaps in the floor. He felt them brushing his cheek. He mistook it for a Ninjutsu, ‘Shit! Did those birds do this? I should take them out…’

Sato flitted in and out of sight, blended and distorted by the feather illusion. It only reinforced Noé’s mistaken notion of what the problem was. With impressive speed and footwork, Noé successfully
knocked Aree out of the air with a slash of his blade, severing a few contour feathers. She plopped to the floor, alive, and her brother owl circled in tooting fright.

Before Noé could skewer Aree, Sato flashed forward to parry again in her defense. With his free arm he pulled Noé into a pseudo-handshake, “Hi there!” And tripped Noé in a dance like move across his extended leg. Noé went crashing to the floor on his face, listening to the Leaf ninja scold, “Be nice to these birds, please. They’re like my kids.”

Aree had hopped away to safety, grounded. Noé hurdled to his feet and swung his sword with two hands, “Don’t bring precious lives into battle!”

“Dude! Sometimes you have no choice!” Sato countered with both of his sabers, “What about your teammates, huh? They aren’t precious?”

“They watch their own backs.” Noé struck with a blow so hard it flung Sato across the room a ways, “When a team is able to take care of themselves separately, that’s what makes it a great team.”

Sato conceded, from his spot on the floor, that he kind of had a point. He gave a hand signal to Aroo above.

His feather illusion had granted him a few seconds of safety, as the not-so-astute Grass ninja was still having difficulties spotting him through the Genjutsu. Aroo flew in circles, releasing bursts of real feathers to mix with the imaginary storm. It was what Sato liked to call a practical illusion, a term Kurenai had coined after she had seen it in use. Layering real distractions with Genjutsu made it harder for an opponent to judge what was false. Eventually, Noé did find him and took another swing as his head.

And while in the middle of the fight, to Shikamaru’s disdain, Sato did stick his foot in his mouth.

“So, are you really a foreigner? What does your name mean?”

Noé’s temper ticked up a fraction.

Sato ventured, “Looks like you’re dressed for one of those geek conventions…”

And then Noé snapped, roaring furiously, and landed an unexpected, tall-person kick that leveled Sato. The chakra saber slipped from Sato’s hand and spun across the floor. Noé took a flying leap in the hope of chopping him as one does a wood stack. Sato back flipped several times to avoid the vicious sword swipes, and after a round-off he rushed hand seals. He was preparing a new clone technique he had wanted to demonstrate for his uncle.

Noé took that millisecond to pull a dastardly-looking mushroom from his pocket, and in a practiced motion, used the tip of his sword to fling it into Sato’s open mouth. Noé kicked him again, lost sight of him in the feather-whorl as Sato tumbled, but could hear Sato choking on what he had accidentally ingested.

“Enjoy that, you tactless dishtowel…” Noé sneered.

Hacking, Sato cleared his throat and stood, “…it’s Sato, actually. Maybe you misheard…”

Eyes furious and wide, Noé swore in terms the Hatake could not decipher, Bête comme ses pieds!

The clone that Sato had produced with seals earlier pounced on Noé from behind. He swung his broadsword and cut it down the middle, balking in shock when the clone burst on him like a broken water balloon. It degraded in to a black, sticky mass. Weighed down with a sword coated in the stuff,
Noé made the effort to run and break loose, but found himself stumbling in the substance.

Aroo flew by and let a dusting of white down feathers fall on the trapped Grass ninja’s head. Sato finished choking and stowed his blades away. He spoke directly to his opponent, “I’m sorry if I made you angry, but give up now. You can’t get away from a Tar Clone.”

“Foutre le camp, abruti!” Noé continued thrashing, “I’m not losing to an uncultured fuck like you!”

While Sato took a moment to let the insult sink in, Aree had clambered up to his shoulder and perched. He was frankly amazed that Noé had still not realized he was under a Genjutsu. ‘I mean, it’s okay for him to be upset, but if he overlooks something so crucial how does he expect to win?’ By then, Noé was tarred and feathered and many Genin watching were laughing their heads off. Noé’s self-esteem was plummeting.

“Surrender, or we can do this the hard way.” Sato warned him again, holding a hand seal.

“You think you’re going to live after swallowing that mushroom, you idiot?” Noé hissed, “That came from Hidden Grass’ poison forest. Let’s see who drops dead first!”

And Sato thought, ‘Well that does it.’

He completed hand signs for a miniscule fire jutsu, “Katon: Lighter Thread!”

The burning spark lit up the tar that Noé was coated with. The Grass ninja continued to be stubborn for a few seconds before he began screaming bloody murder, essentially a human bonfire.

Shikamaru descended quickly to call the match, “The winner of this match is Sato.” He turned to the Hatake and added sternly, “Medic-nin are to your right. Don’t die. You left me a big enough mess as it is…”

“Sorry…” Sato gave an apologetic wave before meeting a medical professional at the edge of the room. His owls both poofed back home at his request.

Shikamaru realized the burning genin was going to be a problem because:

A) Stop, drop, and roll via Shadow Bind was not working while Noé was stuck to the floor.

B) The Grass team’s sensei, Mahoto, had used a water jutsu that failed to put out the flames (Guess not all tar is water soluble, fuck, Sato, why did you do that?)

C) Other concerned Jounin were puzzling about what to do.

D) Tsunade was not doing much of anything to help.

E) Gaara was about ready to douse the kid in sand (Which could accidentally kill him anyway, Kazekage-sama) and…

F) Kakashi said he had a weird, new technique he could try, which did not make Shikamaru feel any more comfortable with people trying to get close to assist.

Chouji spoke sidelong to Fujita at the rails while watching the mayhem, “Sato screws things up sometimes.”

Abruptly, the flames flickered and went out.

Noé’s screams ended. All heads turned to follow Shikamaru’s gaze as the proctor had sensed who
had gotten involved. They noticed Huo at the observation rail, glowering as he lowered his hand. An eerie silence hung as many realized he had extinguished the Grass genin, but hardly anyone knew how.

“Did you want him to keep burning?” Huo sniped at the incredulous looks directed at him, “You’re all wasting time. Let’s get on with this.”

At about that point, Shikamaru felt a niggling, wary feeling about that particular Rock ninja. ‘How the hell did he just do that? He barely even moved a muscle…’

Things calmed down and medics were able to escort Noé away on a stretcher. His sensei, Mahoto, worriedly followed after the medic-nin and left the room. Aota and the kunoichi of his team remained, speaking in hushed tones to each other.

Tama had begun fidgeting between Kiba and Sakura. After Sato had been escorted away to be treated she felt a tightness in her chest. ‘I know he’ll be fine, but…I’ve always found it difficult to watch Sato-kun fight. I worry even when I know better!’

Kiba could tell what she was thinking about, “He’ll be back in a few minutes, Tama. Poison sure as heck isn’t as bad as being burned alive, don’t you agree?”

“Kiba-kun,” Sakura spoke testily, “We’ll all do whatever it takes to win these matches. That Grass ninja is going to live too, you know.”

“It was still gruesome.” Kakashi chimed in behind them, flipping a page of Icha Icha Paradise, “I need to have a talk with my nephew about the concept of excess.”

“I said that Grass ninja will be fine.” Sakura repeated, hoping to prevent a wave of guilt from crashing into Tama, “So that tar will be hard to clean up— but treating burns is one of the first things medic-nin learn to do around here. We live in the Fire Country!”

“It’s alright.” Tama assured her quietly, “I guess I’m a little nervous. I’ve never done this before and these matches are nothing like what I expected.”

“They never are.” Kiba agreed.

Tama reached down to pat Akamaru’s head, starting to relax. Sakura went on to discuss how Noé would have fared better if he had poisoned Sato at the start of the match. Kakashi concurred that it was a blunder, and that Sato had distracted Noé at the beginning of the fight; likely making Noé forget about his option to cripple a strong adversary. And, not surprisingly, Sato’s prodding remarks had also goaded Noé into stupid mistakes.

“If someone is still susceptible to trash talk at this point in the Exam, and messes up because of it, I don’t think they’d make Chunin anyway.” Kiba observed, eliciting a nod from his sensei.

The announcement for the next match made Tama reach out and hold Sakura’s arm in surprise.

“The sixth match will be between Srisati Tio and Haruno Sakura.” Shikamaru called.

“That’s a Rain genin.” Kakashi updated Sakura quietly, subtly pointing out a small boy in a rebreather mask to the far left of the observation deck, “And if I do say so…he looks like a greenhorn to me.”

Kiba chuckled in delight.
“Well,” Sakura tugged on one of her gloves, “I better teach him a thing or two.” She gave Tama a confident smile before walking towards the stairwell. She was also certain she could feel Gaara and Tsunade tensely staring at her.

‘Don’t worry Gaara-kun, Tsunade-shishou…’ Sakura raced down the steps, ‘I won’t give that guy a chance to set up against me. Watching all of the matches before mine…gave me an idea of how to do this right.’

She and Tio entered the arena at about the same time, and Shikamaru was there with his hands in his pockets, looking slightly careworn after officiating Sato’s match. He only spared a short glance towards Sakura from the corner of his eye. Sakura determined his lack of concern was a good thing.

“Begin!” Shikamaru quickly excused himself.

Tio drew a kunai, his voice garbled by the mask he wore, “Gosh you’re pretty! Miss, I wouldn’t want to-!”

She was already flashing through hand signs for a Grand Fireball. With a chirp of alarm, Tio threw the kunai, missed as she rolled aside, and Sakura exhaled a plume of flame at the Rain ninja. He was quite acrobatic, using a high leap to avoid the attack and forming his own seals. Sakura aimed another fireball at Tio, positioning him close to a gap in the floor. Interestingly, he had enveloped himself in his own Water Prison orb, and defended against the next fire technique that struck him.

Still steaming, Tio made the mistake of charging at Sakura for close-quarters combat.

Above, Kiba flinched when Sakura’s chakra-precise punch connected with Tio’s stomach. The force of it made particles in the air tremble. The Rain genin gurgled in horror at the pain, momentum reversing, and he was catapulted across the room and into the wall, shattering the plaster and stone behind it. Tio then slipped through the triangular gap in the floor, falling towards the next level stories below. Shikamaru cursed quietly and dove down to rescue him.

A minute passed and Sakura adjusted her gloves again, silently enjoying the whispering and looks of spectators. Many were blatantly aghast that a pink-haired beauty had just knocked the soul out of another genin.

“Hey, excuse me!” A brazen and very muscular Cloud genin called down to Sakura, “Are you single?”

She frowned reflexively, refusing to answer, and stole a glance at Gaara who stood placidly beneath the digital display with Tsunade and Matsuri. Sakura was relieved that he let the crude comment go. ‘Very mature of you, Gaara, thank you.’ It was Kakashi who had politely asked the Cloud sensei to “Shut up his trainees and save their socializing for after the Chunin Exam.” Asuma and other Leaf Jounin snickered at the Cloud Jounin’s mortified face. His student was promptly silenced.

Eventually, Shikamaru returned with Tio slung over his shoulder. The boy was weeping, his broken ribs causing him to gasp in pain with each breath. Shikamaru ushered over the medic-nin hovering in wait, speaking after a heavy sigh, “That was too fast for my taste…Sakura is the winner of this match!”

Ino was the first to cheer, “Yeah, Forehead Woman! You beast!”

Tama and Kiba had also gotten noisy with their excitement.

She could not help but smile as she walked. As Sakura reflected on Shikamaru’s quip, she hoped that
he understood her haste. Surely he knew that she had no desire to drag things out when it was the Final Round that would determine her promotion. She was far too practical, at this point in time, to delay her own success. Sakura waved at the Hokage who grinned lopsidedly at her, and then ascended the stairs with her chin held high.

Simultaneously, Sato returned to the observation deck with a plastic cup in his hand. He looked okay, by most standards. He stopped in the space between Team Kakashi and Team Kurenai, greeting, “Yo! Who just fought?”

“Sakura-chan won with a single punch!” Hinata filled him in.

“Damn. Good thing none of us had to fight her.” Sato then turned to Tama, “Are you still feeling okay, Tama? Don’t have the jitters about your match yet?”

“Not yet.” She then asked him, “Sato-kun, how did the treatment go?”

“Like you’d expect it to. I got taken to the breakroom and spoonfed some ipecac syrup. I missed the trash can at first and the medic got mad at me. It was a lot of puke.” He shrugged, tipping the cup back to suck on ice chips, “You know they have a refrigerator back there? It’s only filled with ice pops and other frozen stuff.”

“How strange.” Tama tapped her chin.

“Glad to have you back.” Kakashi patted his shoulder, “Please, refrain from torching people in the future, Sato, unless you have a way to put them out.”

“Shoot, you guys couldn’t put him out?” Terrified, Sato looked around wildly for Noé.

“He was eventually extinguished, but you did cause him unnecessary pain.” Kurenai informed her student, “We’d appreciate it if you did not do that, going forward.”

“10-4, Sensei!”

Kiba rolled his eyes.

Sakura returned and was quickly squeezed into a hug by Tama and Ino. A few teams down, Lee was also giving her a thumbs-up, and he had convinced Tenten to do the same to congratulate their friend. Neji stood by peacefully and seemed to be pleased with the outcome of her match.

“Well done, Sakura.” Kakashi commended her, “You struck fear into the hearts of all the young contenders here.”

“It was my pleasure!” Really. It was.

Hinata had quietly sidled up to her friend and expressed her admiration, “Sakura-chan, you reminded me of Tsunade-sama, a little bit.”

“Thanks! That’s the idea. All of my hard work wouldn’t have paid off if I didn’t resemble her by now.” She adjusted her headband at the top of her head, fixing her pastel hair, “I bet you’ll be way more impressive than me, Hinata.”

“I don’t think so.” The girl disagreed, “I just hope I don’t have to fight anyone I know. I want to keep my match short, like you did.”

“You will, believe me. It’s easier when it’s a stranger.” Sakura added softly, “Much easier than I
thought, actually. I almost never do that to people…”

“Thank goodness.”

They shared a laugh as names were cycled across the board on the wall. Neji’s name appeared.

Shikamaru announced, “The next match will be between Hyuga Neji and Kuang Qin.”

Hinata and Sakura swiveled to take a gander at the team of Rock ninja across the room, holding stock-still at the rail. The little brother, Ga-Fen, was still missing and would likely be staying in a hospital henceforth. Sakura wondered how Qin would feel fighting another member of Gai’s team, perhaps thirsting to avenge his brother’s injury by Tenten. ‘They aren’t pushovers, that Iwa group… and Neji’s one of the strongest ninja on our side…” She noted Tenten who was sending Neji off with pride, ‘I want to say that Leaf has the advantage again…but I’ll need to wait and see!’

The whole assemblage of Leaf ninja in the observation area was simmering with support for their one-and-only notorious grump and genius prodigy, Neji. Most Leaf comrades had taken a shine to him in spite of his antisocial tendencies; he was considered a caring big-brother type nowadays. Gai had reined himself in and saw Neji off with a considerate volume, knowing how easy it was to irritate his Hyuga pupil. Neji appreciated it, and proceeded down the stairwell calmly.

Shikamaru got the feeling that Qin was very, very mad even if his face betrayed no trace of emotion. He stood like a statue, hardly breathing as he waited for Neji to cross over to him. ‘Ohh there is definitely some resentment here,’ Shikamaru deduced, ‘The likelihood of this being a more… destructive match…is pretty high.’ He looked right and left at the combatants and then raised his hand, ‘I’ll stand closer to the Hokage for this one.’

Shikamaru signaled for them to start, “Begin!”

Qin only just let Shikamaru get out of the way before he thrust his arm forward, echoing Wushu style. Black soot shot from his sleeve like a magician’s trick, only on an ominously large scale. Within a fraction of a second, the thought process in Neji’s brain went as thus: The soot could probably be used to disguise another attack OR facilitate a successive technique. Solution: deflect it. Counterattack: Air Palm, to stun Qin against a wall; Follow up with: Sixty-Four palms. Win.

He rotated to force the black substance away, but when Neji’s defense ceased the soot floated down and stuck to him anyway. While it did not go as he planned, Neji kept to the agenda and launched a form-perfect Air Palm towards Qin.

But his arms felt heavy. Rather, everything felt heavy. It delayed his counter and Qin was able to avoid the vacuum blast that careened across the room and tore a hole in the tower wall. ‘As I assumed, this powder has the effect of a jutsu.’ Neji tried to dust off the soot but it clung stubbornly. Qin had no problem emptying more ash from where it was concealed inside his jacket.

Within fifty five seconds Neji was by far much dirtier than Tenten had been during her entire match. Maybe he should not have poked fun at her for it?

Forcing chakra into his limbs merely to move at average speed, Neji closed in on Qin just as the Rock genin completed sealing for Ninjutsu, “Doton: Golem Shell!” In an unsightly twist, Qin’s skin had hardened and expanded into blocky, grayish plating all over his body. Neji was distantly reminded of his life-or-death brawl with Kidomaru and his golden armor. Thoughtful, he chose to modify his attacks based on how he had defeated the spider-limbed Sound ninja long ago.

Qin’s jutsu were unexpectedly problematic. For one thing, his Golem armor had also amplified his
strength, and Neji was having a terrible time of avoiding his blows. Neji’s Wushu blocks, though not up to speed, prevented most harm that Qin tried to inflict. Neji had locked a foot behind Qin’s neck with the fastest high-kick he could muster and flipped him. While Qin’s defense was lowered Neji struck with Jyukken to test its effectiveness, and noted the Golem armor buffered the strike, protecting Qin’s tenketsu, ‘I’ll break through it shortly, but first…’ He needed the soot off.

Neji flushed himself with chakra, hoping Shikamaru would not disqualify him for the wind tunnel he had produced in the tower, his Wind Affinity lashing wildly from his next rotation. The burst had bowled Qin over. Neji twice used the method to cleanse himself, launching an Air Palm to test his ability to move, and was glad when his mobility was satisfactory again.

“Don’t think you’re free and clear, I can coat you with dust all day long!” Qin crowed joyfully, “You’ll be a lump of coal by the time my Heavy Rock Technique is through!”

Neji had not taken the bait for close-quarters. He shot a Wind Release: Air Palm that broke on Qin even when he raced away, chopping him with a fury that would have otherwise julienned him without armor. Said armor was notched and most of Qin’s hair missing after the attack. The Rock team’s sensei, Sekieima, spoke up only to scold him, “You can do better, Qin.”

Neji was unsure if it was his teacher’s jibe that humiliated him or his vanity after receiving an uncalled-for haircut: Qin’s blood boiled. His concentration wavered as he charged, honing immense strength, and he bore down on Neji with a punch that could give both Sakura and Tsunade a run for their money. In fact, it blew out the entire floor when Neji evaded it. The tiles of the arena jerked, cracked, and then fell away in segments, detaching from the tower’s sides. Neji and Qin retreated to the walls, hanging on with chakra, and the floor cascaded down for hundreds of meters before collapsing on the next level.

Shikamaru was not pleased by the new open-air feature of the arena, ‘Fucking hell what a mess! I REFUSE to get wrangled in for clean-up. This is troublesome enough!’

Qin leapt in a rage and became a human cannonball. In response, Neji artfully swept another Wind Release: Air Palm over him, scoring and weakening his Golem Shell again. Qin’s attack missed; his hair and clothes were massacred again, and Qin knocked another hole in the tower wall when he crashed. Shikamaru was cursing out loud at that point.

The soot containers for Qin’s Heavy Rock jutsu had broken in his sleeves, spilling their contents all over the tower and down into the rattling depths below. Neji seized the opportunity and was on him instantly.

Qin was pulled off of the wall, hit point-blank with a Wind Gentle-Fist blow, and as the Rock ninja’s armor crumbled, Neji took a leaf out of Lee’s youthful book. He segued into a Sixty-Four Palm strike as they both plummeted down the tower shaft, Qin hollering and made helpless by his own heavy form. Neji drilled through, finally striking chakra points, and though that may have been enough, he still chose to slam down on Qin at the next level as if he had adopted the Front Lotus.

Qin nearly shattered, his eyes wide and unseeing, mouth gasping like a trout’s, and then slipped from consciousness at the tower bottom. Neji stood over him and dusted his hands.

There was distant cheering far above.

He looked up and could see Shikamaru carefully descending along the wall for a check. He gave a brooding look to Neji, muttering, “Well, the arena got royally fucked up…though you weren’t entirely to blame.”
“I did not give much thought to the matches after mine.” Neji admitted apologetically.

“Yeah, thanks a bunch.” Shikamaru knelt down to examine Qin, “Jeez…is he alive? I don’t think he’s breathing.”

“He is. It’s faint. I can see his heart beating.”

“Shut off your Byakugan, for God’s sake. You won, you ass.” Shikamaru hefted Qin up, “You know what? Help me carry him. He’s dead weight.”

It took a while for them to return to the observation area, and a medic-nin retrieved Qin from the walkway for emergency healing. Shikamaru marched woodenly towards Tsunade after announcing Neji’s victory, wondering how the hell they were supposed to proceed without a floor.

Tsunade made a shrugging motion, asking sidelong of Gaara, “Will you kindly provide us with a new floor for now? I hate to bother you, Kazekage.”

Gaara huffed softly, almost amused, and then released sand from the gourd at his back. It took a while for him to replicate what had been in place earlier and fortify it. To keep the matches fair, Gaara included the same gaps that ninja had taken advantage of in previous battles. Once condensed, he exerted a minimal line of chakra to keep it afloat. Tsunade thanked him warmly.

The Hokage turned back to Shikamaru, “Let’s continue.”

Breathing easier, Shikamaru resumed his duties and clicked the transponder in his pocket. The selected names appeared shortly after that. “The eighth match will be between Mizushima Nurega and Aburame Shino. Please report to the arena now.”

Shikamaru watched interestedly as the kunoichi of the Rain team feigned complete confidence, hurrying down as if she had grown impatient to fight. Odd. Earlier, he had spotted her looking anxious while watching the more vicious battles. Shino, predictably, was as stone-like and unflappable as he always was, even with Sato and Hinata’s cheers. When the two combatants faced off on Gaara’s new floor and Shikamaru signaled them to begin, the kunoichi’s resolve cracked.

Nurega made a move to charge towards Shino and then stopped, petrified, and used a low-powered water jutsu that she spat from her mouth. Shino evaded, and maybe out of pity, threw two kunai at her. A swarm of Kikaichu insects had erupted from his body and were slowly gathering. Nurega was plunged into rookie stage fright, shrieking and ignoring the guidance of her shouting team as the insects crept closer.

Shikamaru noted that Shino was not as compassionate as Chouji, at least when it came to a one-on-one duel. He offered no free shot, no recourse, and no soft words when the swarm gathered around the screaming girl, wholly unprepared for an adversary she knew nothing about. Nurega attempted another water jutsu that missed, knocking a portion of the Kikaichu swarm off. Shino raised his arm and replenished the dark, buzzing cloud.

Nurega flailed, crying frantically, “Just stop! What kind of jutsu is this? Eeek!”

Sato cupped his mouth with a hand and shouted, “Get a clue, little lady! The Aburame clan is one of the most prestigious clans in our village!”

Shikamaru thought to himself, ‘I guess Sato is gunning for his best friend to win too. Although, this girl had no idea what she was getting into, it looks like.’

Shino’s insects made lunch of the girl’s chakra and Nurega collapsed to her knees, begging, “Please
stop! I give up!"

Shikamaru clucked his tongue quietly and motioned to Shino to back off. The insects retreated as Shikamaru raised his hand and announced, “With Nurega’s forfeiture, Shino is the winner of this match.”

Sato shouted again, “Lame! How come she didn’t put up a fight? Shino was robbed!”

“Of what?” Kurenai asked him quietly, “A destructive match with a worthy opponent? Be glad. That girl’s reluctance to fight saved her from a worse fate, had Shino mistaken her for a serious competitor. She is clearly not ready to be here.”

“Right…” Sato deflated a bit, “You’re right, Sensei.”

“Of course I am.” Kurenai smiled.

Perfectly unharmed but mostly scared, Nurega left the arena and returned to her team. Shino rejoined his teammates and slipped his glasses further up his nose, “Perhaps the Final Round will be a proper test of my skills.” Sato and Hinata agreed whole-heartedly.

The Leaf teams were starting to get very optimistic about their standings in the exam, jabbering and talking while many non-Leaf teams sulked. Most were not as prepared as Konoha’s participants, or they were first-time entrants.

While the room buzzed excitedly, Shikamaru watched the board as names rapidly generated once again. He made his next announcement, “The ninth match will be between Maito Tama and Jeon Tun.”

Sato’s head snapped to the side, startled, and he set his heavy gaze on Tama, a first-timer in her own right. She looked back at him with her brows furrowed, smiling, urging him: Don’t get wound up! I can handle it.

Kiba and Sakura were giving her all the encouragement that one could possibly need.

Her opponent, Tun, it so happened, was the same huge Cloud ninja who had catcalled Sakura earlier.

“Hit him where it hurts.” Kakashi suggested blithely.

Tama nodded, “That’s what I do best.” As Lee and Sato had done before her, she took a graceful leap off of the rail and into the ring below.

Sato watched in unusual silence with a hammering heart. He had been the one to encourage Tama to seek the shinobi career she had been told to forsake. To put it lightly, he was extremely invested in her happiness and advancement. ‘It won’t feel right if she doesn’t make it as far as the rest of us…’

Tun lumbered down to the arena and Tama observed him carefully. His wide and built physique could be an indicator of Taijutsu, It looks like his muscles have muscles. He seemed nice, despite his beefhead appearance. Tun was smiling, calm, and probably the size of his two teammates (Kimori and Minho) combined.

“Hey cutie.” He winked at her.

Tama got an impression from the gesture, Either he’s trying to lower my guard…or he genuinely wants to pick up women from this exam…’ Playing along, she smiled back and said nothing. Thank goodness her back was to Sato; otherwise he may have been outraged by her reaction. Shikamaru allowed them to begin.
Tun wasted no time hurling shuriken at her, stored on magnetic arm bracers, that were electrified upon launch with what she suspected was a fancy hidden gadget. She cartwheeled to safety as the knives and stars flew by. Maybe he already knew that all the women on her team could punch like trucks…or maybe Tun had no idea and thought her a dainty flower. ‘Hmm. If he is expecting my Taijutsu it could be a problem…’

She countered with her own projectiles and got a nasty surprise from shuriken discarded on the floor. Small electric bolts arced between the scattered weapons, sending a zap through her body several times via her fingers and once through her feet. Her eyes watered as she raced away from the nuisance, ‘That’s a cheap trick!’

“Sorry sweetcheeks, you know I don’t want you to get hurt,” Tun advised from afar, “Why don’t you just give up?”

She gave him an incredulous look, “That…wasn’t much more than what happens when you plug an appliance in an outlet.”

He took mild offense, “Hey! I just learned Lightning Style so don’t talk sm-!”

With terrific speed, Tama had closed the gap between them, using her Kakashi-trained southpaw to strike his face with a solid left hook. He crashed sideways, attempted to kick her legs from under her, but Tama leapt and sent him rolling with Leaf Hurricane. She quickly deduced his techniques were barely beyond Academy level. Even his Taijutsu was not as up-to-par as she had anticipated, after judging all of those muscles. He fought frantically, and probably could have clobbered her, but Tama danced around him, a svelte boxer toying with a trainee. She ran circles around him and his eyes crossed, unable to keep up.

With hand signs, the gadget on his arm released a miniature lightning discharge. At close range it hit Tama in the side and she staggered, quickly overcoming the pain, but was displeased with the hole burned in her halter top. She disappeared and Tun blinked, bumbling left and right to spot her.

Tama exploded up beneath his chin with a ferocious kick, rocketing him up and up with strength that nearly defied physics.

Sakura did comment from the rail that it was peculiar seeing a willowy woman batter a hulking bodybuilder like a ragdoll.

“It just proves who trained harder.” Kiba snickered.

“Shadow of the Dancing Leaf!” Tama was airborne, hovering beneath her opponent, but she had not bothered to open any of her Inner Gates. She figured one of Kakashi’s E-Rank pranks could do the trick. He had said to hit Tun “where it hurts.”

“One Thousand Years of Death!”

It was hard to watch…so hard to watch. Tun howled louder than Beppu had during Masugama and Lee’s fight. Akamaru nearly sang along when he heard the sound. Gasps of shock sounded like a cacophony in response to the bizarre technique. Kakashi hid his face with his book, not expecting his new student to take his recommendation literally. ‘I shouldn’t have taught any of them that one…’

Tun landed head-first on the floor and clutched at his backside. He kneeled in agony and would not move. Tama landed softly and wondered if the Cloud newbie had no tolerance for pain, ‘I can’t believe…that’s all I had to do…’ She frowned worriedly, ‘Please get up! I’ll be embarrassed if that’s how I end my match.’
She looked up at her team to see Kiba’s mouth hanging wide open. Sakura, likewise, had a similar surprised expression mixed with a hint of approval. Kakashi locked eyes with Tama and shrugged at her. She shrugged back. Maybe it had been a rude move to make?

“It’s legal.” Shikamaru assured her, having stepped into the arena, “But who the hell taught you that?”

“I’ll never tell.” She replied, knowing her sensei would not want it disclosed.

Shikamaru asked Tun if he could continue. A spark of pride compelled the Cloud genin to action, and with a shout he propelled himself up and rushed at Tama. Shikamaru retreated to let the match resume. Tun’s Taijutsu was as inferior as it had ever been, but his ambush-launch of a metal wire net caught her off guard and snared her. She was all legs as she tumbled, thrashing in the net on the sand floor. Tun was plainly angry when he threw electrified shuriken at her with abandon, cutting her up and shocking her while she writhed.

At that point Sato started snarling and cursing at the Cloud genin whose attitude towards kunoichi competitors had done a complete 180, “She can’t even fight back, you fucker!” Shino coolly restrained him by his arm. Hinata stood beside Sato as he carried on irately, filled with fear that her friend could lose the match or come to great harm.

It took the First Inner Gate to give Tama the boost of strength she needed to tear out of the tightening net. She was still frazzled from the electrical shocks, so Tun did land a sucker-punch to the face that flattened her again. The off-put Cloud nin pulled her by the ankle towards the gap in the floor and dropped her through it, following her down to finish her off.

Many teams had quailed at the disconcerting sight. Both Shino and Hinata had to hold Sato back, who was beside himself with terror and rage. Kurenai reminded him that if he interrupted the match it could disqualify Tama and/or himself. Hinata watched the action with her Byakugan that most other spectators could not see.

Thankfully, Tama had opened two of her Gates and gained some control again. It was a consummate slugfest between her and Tun, both attached by chakra to the reverse of the arena floor.

Tama’s speed outmatched Tun’s anger-fueled strength, and after some impressive upside-down footwork and dodging, the third Inner Gate helped Tama use a clutch jutsu the way Lee had been able to earlier. She bounced from the walls, too swift to follow, and struck Tun numerous times before a savage barrage of kicks knocked him through the arena floor, up through its surface with an eruption of compressed sand, “Blooming Lotus!”

Tun collapsed with a thud, groaning in pain. Tama exited through the hole in the floor and shut her gates, the red of her skin quieting. She took deep breaths and waited as Shikamaru looked over Tun, who was slurring his replies to the proctor’s questions.

“You okay to keep fighting?”

“Yessir-erg.”

“What was that?” Shikamaru frowned and held up four fingers to Tun’s face, “Tell me how many this is.”

“Threef.” His eyes were blinking open and shut. Tun could not move much at all.

“Close, but I’m gonna have to call this.” Shikamaru notified him, standing upright again, “The winner of this match is Tama.”
A smile slowly spread on her face, as if she had not completely expected to be victorious. Tama chose to take the stairs on her way up as many people cheered.

Sato’s panic had morphed into elation. He left his place at the rail and hurried to the stairwell, meeting Tama halfway. He caught her gently by the wrist and pulled her close, valuing some rare privacy in the tower. Sharing the same step, she settled her chin on his shoulder as they embraced and Sato spoke her name softly.

“I was freaking out! Great job out there, though.” Sato praised her, “Your first one-on-one victory of the Chunin Exam and I got to watch.”

“Did you ever think you would?” She chuckled.

“I never tried imagining it before.”

“My opponent decided part of the way through the match that he did not want to give up easily.” Tama sighed, “I shouldn’t have underestimated him. He hurt me a bit.”

At her words, Sato lifted his hand and noticed his fingertips were stained with blood. He had accidentally touched the cuts on her side where shuriken had sliced her. He observed it in a moment of horrified wonder until she took his hand in her own, “It’s okay.”

“I kind of…wanted to kill him…when he pulled that shit.” He admitted rigidly.

“You knew you couldn’t step in, and really, I didn’t need you to.” Tama concluded, “I think I made him mad when I used Kakashi-sensei’s stupid jutsu.”

“…you’re telling me Kakashi came up with that?”

“Yes, he did.”

“You’ve got to be kidding me.”

She frowned in confusion, “He never used it on you during practice or a bell test, Sato?”

“No! Never. My uncle used that on your team?”

“When I joined, we retook his famous ‘bell test’ to find out how well we worked together. I guess Kakashi-sensei wanted to have fun with it.”

“He’s demented.” Sato scoffed, “And he taught you how to use it.”

“I asked him to teach me as many jutsu as he thought I could use.” She confessed, “Maybe I should have ruled out the stupid gags?”

“Well…it worked.” Sato noted.

She was still high from her success. When Tama smiled again he had to kiss her. Her lips were supple and warm, smooth against his own, and he liked it when her hands laced behind his neck when she got into it. Once he had parted her mouth just enough, the hot wetness of her tongue, the quiet sounds she made; ah, it stoked the fire in his stomach that had been consuming him for weeks. Sato carefully pressed her against the wall of the stairwell, trying not to jar her wounds, and kissed her fiercely. ‘She’s so…’ Tama was pure magic in his hands, good and evil. The ultimate distraction and singular goal he had overlooked for too long. ‘So fucking beautiful.’

Oh, she must have felt it too. That pull. That haunting drive for touch and desire that they were no
longer immune to, not as they had been as innocent kids. Her hands roamed over the young man.

Strange half-thoughts bobbed in Sato’s head while kissing, trying to calculate just how precious she was. Tama was stronger than he had ever thought she could be, wiser and more responsible, seducing him sometimes with a small glance, though never intentional. She could torture Sato with her cheerful spirit and a flip of her hair, in so many ways that devoured his heart whole. But truly, Tama was more heroic and treasured than he could ever find the words to describe to someone if he had been asked, Who do you love?

At about the point their hips had met and their motions became more adult in nature, a voice echoed down from the top of the stairs, unseen around the corner’s turn, “Sato…” It was Kurenai’s voice.

They parted with a jerk, embarrassed. It sounded as though Kurenai was not on her way down to catch them, but she probably knew well enough what was going on, “Please let Tama-chan come out here to have her injuries be treated by medic-nin. Also, Hinata’s bout will be starting shortly. Considering that she was a spectator of your match, you owe her the same courtesy.”

“Oh!” Sato turned his head between Tama and the top of the stairs, conflicted, “We’ll be right up!”

“I expect so.” Kurenai’s tone was authoritative.

He managed one last lip lock before Tama pushed back on Sato’s chest gently, chiding, “We sidetrack easily. Let’s go support Hinata-chan now.”

“Alright, fine.” He stroked the side of her face, “But tell me…”

She gave him her undivided attention.

“Did you like that?” Sato wondered.

“Very much.” With a grin, Tama led him by the hand up the stairs and back to the spectator’s walkway. Kurenai stood by with her arms folded, giving them both a pointed look.

Hinata smiled knowingly at the pair and thanked them when they wished her luck. She trotted down the stairwell with relative confidence.

Tama was shepherded away by a medic before she could rejoin Kakashi and her group. She gave them a look from over her shoulder, hoping to make it back in time for her friend’s match.

Sato stood awkwardly beside Kurenai. He made a bid to change the subject, “So… who is Sunshine’s opponent?”

“The last member of the Grass team: their kunoichi, Guena. That team is more competent than many other entrants in this stage.” Kurenai assessed, “Hinata, however, is a very good judge of any adversary she faces.”

“Yeah, this shouldn’t be too difficult for her.”

From Kurenai’s opposite side, Shino spoke, “You had more trouble in your match than you should have.”

“Yeesh, Shino! That guy was way taller than me and not half bad with a sword.”

“You had the tactical advantage with a Tar Clone but you delayed in using it.”

“I’m more comfortable setting up Genjutsu first. It’s not easy making Tar Clones outright; it takes
way too much chakra.”

“And what if your opponent had been able to break your Genjutsu?”

“The both of you-” Kurenai interrupted them, “Need to stop speculating and pay attention to your teammate.”

The two boys looked down into the arena immediately. Hinata stood across from the Grass kunoichi who was impeccably clean for someone who had trekked through the Forest of Death days before. Guena, Kurenai had said her name was. She was willowy and good-looking, and also appeared self-assured about her duel. Her thick, golden hair was held in a long braid that reached to the backs of her knees, tied with vines and a multitude of colorful flowers.

Guena was also glaring dangerously at Hinata, which Sato felt could not be a good thing. The girl looked very thirsty to win.

No sooner had Shikamaru spoken the word “Begin” Guena had stuck Hinata’s shoulder with senbon, landing a second needle above her left knee. With ungainly evasion, Hinata had avoided the precisely aimed projectiles and pulled the needles out, wobbling. Guena had certainly been going for important pressure points, Hinata assessed, ‘She could have immobilized me with one more senbon…’

Hinata took great care in avoiding more flying needles as she hurried towards Guena. With an elegant Jyukken stance, Hinata skidded over the floor as she turned, aiming a forceful palm at the other shinobi.

“All these Leaf kunoichi…” Guena blocked and let the strike shut a chakra point in her upper arm, stabbing Hinata’s hand with two needles in retaliation, “Are so very fond of their Taijutsu, aren’t they?”

Hinata’s follow-up blow only grazed her opponent’s shoulder as Guena slipped away, predicting the Hyuga girl’s moves. In a moment of respite Hinata pulled the senbon from her hand and used a rotation, deflecting the fusillade of senbon that came for her again. Whether near or far, Guena was going to be tricky to corner. ‘I will have to commit to ranged attacks too if I cannot get close enough to hit her.’ Her frown of concentration resembled her father’s, though she did not know it at the time.

“Kunoichi of Konoha…punching and beating their enemies. It’s so barbaric.” Guena tittered, making hand seals, “Where I come from we stun and kill with grace.”

Guena shook loose her braid, scattering the buds and flowers that she had kept tied up. When they landed on the floor, the chips and seeds burst, chakra-saturated, as she completed her jutsu, “Doton: Fresh Soil Spreading!” Most everything on the ground was rapidly growing and climbing, and Guena handily kept Hinata back with senbon. Trees, shrubs, fruits, vines, ferns and all manner of woodland diversity were transforming the arena.

Thinking quickly, Hinata honed a point of molded chakra in the tip of her finger to create a cutting edge of Jyukken. She sliced a watermelon in half on the floor, cannibalizing it as a water source. Her Water Affinity easily pulled the water free from the fruit. With hands quicker than light, Hinata had shot Guena full of water needles before the girl rolled to the side with a pained yelp. Hinata created a Shadow Clone that pressured Guena to retreat; both the originator and copy could avoid her senbon attacks.

“I can’t deny that you’re a freak of nature!” Guena crowed, flipping away, “But you won’t be able to use my own jutsu against me now…” With more hand seals, she added, “Hiden: Lush Jungle Trap!”
The growth in the room surged up and out; the plant diversity had become so tall that the green tops were level with the railing of the observation walk. Spectators began complaining again that they could not see what was going on.

Tenten tapped Neji’s back, “Keep Lee and I informed, please! This is a crazy one...”

“I will.” Neji observed with his Byakugan, aware that Hinata was also using her Kekkei Genkai to navigate the impromptu forest below. Hidden Grass, as it turned out, had plenty of jutsu in its bag of tricks.

Hinata darted around through the roots and plant matter, cutting herself out of snares as vines reached for her. She recalled the winning Grass ninja, Aota, and his subtle skill with plant jutsu as well. *This technique is built off of the last technique she used, and I am sure that it cost her a great amount of chakra. I doubt she will try to confront me directly at this point!* Hinata had zeroed-in on Guena, who believed that she was safely hidden on a tree branch behind a thicket of leaves and fruit.

Hinata positioned her Shadow Clone where Guena could see it, and then snuck the long way around carefully through the bramble and trees. She would have to create her own opportunity to ambush the Grass kunoichi and pummel her with Gentle Fist.

The clone darted around and resorted to using a *rotation* to rip off vines while simultaneously blocking thrown needles. “Oh! You’re good!” Guena called, leaping to the safety of another branch. The shadow clone made its move, racing up a tree trunk with chakra, closing the gap as it launched itself palm-first at Guena.

The Grass kunoichi substituted herself with a bushel of durian fruits. The clone’s attack squashed them apart, thorn-pricked. The foul stench of the fruits made the shadow clone gag and stagger. Guena reappeared in a flash and wrapped a vine ‘round the clone’s neck while it wretched. She pulled the lasso taught and decapitated it, pouting when smoke signaled that she had only gotten a doppelganger. “Shoot...that usually works.” Her eyes darted around wildly to spot the lurking Leaf kunoichi.

Guena held still, detected the rustle and displacement of leaves. She snapped the vine-whip down, skillfully catching Hinata’s ankle, and hopped down from the branch. The makeshift pulley system dragged Hinata into the air by her foot, and Guena landed on the ground, scoffing merrily. “ Seriously? You need to be quieter!” She laughed.

Hinata cut herself down from the snare just as Guena kicked up a broken bamboo stalk from the forest floor, catching it, and skewered the Leaf ninja through her middle. When that *shadow clone* also dispersed into smoke, Guena only had a moment of horror to realize she had played into a distraction.

She felt chakra points in her back being shut at a concerning speed, and though Guena swung her bamboo-spear to stave Hinata off, the Hyuga girl broke it into segments with two, well-timed palm strikes. Guena shrieked, staggering back through the jungle hazards she had laid, unable to protect her chakra points.

“We ninja of Konohagakure, men and women alike,” Hinata raised a glowing hand, chakra radiating from it in the shape of a lion’s head, “Do excel in Taijutsu.”

Hinata blasted Guena through a tree and to the edge of the room. The Grass kunoichi came to a rolling stop, tangled in plant matter. The jungle began to wither and die as it had required more chakra, but Guena lacked the strength to sustain the technique.
Muttering in annoyance, Shikamaru ventured into the arena to locate the combatants when he noticed the ‘jungle jutsu’ collapsing. When he did find Guena she had already come-to, battered and bruised. She quietly admitted that she could not go on, but the Grass kunoichi scowled at Hinata as she stood nearby.

“Due to Guena’s forfeiture, the winner of this match is Hinata!” Shikamaru shouted up from the nettle. The cheers intensified as the trees and leaves receded.

The victor of an earlier match, Aota, leapt down into the arena to help escort his teammate away. He congratulated her hard work while Guena complained under her breath, hobbling back to the stairs with him.

Hinata peeked at the observation area before leaving the arena, seeing her kunoichi friends celebrating boisterously. They were also nudging Neji, pestering him for his thoughts on the match. It was only natural for him to be proud of his cousin’s triumph. Hinata let nervous giggles escape her as she entered the stairwell, pulling debris off of her clothes and hair, ‘I did it. I can compete in the Final Round of the Exam!’

Hinata climbed the stairs slowly, ‘If only Naruto-kun had been able to watch this match. I know it would have made him happy…’ She wrung her hands, considering it, ‘Well…it’s a shame he is not here to compete either. Naruto would have wanted to advance with the rest of us…to feel the excitement…’

Gaara was able to watch and was hopefully enjoying himself. With that thought, it did strike Hinata as odd that Haku had not entered the Chunin Exam at all, although his new attachment to Sunagakure could have something to do with it. Had Gaara informally taken him as an assistant, in the way that Tsunade relied on Shizune? Hinata frowned. She had not seen Haku in so long. She had heard various excuses from Gaara that made her wonder what could possibly keep a social sweetheart like Haku away from his friends. ‘It’s suspicious…’ She decided. Haku should be here. Naruto, too, deserved to be here. It did not feel completely right that their voices were not mixing with the cheers of other Leaf teams.

‘I miss them so much.’ Her shoulders drooped as she climbed, ‘All I can do now is get through this exam. I have to do it for myself. I always felt confident having Naruto and my friends by my side, but now, even on my own…nothing scares me. Nothing makes me feel small anymore.’ Hinata smiled to herself, ‘I will make everyone proud this time.’

She reveled in her warm welcome back at the observation area. Her own team and Kakashi’s team surrounded her, and even Lee and Tenten joined in, all clamoring and talking over each other. Ino was drowned out in the noise when she tried to remind everyone that Hinata could probably use some fresh air, “And all of you are crowding her and sucking up oxygen!”

Neji stayed back as he typically did. There was a genuine, closed-mouth smile on his face. Hinata had spotted it before it disappeared, too fast for her to point out the rare phenomenon to her friends. Thankfully, Kurenai managed to push the mob back a little and give her third victorious student an excited side-hug.

“You did very well, Hinata. Your opponent was certainly a challenge, but you kept a level head. From what I was able to see, I was most pleased.” Kurenai estimated, “At this rate, Kakashi and Asuma’s teams should also be entirely victorious. Don’t you think?”

“I hope so!”

“You freaking attacked someone with watermelon juice!” Sato exclaimed, getting a word in.
edgewise, “I am a fan for life now.”

“It was improvised.” Hinata admitted with a squeak.

“Ugh…I think I can still smell those durian fruits…” Sakura added, fanning her face with a small frown, “I guess a stinking substitution does have some utility.”

“It would have ruined me.” Kiba and his hyper-sensitive nose concurred.

Tama returned to the walkway after being treated by the attending medic-nin in the breakroom. “I missed it!” She threw her hands up in frustration, but pulled Hinata in for a hug anyway, congratulating her, “I was sure you’d do great! It must have been exciting!”

Across the room, beneath the digital board cycling through names, Gaara spoke to his student, “There are only four matches left, Matsuri.”

She nodded anxiously, “One of them will be mine. The pool of competitors…thinned out a lot. All of these Leaf ninja are so strong.”

“They are. They’ve worked very hard to prepare for this exam.” He motioned his head towards the celebrating Leaf group, “There is a 3 in 8 chance you will be facing a Leaf opponent. 1 in 4 a Dream shinobi, or 1 in 8 either Rain or Rock.” His mouth curved into a slight smile, “But I believe you can win.”

“Oh,” Matsuri clasped her hands and replied softly, “Thank you, Sensei. I really don’t want to disappoint you.”

“No matter what happens, you won’t. You’ve improved greatly, and I am glad that you made it this far.”

The board above settled on two names and Shikamaru made his announcement, “The eleventh match will be between Togano Tetsuya and Inuzuka Kiba. Competitors please report to the arena!”

Gaara said sidelong to his student, “Make that 1 in 3 Leaf or Dream; 1 in 6 Rock. I’d prefer if you didn’t fight that Rock ninja, to be quite frank.”

“Why not?” She wondered.

“He is trouble.” Gaara said nothing more on the subject.

Kiba and Akamaru arrived on the floor below just as the Rain genin, Tetsuya, did. Compared to his inexperienced teammates, Tetsuya looked a bit wiser and more steadfast.

Kiba quirked an eyebrow at the boy, ‘He’s smiling at me. Kind of.’ Akamaru sat patiently beside his master while Kiba reflected on the uncharacteristic expression on his opponent’s face, ‘I want to say it’s because I look good. He’s digging my style…or he’s damn sure he can kick my ass.’ Kiba took his hands out of his pockets and cracked his knuckles, ‘My team is two for two. We’re gonna be three for three.’

Shikamaru looked between them and then dropped his hand, “Begin!”

Right off the bat, Tetsuya used hand seals to weave a Genjutsu. Kiba had to hand it to the first-year trainee that it was a quality illusion, complete with swamp scenery and sounds of wildlife to boot.

But he could very easily smell Tetsuya as he tried to sneak in for an ambush.
Akamaru sat calmly and scratched his ear while Kiba shut his eyes and dove at the Rain ninja, relying on his keen nose to catch the twerp. Then, Tetsuya punched him in the jaw so hard Kiba reconsidered the strategy entirely. ‘Oh! So this ain’t a pushover I’ve got here!’ He whistled for Akamaru.

In that moment of recovery, Tetsuya used a jutsu that produced a small rain cloud. The vapor puff rose up and up until it stopped at the glass ceiling, and it began to pour down into the arena, appropriately not dousing spectators.

While Tetsuya produced a few Water Clones, Kiba released the Genjutsu with a seal (as Sakura had demonstrated to him many times,) and then allowed his dog to perch on his back for a combination transformation, “Follow the original, Akamaru!”

The ninken transformed into his master’s likeness and the two spun with claw-like nails extended. Tetsuya evaded to the best of his ability as water clones were hacked and splashed apart. His resolve wavered when a chunk of the sodden sand floor was gouged up by Kiba’s Taijutsu.

That moment of uncertainty motivated the Rain genin to take more drastic action. He used ninjutsu to convert the state of two water clones that Kiba and his dog were about to shred. “Suiton: Geyser Burst!” The clones liquefied and boiled, blasting back the Leaf attackers.

The hot water was too much to take. Kiba and Akamaru shook themselves and tried to cool off, ‘Aw, kid, I’m going to pay you back for burning me…’ Two more of Tetsuya’s clones were raked apart when Kiba charged, skidding over the floor with Akamaru. Tetsuya used another water blast to shoot one of his assailants through a gap in the floor, and then he pounced.

With some unexpected gall, Tetsuya reached for his waterlogged opponent and utilized another jutsu, “Suiton: Water Prison!” An orb of water rose up with a spin and then encapsulated Kiba. With only a moment to react, he had thought to hold his breath. One last Water Clone prowled the arena while the real Tetsuya hoped to drown his captive.

Sakura and Tama were hollering for Kiba to find the weak point of the technique to exploit and escape, but Kakashi had calmly returned to his book. He had noticed Tetsuya’s mistake where his students had overlooked it.

After several seconds, the ‘Kiba’ inside the Water Prison reverted back into Akamaru. The ninken had wide and concerned puppy-dog eyes, aware that his situation was less than optimal. Luckily, Kiba had burst out of the hole in the floor that Tama had created with Blooming Lotus. The single kunai he had thrown sailed through the Water Clone’s head, dissolving it, and the knife continued on cleanly until it sunk into the center of Tetsuya’s stomach. With a wail, the boy pulled his hand free of the water orb. The prison squelched apart and Akamaru leapt away, shaking himself rigorously once again.

At that point, Kiba had closed the gap between himself and the Rain ninja. He returned Tetsuya’s punch to the face with twice the force, snapping his head to the side. As the boy toppled, Kiba felt no remorse in smashing him with one final, spinning attack.

Shikamaru had hustled to get between him and the beaten Rain ninja, asking Kiba to step back, “It’s getting to be a bit much.” He bent down to examine Tetsuya. The boy was conscious but bleeding liberally. Shikamaru had advised him not to remove the kunai from his stomach just yet, “Let a professional handle that.”

“I can go on, proctor…” Tetsuya rasped. He struggled to stand and then slipped in a puddle of rainwater.
When the Rain nin collapsed again, Shikamaru advised quietly, “Learn your own limits.”

He stood upright and announced, “The winner of this match is Kiba!” As cheering erupted Shikamaru added to Tetsuya, “Now stop this damn rain…”

The jutsu ceased per the proctor’s request, and Tetsuya was escorted away by medic-nin. A little drenched, both Kiba and Akamaru returned to the observation area to bask in praise.

“Three for three.” Kiba told his sensei with a grin.

“I know. I didn’t picture it any other way.” Kakashi was smiling under his mask, “Well done, Kiba. It was a balance of poise and violence.”

Kakashi had put away his book with the intention of watching the last three matches. Truly, it was a relief that his team had broken even with Gai’s team in terms of victories, or he would never hear the end of his rival’s pontificating. He did feel a swell of pride that his unorthodox team, with kunoichi outnumbering a male peer, was the subject of admiration for many defeated first-timers. Even Sato had made him proud, though his win had come at the expense of badly burning a Grass genin.

Fujita had an opportunity to commend his good friend, “Kiba-kun…congratulations on your match!”

“Thanks, kid!” He mussed the small Hyuga’s head, disordering his ponytail, “Are you pumped up for your match?”

“Yes! My heart hasn’t stopped racing. I’m not sure how to keep my head clear…”

“If it helps,” Kiba suggested, “Try thinking about when you saved me from the Cloud Jounin’s Kekkei Genkai, back in the Lightning Country. Remember that? It took some major balls to jump into that fight.”

Fujita’s smile widened and he subconsciously rested his hands on his hips, as Lee often did, “I do remember that.”

“Good. Stay in that mindset. You were clear and dependable that day, and I still thank God that you were there.” Kiba informed him.

The conversation was interrupted by Shikamaru’s declaration, “The next match will be between Hyuga Fujita and Sometani Matsuri.”

Kiba watched his young friend’s surprise convert into a cool expression. Fujita had the encouragement needed to think and win. ‘He can do it. Neji and Hinata blazed a path for him here, and I’ve seen what he can do. Fujita has what it takes. He’s the same age as other newbies, but they can’t hold a candle to him!’ Fujita patted Ino and Chouji’s arms before bustling down the stairwell.

Gaara’s only comment to Matsuri before she ventured down was, “Expect Taijutsu, Matsuri. Don’t forget what we reviewed two weeks ago.”

“I won’t, Sensei.” She took a few deep breaths and then walked briskly down a long stretch to the stairs.

There were muttering comments noting that three members of the Hyuga clan were competing. In a worrying trend, two of the three Hyuga shinobi had advanced to the Final Stage. Many foreign teams could only expect a similar result. The Kazekage’s student was plain and mousey-looking. Though she was well dressed in a navy wrap top beneath an armor chestplate, she was short, gangly, thin, and was certainly too young to have been in many serious battles. Fighting another Byakugan
user was going to be an uphill struggle.

Kiba felt Sakura tense beside him. He turned to her, inquiring, “Is something up?”

“I’m wondering if…” Sakura frowned and lowered her voice, “This could be an even match.”

“No way. Fujita’s got Hyuga skills and his personal tricks of the trade. I’ve seen it.” Kiba insisted, “That girl looks like buttered toast to me.”

“But Gaara trained her.” Sakura reminded her teammate, “Gaara. Trained her. Don’t tell me that we can’t expect her to have some tricks of the trade too. Assume her aspect is purely for deceit. If Gaara had taught a male student, do you think any of us might just be a little concerned?”

Kiba hesitated before he confessed, “Yes, and I hate to say I didn’t consider that angle, but…I guess I’d worry.”

“Then worry.” Sakura concluded.

Kiba did not feel so sure of the outcome after that point. Both competitors were, as Sakura had described, more formidable than they looked.

Below in the arena, Fujita looked up at Hinata and was comforted by her pep and friendly waving. Neji was nearby, composed, but also appeared supportive despite his stillness and silence.

Matsuri stood as the sole Genin representative of the Hidden Sand village, her posture straight and her countenance serene. Her nerves had coped with worse, she recalled. Becoming Gaara’s student had not been a simple matter. A cavern full of giant scorpions had not been a comfortable experience. The Shin clan had been a doozy for her as well. The Chunin Exam, while it had thrown curves and bumps at her, was not nearly as bad as Matsuri was prepared for it to be.

She faced front to stare at the small Hyuga boy. He was going to make a serious attempt to add another victory to Leaf’s cache of conquests. Matsuri suspected that this attitude in her opponent was going to make her fight more difficult, ‘He’s not going to surrender. I’ll beat him outright before he can force me to quit.’

Matsuri stole a glance at the proctor from the corner of her eye, ‘The proctor is kind of good-looking.’ Her eyes snapped forward again, ‘And my opponent’s name is Fujita. He has the Byakugan like the other Hyuga do.’ His hair looked like someone had tousled it. Fujita’s frown also looked an awful lot like the older Hyuga boy’s expression. She kept her hands at her sides, waggling her fingers in preparation to reach for her weapon, ‘I think I know exactly what to do, this time.’

Shikamaru permitted them to begin. Matsuri pulled the jouhyou from the clip on her back and let it whirl threateningly. Fujita only balked for a moment before he raised his arms in a traditional Jyukken stance, the veins at the corners of his eyes bulging.

Revved cheers of spectators resounded from the walkway above.

The boy charged and prodded at Matsuri’s defense with a Gentle Fist slap. The red flag of the rope-dart lashed down, quick as wind, and the tooth of the jouhyou smashed his chin. Fujita’s eyes watered with pain as he reached, nearly catching the rope to pull the weapon from her grasp…but Matsuri hooked the cable with her foot and swung it clockwise, snaring it ‘round Fujita’s leg. She pulled back and tripped him, and as the Hyuga genin hit the floor he hurled a volley of senbon at her.

Two needles sunk into her thigh, and the rest pinged off of her chestplate. Matsuri freed the rope before Fujita had the chance the cut it, and she spun it while pulling the needles out, ‘I won’t let him
do that again...’ But he tried to. Fujita was up in an instant and besetting her with senbon thrown in threes or fours. Matsuri spun and twirled her weapon, knocking every projectile out of the air with the metal tooth of her jouhyou.

The standoff lasted for over a minute. Fujita had nearly exhausted the senbon quivers at his hip and up his sleeves, frowning in concentration, ‘I have nine needles left before I need to collect them from the floor. She will not give me that opportunity unless I make her...and she can block them without much effort.’ It was a matter of getting in close to stab a pressure point with a needle, or attacking her chakra points with Gentle Fist. Her defense was troublesome.

Fujita charged again without a sound, his eyes brimming with his bloodline talent. When his mock-attack was met once again with the speedy spin of the jouhyou, Fujita threw himself into a rotation, “Kaiten!” The revolving shield of chakra tore the jouhyou from Matsuri’s hands and flung it across the room, tangling it wildly against the metal posts of the spectator walkway.

In the same motion, Fujita ended his rotation and charged forward, landing his first hit on her arm as she put it up to block. Matsuri screeched, frustrated, and rolled to the side when another Jyukken strike painfully grazed her side. She reached for another weapon clipped to her belt and wrenched it open, swinging it in a wide arc at Fujita as he stood two meters away. It drew blood that splattered across his face and shirt. Fujita winced and stepped back cautiously.

Matsuri’s second jouhyou was entirely metal, the tiny chain links of the cable were fortified steel, and the end she had thrown at Fujita had a small, double-edged dagger. It had cut the lobe of his ear open when she tossed it. Matsuri stood and resumed her routine, spinning and defending; the opposite end of the steel jouhyou was fixed with a tooth and red flag like the original.

In a blink, Matsuri had smashed the rope-dart’s tooth once against Fujita’s injured ear, and then a second time behind the knee. He fell, somewhat stunned, but launched himself up defiantly when Matsuri moved to attack again. Fujita used another rotation and Matsuri swung her jouhyou away, not keen on losing another weapon.

‘I can force her to back off with Kaiten...’ He threw a senbon that landed in the flesh that joined her clavicle and shoulder, ‘Shoot, I was a few millimeters off!’ In retaliation, she swung for his injured ear again. They savaged each other in attempt to wear down the opponent, attacking weak points and injuries.

Gaara watched without batting an eye, one arm folded beneath the other as he cupped his chin. He had been the one to teach Matsuri the importance of defense and breaking one’s defense. She would likely work on Fujita’s ear and knee until he slipped up or became distracted. In that singular moment of diversion, Matsuri would then use the jutsu she had been perfecting. For her part, Gaara acknowledged that she could not afford to take more than a few Gentle Fist strikes or a blow from a Rotation. Both he and his student played a patient game in battle.

Matsuri avoided Fujita as he charged time and again, flipping and leaping, directing the rope-dart’s whirl with her feet, shoulders, arms, and neck. She retreated when he dared to rotate, and counterattacked when he left himself open. Eventually, as Fujita felt his purpling, injured ear be impacted by the jouhyou’s tooth once again, he caught the rope-dart chain. He let a spike of his chakra channel through it and wham Matsuri with a Gentle Fist strike at the opposite end. She collapsed on her back, winded, and dust rose up from the floor in a puff. The chain weapon rattled to the floor as Fujita discarded it.

Up above, Neji recalled using a similar tactic long ago on Kidomaru.

Breathing heavily, Fujita made his move to pounce on the girl, eyeing the exact chakra points he
intended to shut. There were cheers and sounds of dismay from spectators.

Then, the Sand kunoichi waved her arm, and a length of beige fabric shot free from the sleeve of her tunic, snaring the Hyuga boy’s legs. With a cry, Fujita fell and slid face-down across the floor, hog-tied. Matsuri was promptly on her feet again, and retrieved her jouhyou with her free hand.

Before she could crack Fujita over the head with the rope-dart’s tooth, Fujita funneled chakra from his tenketsu in a semi-rotation. It tore off the fabric snare and simultaneously propelled him up, gouging a trench into the sand floor. He wobbled to his feet, tuning out the sounds of other shinobi watching, ‘She almost had that chance to get me! Ah, so she can use multiple types of soft weapons.’ Fujita observed her carefully with his Byakugan, spying the features on her person that he had overlooked earlier, ‘She’s concealing that throwing sash in both of her sleeves, but I thought it was only clothing before…’

Matsuri had been inspired by fighting the Shin clan’s leader a few months prior. He had aptly used a throwing sash to batter both her and Menma when they had least expected it. After consulting with her sensei, he agreed that it was worth experimenting with new ranged tools.

Fujita fluttered his eyes in confusion when Matsuri leapt up, reaching above her head with the fabric sash. It knotted itself around the rail of the spectator walkway before she climbed up gracefully, casting the sash again to snare the support beams of the ceiling. Matsuri pulled herself up, wrapping and unwrapping herself in the sash to scale higher. She had very quickly gained altitude.

Fujita took another moment to process and rethink his course of action, ‘I only have…eight senbon now…and I don’t know how to use Air Palm yet.’ He frowned to himself, ‘I will have to take the fight up there before she finds new ways to attack me!’

The Hyuga boy debated which was the best path ‘up.’ Matsuri had fixed several fabric sashes to the rafters, no longer needing them concealed in her sleeves. She had only tested the aerial routine a few weeks prior, but both Gaara and Kankuro agreed after seeing it that it was ‘an asset for the Chunin Exam.’ Matsuri wound herself down and around two cloth ropes as Fujita leapt, and he clung onto the bottom-most end of a sash.

Shikamaru rubbed his chin out of nervous habit, wondering which genin would fall and break his or her neck first. His Shadow Bind could not help much in mid-air, ‘I’m not crazy about having to catch one of these scamps…’

Holding on with her feet and legs wrapped in cloth, Matsuri’s hands were free to use her jouhyou. Fujita was curiously nimble, she had to hand him that. He had adapted and learned how to climb, albeit less effectively than Matsuri. She was only able to strike him once with a glancing blow from the rope-dart’s knife end. A breath later, he had gotten a hold of the jouhyou again and surged a Jyukken blow through it. Before it could connect, Matsuri looped the rope-dart’s chain around a hanging sash and leapt to the safety of another cloth rope. The Gentle Fist strike shredded the sash Fujita had been holding onto, and he managed to clamber to another cloth suspension.

With his Byakugan, he could see Matsuri had scaled higher, just beneath the glass of the ceiling’s windows. She had pulled a small tool scroll from her hip pouch and whipped it open, hastily summoning, ‘She has another weapon!’ Knowing she would descend with speed, Fujita tried to time his Rotation correctly. Matsuri tumbled down with a third soft weapon, much like the one before it, but the weights on each end of it were hazardous. She swung it with practiced momentum off of her shoulder and the side of her body, gravity-assisted, and let it fly as Fujita’s chakra shield whirled below.

Kiba spoke to Sakura as he watched in amazement, “She’s definitely better than I thought.”
“Agreed, but what is that?” Sakura was puzzled.

Poking in-between the two, Kakashi enlightened them, “That’s a Meteor Hammer. It’s barely legal for this exam, if Shikamaru does not disqualify her this very moment.”

When the two asked “why” in unison, Matsuri’s meteor-hammer ricocheted off of the Rotation shield, its trajectory whizzed along the cylindrical wall of the tower arena, gaining sickening speed…and crashed into Fujita on the rebound with a flash of the Sand kunoichi’s chakra.

It knocked Fujita, shield still spinning, into the tower wall. With the resulting crash, Fujita felt his head rattle as he ended his defense and avoided the spectator walkway on his way down. He could not plummet to floor nearly as fast as the two-ended hammer could. The lead-core, steel-wrapped sphere rocketed down with ferocity, catching around Fujita’s ankle. Trapped, he was pulled up again as Matsuri descended with the other end of the spinning meteor-hammer. His Jyukken strike looked like it had come from a dizzy kitten. It missed, and after Fujita hit the floor on his back, the other hammer-sphere slammed into his stomach with wall-shaking force.

Horrified gasps echoed in the room as dust and plaster settled.

Kakashi pointed out quietly to his students that maybe Shikamaru didn’t know if the terrible weapon was tournament-sanctioned or not. They would review it with the Hokage later. Kiba watched with a slack jaw as Matsuri rose up and backed away, looping the chain of the meteor-hammer around her shoulder. Shikamaru tip-toed over to the crater, worried about what was left of Fujita.

Above, Tsunade gave Gaara a peeved look from the corner of her eye. Had it become a trend for Kage to turn their female apprentices into super humans?

Shikamaru crouched down and examined the small, crumpled Hyuga. ‘Damn. It looks like he attempted to make another chakra shield when she hit him just now, so it blocked some damage…but this isn’t something he’ll stand up and walk away from.’ He patted Fujita’s cheek and the boy’s eyes blinked open, “Can you hear me?”

“…yes…sir.”

“Can you continue?”

His breath came in a wheeze, “No…sir.”

“Sorry, kid. We’ll get you out of here in just a second.” Shikamaru stood and pointed his hand to Matsuri, “The winner of this match is Matsuri!”

Some pleased cheering sounded, but many were still stupefied by the conclusion of the duel. Both Hinata and Neji had respectfully descended to check on their second-cousin. Fujita could only speak to them in fragmented sentences, expressing his hope that nothing in his chest or stomach was extensively injured.

Neji assured him, “You will live and recover. We will find you at the hospital as soon as we are finished here.”

“Thank you…Neji-sama.”

Hinata squeezed Fujita’s hand sadly before he was hauled off on a stretcher.

Not intending to instigate further discord, both Neji and Hinata avoided looking at Matsuri and returned to the next level. While they were certainly irked by the girl, she was still Gaara’s student.
On the other end of the room, Matsuri took the stairs back up as well.

Ino looked at Hinata when she returned to the observation deck. She could immediately tell by the look on her friend’s face that they would have to visit their beloved little substitute later. *Poor Fujita…in my book, he was anything but a pushover…and he was smashed.* Ino looked around at the last few contenders, *‘Two matches left. I’ve got to be in the next one or the last…it’s the two Dream ninja and the…the…’* Her eyes settled on the last Rock nin standing on the other side of the room, *‘Lee and Tenten said that guy is a psycho!’*

“Ino.” Chouji squeezed her in a one-armed hug, “Do not panic. Fujita will be okay. You’re going to be okay.”

“Everyone remaining is strong.” She muttered.

“So are you. Keep your head right, woman!” He replied in a hiss.

Shikamaru had stopped in the observation area to briefly converse with Tsunade, trying to stall in case Ino needed a moment to collect herself.

“So…” Shikamaru looked between the Hokage and the Kazekage, “Was that an official win, or did I call it incorrectly?”

“You were correct.” Gaara said flatly.

Shikamaru frowned, “Your student used a…I don’t know what it’s called. How can I confirm that it was permissible?”

“I understand your concern, Shikamaru. Let me see what the Exam framework says; a moment, please,” Tsunade paged through a laminated booklet she had kept at her side, JUST in case Danzo wanted to rain on her parade rules-wise, “Ah, Section G, acceptable weapons and tools…part two, Soft-Weapons. It’s a chain or rope dart with weights attached, also called a hammer. Legal. In fact…” Tsunade circled the tip of her finger on the page, “This here says that all legally-acquired weapons brought into battle by Genin can be used. There are maybe three or four types of exceptions, but this isn’t one of them.”

“Really?” Shikamaru bent his head to read it, astounded.

“Yes. Most anything goes, as long as it isn’t stolen or given by a teammate or third-party during a match.” Tsunade advised, “Props to the little girl for her…dexterity.”

Gaara made a sound that came out of his nostril, half-amused, half-annoyed.

“Allright. Thanks for the clarification.” Shikamaru sighed, turning around as he clicked the transponder in his pocket, *‘Please. If there is a higher power or God…don’t let Ino have a match that rough…’*

He leapt down into the arena and swallowed hard before looking up at the screen, “The next match will be between… Sasagainu Huo and Hirasaka Agehanto.” Shikamaru was overcome by instant relief. That meant the final preliminary match would be between the last kunoichi competitors of Dream and Leaf. Not everyone in the tower felt relief, though.

Tenten stood with her hands wrapped around the rail, staring without seeing. The name on the board could not be correct.

Pearls of sweat started behind her ears and the nape of her neck, rolling down her skin agonizingly
slow. There. She saw him walking tranquilly, the Rock ninja: Huo. He trotted down the stairs for his match. ‘That surname…’ She shut her eyes hard and then opened them again. The board’s readout was the same, ‘That was the clan name my parents left behind when they fled Iwagakure and came to Konoha…as refugees. The name they said I could never use.’ The pits of her arms and palms of her hands grew clammy, ‘I don’t understand why anyone would use that surname in the light of day…’

Neji softly nudged her with an elbow, tired of being ignored. Tenten swiveled her head toward him. “What are you doing?” He asked in a low voice.

“Nothing! These…last two matches are going to be intense, I think.”

“You weren’t breathing.” Neji pointed out archly.

“I just…” She exhaled, “I know that Rock ninja is out for blood. I know it more than Lee, now.”

“And how do you figure it?” Neji was minutely intrigued.

“I’ll…tell you when we get out of here.” The look in her eyes assured him that was a promise.

Below in the arena, the Dream ninja named Agehanto was as vibrantly colored as the rest of his team. His violet hood emerged from beneath a pop-collared gi. The ombré dye of the top faded from crimson into canary yellow, and Ino had snapped out of her nervous funk just enough to comment on the fashionable look. Chouji agreed with her quietly, snacking on the half-finished bag of chips.

Huo looked stark and bland standing across from his opponent. Ino recognized the clothing to be Wushu attire similar to what she had seen Lee and Neji running around in. The black fabric was offset by white piping and trim, tailored to Huo’s slim frame. ‘And that face…’ Ino observed, ‘It makes you want to cross the street to stay away from him…’

Shikamaru removed a single hand from his pocket as he stood nearby the competitors. The wary feeling in the back of his mind persisted, but he dutifully pressed on, “If you are both ready…you may begin!” He leapt to the safety of the observation area, surprised that neither Huo nor Agehanto had moved a muscle.

After the initial stare-off, which persisted for about fifteen seconds, Huo folded his arms behind his back. There was a dull expression on his face.

This small action piqued Agehanto, who spoke, “Are you trying to surrender?”

“No,” Huo assured the Dream nin, “I am relaxing.”

“Really?” Agehanto’s lip quivered, irritated, “I suggest you raise your arms now.” He held a Tiger Seal and charged his chakra. Huo did not flinch or move, not even when Agehanto began to levitate, glowing with radiant dark purple chakra.

From what spectators could discern, it seemed like an unusual telekinetic ability. Kakashi noted this to his students, no longer distracted by his book, and he figured that this was a jutsu that the Dream sensei Yomito could also use as a member of the Hirasaka clan.

Agehanto looked as though he would float clumsily with the technique, but he propelled himself with a burst of speed, tapping a foot once on the floor. The flurry of punches he unleashed on Huo’s upper body looked to be as quick as what Tama or Lee could deliver. Huo kept his arms behind his back, tilting and rocking, sedately dodging the attacks. Huo stepped backwards lightly, his face
solemn, and his nimble feet guided him away from Agehanto’s strained strikes.

From then on, Agehanto chased without a single move of retaliation or true defense from Huo. He zipped and floated low over the sand floor, crying in frustration each time he missed. The Dream ninja pulled a small carousel of knives from his back belt and let them fly, directing them with his purple-telekinesis technique. When Huo evaded the projectiles, Agehanto flipped the knives around in mid-air and redirected them with a thought, missing Huo time and again despite his lethal talent.

Agehanto’s outrage escalated when Huo casually plopped through the hole in the floor Tama had made. He had attached himself to the underside of the arena floor. Agehanto followed in a rage, still floating, and spectators were largely unaware of what occurred beyond their sight. Agehanto had used a summoning technique, made evident by the remnants of a smoke cloud rising from the floor gap. While rumbling and sounds of impact could be heard, no one save for the Hyuga participants saw a thing, that was…until a large, violet, bi-pedal creature crashed through the floor with terrible strength.

That too had missed Huo. Back on the upside of the arena again, he backed away calmly as the earth monster pursued him. Kakashi guessed sidelong to his students that the floppy-eared beast was a Nuiba, and it blundered forward towards the Rock genin. The bulky Nuiba swung its thick arms down to strike its target, and Agehanto simultaneously attacked Huo from behind.

Though he had no visual confirmation of it, Huo was able to step away from Agehanto’s kunai barrage once more. The knives stuck into the Nuiba, which squealed in response. The Dream genin had lost patience, stamping his foot as he shouted, “You’re not willing to fight me, eh? Is that it? Why’d you enter this Exam in the first place?”

Huo looked over his shoulder at his opponent. After a long silence he admitted, “I only make an effort against worthy opponents.”

“I don’t think you know worthiness when you see it!” Still hovering off of the floor, Agehanto used a jutsu to launch several arcs of his chakra across the room, “Chakra Slicers!”

The aggressive move drew clamoring from the team of Dream shinobi at the observation deck. Since his defeat at Lee’s hands, Masugama was bandaged but cheering loudly for his friend below. The kunoichi was pounding her hands on the guardrail.

The slicing attack collided directly with Huo. He had not bothered to evade, allowing the strike to stagger his stance and untidy the queue at the back of his head. Following that, Huo did side-step the slow moving Nuiba’s fist as it came careening down. At that point, Agehanto was both astonished and furious. It was not as if Huo had taken a direct attack because he could not avoid it…he had taken it merely to disrespect his opponent. Huo unfolded his arms momentarily to dust off his shirt and fiddle with the cuffs of his sleeves.

“Don’t you get it?” Agehanto warned as he floated nearby, “That jutsu sealed your chakra! You willingly let me do it; just because you’re convinced you’re better than me?”

It was as if a switch flipped. Some spectators blinked a few times, confused, unable to follow where Huo had gotten to when he started to move. Kakashi observed that it was genuine Body Flicker speed, but he didn’t need to explain to his students what they were witnessing.

Using only his feet, Huo maneuvered himself behind the Nuiba, kicked it towards Agehanto, clipped the back of the creature’s knee so that it folded, and then with footwork that forgot gravity mattered, Huo forced the beast’s arm down to pulverize its own summoner. Agehanto rolled out of the way, evading the super-fast strike by a hair, but the rebounding blow from the Nuiba’s other arm struck
him. Agehanto skipped like a pebble across the arena floor before rolling to a stop.

“It’s kind of like a great, big toy.” Huo assessed the Nuiba. Then, he lithely collapsed to the floor in a tumble, and with that momentum he used a single kick to launch the hulking beast up the tower and through the glass ceiling. As glass shards rained down, most spectators could see the Nuiba had hit the protective Sealing Barrier Dome that surrounded the tower for the Exam. It was immediately incinerated.

“Why don’t you…summon another?” Huo suggested as the Dream ninja struggled to his feet, “I’d like to do that again.”

Agehanto wiped his lower lip and pulled his disheveled hood up. “I know I did…I know my jutsu sealed all of your chakra…” He muttered.

Huo was back to straightening his shirt again.

The Dream genin charged at his opponent, levitating, with purple chakra expressed like a sickle in his hand, “Get serious you piece of-!”

Again, Huo used a single kick, but it looked like a premature move. He had only hit air, and yet, Kakashi let his Sharingan track it to watch an odd, half-transparent seal lift off of the bottom of Huo’s foot. Surely it was manifesting from Huo’s chakra, dim and difficult to spot…but the translucent, glowing character hung in empty space long enough for Agehanto to crash into it.

It looked as if the Dream genin had smashed his face into a shield. His own levitation power slipped him up, and with zero traction against the floor Agehanto fell backwards, the back of his head impacting the sandy ground once. He had nearly blacked out, hovering inches off of the floor with a bloody nose.

“You would pay dearly if I fought you seriously.” Huo counseled, slowly lowering the kicking pose he had held, “I do not need to use my chakra to defeat you. This is the time for you to give up.”

‘That hardly makes sense.’ Kakashi reflected on the Rock genin’s warning. He thought he had watched Huo leave a physical seal in the air that could block an opponent. But if that was actually what it had been, it would have required chakra to use, ‘And that’s beside the fact that sealing of that level is not something Genin, Chunin, or even most Jounin can do…’ Only Jiraiya came to mind, off the top of his head. ‘So then,’ Kakashi deduced, ‘That was something else. Not purely physical, but...a different kind of technique.’

The stubborn Dream ninja rose to his feet again, preparing his next course of action, “There’s just...something wrong with you. Something missing. I don’t plan on surrendering to an empty shell like you.”

Kakashi thought three things when Agehanto spoke his last words. 1) If he had been the proctor, Kakashi’s instincts were telling him to jump in and interrupt the match right that second. 2) Huo already knew the Dream ninja was too angry and insulted to surrender to a condescending adversary. 3) Huo would use Agehanto’s words to justify what he was inevitably going to do next.

With the same unknowable speed, Huo had worked his way around Agehanto. His kicks had that same, strange property that Kakashi could not recognize, not even from all of his many years of experience. Maybe the brute strength and discipline reminded him of Lee and Gai, Kakashi supposed. Perhaps his speed and poise resembled that of the well-trained Genin of Leaf that were assembled, but Huo’s form was so utterly unique in its fluidity and exactitude… ‘That’s not Taijutsu or Ninjutsu, to my knowledge. More importantly...I don’t know if that is a Genin.’
Without using his hands, Huo had again turned one of Agehanto’s techniques against him, taking advantage of the Dream nin’s levitation to kick him around in a friction-less state. The single time that Agehanto had crashed against a wall, Kakashi estimated that it shook the tower down to its foundation. After that, Huo kept him in the air and treated him like a colorful footbag.

Soaring up into the height of the chamber towards the ceiling, Agehanto’s teammates could see for a fleeting moment as he was kicked past the rails. On his face: distress, humiliation, tired anger, and the absence of pain because his feeling had gone. It was too much for the team of Dream shinobi to allow the cruelty to continue. Masugama reached out his hand as his friend whizzed by in the air. He felt the fabric of Agehanto’s shirt against his fingertip, and then suddenly Huo had kicked the Dream genin to the apex of the tower. Their sensei, Yomito, leapt into action a fraction of a moment too late.

Huo descended after kicking Agehanto down, and when the Dream nin hit the floor of the arena, his head and neck were level with the edge of a floor gap. Huo landed on Agehanto’s back with a soft crack, and then stepped away lightly. It was definitively over in that moment, Kakashi felt.

Huo had wisely put distance between himself and the jounin Yomito, who was grimly fuming when he hurried across the floor to his fallen nephew. Shikamaru called a time out as he entered the ring as well.

The proctor and jounin kneeled on either side of the unresponsive genin. Agehanto was still face-down on the floor and, upon Shikamaru’s inspection, had a neck injury that did not look as simple as fractured vertebrae. “Don’t move him.” Shikamaru suggested to Yomito, “I’ll get the medics over here.”

“Quickly.” The man advised.

Shikamaru returned with two medic-nin who ushered Yomito away from the boy’s side. While their examination commenced, Shikamaru had some foresight on the matter, ‘I don’t know if I can call the match yet. If this Dream genin dies here in the ring, it’ll immediately disqualify Huo.’ He snuck a look at the Rock genin on the far side of the arena, ‘And that’d probably be a blessing.’

“Nara-san,” The female, uniformed medic-nin gave her assessment, “My partner, Ryuta, can stabilize this child’s vitals for now. Unfortunately, he needs emergency surgery to survive this trauma. I may even need Tsunade-sama’s guidance on how to approach the procedure.”

“The Hokage?” Yomito was alarmed by the necessity of Tsunade’s expertise, “What’s happened to Agehanto?”

On the floor, Ryuta had his hands carefully positioned on the Dream genin, “This is classified as an internal decapitation. There is substantial ligature detachment and spinal detachment from the skull base. An uncommon but severe shinobi injury, all things considered.”

‘Savage.’ Shikamaru thought to himself, “But he’ll live?”

“It’s uncertain.” The woman medic replied, “If surgery goes well he can live, although with major functional issues. We shouldn’t waste time.” She and Ryuta proceeded to cautiously replace Agehanto on a specialized stretcher. Both of Agehanto’s teammates had descended to demand answers and see their friend off with great concern.

Shikamaru placed a hand on Yomito’s arm as he turned to stare at Huo, “Please don’t. At least not here. What he did was intentional, I’ll give you that, but all Genin are protected by their Exam contracts.”
“Not him.” Yomito asserted, “Killing is against the rules.”

“Huo did not kill your student.” Shikamaru pointed out, “I’m sorry. I can’t allow you to approach a Genin during this stage of the exam.” He lowered his voice and whispered from the corner of his mouth, “Wait until he’s alone in a dark alley when all of this is over. I can’t begrudge you anything out in the contract-less world.”

“Well spoken, Nara-san. You have more understanding about this than I would expect from a proctor.” After that, Yomito had to extricate Masugama from the arena before he could get violent and attack Huo. The kunoichi of the Dream team, Eifa, wept quietly and stayed to the side of the ring. Her match, inevitably, was the last match of the preliminary rounds.

Tsunade descended to have a word with the two medic-nins before they hurried off with the incapacitated genin. She passed Yomito and Masugama as they wrestled, both undoubtedly struggling to obey the rules.

Tsunade paused for a moment and gave a critical look to the pink-clad, wolfish boy, “You. That’s enough. Your sensei has an excess of anguish to deal with right now. Return to the observation area immediately or escort your teammate to the hospital. Since you aren’t required to stay here after losing a match, the choice is yours.”

Masugama stilled and his sensei was finally able to release him. The boy rested his conflicted gaze on the Hokage, “Hokage-sama…that Rock nin tried-”

“I know what he tried to do. I know what he didn’t do, and I know the rules. Listen to what I am telling you.”

“Yes ma’am,” He was compelled to acknowledge her, “I’ll stay with Agehanto.” Masugama gave one last parting look to both Yomito and Eifa. He hustled into the downward staircase.

Tsunade regarded Yomito, “Give some encouraging words to your student over there. She’s going to need them for her match.”

It seemed that the Dream jounin already had that in mind. He swiftly went to the girl’s side and braced her shoulder as she began to tremble terribly.

Shikamaru cleared his throat softly from beside the Hokage, “Ma’am…”

She huddled in with Shikamaru and conversed with him so that no other occupant of the tower could hear, “That was a fiasco. Any of the Jounin here should have been able to intervene and stop that blow.”

“He was too fast. One of the fastest goddamn living things I have ever seen.” Shikamaru assessed quietly.

“Huo’s offense does not constitute disqualification; all the same…pushing a boundary like that makes me want to wring his neck.” The Hokage admitted, “That boy, Agehanto, is not going to survive. Whether he expires on his own in a few minutes or languishes over the next few days…that injury was too severe. Those medics gave an optimistic assessment with which I did not agree.”

“Couldn’t you have-?”

“I wouldn’t have saved him with my healing.” Tsunade’s tone was frigid, “If you count being able to breathe without moving, seeing, sensing, feeding or caring for oneself for the rest of one’s days…that isn’t a life. To live through that kind of injury…it would have to be the least serious occipital
dislocation it could possibly be. His was not that.”

“I understand. So…should I declare Huo the winner?” Shikamaru whispered.

“If it were a matter of personal opinion and not the rules, I would ask you not to. However, this match was undeniably won.” Tsunade excused herself to return to the upper level.

While hardly even looking at the Rock genin who was waiting, Shikamaru gestured towards Huo and announced, “Huo is the winner of this match.”

A mortifying silence hung in the room. Unabashed, Huo cleared out of the arena and Shikamaru turned about to take a few cleansing breaths. ‘Easy does it. Proctors keep a level head during official Exam matches. I can’t screw up now just because I am sick to my stomach. There’s only one match left…” For consistency’s sake, Shikamaru let the board select the two names of the final match’s participants: Amagiri Eifa and Yamanaka Ino.

By then, Yomito had emboldened his student as best he could before he was forced to return to the observation rail. The Dream kunoichi stood silently in her colorful armor in the middle of the arena. Glass from the ceiling’s shattered windows was scattered about the floor. She stared into a broken piece near her boot and mused at her own reflection, lost and tormented.

Ino had also absorbed the traumatized reactions of her Leaf peers before she went to the stairwell. When the final blow had been struck on Agehanto earlier, Ino noted the reactions of her friends.

Sakura and Tama had looked away, leaning into each other as they stood side-by-side. Hinata had covered her face with both hands as if to prevent a shriek. Many of the young men of her group watched with gaping mouths, disapproving of what had been done. Lee had covered his mouth with a closed fist as he watched with a furious frown. Ino wondered if Huo’s style and chakra-less fighting had bothered Lee simply on principal, apart from Huo’s brutalizing of another competitor.

‘Tenten had a weird reaction too.’ Ino recalled as she slowly took the steps down, ‘She was fidgeting. It looked as if she wanted to fight. Or flee. She wanted to do something…at least that’s what I thought.’ Eventually, Tenten had also squeezed her eyes shut. It was hard to willingly watch a tragedy unfold, and then see it go unpunished by the Exam proctor and the Hokage. ‘We all knew that guy wanted to kill other participants, he said it himself! While it wasn’t an idle threat, he stopped just short of murder so he could continue to compete.’ Ino exhaled harshly, ‘What’s going to stop him from doing that again? Most of my friends are competing in the Final Rounds!’

Before she had completely snapped out of her thoughts, Ino found herself standing in the arena across from the Dream kunoichi. Close by, Shikamaru gave a very serious look to his teammate-turned-lover. Ino knew what that look meant.

‘Get it over with and don’t feel sorry about what I have to do!’

Yet still, it was difficult to not sympathize with Eifa as she stood like a small tree trying to weather the storm. Her posture was poor, her eyes swollen from crying, lips still quivering… Someone she cared for had been disrespected and robbed of his life. The image of it was trapped in her brain and demoralized her. Knowing that, Ino could not be more certain that capturing Eifa’s consciousness would ensure victory.

“Begin!” And Shikamaru leapt away.

Few spectators were still invested in watching, although those that did could not at first tell which kunoichi would come out ahead. A small spark remained in Eifa, and she used what anger and
frustration she could to hurl and direct a fuuma shuriken with wire. Ino’s easy ballet of acrobatics made Eifa’s use of weaponry look amateur. The Dream kunoichi’s patience wore thin as Ino capably evaded her attacks, countering only with kunai. One projectile nearly succeeded in taking Eifa’s eye out, but she tipped her head to deflect the knife with her helmet.

When Ino charged with unexpected speed, Eifa freed her hands to use a jutsu, and spat out a jet of poison mist. The Leaf kunoichi stumbled in the violet fog and then collapsed. After a moment of confusion, Eifa was disappointed that she had only stumped a clone with the technique. Before she could pull back on the wire for her giant shuriken, Ino had gotten behind her and used an upward kick to knock the samurai-like helmet off of Eifa’s head. The Dream nin overreacted with poison again and missed, exhaling a plume in the wrong direction. Ino’s follow-up kick spiked the helmet down and cracked it over Eifa’s head.

Hissing sounds of sympathetic pain sounded from those watching at the rails. Eifa staggered, seeing triple, and reeled in her flying fuuma shuriken just in time to ward Ino off and avoid close-quarters combat. When her vision returned to normal, she spied a corsage of flowers at her feet, ‘What the-?’ For some reason, the small bundle of flowers had a lit fuse.

The flower bomb went off and sent Eifa flying across the arena. The kunoichi’s armor buffered the blow as she hit the floor and rolled, and her giant shuriken was snapped loose. Coincidentally, the fuuma shuriken sailed straight for Ino by pure chance, but she swiveled her body to let it pass harmlessly by. ‘Phew! That was close!’ She prepared her clan’s staple hand seal.

Eifa had to take a moment to get her bearings again, letting a sob of frustration escape her. She was not fighting like her normal self. She was quicker and more precise than this sorry display she was giving in her match, ‘I just can’t stop thinking about Agehanto-kun…’ Suddenly, her thoughts and lament over her teammate felt compressed, slipping to the edge of her consciousness. Then it went dark.

‘Oh man, is it sad in here…’ Ino observed her adversary’s mind, ‘She’s so upset. She’s known that boy since they were small kids…’ While in control of Eifa’s body, she stood upright and dusted off, ‘I’m sorry that this happened to you and your team. But please try to think: that could have been you or me in that fight. Neither of us would have been spared unless we surrendered, and I’m not even sure of that…’

Eifa, with Ino’s persuasion, raised her hand and looked directly at the proctor, “I forfeit the match.”

“I had a feeling you would.” Shikamaru muttered as he descended back to the arena, and then nodded, “Alright. The winner of this match is Ino!”

He pointed towards Ino as she had only just returned to her body, rising to her feet and reordering herself. When Eifa came around, she made muddled sounds of protest to accepting the outcome as she looked around. No one on her team had been successful. Only the Leaf cohorts were cheering, and she considered that they would not stay very happy when they later would be pitted against each other.

Eifa confirmed with Shikamaru that she was no longer required to stay in the tower.

“If you and your sensei want to go the hospital and be with your teammates, you can.” Shikamaru assured her. Without a moment to lose, both Eifa and Yomito exited the top of the tower without looking back. Their first-in-decades participation in a foreign Chunin Exam had been, in Masugama’s words, an unrepeatable clusterfuck. Shikamaru knew that it had been unfair experience for them, as truly strong and respectful competitors, ‘I wouldn’t be surprised if we caught flack for this from Yumegakure…’
Before Ino could go to the stairs, Shikamaru halted her, “Stay here for now. All victors need to get down here anyway for the lot drawing.”

“Hm. You calling me a victor has a nice ring to it.” Ino agreed.

An infatuated smile nearly overtook him before Shikamaru shook his head and made the next announcement.

“Eh-hem! This concludes the preliminary matches of the Third Stage. All victors please report to the arena floor now for further instructions!” He added thoughtfully, “Jounin may also report to the floor with their students. Those of you who did not advance may report to Stairwell B and meet with the assistant who will escort you. You can wait at the observation level to join your teams after the last directions are given and then leave together.”

Unsuccessful Genin filed off to the designated stairwell, some of whom stayed to wait for the victorious members of their team still waiting on instructions for the Final Stage.

It took a few minutes to congregate below, Genin and Jounin alike assembled in rows facing the proctor. Tsunade and Gaara loitered to the side (Matsuri standing anxiously beside her sensei) appearing adequately worn out and both in need of naps. The large digital board on the wall was now displaying brackets for a tournament, beginning with seven initial matches. Shikamaru glanced around at the antsy Genin who eyed the board up above, and he controlled the screen with the remote in his pocket.

“It goes without saying that you can all expect to compete with each other in the Final Stage of the Exam. First off, let me explain how it’s set up.” He orated as a graphic and Exam images flashed on the board, “In past years, Final Rounds are structured to be one-on-one knockout matches that facilitate winners to proceed to the next match. There are usually only a handful of competitors, though. This year we have a high volume of participants, which was anticipated.”

Shikamaru stole a look at Tsunade before he continued, “This Exam’s final round Tournament will be held in the sports stadium for an estimated 9,000 spectators. You heard that correctly. Your performance and skill will no longer be privately witnessed from this point on, as it is traditional for Genin with great ability to enjoy the limelight briefly and represent their villages. The Tournament will narrow down victors of matches until there is one champion. That champion will publically be named a Chunin in front of stadium attendees by our very own Hokage.”

Tsunade waved half-heartedly from her position, trying to keep focused. She was starting to daydream about locking herself in an office for some undisturbed rest.

“Please note that winning your match is not a condition of being promoted to Chunin rank. Evaluators and the watching Kage will score your aptitudes and judgement, win or lose, to determine your promotion eligibility. The utmost propriety and discretion is required for this stage, as the Tournament is a tourist attraction that will feature…complex betting on competing Genin…and their projected odds for advancement.” Shikamaru nearly bumbled over the words as he read them from a flashcard Tsunade had given him.

‘It's a sure thing that Tsunade will be placing her bets at this thing…if she had to emphasize that feature…’ He mentally grumbled, stuffing the card back in his pocket.

“The same rules are in effect. No outside interference or killing is permitted. Your binding contracts and waiver for the Exam is also valid up until the Exam’s conclusion. There will be a mandatory one-month period of preparation before the Final Round matches commence, ensuring that you are all given time to recover and train as you see fit.” Shikamaru held up an opaque, hemp sack, “You
will all draw a single number from this bag to randomly determine who your opponent will be in the initial round. Your names will populate on the board above to give you an idea of how the Tournament will begin, and what you can expect.”

With that, Shikamaru approached the Genin who had formed a line and made his way past with the lot-drawing bag. As ninja selected their numbers, Shikamaru controlled the screen on the wall to build brackets.

Most everyone gathered glanced up and down again to see who had been pitted against whom. Shikamaru covered a few more minor rules of the Tournament, such as the prohibition of rigging matches for betting profits and the like. He also glazed over the updated security detail that could easily detect and snuff out threats, preventing an invasion like the one that had occurred at the previous exam.

Shino was the last to choose a ball from the bag, but by then his place was secure in the brackets as everyone had plastered their attention to the completed chart. Shikamaru looked over it as well, ‘Let’s see, how did this pan out? Huh! Sakura and Ino are 1 and 2. Looks like a long-lost wish of theirs was granted for Match 1. Heh! Match 2 looks like that Grass fellow, Aota versus Tenten. Match 3…will be Tama against that Rock nin, Huo.’ Shikamaru frowned deeply at the prospect, ‘That’s…as troublesome as it gets. Match 4 will be Shino versus Kiba, and Match 5 will be Neji…fighting Sato.’ Again, he restrained any commentary, ‘Match 6 is Hinata versus Chouji, oh man…I don’t feel good about that either. And Match number 7 is between Lee and Gaara’s student, Matsuri.’

As Shikamaru looked over the Genin who were considering the board, he could plainly see some of them were flabbergasted by the outcomes.

He made his last announcement, “Please note who your first Tournament opponent is and prepare accordingly. Based on the matches you watched today, you should have enough information to work on the skills that will best serve you in the Final Round.” Shikamaru looked over to Tsunade, “Are there any closing remarks from the Hokage?”

“Yes.” With her arms folded, Tsunade cocked her head at the trainees, “Respect your opponents, and respect this Exam. Certain behaviors…are unbecoming of honorable ninja. Certain behaviors are unacceptable of Chunin. Oh, and also, get plenty of rest. That’s what I’ll be doing. You few non-Leaf-shinobi who may be looking for accommodations during your one month stay here, you’ll be happy to know that there are a few hotels with discounted rates for you and your teams. Meet Shizune at the exit if you’d like to inquire about that.” The woman turned on her heel, “Now let’s all be on our way. The clean-up crew has a hell of a job to do in here…”

By early evening that day, the effects of the Exam were still rattling the Leaf genin. All were unwashed, hungry, dirty-clothed, sleep-deprived, and tremendously anxious about what was to come.

Based on the conversations they’d had on their way out of exit tunnels, Hinata figured that the first thing on everyone’s mind was a bath. Ino was loudly inviting all kunoichi, including Matsuri, to an onsen where they could clean up and decompress. Many had accepted the invitation with tired groans, including Tsunade. Shizune impatiently sniped in the woman’s ear, reminding her that a mountain of work was waiting at the office. She shepherded the Hokage away dutifully.

The idea was fostered by Sato and Shikamaru (who was at that point free from his proctor duties) and they gathered up their brothers-in-arms who were also stinking and wishing to relax. Gaara’s ears perked up at the offer. It had been a long while since he had spent time with his friends.
“May I accompany you?” And no sooner had he spoken the words, he was hauled off by the by the Leaf Bro regiment. Of course, most would make stops at home to pick up fresh clothes and then proceed to the nearest ryokan.

Just as her friends had, Hinata had retrieved clothes to change into and then met them at the check-in desk of the Konoha Hot Springs. She had to laugh softly as Sakura animatedly introduced Matsuri to the group, keeping an arm wrapped around the girl’s shoulder, “Matsuri! Let me introduce you to the girls! This is Ino, my good friend. She’s a pig-”

“Sakura, if you want to have our Final Round match here, we can start it here-!”

Sakura went on, ignoring the threat, “This pretty lady is Tama, my teammate.” Tama greeted Matsuri with a customary, How do you do? “Here is Tenten, our big sister/weapons master. She looks about ready for a bath.”

“I was born ready.” Tenten assured them, aching all over, “Hi Matsuri. I felt bad about Fujita’s match since I’ve tutored him in the past…but I can’t deny that you impressed the pants off of me.”

“Thank you.” Matsuri squeaked, “Gaara-sensei wanted me to do my best.”

“If it’s Gaara’s standard of best, of course it’ll hurt.” Tenten imagined.

Sakura steered Matsuri towards Hinata as they were nearly done with the check-in, “And this is Hinata, another very good friend of mine.”

“Ah, it’s nice to meet you.” Hinata gave a slight bow and tried to deter the small girl’s shyness, “Your match was very exciting, Matsuri. I’m glad that you get to enjoy the hot spring with us.”

“Me too…I’ve never been to one before.” Matsuri admitted, “I’ve swam in the ocean a few times…but we don’t have many water activities in the desert.”

“Then let’s get you set up.” Ino encouraged, leading her around the bend towards the women’s lockers, “Once you try this you’ll keep coming back!”

They stored their clothes and belongings in coin lockers, and then proceeded to a line of spigots in the ladies shower area. The group of Leaf kunoichi hardly acknowledged their nudity around each other. Matsuri was mystified by their casual attitudes, and followed behind the older girls to the stools stationed in front of taps. She took a seat and was glad they were wrapped up in their own conversations for the time being. She had contorted herself to be less visible and fumbled around with soap bottles.

Matsuri timidly scrubbed herself as she sat on a stool, ‘I’ve never bathed in public! I feels embarrassing…’ She kept her eyes averted as she soaped up, ‘They’ve been friends for years and probably do this all of the time...and these girls are more mature than me.’ She glanced down at her mosquito-bite chest, ‘I need to make a wish at a shrine...soon. It’s like my boobs refuse to grow no matter what I try!’

Sakura was seated beside her cleaning up. She spoke sidelong to Matsuri, “Are you still feeling shy?”

“A little. I don’t know if there even is a communal bath in Suna, and if so I’ve never been to one.”

Matsuri tried shielding herself with a rinsing bucket, “It’s easy to keep to myself back at home.”

“It’s always awkward the first time you come to a place like this. Imagine: On my first visit I was forced to go to a public bath with my mom. I was nine or ten. I thought I would go insane…” Sakura
was taking time to lather and rinse her hair, “Even now I still get embarrassed, but that’s usually because Ino delights in making fun of my chest size.” Sakura sighed, “Bit by bit I am learning to let go of that insecurity, but this place always reminds me…”

Matsuri patted her chest sadly as she considered the tale, “I guess…that makes two of us.”

“I wish I had your problems.” Tenten commented from the next seat down, “I bind my chest every day so I can train and fight to my team’s standards. Whenever I tried not to, mine would get in the way. I learned my lesson. It’s a shame they aren’t large or beautiful or worth showing off. They’re just annoying.”

“The struggle is real.” Tama agreed, further down the line.

“Well they say the grass is always greener…” Sakura sighed.

At the far left, Ino piped up, “Has anyone seen how green Hinata’s grass is?”

A round of playful laughter erupted while Hinata crossed her arms, peeved, “Why do you have to say something like that every time I come here?” Her face was beet red. She was hurriedly concluding her shower routine.

“Because we envy you, and also…admire you, Hinata. Some people have all of the luck.” Ino explained, “When I rip on you it’s perfectly okay to mock me back. I’ve seen store mannequins better endowed than me.”

“Then next time I will call you a mini mannequin.” Hinata decided. Her smile was too naively innocent to be truly sly.

Proud of her docile friend’s jibe, Ino pressed a finger to her own arm and made a hissing sizzle sound.

“You set yourself up for that one, Pig.” Sakura crowed. In relation, Ino hurled a soggy washcloth that landed squarely on the pinkette’s face. It clung comically.

Ino stood and motioned for Matsuri to follow, “If you’re all clean let’s get you to the hot spring, new girl. You’re gonna love it.” The same washcloth was thrown at the back of Ino’s head, contacting with a wop and then it slid off. Ino tossed it into a laundry bin, “You too, Forehead Woman. You wash slower than a grandma!”

In due time, they had all rinsed off and ventured to the women-only hot spring. Tenten was the last one in, assuring Sakura that, “If anyone goes at grandma-speed, it’s me. I’m beat.”

“You did have a difficult fight today.” Sakura acknowledged, “Do you want me to look over your injuries again?”

“Nope, just give me a spot.” Tenten entered the steaming water faster than what her friends could tolerate, who were still slowly acclimating, “Mmm. If I had to choose the way I had to die, I’d pick boiling. I love it here.”

“Tenten, I swear…sometimes I wonder if a crazy old person was trapped in a young woman’s body when I hear you speak.” Ino proclaimed, “Do you remember who’s Obaa you were?”

“I would tell you a Your Mama joke to retort, but Sato tells those too much. It’s annoying.”

“Yeah, thanks for not doing that.” Ino relented.
“For the record, I don’t remember if I am a trapped old person, but my dad used to believe I was a reincarnation.” Tenten scoffed as she leaned on the side of the stone pool, “Pft. He was the crazy one. The only genre of story he subscribed to was bananas.”

“Reincarnation?” Hinata was intrigued, “Why did he think that?”

“It’s a long story.” Tenten hoped to dismiss it, “No, really. It is a story. Neji’s reading that book right now.”

“Oh! Maybe your father thought that you took after a character!” Hinata smiled at the idea, “It’s sentimental.”

“Maybe.” Tenten rested her head on her folded arms and relaxed.

Deciding that Tenten’s position looked comfortable, Matsuri mimicked it and kept listening to the women’s banter.

“Well…if your dad was right and you have a past life, maybe you do have grandkids running around somewhere.” Sakura had folded her modesty towel and balanced it on her head.

“I don’t even like children.” Tenten announced, “If they’re around somewhere, I’m not really dying to meet them.”

“You wouldn’t even know if you were talking to them this very moment.” Tama joked, “Maybe they aren’t so bad?”

“Ahh, well…I guess they wouldn’t be…”

Ino shuddered at the idea, “Thinking of you being my grandma made me think about becoming a grandma someday.”

“I’d personally be okay with it, so long as I could keep up my shinobi career.” Sakura speculated.

“It’s good to stay ambitious like that, Sakura-chan. That’s how I feel too.” Tama agreed, “Tsunade-sama is still working hard at her age.”

Sakura’s face paled at the idea, “You…are so lucky Shishou did not hear that.”

“Hokage-sama is still young. We have elders in my clan who are nearly one hundred years old…and I still see them use the training yard sometimes.” Hinata elucidated, “Even the grandmas.”

“Huh.” Tama and Sakura took that as food for thought.

“That’s because the Hyuga clan are too proud to quit.” Ino considered, “In my clan, the most stressful things my elders partake in are drinking games.”

“Hah!” Tama and Sakura took that as food for thought.

“How about you, Matsuri? Do you have family that work and play up until that age?” Sakura wondered, hoping to coax her into conversation.

“Well…” She fiddled with the towel at the edge of the pool, “Maybe at one time, I did…” Matsuri swallowed hard before adding, “I don’t have any family, really. Most of them left Sunagakure a long time ago, and some died in the last war. My mom and dad were killed when I was young.”

The dip of silence was ended at the next beat, in which Matsuri clarified, “But it feels like…Temari,
Kankuro, and Gaara-sensei made me their little sister. They’re kind of like my family now.”

“Ah! I see.” Sakura grasped her meaning.

“When I think of them, I know that all of them work too much. Especially Sensei; he falls asleep at his desk all of the time, like a grandpa.” Matsuri giggled as she went on, “Oh! And you know, Temari-sama and Kankuro-sama play this game with a ball and cups of beer. They get so competitive some nights…”

“I played that once at my older cousin’s house.” Tama chimed in merrily.

“Do they get Gaara to join in?” Sakura asked, brows raised.

“No, he prefers sleeping.”

Ino snickered as she wetted down her arms in the hot spring, “I guess there are plenty of people who have the spirit of a senior citizen locked inside them…”

“Hey, mini-pig-mannequin, or whatever we’re calling you now,” Tenten responded over her shoulder, “You’re hurting my grandma feelings.”

On the opposite side of the partition, the menfolk of the Leaf Rookies had also washed up and entered the hot spring.

“I bet they’re talking about us.” Sato insisted.

Shino begged to differ, “Unlikely. There is plenty of other subject matter to cover.”

The other young men were edging into the spring carefully as Sato and his best friend debated the possibility of the kunoichi worrying about what was “on the other side of the wall.”

After sliding guardedly into the hot water, Gaara resembled the mercury in a thermometer. His skin turned lobster red from bottom to top. He said nothing as he folded his arms across his chest and shut his eyes, trying to stay nonchalant. Being a desert dweller with fair skin made a dip in an onsen uncomfortable, at least initially.

Shino was to his immediate left in the spring. Sato hovered near them in the open water while most of the bro squad had lined up with their backs against the edge of the pool. To Gaara’s right he saw Neji (his long hair clipped on top of his head,) Lee, Chouji, Shikamaru, and Kiba (Akamaru had been left at home.) Dead ahead was the wooden wall that divided the men and women’s baths. Gaara imagined that by now, had he been present, Naruto would have already been teasing others about stealing a peek. ‘Sato would join in on that…’ He thought, imagining Haku castigating the immature idea. ‘This seems somewhat incomplete without Naruto or Haku being here.’

“I needed this.” Shikamaru confessed aloud, “Those matches took a lot out of me…”

“Considering that you didn’t have to fight in one.” Kiba snickered.

“Shika did have to rescue a couple of people, and run around…” Chouji observed, “We only had a single fight and then we were allowed to relax.”

“Well, by the end it was tough to unwind.” Kiba noted, “That Rock guy is a freak. He didn’t even have to use his hands to win his match.”

“Please do not call that a victory.” Lee advised, “It was cruel! He should have been disqualified.”
Shikamaru caught Lee’s eye and recognized his opinion, “I know, Lee. I tried to weigh in on it, but Tsunade said he didn’t break a rule. And vague intent just isn’t enough to go on to expel someone from the Exam. Then it’d be possible to misconstrue accidents with intentional, mortal injuries.” He added, “Which could be a problem with all of you knuckleheads, later.”

“We would never go that far.” Lee protested, still disturbed by the heartless, Wushu-styled beat down Huo had wrought on the Dream genin.

A silence hung as they all considered it. Huo was a problem, and Shikamaru was likely waiting for him to legitimately incriminate himself at the Tournament.

“Phew, we need to lighten the mood here. We’re supposed to be relaxing.” Sato reminded his friends, “I mean, check Gaara-kun out. His skin and his hair match.”

“For now.” Gaara acknowledged.

“Quit while you’re ahead, you can’t tease the Kazekage.” Kiba warned, “Besides, he’s already ghosting up again.”

“Just so you know that wasn’t very respectful either.” Chouji informed Kiba.

Gaara merely shrugged it off, “It’s true. I haven’t been to an onsen in a very long time.”

“Yes, I remember a few years ago when Neji also flushed bright red in hot water.” Lee nodded his head thoughtfully, “Not so much now, however alcohol has a similar effect.”

“I suggest not discussing those topics.” Neji recommended calmly. His eyes were shut and he had propped his arms up on the ledge of the pool.

Since Gaara was off-limits, Sato could not help but to poke fun at his soon-to-be Final Round adversary, “If we’re not going to discuss that sort of stuff, Neji, then maybe you’d care to explain what I saw you do in the shower room?”

Immediately, Sato had everyone’s undivided attention. Kiba, Shikamaru, and Chouji shared this is gonna be good expressions while Lee tried to silently implore Sato to reconsider his course of action. Gaara stood by in silent fascination as Shino, behind his glasses, did nothing to avert the impending crisis.

Eyes still shut, but slightly irked, Neji tried not to take the bait, “To what are you referring?”

“Well…just that you stayed behind after we had all finished cleaning up, so I thought I’d go back to fetch you…” Sato wore an unrestrained smirk, “But there was no mistaking you using the Byakugan!”

Raucous splashing and indignant yelling erupted. Lee was shouting at the top of his lungs declaring the falsity of the accusation. Kiba howled with laughter while Shikamaru tried to talk over people to extract the truth from the hubbub. Even Gaara was stymied, and turned to the Hyuga heir beside him to quietly ask, “Did you?”

Sato had his hands on his hips, staring as intently as a prosecutor. The noise died down as they waited for a reply. Instead, Neji said nothing. He leveled an even glare with the Hatake.

Lee started shouting again. It was false. Untrue! So unlike Neji and his unshakeable honor. Sato was compelled to shout back with a finger pointed at Neji, “I’m not lying, Lee! This is not something I’d joke about! This sumbitch is guilty!”
Shino concurred as he wiped his glasses dry with a towel, “I can attest that Sato is not lying, in this instance.”

Lee’s head snapped toward Neji, his face devastated, “You did not.”

The prideful look on Neji’s face was adopting a hint of compunction, merely over the fact that Sato was a human broadcasting system for all things that need not be said. “Perhaps you all want to be reassured about…what I was looking at?”

The din of calamitous shouting that followed Neji’s admission had alarmed the women on the other side of the partition. Even Gaara had to scold him, in a normal volume of voice, expecting more of Neji. Shikamaru was also quite displeased that Ino may have been peeped upon. In contrast to others, Kiba was congratulating Neji on using his bloodline talent the way they all wished they could. Lee was on the verge of tears, having never been so deeply disappointed by Neji after developing new, very high esteem for his good friend. Shino advised that they lower their voices before an attendant threw them out.

Sato and Kiba had started a smaller, argument within an argument about the moral correctness of Neji’s actions. Eventually, Shikamaru managed to get them all to shut up. He looked pointedly at Neji, “What’s with you? You’d never do something like that.”

“I never have frivolously.”

“The hell does that mean-?” Shikamaru nearly scraped his teeth together.

“I had no designs to observe all of our colleagues in the women’s bath. They weren’t there.” Neji pointed out, “They reached the onsen before any of us did, if you had been listening to them converse on the opposite side.”

“That I did catch.” Shikamaru was slightly relieved, “But even when you knew that their washroom was unoccupied, what were you looking for?”

He answered with silence again. Gosh, was it uncomfortable to talk about these things. Tenten had been the last one to exit on the women’s side. The beautiful sight would forever be burned into his retina.

“It stands to reason…” Shino deduced, “That one person stayed behind in that room. Does that lessen the severity of this gross abuse of power? Not necessarily.”

Sato turned to his best pal, “Wait, Shino…are you saying…he was peeping at-?”

“Please,” Lee begged tearfully of Sato, “Do not…do not say…”

“Get a grip man, it was bound to happen.” Kiba half-comforted Lee.

Neji did have to confront Lee’s obvious discomfort with what he had done. “Would denying it make you feel better?” He frowned and folded his arms across his chest, “Or would it be worse?”

“Neither makes me…feel better…” Lee sniffled, keeping his runny nose over the stones of the pool’s surround, “You would do that to Tenten…who is like family to me! And you, my best friend…would comport yourself so!”

“Lee.” He was wondering what in the world this strange sensation was, ‘Not…guilt?’ He felt bad about upsetting Lee. Though really, Lee was usually more upset or excited by things than most human beings were.
“I cannot…even look at you right now, Neji.” Lee turned his back, folding sadly onto the edge of the spring.

“In Neji’s defense, I am surprised to say,” Shikamaru cut in, “That checking out one’s naked girlfriend is kind of normal. Sorry, Lee.”

Lee wailed in response.

Gaara tended to agree with the statement, “However I would not attempt something like that here.”

“Gee, great.” Kiba grumbled, trying not to think about what the Kazekage’s intentions for Sakura were.

Chouji turned to Sato, “See what you did? You made Lee cry.”

“Neji made Lee cry.” Sato defended, “I was the poor schlub who had to catch him in the act!”

“You didn’t have to say anything.” Chouji retorted, “Or maybe you could’ve waited until later?”

“Chouji, I was born without a filter or general regard for delicate subject matter. Just ask Shino.”

“Correct.” Shino confirmed.

“Troublesome…I hope it was worth all of this noise.” Shikamaru muttered to Neji, “…was it?”

“It was worth a bloody brawl in this spring, if that’s what it would’ve come to.” Neji assured him.

“Hmm.” Shikamaru was mildly happy for him.

Gaara looked between the bickering of Chouji, Sato, and Kiba, Shino’s statue-like presence, Lee’s heartbroken, crumpled bumbling, and Shikamaru engaging Neji on the joys of girlfriends.

Gaara blinked and resolved to himself, “It’s good to be back.”
Hinata had not woken until noon the next day. Her father and the attendants of the Main House had not wished to disturb her.

She sat up in bed with a metallic taste in her mouth. Hinata could still smell the minerals on her skin from the spring water she and her friends had bathed in the night before. ‘I do feel much better…uh…ah! What time is it? Everyone else must be up already!’ She tossed her blanket aside and darted around her room, ‘Fujita is still in the hospital and we promised we would see him! Oh, and what about Father? He probably thinks-!’

When she nearly tripped over her own sweatshirt on the floor, Hinata elected to calm down a bit. It stood to reason that if her father had not come looking for her account of the Exam by noontime, he had probably not bothered Neji either. ‘How understanding of him…” Maybe it was because the two Hyuga finalists had come home the night before and gone to sleep without a word to anyone. People could take a hint.

Prior to their onsen visit, Kurenai had reminded Hinata and her teammates that they would have a free day to catch up with their lives. A day or so after that, she expected the team to meet and discuss which training regimens best suited them up until the Tournament. With this in mind, Hinata gladly pulled on and buttoned up a sundress. Beyond her bedroom window, it looked like a mild, summer day outside.

After completing her morning routine, Hinata ventured around the house hoping that there was still a hot pot of tea and sustenance somewhere. She had a word with a kind housemaid who asked her to wait in a tea room, “I’ll bring a meal out for you, milady!” Before Hinata could take a seat in the unoccupied tea room across the hall, Hanabi came stomping around the corner.

“Must have been a strenuous exam if you had to sleep that much! I’ve been waiting all morning.” Hanabi tugged her sister into the room. She sat down at a low table and gave her elder sibling a pressing look, “You advanced just like Neji-niisan, right? Who are you fighting? When? Who was at the-?”

Hinata held a quieting finger to her own lips, signaling her sister to tone it down. Hanabi fell silent, but her stare was unwavering.

“We both advanced.” Hinata smiled when a grin spread on her sister’s face, “My first opponent in the Tournament is Akimichi Chouji, four weeks from now. Almost all of the shinobi competing in the final round are Leaf ninja. I should be telling Father all of this as well; do you know where he is?”

The younger girl used her Byakugan on reflex.

“Their agenda is the same as mine. Surprisingly, Neji was awake and, by the sound of it, returning from a
function, ‘How does he have the energy? He must be exhausted too!’

Mercifully, the housemaid dropped by with a tray and set it on the table. Hinata thanked her profusely and asked that she not shut the porch door, “My little sister should be back momentarily…” Green tea, a small bowl of miso soup, onigiri, a croquette and several orange wedges; her preferred fare, and the maid surely knew it. No sooner had Hinata folded her hands to thank god and good fortune for the meal, Neji and Hanabi returned with raised voices.

Neji stepped inside, shoes off, wearing his black and teal Wushu attire. Hanabi was talking over him as he tried to satisfy her questions, but not nearly fast enough. He looked sweaty.

“How does he have the energy? He must be exhausted too!”

Neji suggested, patting the cushion beside her. She gave a strained look to Neji, “Niisan…you were already out training with Lee-kun this morning?”

“Hanabi, come have some oranges.” Hinata suggested, patting the cushion beside her. She gave a strained look to Neji, “Niisan…you were already out training with Lee-kun this morning?”

“At sunrise.” He confirmed with a sigh. Neji sat down and began tidying his hair. Wong Leung had disdained the week that Lee and Neji took off for the Chunin Exam, and so he quickly reinstated their training program.

“You had time to train with that old-Wushu-grouch, but no time to tell me about the Exam?” Hanabi sniffed, “That wasn’t considerate, Niisan!”

“First off, he is Wong Leung-shishou, or Shifu; and you should address him as such if you should ever meet him.” Neji corrected her disrespect, “Also, you were asleep when I left. I thought it better to tell you of those events later in the day, Hanabi-sama.”

“Hmf.” She chomped on an orange wedge, “Alright then.” She said with a full mouth.

Hinata delicately balanced food at the end of her chopsticks, “The slacker I am… I only just woke up. Niisan was up at dawn after going through the same test I did…and Lee too!”

“Lee managed it.” Neji confirmed glumly, “I barely managed it. He came to fetch me in the dark.”

“Oh.” Hinata finally understood. No wonder he looked so haggard.

Sympathetically, Hanabi passed an orange wedge across the table to Neji and he accepted it. He bit the fruit away from the peel after thanking his cousin. Guessing that he was starving, Hinata handed the croquette over to Neji which he also ate in one bite. The sisters made small sounds of concern, wondering how he would keep his temper in check for the day.

Hinata softly asked Hanabi if she could fetch something to sustain their big brother while they waited for the adults to drop by. The young girl snatched another orange wedge before bustling out to conduct the task.

What sounded like a volcanic roar rumbled from Neji’s stomach. He shut his eyes and languished across the table from Hinata while she remarked, “My, that was a loud one.”

“I am deficient in strength and sleep…and abundant in hunger.” Neji confessed, “I apologize that you have to see me like this.”

“It’s alright, Niisan! We’re all tired after yesterday’s matches.” She sipped her soup briefly, “Mmm. Did you enjoy visiting the hot spring last night?”

He looked thoughtful for a long moment, “I did.”

“We heard a lot of shouting and arguing on the men’s side.” Hinata recalled, “Do you know what
“I can’t get into detail, but…Sato started it.” Neji illuminated the matter.

That was all Hinata needed to know in order to fill in most of the blanks. She recounted her own experience and the fun she’d had.

Gaara’s student Matsuri had been good company, though shy. Ino and Sakura engaged in their typical level of mud-slinging while Tama arbitrated. Tenten had also had a bit of fun poked at her, “If she had to, Onee-san said she would pick death by boiling.” Hinata chuckled at the thought. Only grandmas loved onsen more than she did, if Tenten didn’t already count herself among them. They had to harangue Tenten to leave the spring later that night before she pruned up like a raisin.

Neji had to stop himself from saying I know, trying to play off the fact that he had kept track of his girlfriend’s movements the night before. Eventually, Hanabi returned with breakfast morsels, most of which she passed off to Neji. She kept some sweets for herself. The group ate in peaceful silence.

At about the time they had finished their meals, Hiashi stopped in to bid them good day. He wasted no time in asking for their accounts of the Chunin Exam. Neji and Hinata gave simultaneous testimony, speaking in equal parts, and Hiashi nodded as he listened. Though pleased, he was largely unsurprised by the outcomes of their matches. He commended them, “So too will you prove yourselves again in a month’s time.” Without saying it, Hiashi indicated that he was confident they would be promoted to Chunin. The Clan head ushered them along to meet with Kayato and Hideyasu before going to visit Fujita at the hospital.

On the way, the Hyuga Main House gaggle drew only a few stares from other villagers. Hinata imagined what it must have looked like to them. She and Hanabi were dressed as comfortably and girlishly as they respectively saw fit. Neji’s Wushu uniform was probably the most impressive, or perhaps most concerning sight, ‘He’s still just a little irritable...’ And passers-by would probably assume the adults with them to be as haughty and unlikeable as rumors purported.

‘But they really are nice...at least to me and most of the clan.’ Hinata acknowledged. Her father was a stickler for dignity and all things formal, but so help him, the widower had two daughters to raise… holding out hope that he was not making them hate him each day. Hideyasu and Kayato, perhaps the most laid-back couple to ever make their home among the Hyuga clan, were by no means weak or slighted for their outgoing natures. What villagers couldn’t see, Hinata supposed, was how broken this strong-looking family was, ‘Hikune-niisan is gone, and I know Hideyasu and Kayato will never be the same since his death. And without Mother...Father struggles to get through each day...’ Then there was Neji, parentless from a young age, who had hardly ever known what a typical family unit was like.

As they entered the hospital’s doors Hanabi muttered to her sister, “You think so hard I see steam pouring out of your ears.”

Hinata jolted out of her thoughts and the younger girl smirked at her.

“Come on. We’re going to room 343.” Hanabi pulled her along by her wrist, following behind Neji and the adults.

They elected to use the stairs as opposed to the elevator. (No one brought up Hiashi’s dislike of confined spaces.) On the third floor, they quickly happened upon Fujita’s room, inside of which the boy was awake and upright in bed. Sheets of unfolded origami paper were on a bed tray in front of him, and it looked as though he had nearly finished a green-checkered dog. Fujita greeted them all by name happily.
“Whatever you do, please do not say or do anything funny.” Fujita gave them a proviso, “It hurts too much to laugh.” His ribs were on the mend, but it was going to be six weeks of non-stop pain ahead. Pain medication was only sparingly given to him.

“Alright, son. I’ll try to be boring today.” Hideyasu held back a grin.

Kayato took the seat beside the bed and began doting on her youngest, stroking his hair (free of its ponytail) and inquiring about what had happened. He gave her his recollection of the exam and the Kazekage’s student hurling a meteor hammer at him. While Kayato winced, Hideyasu folded his arms and whistled, “Ha, Fujita, you challenged the Kazekage’s protégée and gave her a run for her money! Hm.” He fell quiet as the cogs in his head turned. ‘Hmm. Maybe he could marry that girl… he needs a strong wife someday!’

“Not long ago, the Kazekage was a peer of Neji and Hinata.” Hiashi noted, “Imagine the progress he underwent to so quickly become the head of a village.”

“He still is a peer.” Neji amended, “Rather, a very loyal friend.”

Hinata agreed, “A wonderful friend!”

Hanabi tossed in some gossip, “Fujita, I heard that Gaara-sama went with them to the onsen last night.”

Fujita was crestfallen, “You all went to…the hot springs?”

“We’ll take you there as soon as you are well again.” Neji assured him, “Gaara did not particularly enjoy it.”

When Hiashi gave him a pointed Why not? look, and Hinata was equally perplexed, Neji went on, “Hatake Sato enjoys teasing he and I.”

“Ah, Hinata’s teammate.” Hideyasu nodded knowingly, “A more lighthearted fellow than Kakashi, isn’t he?”

Neji could only describe it as “an assault of lightheartedness.”

Hideyasu cackled at the thought and Fujita was enticed to chuckle, but tears pricked at his eyes as he restrained laughter. Kayato frowned over her shoulder at her husband, “No funny business, please. I know we all want to laugh at a time like this, Hide-chan, but Fujita is in no condition for it right now…”

They stayed for two hours and attempted more serious talk to avoid any sort of mirth. After that, Hiashi excused himself, as well as his daughters and nephew, leaving Fujita in the company of his lingering mother and father.

At home, Hiashi announced that he would be meeting with a few veteran Branch members to discuss promotions and other subject matter he preferred (relieved it was not an assembly with Main House elders.) He added to his oldest child, “Hinata, please stay on the grounds today. There is a technique I would like to go over with you this afternoon.”

She perked up, intrigued, “Oh! I will, Father.”

Hiashi redirected Hanabi’s mounting frustration over her own personal lack of attention. The girl was puffing her cheeks and scraping her feet on the gravel of the front yard.
“Hanabi…”

“Dad, can I join the lesson?”

“Not today.” His voice was softer, patient, “Perhaps your elder brother will have time to practice with you?”

Neji’s furrowed brow silently implied: Thank you, Uncle. I definitely didn’t have plans…nor do I feel tired after the last six days I’ve lived through.

“Neji-niisan!” Hanabi rounded on her cousin. Hiashi slipped away before he could be held accountable for anything.

Lips resisting a grimace, Neji gave a short, imploring look to Hinata.

“I’m sorry. I am not dressed for training right now. I was going to trim and weed the garden, actually.” Hinata smiled contritely.

“You heard her! Train with me!” Hanabi added as an afterthought, “Please, Niisan. I just want to get as strong as you.”

“I was supposed to meet someone…but I can spare an hour.” Neji relented, turning towards the south side of the compound, “We’ll use the pebble yard.” Hanabi trotted after him victoriously.

As the last of her immediate family trudged off for more enthusiastic/reluctant training, Hinata fetched her hat, work gloves, and gardening tools. She practically sauntered through the eastern garden, delighted to have free time for her hobby. Bees floated by the dozen amongst the coneflowers and yarrow, but they did not bother with Hinata as she stooped over the plants with her trimmers.

‘I feel a bit bad that I…stuck big brother with Hanabi…’ She thought, yanking at the roots of a stubborn weed, ‘I knew he was tired and that he probably wants to see Tenten-neesan.’ But it was a moot point. Hanabi was pushy. She would not settle for standing around and watching Hinata in the garden, because she certainly wasn’t going to get her hands dirty. It would be such a bore. Furthermore, Neji had to put up with the strident, pre-genin hardhead like everyone else in the Hyuga clan did.

Gardening consumed more than an hour, and Hinata had noticed Neji later, slinking out of the estate, ‘Ah. He escaped.’ She spotted Hanabi still practicing the forms she’d been taught. ‘I wonder what Neji-niisan does with Tenten-neesan on days like this? I saw them eat noodles once…and they shopped in the Ethnic Quarter too. I’m sure they don’t want to train today. Maybe…’ She blushed and fumbled with a small rake, ‘Maybe they-!’

Hinata shook her head and muttered to herself, “Don’t think about it…”

After putting down the last of the mulch, Hinata returned indoors and changed. She thought about it again. ‘No! It’s none of my business! They have privacy away from the clan estate, though, where Tenten lives…ohh. I wish I could have some privacy…’ She thought with rosy cheeks, ‘With Naruto.’

It was a subject that her mind wrestled with frequently. ‘Alone-time’ with her boyfriend would probably not be easy to come by, once he came home. Her father would most certainly be watching her like a hawk, as he had become somewhat aware of her relationship with Naruto prior to his departure. ‘And Father has no idea that Neji-niisan is dating anyone…” That gave Neji an added bonus of freedom. How long it would last was anyone’s guess.
Knowing her father, he’d probably be watching Naruto’s haunts and apartment whenever his daughter failed to return home promptly at night. Hinata rapped her head with two fists, frustrated, ‘No matter what I do, I may not have a chance! I don’t want to get Naruto-kun in trouble just because I…want that so badly. I may have to wait.’ She considered it. Waiting for her relationship to be legitimized by the Hyuga, ugh, heaven help her. Marriage, even, may have to take place. She was projecting her first intimate opportunity to be at least a decade away, by that measure.

Hinata marched heavy-footed through the halls of the house, feeling resolute, ‘If that’s what I have to do…if I have to fight for Naruto and stand up to my clan and their supervision, I will!’ At least clan elders had a bit of respect for her, these days. She had to be worth more than a breeding sow-- only good for inter-clan marriage--or so she hoped. Those old men sang the praises of her Misago Byakugan and what it could mean for the future of the clan. ‘They should listen to me. I want to make my own choices just as much as I want to look after the Hyuga.’

Another idea hit her, as it had once been suggested by Sakura, ‘Or I can wait until we are assigned on a mission together.’ Unless her father was heading the team (an occurrence which would probably herald doomsday,) all bets were off. They could probably procure some time to themselves on an assignment. The likelihood of getting away with that scenario, unfortunately, was also quite low. ‘I don’t want to disrespect my teammates either…’ Maybe she ought to ask Naruto what he thought about it? Their letters had gotten very candid as of late.

She spotted her father in the Main House courtyard. Hinata cleared her head and pulled on sandals at the porch’s ledge before joining him.

The man wore a so-small-you-could-miss-it smile as his daughter stopped beside him. “I am sure you are already thinking of ways to prepare for the last trial of the Exam. For now, I would like to personally guide you before you make plans with your team.” He inclined his head and raised his arm, motioning for her to do the same, “You should master Eight Trigrams: Air Palm before the Tournament.”

Hinata made a small sound in her throat, mostly in agreement with her father’s wish. Her previous attempts with the technique had been underwhelming and pitifully short-ranged.

Hiashi spared her another sideways glance, “Do you recall what we covered last?”

Hinata rotated her hand a few degrees, frowning, “Channeling in Taijutsu.” It was a core shape-manipulation principal that took a close-range Gentle Fist strike and transformed it into vacuum wave, capable of blasting distant adversaries aloft like scattered bowling pins. Applying the principal was toilsome. She had failed several times before.

“The post over there: aim for that.” Hiashi reminded her as he took a few lateral steps, “Give it your best attempt and then we will streamline our efforts.”

Hanabi would translate his words as: He wants to see how much you suck and then instruct you on the million little things you did wrong!

She held her arm and looked down past her tilted wrist, as if it were a sight aligned with the target across the yard. As was good form in Jyukken, Hinata bent slightly at the knees and relaxed, breathing out, ‘I have not tried to do this in a while.’ It was among the final few high-level techniques taught in the Main House she had yet to learn. Neji had conquered it some time ago.

Hinata went down a mental check-list, modifying her stance from her feet and up, recalling the components her father had described weeks ago. Hinata snapped her arm forward, shaping the
chakra away from her palm and out (Channel it!), forward, not strong enough— she knew… but the small bolt sailed for two meters before dissipating. Her father quickly reached over and raised her arm a fraction, bending it back for the spring, and traced two fingers along chakra pathways that extended down to her hand. Then he let go. “Again.” His tone was clipped.

She took the hint that he wanted her to channel, at the very least, where he had indicated. It went slightly better. Her vacuum wave was a meter short of the target. “Once more, with all of your strength.” Her father encouraged.

Hinata repeated the process, striking the target, but the post rocked on its two legs without a scratch of damage. Hiashi stood beside her and pantomimed the “best form” again for her. She mimicked him for several minutes, copying until they were nearly mirror images. Her head emptied of all other thoughts until she was confident in the motion. Hinata attacked again with a cry, and hacked a portion of the circular target off.

Hiashi tapped her shoulder approvingly before he walked away, “Good. Hit the target again, and then we will move on.”

With another small shout, Hinata toppled the target with a well-aimed Air Palm.

“Have you not been practicing this technique?” Hiashi wondered.

She admitted, “Not as often as I should.”

“You’ve been otherwise occupied, as of late.” He noted and then added, “Make two Shadow Clones and direct one to the edge of the yard.”

Hinata collected herself after a moment and then produced two shadow clones as she had been asked. One waited timidly at the end of the Main House courtyard, expecting what fate was in store for it during practice. Hinata watched as her father executed an impeccable version of the technique, bloated with his great chakra, and like a shot it cracked across the yard and dissolved her waiting shadow clone.

With a hand on his hip, he explained, “As far as form and shape manipulation are concerned, you are a natural craftsman, Hinata. You seem to have an instinct of how to shape chakra with little guidance from others…” Hiashi drew closer, sighing, “But you need to become comfortable with expending more chakra. This technique demands more than a traditional strike.”

“I understand.” She peeped, rather surprised. It was true. She recognized her own habit of conserving chakra— using less when possible, or using only the exact amount for a jutsu that required a hefty contribution, ‘Like the Shadow Clone jutsu, for instance.’ Hinata generally avoided making more than four clones in a sitting unless she absolutely had to. ‘Sometimes I wonder how Naruto could be so liberal with making Shadow Clones… he has the most radiant reservoir of chakra I’ve ever seen!’ She had witnessed him using powerful jutsu on several occasions.

When Hiashi told her to “Watch,” Hinata assumed that he meant with the Byakugan. With her Kekkei Genkai, she observed as her father concentrated chakra, boiling it up from his impressive reserves. It coiled out from his abdomen through the pathways of the arm and his left hand, and then he struck again with a ferocious chakra bolt. She watched in admiration as it was shaped into a spatial wave and travelled at a blinding rate of speed. It crushed the second clone at the end of the courtyard.

‘I can do that.’ The young woman estimated. With a bit of concentration and pure Hyuga-audacity, she could work up that strength. Suddenly, Hiashi rounded on her. They assessed each other with
their respective Byakugan before the Clan Head charged.

Her father’s unprovoked attacks were supposed to “educationally motivate” his youngsters. Well, that’s what he always said after the fact. It produced results. Hinata rolled out of the way of an incoming Air Palm and determined that to be the name of the game. She had to put the new technique into practice. Her father’s missed jutsu had struck the edge of the porch, shattering it.

They darted around the yard, attacking and evading each other with ranged wave-attacks. Hinata progressively molded more chakra, lashed out more boldly as she failed time and again to strike her father. Some portions of the veranda and outer support beams of the Main House were collateral damage of the crossfire. Had Hideyasu been around, he would have snappily reminded them that any and all “affinity-combination OR ranged Taijutsu take place in the yards furthest from the house.”

Hiashi had not been going easy on his child. Eventually, one of his consecutive strikes flew across the clearing and clipped his daughter’s legs as she ran. She tumbled and skidded in the dirt at high speed, and after Hinata fell front-ways he briefly paused. Inside, his heart screeched with the sound of his departed wife’s voice, Give her a moment! Oh! Is she hurt?

Hinata swayed back to her feet and shook it off, dust-covered. Though a fragile flower like her mother had been, on most days, Hiashi knew he was looking at a part of himself when Hinata stood determined, grimacing at him. Just as he was gentle somewhere deep inside, so too Hinata could be hot-blooded like all the rest of her clan. When her retaliating Air Palm missed him, Hiashi had still been done proud; Hinata’s Air Palm had blown away the corner doors of the house—collapsing a portion of tiled roof.

Hiashi was unsure if he would have kept all of his teeth if he’d been struck by it. ‘She certainly has a feel for it now…’ And it was a little scary…though he would never admit it. He rushed around with his daughter until she blocked another wave with a rotation, and then Hinata countered immediately with the strongest vacuum wave she could muster. Wide-eyed, Hiashi was late when it came to rotating in defense, and he was rocketed inside the house into the interior of the busy kitchen, and landed with a coating of rubble. Workers hollered in fright after the blast and quickly helped the man up.

Hanabi’s part-time babysitter, Natsu, dropped the tea strainer she had been washing. She frantically dusted Hiashi off, “My lord, are you alright? It looks like you were attacked!”

“I provoked it.” He admitted calmly, waving off the concerns of attendants, “My eldest child has grown very strong.”

“Ah!” Natsu smiled widely in understanding, “With all due respect, sir; training with Hinata-sama… should probably not take place in the Main courtyard.”

“Agreed.”

She added, “I’ll put in the order to repair the wall and doors.”

“Thank you, Natsu.” He muttered, just a tiny bit sheepish. When his back and hips stopped ringing with pain, Hiashi exited through the door (more of a gaping hole) while brushing his robes off.

Hinata was teetering anxiously from foot to foot in the yard, terribly upset, “Father, I-!”

“You did exactly what I asked of you.” He held up a hand to still her, “I’m not angry.”

“But the-!”
“That wall will be repaired.” Hiashi assured her, “Let’s go to the back-property yard before we continue.” He ushered his daughter along and stayed half of a step behind her, trying to conceal a small limp.

That evening, after a warm bath and friendly chat over a family dinner, Hinata retired to her bedroom. She had definitely earned the soft comfort of her pajamas after a wild day of training.

‘I have some improvements to make with my Air Palm, but Father said it was satisfactory today. He also wants to go over combining jutsu with Nature Transformation…’ That subject, she felt, would be cumbersome in the short time she had to prepare before the Tournament. ‘I also wanted to train with my team…’ Hinata thought as she slipped beneath the covers of her bed, ‘Maybe I can divide my time equally?’ After all, Shino and Sato probably had their own personal lessons to cover with their families. They could rotate their training.

Her head felt heavy. There was too much to think about. Too much to do.

Lights switched off throughout the house as many retired to sleep. In the dark of her room, Hinata still had tension radiating in her muscles from the day’s training. It felt like her arms would involuntarily snap up to perform another Air Palm. She breathed slowly, shutting her eyes, and after a long while felt as though she would melt into her bed.

‘I…I meant to write to Naruto.’ She acknowledged sleepily, ‘But I just don’t have the energy to do it.’ Hinata had thought about having correspondence ready to send when Kosuke returned, but she would have to pen something down on borrowed time. These next four weeks would be chock-a-block with activities. ‘I just need a moment to myself. For him. Naruto is still waiting in the Toad Valley, wondering how I did during the first stages of the Exam…’

Hinata pouted sadly. Naruto, who worked hard every single day; he found the time to reach out to her. No. No matter how busy she was, there was no excuse good enough to exclude him from her routine. He needed contact with the outside world. She provided the periscope for him to glimpse what life at home was like.

All she could do was roll to her side and reach for the pen on the table. Hinata stared mutely at a blank scroll sitting in a bin on the floor beside her bed. It was as if her brain had disconnected from her hands. She was unable to function, and certainly not able to form coherent thoughts on paper no matter how hard she tried that night. It would have to wait. She drew her hand back, curling it beneath the blanket.

‘As soon as I wake up in the morning.’ Hinata resolved. She had to be fair to herself. She was already spread thin before commencing all of the demands the pre-Tournament routine. Laying on her back in the dark, her thoughts trickled through the last bit of consciousness she had left.

Her father had been pleased with her today. It was so unlike the days of her youth, in which he averted his eyes to her mediocrity, passing her over to take pride in Neji and Hanabi. Now, Hinata owed her achievements to pure stubbornness—the inability to quit, the gift that Naruto had imparted on her. She suspected that her father would credit Uzumaki Naruto with her boosted confidence. Her ability to speak with her chin held high, soft but clear, and her ability to forget the promise of death in battle against even the Akatsuki. Oh yes, she had changed, and Hiashi would never deny it. He would also never personally take credit for it. He couldn’t, but he was truly very happy that it had happened.

Apart from that, Hinata’s hyper-developed Byakugan seemed almost arbitrary, as if it was merely a roulette of genetics that had done her no favors in the early years of her life.
Hinata pondered if, had none of these good things come about, would her father have responded in kind? If his disinterest and disappointment in her would have lasted until the end of her shinobi career, or until his deathbed? Or was his cold attitude in fact the guise of his fear? His knowing that the elders of the Main House would create and enforce consequences for her lack of progress? That, perhaps, he was a desperate parent who could do little to save his child from pain, and was praying that she would somehow save herself? Quite obviously, Hiashi did take comfort in her strength and repaired reputation.

It felt good that her father did not measure her worth based on her Bloodline Talent. If she had to guess, Hinata would wager that her father probably gauged her success based on her happiness and safety. He never said these things outright, but he acted that way. Her honorable elders, on the other hand, were obsessed with the Misago Byakugan. The random product and uncontrollable development of their doujutsu, unseen by many generations of the Hyuga clan.

Hinata adjusted the quilt beneath her chin. Out of genuine curiosity, she tapped into the Misago to wonder again at the strange and undefined power of hers that her elders worshipped. Even with her eyes closed, she could see the intricacies of her room, the house, the grounds, and a quarter of the village, in a full 360 degrees, dimmed by the quiet night. Her attention was drawn to the pool of stars in the sky, made noticeable past the roof above her head. Transparent silver energy hummed through her chakra pathways as she lay calmly.

‘I wonder if I will need to use this during the Tournament?’ She tried to have foresight on matches beyond the first round, if she would be matched against a tough opponent, ‘Like Neji-niisan. I would do anything not to lose again. I need to do my absolute best!’ The trouble was that she still had very little understanding of what she could do with the ability. For the sake of avoiding accidents or unintentionally harming others, Hinata did not tinker with it much at all.

She felt less sleepy. A drop of concentration let her gleam a bit of the astral plane, though faint. It was entwined with her reality of flesh, grass, water, and sky. All around, she could see the hint of primitive symbols; maybe they were as old as the world was, or as old as her ancestors had been when they came to understand more than the physical world.

The character she was familiar with, a pictograph she had tampered with before to overlay with others, responded to her attentive stare. It felt a bit like a plunge, a rush of backwards and inwards movement as she laid unmoving…and then her surroundings seemed a bit different. ‘None of this looks as though I am seeing it with my Byakugan…’ She could have sworn she did not intentionally return to her normal level of vision. It was average sight at best.

The room went dark momentarily, her eyes sleepily blinking, before Hinata noted that the sensation seemed different. Like she was a spectator…‘I’m…I’m not seeing out of my own eyes!’ Trying not to panic, she conceded that it did feel like she had travelled a bit far from Hyuga grounds. It looked like she was in a different room and environment. Hinata went on to infer that she had carelessly overlapped her consciousness with another’s.

Then a yawn sounded familiar.

In pre-sleep moments, people see and think things they almost never remember. Naruto is no exception, he knows this. But what happened in the moments just before he slipped away from the awakened realm that night were just too weird to forget by morning.

‘Kinda feel…overheated…all of a sudden.’ He tossed his blanket off. His limbs were spread wide on the futon in Ma and Pa’s guest room. Eyes fluttering tiredly, his mouth cracked open childishly to exhale.
Abruptly, Naruto felt a tug. From the inside. Or maybe it was some crazy dream. Or gas. He had labored all day to absorb Natural Chakra, and Fukasaku had whacked him over the head at a rate of six-bashes-per-hour to prevent him from becoming a Toad Statue. He wouldn’t be surprised if he was regularly hallucinating after such treatment. 

Naruto!

Eyes shut, he smiled to himself.

Naruto-kun!

‘Sounds like Hinata.’ The distant call registered as a blip on his awareness-radar.

The second blip he registered was when his hand moved without his (its owner’s) volition. Naruto peeked an eye open to see his right arm raise, hovering a hand above his face and turning it over to examine it. As if he did not know what his own hand looked like. More confused than alarmed, he regained control and set it down. Whether it was a ghost playing tricks or a freak muscle contraction, he was too exhausted to care.

Except that his eyes were not willingly shutting anymore. ‘…the heck is wrong with me tonight? I’ve got to ask Pa to let up…’

He was hearing things again too.

Naruto, I’m sorry, I tried this once before and it was too difficult…and now I’ve picked a terrible time to do something like this, but…I want you to wake up! I’m here! I have never reached someone so far away before.

He slurred his words aloud, “What’re ya talkin’ about, Hin…Hina…ta…?” He started falling asleep even with his eyelids peeled back.

You’re not asleep and you’re not dreaming! I don’t know how long I can hold this technique. The uninvited occupant of his body raised both hands and patted his face, I’m doing this. See? Forgive me; it is a bit rude…

Naruto found that his dreams almost never had detailed explanations or apologies from Hinata. Sometimes there was conversation, but it was mostly…action. ‘This just ain’t right…’ He sobered up a bit, raising his head to glance around.

Oh… The hands on his face traced across a prickly, stubbled chin. The little dream voice in his head sounded fascinated. At about that point, he put five and five together, or, voice-in-head plus lucid-consciousness equals…

“Wah-? Eh? Whoa!” Naruto sat up, fully alert and acutely petrified.

From what all of his senses could detect, he had an unexpected visitor, complete with a mind, disembodied voice, and chakra system maxing out the capacity of his already-home-for-two body. But in the seconds that followed, as the high-pitched, familiar, and apologetic voice rambled about bad timing and overlaying or something, Naruto felt that the presence was extremely comforting and, though invisible, making his heart race in the dead of night.

He held up a finger to the moon-lit, empty room, halting the voice in his head. Naruto willingly suspended his disbelief and spoke to himself, “Hold on a minute, you’re going too fast. Restate your purpose, uh…whoever…this is?”
“Hinata?!” He hollered much too loud in a house with two sleeping elderly toads and one older pervert. For now, the shocked cry had not woken any of them.

_I was telling you that I did not mean to use this technique at such an hour_-!

“It’s not a dream?! It’s a jutsu?” Naruto was incredulously touching his chest and pinching himself.

Yes, _I'm sorry_!

“Why are you sorry?” He lowered his still mostly raised voice, chortling, “I didn’t know you could do this!”

*I’m still learning how to put it into practice. It’s easier when someone is right beside me._

“Do you feel okay? I’m not close by and I don’t want you to hurt yourself.”

_Once before I tried to reach you when I was in the Land of Waves, but it was much too far. I hurt myself. For now I think I’m alright._

Naruto covered his mouth to muffle laughter that would irritate his housemates. He fell to his back on the soft mattress and rejoiced, glad that he was in the presence of his most important person, and also, not certifiably insane. Hinata’s tinkling laughter was ringing in his head.

When the gleeful fit passed Naruto wrapped his arms around himself, smiling from ear to ear, “I missed you. I was waiting to hear from you.”

_I know. I wanted to write to you but I was falling asleep!_

“Well you probably had to be awake to do something like this…”

_It was not intentional. I was thinking about you, Naruto. Ohh…it was a bit careless to test the Misago Byakugan before bedtime._

“I’m not complaining.” Naruto relaxed and folded his arms behind his head.

His voice was warm and sounded deeper. Her perception of the body she was visiting had become sharply aware of its dissimilarity to her own. She felt taller, springier, and sturdy. The center of gravity was a bit higher. The arrangement of muscles, the feeling of a firm flat chest beneath a worn t-shirt…though dramatically different, was really quite pleasant.

It would take some getting used to; specifically, the feature of inadvertently commanding Naruto’s body. Hinata had made him roll to his side, curling into a ball on the futon as she would have. He shook off her control awkwardly.

_I’ll try to stop doing that, Naruto. I just keep fidgeting._

“It’s alright, you said you don’t do this much. Relax and just hang out with me.” He sat up and stretched, “As long as you don’t make me walk all the way home or send me to my death, we’re good.” Naruto brightened with an idea, “Wait a second, Hinata…do you…want me to show you around?”

_The Toad Valley?_

“Yeah, just locally. It’s pretty well-lit at night!” He propelled himself to his feet.
Oh yes, if it’s not too much trouble! But…don’t you need some sleep?

“Sleep-shmeep.” He exited from the bedroom’s porch door into the dark, bare-footed. She could feel grass underfoot, and the air was dewy and thick. Before Naruto’s eyes had fully adjusted to the dark outside, Hinata could smell (by his keen nose) the notes of flowers and plants she had never experienced in Konoha: the tang of pink-flowered euodia, the pungent aroma of gardenia germinating at night, paperbarks, and tall, leafy trees furling around the property.

Eventually, she could spot other small houses and hutches ensconced at the edges of the wide lawn. At the brink of the yard was a footpath littered with toadstools that wound over a hill and into the wild tangle of the valley. Naruto set off on said path at a slow pace, grinning, his hands folded behind his neck, “Smells nice, right?”

It’s like a giant garden!

“It kind of is.”

Is anyone else awake, do you think?

“Nah, it’s just you and me. I haven’t met many nocturnal toads here, and they usually just stay inside drinking and philosophizing all night.”

He found his footing carefully over slippery mulch and vegetation, and then politely side stepped a hog-sized millipede. In his head, he could hear Hinata tittering in bewilderment. His breathing quickened a bit— her doing, most likely, and Naruto tried pointing out the fireflies putting on a lightshow along the path.

“Yeah, sorry! There are tons of bugs. It’s not so bad at the house or by the pond. Here, look.” Naruto trotted toward the lakeside a few meters off the path, “There are lotus flowers out here, but they close and go underwater at night. They’re big enough so sit on during the day, though. Ero-sensei likes to do that.”

Ah, how nice! I think I hear a waterfall…

“Yup! On the opposite side, I dunk my head under that thing regularly.”

Naruto peered down at the smooth plane of darkened water, noting the curved glimmer of their galaxy’s arm reflected in the pool.

The sky is so clear here. In the village there are too many lights on even at nighttime, and it’s difficult to get a good view of the stars.

“You can always see ‘em out here. There’s a great view at the Hidden Star Village too, it’s so dark in those mountains.”

You’re right! I remember Sumaru and Hokuto pointing out every constellation on our way back to Leaf.

“Whoa! I keep forgetting you met them too,” He chuckled, taking a cross-legged seat beside the pond, “It’s weird. It’s like we’ve been traveling all over without actually going on a trip together.”

It does feel like that. A few times I wondered if I would ever get to visit the Toad Valley, someday… When they talk about letting your mind wander, I never thought it could wander this far.

Naruto rubbed at the tip of his nose, excited by the prospect, “Heh! They’re gonna have to put you in
the dictionary for redefining that phrase.”

*Oh no! No!*

“Why not? Just let them take your picture; I’ll bet yours will be the most beautiful face in there.” He cackled at Hinata’s bashful reaction, which was ongoing, “But I will definitely get you here, Hinata, for real. I want you to see this place.”

*But visiting a sacred place calls for strict—*

“You’ll be welcome here. Think about it: they let Ero-sensei come in and spend all that time.” Naruto reasoned, “It could be a short trip or a vacation…or maybe later if you feel like becoming a Sage…” With his insinuation, she laughed at the thought, “Either way it takes getting used to. The Natural Energy here is so dense that when I first arrived all I could do was lay around. It can be exhausting.”

*Do you really think I could acclimate to the environment?*

“Sure, anyone can. It just takes some time.” He scratched his chin, wondering, “And maybe eating bugs helps. I dunno. The more in tune with nature you are on Mount Myoboku, the better off you are.”

*Yes, I can understand that.*

“So, before we plan vacations and stuff like that…” Naruto leaned back on his arms and requested, “How about you tell me what the Chunin Exam was like? It started recently, didn’t it?”

*It did, and the first stage was a written test again. The rules seemed suspicious and there was a time constraint that would have made earning the necessary points impossible for most Genin. Many of us realized that we could be excused from the room without penalty, which was odd for a time-dependent test, don’t you think? I don’t remember if we could take bathroom breaks at the last Exam, but at any rate, most teams left the building to move on to the second stage.*

“Jeez, that’s so underhanded…making all those goody-goodies who wanted to finish the test feel stupid for staying behind.”

*Well, they were convinced that points were more important than time. But on a mission there is no such thing as points.*

“Very well said, Hinata.”

*Thank you, where was I? Oh, and at the second stage we were required to sign liability waivers to enter the Forest of Death.*

“Damn, they made you all go through that again?” Naruto could hardly believe it.

*The objective was different this year. We were instructed to enter the tower at the center of the Forest, but it was impossible to get inside by normal means, or so it was said. No one really understood what that meant initially, the proctor was so vague… But every team was given a scroll that could be a potentially useful clue, or a ‘dummy scroll,’ which was meant to be unhelpful. We were forbidden to check our scrolls until we were inside the Forest…and my team’s scroll was blank.*

“Eck, that’s rotten luck…”
For a moment we were discouraged, but we came up with a plan to steal another team’s clue and then forgo sleeping that night. Naruto, we did it! We actually found a useful clue and worked through the night. I was tired, but we figured out that we were meant to search for a specific landmark in the Forest. When we did, there was an underground tunnel we followed directly to the tower’s basement.

Naruto was intrigued, “No kidding! Do you think those tunnels were there when we first took the Exam?”

I am quite certain they have always been there. I don’t think any Genin ever noticed them or used them, previously. Sato-kun thinks those passages are what Jounin use for training drills.

“Huh…that makes sense.”

We were the first team to arrive in the tower! It was so nice to sleep after that.

“You came in first?!?”

We did! Later the next morning the second team arrived. They were Genin from Iwagakure and hardly spoke or looked at us.

“Yeesh…”

And then Neji-niisan’s team arrived third. That made me happy! Then Sakura-chan and Ino-chan’s teams… All kinds of different teams made it in the days after that. We had to wait a while before the 5-day limit expired.

“Yeah, gotcha, so administrators probably fed you and stuff?”

Yes, rations were brought into the tower for waiting teams. All of the Jounin-sensei arrived on the last day, and when the third stage began, even Gaara-kun was there! His student made it and was able to compete in the last stage.

“Hah! Was Gaara smiling about it? I bet he was proud…”

I could tell he was proud. His student, Matsuri, was the only Sand Genin capable of going on. Her substitute teammates had to drop out to recover from illnesses. Oh! And Shikamaru-kun was the proctor for the third stage. It was just so exciting to see Gaara-kun there with Tsunade-sama…I don’t remember hearing all of the rules, exactly. I was a bit distracted. There were so many participants that a preliminary round was necessary before final matches were determined.

“So did they make everyone duke it out in the tower again?”

Yes, but we were escorted to the top floor of the tower where an observatory and arena had been set up. We could see the ceiling windows and sky and everything… I was a little bit worried that I would have to go first, and I was preparing myself for it…but Tenten-neesan had to fight the first match against a Rock Genin.

“Wow, must’ve been— wait a second. Why do you talk about her like she’s your big sister?”

Well…she is. She’s always looked out for me.

“Yeah, but I’ve never heard you talk about Tenten like that. Not out loud.”

I know and…there’s…the other reason…
“Another reason? Are you like long-lost relatives, or best friends or-!”

Of course we’re very good friends, I see her almost every day! Well, I used to, but now she spends most of her time with…Hinata found a way to mentally stammer, With Neji-niisan.

“Hm. But that’s not weird. Haku says they were always hanging out.”

Not like that. More like…how you and I are. When Naruto still didn’t seem to get it she added, Neji-niisan is in love with her.

Naruto slapped his hand spiritedly on the grassy ground, hooting in delight, “That guy-? Hohohoho, heh, hold on…hee hee…” He cracked up, “Neji. Hah! Your cousin? Are we still talking about the same person?”

We are!

“Ha-haa!” He fell back and continued slapping the ground, his sides nearly splitting with laughter, “But he…he used to be…” Naruto inhaled air again to get his idea across, “Neji used to be so uptight, remember? Ugh. I mean, even when he lightened up a bit he was still kind of a crabapple.”

He’s much better now, Naruto-kun. You have to see it for yourself! He spends lots of time with Lee-kun, I think…he appreciates Lee much more as a friend now. And it’s true! I always suspected that Tenten made him happy, but he never knew what to do or say. He had to grow up and understand his feelings before he could be honest with her. Niisan has…mostly figured it out.

Genuinely pleased, Naruto quieted down, “That’s great! That’s a marketable rehabilitation story. I’ll congratulate him when I get home.”

You can, but maybe you should congratulate Onee-san too? She had to wait a long time, feeling the way she felt, and Neji-niisan put her through so much. No matter how badly he behaved around you and I in the past…she had to put up with him on his worst days.

“Dang…you’re right…” Naruto folded his arms behind his head again, “I never made you miserable, did I, Hinata?”

No, never. You never argued with me or lashed out at me, you’ve been…my greatest friend and supporter. I only ever felt sad because, I suppose…I made myself miserable. I doubted and worried. I didn’t trust my abilities or that I was worthwhile in any sense…

“Sounds crazy now, doesn’t it? But I can relate to that feeling too, a little. Worrying that I wasn’t good enough to be respected or loved.”

I loved you so much. I always did. During a pause, Hinata made small sounds of apology, Eh-! Oh, what I mean is, that is to say-! I…I still do! I didn’t stop, Naruto-kun, I just…I feel different now. Stronger and more confident…because you feel the same way…

There it was again. His pulse was pounding just at hearing those words— that sincere admission of hers that, when he thought about it, had been completely and utterly true for years.

Hinata had never wavered and never strayed as a friend; had never discouraged or hurt him…and had only ever been a slightly brighter beacon in the dark than Gaara and Haku had been to him. Though he could never put his finger on the reason why when he was younger, now it made sense. Naruto took a rough breath and tried to ignore the fact that Hinata was probably cognizant of his physical reaction to her statement. His skin felt hot and there was a rattling feeling in his stomach and chest, as if he’d become a rocket set for launch.
“You…saying that…” He had to sigh to relieve some pressure in his ribcage, “Makes it good to be alive.”

_I want to say it all of the time, then._

Smiling with closed eyes, he warned, “Hey you, don’t tempt me. Do you know how hard it is not to run home every single day when I want you? How much I miss you?” Naruto fittingly added, “I love you. I’m a little crazy, though. This feeling makes me crazy. I may act a bit…you know, overzealous, when I see you. I don’t wanna—”

_That’s…okay._ Her tone sounded shy but encouraging.

“Not really.” He disagreed, cooling off a bit, “You deserve a level-headed guy who respects your space. That’s what I want to do. It’s what I owe you. I’ve been taught better, not to be handsy or entitled. I mean, Ero-sensei has his vices, but he’s got this gentlemanly side he uses too. His explanation was pretty clear. That stuff matters to me.”

Naruto…

Her voice in his head was appreciative but contradictory, as if she were deliberately inching her way closer. It was almost as if he could feel her hands on him, her smooth skin, the tickle of her hair—somewhere over the great distance.

“Is it like…you’re here, but…you’re not really here?” He wondered softly, “This jutsu is a bit scary, if that’s the case.”

_No, I’m not trying to scare you or anyone else. I cannot fully control the person I overlay with, and the person knows when I am present. I guess it’s that…I can use this technique to help or hinder someone, but never to hurt._

“Cool…but,” Naruto rested his hand over his heart, “It does hurt, you know. For me, anyway.”

_I understand, I’m sorry! Should I stop?_

“Don’t.” His voice was thick.

_I do not want to upset you or become a distraction, Naruto. Your training here is so important and I shouldn’t…I just…I want you to know—_ She struggled to stay coherent, _I want to touch you and be around you. I feel grown up. If you knew what I think about every night…oh…no. I can’t invade your privacy this way to say things like—_

He held up his hands to halt her, staring up at the swath of stars overhead, “It’s alright.”

She calmed down marginally.

Naruto added, “And just so you know, I need to kiss you. In a bad way. I’m not mad that you’re telling me all of this, Hinata, really. It’s an itch I can’t scratch, but I need to shut up about that since I meditate daily. Can’t scratch anything when you’re meditating…”

He smiled and realized she was the one who was smiling.

“Now let’s save this heavy stuff for when…when I can get the heck out of this valley.” Naruto suggested, “Can you finish telling me about those preliminary matches?”

Yes, of course! What was I saying? Ah, Onee-san had the first match and won. Then Chouji-kun and
Lee-kun won their matches. Oh, Lee-kun had a very strong opponent from Yumegakure. Let’s see… Sato-kun and Sakura-chan also succeeded, and then Neji-niisan fought one of the other Rock Genin. Gaara-kun had to replace the floor after they destroyed it in their match.

“Whoa, sounds like Neji got wa-aay stronger.” Naruto noted, “And what’s this about Yumegakure?”

It’s a tiny little Hidden Village near the border of the Land of Fire. All of the ninja there dress colorfully and are descended of powerful clans. They were quite friendly too.

“Huh! Neat. Maybe Gaara had a fun time watching those duels. Well, up until he had to reconstruct stuff.”

He did not seem bothered by it. After that Shino-kun won his match because his opponent was frightened and forfeited…and then Tama-chan defeated a Cloud ninja! Hinata remembered happily, She did very well for her first time in the Chunin Exam!

“Time out,” Naruto gestured for a break with his hands, “Did I miss something? Are you talking about Big Fuzzy Brows’ niece? Sato’s-?”

Yes! She is now a part of Kakashi-sensei’s team.

“Holy-! I didn’t even know she was a ninja!”

She is a Taijutsu specialist and fights much like Lee-kun does. I think Kakashi-sensei has also taught her Ninjutsu… She became a Genin about a year ago, and Sakura-chan and Kiba-kun seem very happy to have her.

“That’s awesome. I can hardly believe it though, like, how old is she? She passed the Graduation Exam after we did…”

She turned 19 in April. When I spend time with my kunoichi friends she acts like a big sister to all of us.

“Wow. That just proves it’s never too late!”

And then…I had my match. My opponent was a kunoichi from the Grass Village and her jutsu were impressive. She used techniques to grow plants and create an environment in the tower. I had to do bide my time before I could beat her.

“Damn, I didn’t want to miss it…but I knew you’d be fine this year.” He rolled to his side and grinned.

After that Kiba-kun won his match and then…my cousin Fujita was defeated by Gaara’s student, Matsuri.

“Ah, one of your younger cousins, right? That was probably a rough match.”

It was. He’s still in the hospital recovering.

“Oh boy. I guess we don’t want to mess with anyone Gaara trains…”

Definitely not. Ino-chan won the final match, but in the second to last fight…things took a bad turn.

“How so?”

The last member of the Rock team terribly injured his Dream ninja opponent. He used…so little
effort. The way he fought was not normal, he did not use his chakra...and I have never seen anyone fight like that before. That young man from Yumegakure was taken to the hospital, but I don’t think he survived... That Rock ninja wanted to kill an opponent, but because he stopped short of it he wasn’t disqualified.

“Someone like that is progressing to the final rounds? He did it on purpose!”

They could not prove that he meant to. Tama will be his opponent in the first round of the Tournament.

“Eh…I don’t know about that. She’s a first-timer and it sounds like this guy is dangerous. I’d feel worried even if Neji had to take him on.”

That’s the problem, Naruto. None of us really want to, but we have to wait and see what can be done. I think Tama-chan will seriously prepare for her match.

“Keep me posted about it…and hey! Who are you fighting in the Finals?”

My first opponent is Chouji-kun.

“Don’t go easy on him!”

I won’t! My father has been training me to master higher level techniques of my clan. Today went rather well.

The conversation tapered off into peaceful silence. The stridulate sounds of a grasshopper sounded occasionally in the dark. The vast stretch of starry sky was a portrait of ancient light and dark space painted by heaven’s brush, only reaching their infant eyes after traveling for millions of years. Lying on his back with Hinata permeating his consciousness, Naruto felt young and alive; a star only just igniting. In time, he too would be an old light that others would look back to for comfort and guidance. ‘Like Ero-sensei is to me, only I’ll be less perverted.’ He figured.

Naruto-kun?

“Hm?”

Would you please do something for me?

“Sure, whatever I can do.” He assured her, sitting up, “What would you like, Hinata?”

Well…I can do it. She added, testing the corners of his mind for control, spreading down and out to his fingers and toes. The result of her conduction only led him a step towards the pond’s edge again, and Naruto knelt beside the body of water.

He looked down at his reflection on the smooth surface. He frowned, unimpressed with his wild hair, ‘Good grief it’s getting long…’ And after a moment he could have kicked himself for not realizing sooner that he was not the only one looking. Hinata was totally silent as she regarded his appearance.

“Sorry that I’m looking a little messy! It was a long day, and Pa just kept whacking my head like he’s getting paid to do it…” He trailed off, somewhat self-conscious.

Still, Hinata made no comment. While continuing to stare at the image on the water’s surface, she directed Naruto’s right hand to his face and timidly stroked his cheek. With baited breath, he stayed a spectator as she traced the line of his jaw, ran a fingertip up his nose and over his brow, along the
edge of his hairline, and then finally pressed three fingers to his lips.

You grew up.

“Yeah, I…we all did…” His speech stammered when his hand dipped along his own neck, stopping at his shirt collar. It was odd and enjoyable all at once, ‘And it’s kind of…it’s…’ He pondered how many beats per minute would herald his heart exploding.

Naruto...

“Yeah?” His teenage brain ventured that things could turn serious in a way he had not been expecting, that was, if he did not object to anything Hinata did.

I can’t stay. I think I’ve exhausted myself.

“Oh. Shoot…” Naruto snapped out of the seconds-long fantasy, “Please don’t strain yourself, Hinata. We can stop for now and I’ll wait for you to write me.”

I don’t really want to stop, She admitted airily, But it’s almost sunrise…we’ve talked most of the night! I know I’ve used more chakra than I should have. I’ll get some sleep.

He nodded in full agreement.

When I am strong enough I will try this again. Maybe at the end of this week I will visit so I can tell you more?

“A-Are you sure that’s a good idea? You might wear yourself out.”

I won’t know that until I try.

Naruto patted his own cheek, trying to get through to her, “Hinata, get some rest. I really am so happy that I got to talk to you. Though I would like to do this again sometime, you should be saving your strength for the Exam. So…let’s not make this kind of thing too frequent. What do you think?”

Well…alright. Hinata made a reluctant but tired sound, But I… She yawned with his mouth, I will write to you soon, Naruto…

And the last thing he noticed as her presence faded was a swell of affection and contentment, a faint heat radiating down from his ears, tingling. It lingered even after Hinata had retreated from the recesses of his mind and body. Naruto sat in stupefied quiet. It felt like the impossibly relaxed comfort he felt after waking from a good night’s rest, the same feeling that made him refuse leave his covers and seize the day. ‘Though I know this has nothing to do with sleep…’ He noted as he stood, and he moved slowly back towards the Toad Sages’ home.

Naruto wondered if he was supposed to feel sad that she had gone. But he couldn’t. He could not feel sad at all when he felt so relieved and grateful that she had come to him at all. What sense would it make to replace such a wonderful feeling? ‘I hope she randomly uses long-distance jutsu whenever she can, definitely, but I won’t be devastated if she can’t…’ Call it serendipity, he thought, and also, ‘Bed.’

He toddled back into the house, slid the door shut behind him, and collapsed on top of his covers. Then he slept.
In the morning as he woke, Naruto had the vague impression he was in trouble.

Before his eyes had fully opened he heard Jiraiya’s voice drifting into the room, “Kid. Hey. Naruto. What the hell did you do last night? Hey.”

“Mmm. Nnn…nothing.” He rubbed at his eyes with the heel of his hand. Naruto was not yet equipped for conversation at that hour.

At the doorway, Jiraiya stood expectantly with Fukasaku and Shima beside him. The toads only seemed mildly curious while Jiraiya, conversely, meant business.

Before Naruto could nod off again, Jiraiya snarked, “You were up most of the night, kiddo. You remember? Up all night talking to yourself.”

“Ugh, buzz off you ‘ol…” Naruto pressed a pillow into his face as he grumbled.

“So you aren’t denying it?” The man confirmed.

Naruto sat up, miffed, “No. I wasn’t talking to myself, Ero-sensei.” He looked apologetically to his toad hosts, “Ma, Pa…I’m sorry if I bothered you at all. I might’ve been loud before I went outside last night.”

“It’s quite alright, Naruto-boy, we have no trouble sleeping with a bit of noise.” Shima assured him.

“We did wonder why you were having a full-blown conversation in the dead of night, though.” Fukasaku conceded.

Naruto scratched his head and tried to devise a good way to explain it.

Jiraiya was highly suspicious, “Tell me you invited someone out here and I’ll-!”

“How would they even get here?” Naruto interrupted him, “I don’t know the secret paths to the Valley that you do, and any outsider who would attempt it gets lost, right? Jeez. And the Natural Energy on this mountain would have squashed them to the ground for a while until they got used to it…”

“Fair.” Jiraiya noted calmly, folding his arms, “But then what the hell, kid?”

“It was Hinata.” Naruto announced firmly, “She used a jutsu…that kinda…put her inside my head.”

Jiraiya stared at him with a leaden expression.

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“Take it or leave it, but that’s the truth! I could hear her talking in my head, like I was thinking it, and she could even steer me around a bit.” Naruto motioned with his arms as an example, “It’s part of her new power, Ero-sensei. She tried it out last night and she had no idea I’d be on the other end of the line.”

Jiraiya said nothing as he rubbed his chin, mulling it over.

“Well…I have rules in my home.” Shima spoke up during the silence, “And my biggest rule is no girls in the house. Naruto-boy, you’ll have to ask her not to do that again.”

“But Ma, she wasn’t technically here!”

Fukasaku seemed to agree, siding with Naruto, “Shima…the child’s right. This is no guest we could clean up and prepare for. That technique is a mental trick at best.”
“Kind of sounds like the voodoo that the Yamanaka clan can pull on people.” Jiraiya determined quietly, still aghast, “But over such a long distance? Well that takes a lot more chakra and precision for them to get right…”

“Ero-sensei, it was more than that. I felt her chakra…like it was in me. And her consciousness didn’t squish me or push me out. I was still awake. She, like…overlapped with me…or she said something like that…” Naruto attempted to explain it, “It was weird but not in a really bad way.”

Jiraiya regarded his student loftily for a moment, “Alright, I hear you. So…let’s say I believe all of this…”

“Come on—”

“You’ll have to request her to try it out on me next time for—” Naruto pounced on the man, kicked his knees out from under him, and pulled him into a rage-fueled headlock. Jiraiya wheezed an amendment, “Fff…for e-e-ekk…e-empirical…evidence…” He tapped frantically on Naruto’s arm before he was released, gasping, “Buh! You wicked animal! Choking an old man out at this time of morning….” Fukasaku and Shima had stepped safely out of the way before the attack.

“Don’t even joke about Hinata doing something like that to give you proof!” Naruto stomped back into the room, beginning to put away the bedding and futon, “Take me at my word, you Perv.”

“Bit of a touchy subject, I see. Naruto, you know I didn’t mean it like that.”

Shima had entered the room and took the folded blanket and pillows as Naruto handed them off, placing them in a storage closet. Naruto spoke over his shoulder, “You are not going near my girlfriend in any capacity. Period.”

At the notion, Shima clucked her tongue disapprovingly at Jiraiya.

“Kid, get real. She’s like a daughter to me! I watched her run around with you twerps all those years ago, and I witnessed her look after your stupid ass. He added with a pointed finger, “Which, by the way, I expect she will continue to do.” Jiraiya went on as Naruto pointedly frowned at him, “That’s the jutsu she used to save her team in the Land of Rain, isn’t it? That, my boy, is why I care to know.”

“Well…yeah.”

“She brought Kakashi’s nephew back to life, remember? And she warded off a member of the Akatsuki. All I mean is that ability is worth learning more about. I will never muscle in on, no offense, the space of someone who I will always platonically consider a black-sheep princess who treats you like gold. I’m indebted to her.” Jiraiya concluded with a dismissive wave of his hand, walking back out to the sitting area of the house, “But don’t take me at my word, or anything! I’m just a professional pervert. Nothing more.”

“Quit bellyaching, I get it.” Naruto grumbled before exiting his bedroom.

“Yes, that’s enough quibbling.” Fukasaku announced, spreading out an arrangement of broth and insects for breakfast, “If you two keep arguing about a young girl you’ll just make Ma grouchy. Why don’t we discuss Naruto-boy’s next haircut?”

Jiraiya and Fukasaku looked to the young, golden haired man at the table before simultaneously agreeing, “He’s overdue.”
That same morning, many leagues away, Tsunade had summoned a particular group of Jounin to her office, expecting them just as soon as the Jounin Council meeting at the Standby Station concluded. Today, she knew, was going to be a long day. ‘There are way too many people to talk to…I need technology to advance faster so I can say fuck it and send out mass-memos.’

To steel her nerves, the Hokage had helped herself to her 8:00AM cup of sake before futilely rinsing her mouth with a swig of water. Willpower wavering, she took a second, slightly-smaller shot before concealing the bottle in her desk. ‘Jiraiya calls it liquid courage. For me it’s liquid patience.’ In the privacy of her office during Shizune’s absence, Tsunade glanced over a document with bullet points listing her concerns. She let the page flutter back down to her desk.

With a small breath, she turned to stare out of the window over the rooftops and signage of her village.

A knock sounded once at the door before the group of Jounin Sensei she had called for filed into the room, chatting quietly amongst themselves. Tsunade half-turned and sniffed, finally getting the greeting she was expecting.

“You’re all proud as peacocks, I bet.” The Hokage smiled wanly, “But let’s not get ahead of ourselves, hm? Your students have a huge challenge standing between them and promotion.”

Gai started rattling off proclamations of confidence, but Asuma drew nearer to the Hokage’s desk to be within her earshot, asking, “I take it you wanted to speak to us about the competitor from Iwagakure, Hokage-sama?”

Gai quieted down at the subject. Tsunade nodded and returned to hear seat, “Quite right. I didn’t expect such a damper on what I’d hoped to be my debut achievement, as Godaime…but not all Genin take this Exam with good intentions.”

After hearing the word Genin spoken, Kakashi interjected, “About that—”

Tsunade held up a hand to stop him, “Let’s not speculate. I have a meeting with Black Ops and counselors today, and that’s where the speculation will take place. Now, I want to make it clear about what I need from all of you…” Her ample bosom came to rest on the desk as Tsunade fitted her hands beneath her chin, “You will all keep your distance from Sasagainu Huo.”

At the uttering of the notorious surname, both Gai and Kakashi made a motion to debate the matter, but Tsunade hushed them again, “You will all maintain your distance and keep your eyes and ears open for me. If that boy has any ill-intent for the Tournament, it’s likely that it won’t be completely concealed for the next four weeks. Stay sharp. Also, none of your students are to have any contact with or may approach Huo before the Final Rounds. Is that understood?”

A diligent chorus in the affirmative answered her.

“On a lighter note, I have great expectations for all of your students. Provided that they do not contradict the terrific qualities I’ve seen in them so far, and that they score well in their aptitudes at the Tournament…I imagine I have many new Chunin vests to order next month. Oh, and get their sizes while you’re all at it. Discreetly.” Tsunade rubbed her chin thoughtfully, “Where necessary and appropriate, make sure that you provide one-on-one training. Some of our Rookies will be facing wild-card adversaries, and you can provide invaluable guidance in what little time they have to prepare.”

Kakashi especially took the suggestion to heart.
“Questions or concerns?” Tsunade added, clasping her hands.

“Are there any techniques you wish to prohibit by level or rank?” Kurenai wondered, “My students have a variety of jutsu that, while effective, may not be judiciously used in a sports stadium. I can speak to them about it if you recommend it.”

With that, all of the Jounin began chattering again, noting that most of their students had some kind of jutsu that could damage the arena or otherwise create havoc.

Tsunade replied simply, “There is no need. The framework rules for the Exam widely permit any type of weapon, Taijutsu, Ninjutsu, or Genjutsu. Unless any attack is deliberately aimed for spectators, no Genin will be penalized for abilities they use in the arena.”

Kurenai had a moment to process the stipulation. She recalled Sato’s utterly irresponsible use of Forbidden Jutsu and Summoning at the last Tournament, those jutsu which had the potential to turn the stadium inside-out. While flashbacks of such carelessness blinked before her eyes, Tsunade qualified her meaning.

“My counselors and Shimura Danzo did explain to me some of the reckless endangerment that occurred during the previous Exam. While it isn’t encouraged, such jutsu are accounted for in the rules. And also, the Sealing Corps has been conscripted to set up a barrier to protect the audience at the Tournament.” She went on airily, “It was expensive, but we all agreed it was a worthwhile provision.”

Kurenai took a steadying breath.

Asuma wondered at the pricey demands of the Sealing Corps, “Why do they charge so much? I should have my brother talk to those pinchfists.”

Tsunade snorted at the idea, “I already asked Netsuke to put in a word with them, as a former member. They wouldn’t budge on their hourly rates…they all felt that because no one else in the village offers the services they do, the price is fair. Honestly…I feel that since I took office all I’ve ever done is butt heads with the Sealing Corps.” She added under her breath, “And a few dozen others…”

“It’s hard to believe they won’t negotiate with the Hokage or Sarutobi Netsuke. If anyone in Leaf deserves a discount, it’s the two of you.” Kakashi also disliked the monopoly on Sealing techniques, “That’s a topic to bring up at the next Village Council meeting, Hokage-sama. Left alone, it could get out of hand.”

“Right, right…” Tsunade tapped papers on her desk into a pile and then looked to Gai, “Gai…”

“Yes, ma’am?”

“Speaking of brothers, is yours still a financial regulator?” Tsunade asked, “With a stubborn, mercenary heart? Ken, I believe it is…”

“Indeed, milady, and he also finds work as a small courts attorney, entrepreneur, public accountant, and referee of children’s sports.” Gai confirmed.

“Ugh…” Tsunade felt physically ill at the concept of one willingly doing so much work, “Ask him to visit me tomorrow morning, at his leisure. Maybe Ken’s voice needs to be heard at the Council Meeting when the Sealing Corps tries to justify its pricing to us all.”

“I will ask him this afternoon.”
“Much appreciated.” Tsunade thanked him, “Anything else?”

Asuma ventured, “Jounin with students competing in the Tournament can still place bets. If I’ve heard correctly?”

“Oh yes you have. Even I am permitted to gamble.” Tsunade smiled slyly.

“And that is not a conflict of interest?” Kurenai was doubtful.

“In the official rules, it isn’t. The Hokage can still win or lose money; for I, like everyone else, have no idea who will and will not perform sensationally at the Final Rounds. It is one-hundred percent fair.” Tsunade explained.

“And what about Gaara?” Kakashi chimed in, “Will he be raising any stakes?”

“Well of course he can’t gamble! He’s underage.” Tsunade groused.

“He is the Kazekage.”

“And a law-abiding citizen. Though he and Hidden Sand could use the money after what he ponied up to repair the Tide Village, Gaara is also subject to the rules.” The Hokage pontificated, “In two more years he will be perfectly eligible to piss his cash away like I do.”

With that, Tsunade humored a few more trivial questions before rising up and excusing her Jounin guests. She stepped out of the office with them, bade them farewell, and then rushed to the ladies restroom. ‘Whew, I just barely made it.’ Appointments always ran long and punished her bladder. After a short break she resumed her tasks.

Tsunade expected that Shizune would hold things down if anyone came sniffing around the Hokage’s office. She descended to the second floor of the building and into a chamber at the end of the hallway. ‘Two more appointments, the next of which will be the least pleasant…’ She stepped inside and located a free space on the sofa beside Shimura Danzo. Across from him on another couch were Mitokado Homura and Utatane Koharu, sipping tea in boredom.

As the door clicked shut behind the Hokage, Homura pointed out, “You are tardy.”

“I am.” Tsunade sighed softly as she took a seat, “I don’t think I kept you waiting for long. Did anyone here have a conference prior to this? Mine stretched out a bit.”

“We did not.” Koharu assured her.

“Then you were not inconvenienced.” Tsunade surmised.

Homura grunted in irritation and Koharu continued sipping her tea. Danzo was utterly unaffected by the pithy statement. He flipped open a file on the tea table between them, spreading out photographs of foreign Chunin Exam contestants. The most abundant snaps were of Huo.

“This one here,” Danzo indicated the Rock Genin, “Concerns you?”

“Does he not concern you?” Tsunade retorted, “His name, at the least, should ring some bells.”

“It’s an old clan name. Sasagainu: that which declined in the Third Shinobi war…and splintered from its Cadet branch that mutinied and murdered its main line. Though a rare name…it suggests very little to me other than one child’s good fortune to survive those days.” Danzo remarked, balancing his palms on his cane, “His temperament has caused anxiety for other Exam participants,
so I am told.”

Koharu thumbed through a report, adding, “All of his documentation is legitimate. It’s been reviewed four times by administrators before falling into my lap. What’s all of this fretting about?”

“Aside from his assault on another Genin that resulted in Hirasaka Agehanto’s death after the preliminary rounds…Huo is not the only participant of Sasagainu lineage in this Exam.” Tsunade explained quietly.

“What of it? There are two Hyuga clan members competing in the Final Rounds.” Homura was disinterested, “These things are coincidence.”

“I don’t want to assume it’s a coincidence while that brute walks freely in my village.” Tsunade asserted, “As Danzo mentioned, the loyalty and purposes of clansmen from the Sasagainu who still exist in Iwagakure…it’s idiotic to pretend that they have no grudges against their kin who settled in Konohagakure. There will be no interaction between this stranger and Tenten of Team Gai, not while this Exam is ongoing.”

“And at no point after that.” Danzo concurred, “Such interchange will not be in the best interest of Leaf.”

Homura innocuously reminded them, “Peace has been made between our villages.”

“That armistice never guaranteed anything from Dintei Bi’s regime, which operates independently of Hidden Rock.” The Root director illuminated, “Should he have any operatives residing in Iwa, they are assuredly no friends of their clan’s main line, nor friends of anyone in the Leaf Village. Tsunade is indicating this possibility, and indeed we should remain cautious.”

Koharu held up Huo’s Chunin Exam entry application before sliding it across the table, “This admission file excludes so much as a hint of the affiliation you fear could exist. He is a seventeen-year-old raised since infancy by a foster family of Iwa’s preeminent artisans, and he graduated at the top of his class…with accolades from the Tsuchikage, already.” The old woman tittered, “And this child is a soldier of Dintei Bi, you suggest? He who has never known war or grudges?”

Homura also scoffed at the idea. For a wild moment, Tsunade had to digest the fact that Shimura Danzo was on her side for once. Well. It looked that way. ‘It’s probably to his benefit…’

“It has been suggested. I will see to it that Root keeps surveillance over this boy.” Danzo decided, “This scrutiny shall in no way interfere with his Exam preparation or eligibility. However, should any incriminating activity be discovered…it will immediately be reported to those gathered here.”

Reluctantly, Koharu and Homura accepted the measure.

Tsunade added, “Keep watch over his Jounin Sensei as well. His teammates have already returned to Iwagakure to recover…but I want to be sure that his chaperone is innocent.”

Danzo echoed the idea before Koharu and Homura rose and took their leave. Cradling her chin, Tsunade poured over the open files and photos on the table, “How does a talented Genin of Huo’s background avoid being promoted to a higher rank for so long? At age 10 he graduated. Seven years is a long time to dally…”

“Not for being a poor-test taker, certainly. No Genin willingly avoids ascending in rank unless they are told to do so.” Danzo wagered, “They are simply too ambitious to burke that desire. For that reason alone I would suspect this young man’s motives…and yet…” He pushed off of the sofa, teetering over his cane, “Until we have evidence, we are merely quailing at fantasies.”
“Oh believe me,” Tsunade said severely, “I do not cower at the likes of that sort of ninja.”

The threat in her eyes promised: *I would have his head, though.*

They concluded the session and Tsunade pressed on to her third engagement, stopping at the building’s kitchen for some sustenance. It was wrong to take the convenience store boxed-lunch that was sitting unwatched on the counter, *‘But if its owner cared they would not have left it where the Hokage could find it…’* Tsunade helped herself, taking the canned tea and chopsticks with her in a plastic bag. *‘If anyone complains about this I’ll confess to it, but I just don’t have the time to stop for lunch now…’*

She was not due to visit the Academy for another hour, so she made haste uptown and then along a winding, unpopulated route towards the ANBU command center. Tsunade puttered down a tunneling, stone stairway, and entered a code for a locked gate that stopped any wayward souls from wandering further. She tapped the buttons sleepily before trotting down the last of the stairs, noting the reverent pauses and greetings of Black Ops agents in the underground atrium.

“Good morning, ah yes, well it’s afternoon just about,” She gave them a small wave, appreciating their respect and good manners. As the Hokage crossed the dried clay quad that stretched before the command center’s building, she frowned at the blown-out neon sign precariously hanging over the doorway. *‘They had better fix that. It’s unsightly!’*

While stepping inside she softly greeted off-duty agents and the secretary, skirting the bustling locker room before stopping in the break room. Inside it was quiet with a single large table and many chairs, with a pantry, sink, radio switchboard and security camera screens. Tsunade took a seat beside Yugao at the table who was already eating lunch. The violet haired woman froze before taking another bite, “Hokage-sama, no one said that you’d—”

“I know. I had the time to drop in and get away from my desk.” Tsunade drew out the bento and opened it, “How are you, young lady?”

Yugao smiled a small, flattered smile, “Rested. Commander asked me to do a check-in at the daimyo’s castle this afternoon. Then I have a date with my husband this evening.”

“Hm, then you’d better not be late. I heard the Oga clan dignitaries were visiting the daimyo. I highly doubt there’s any conflict those clowns could unleash that you couldn’t erase in a few minutes.” Tsunade swirled medallions of chicken in sauce before popping them into her mouth, “I thought about asking Hayate to sign up as a substitute proctor for the Exam in case of unforeseen events…but he hasn’t gotten back to me.”

“I know for a fact he isn’t fond of that role.” Yugao assured her, “I apologize for his avoidance, my-”

“I really don’t mind. I’ll just keep Shikamaru on duty even if he calls in sick.”

“Ah, well, Nara-san is young and strong. He’s done a good job so far.”

“I think so too.” Tsunade agreed, cracking open the can of tea, “Tell me, Sai is in today, isn’t he?”

“In the locker room changing, I expect.”

“And Tenzo?”

“He also just got back.”
“Good. I want to have a word with them. Just a small assignment…” Tsunade spoke between bites of food, “What do you think of Sai?”

The woman looked thoughtful as she wrapped up the refuse of her finished lunch, “Reliable. Well… he’s learning. He is also very entertaining.”

“Entertaining?” Tsunade wondered if she had misheard.

“He refers to everyone here by nicknames, except for the Commander and Tenzo. It helps him make positive associations.”

“He is smart not to do such a thing with me.”

“Not to your face, milady.” Yugao teased her, “I’ve gotten used to being called Plum.”

“How strangely fitting.”

“Don’t you think so? Hayate hates it.” Yugao threw her trash out and then offered, “I’ll fetch Sai and Tenzo for you, Hokage-sama. Please wait a moment.”

Tsunade cheerfully continued eating. She perfectly understood why the Sandaime Hokage had favored Yugao so much. ’She’s a genuine pleasure to be around.’

Come to think of it, most people in the Black Ops were easy to get along with. Tsunade felt that at least in her case, members of the ANBU were conditioned to respect the Hokage and serve the village. Right there: that was already preferential treatment. ’The complete opposite of how I am looked at when I visit Root…like I’m some kind of beast that came prowling in and they go on alert, with their fake words and fake consideration.’ Her ANBU agents felt truly warm and selfless. Not a perfect bunch, of course, but they were authentic, ‘Sure they’ve got their quirks, but haven’t I got those in spades myself?’

Tenzo poked his head into the break room, “Tsunade-sama, you take lunch in here?”

“Now I do.”

The tall man loped inside and Sai followed a few paces behind him, both still damp from showering. They were dressed in simple black sweatshirts and pants, standing expectantly beside the table as Tsunade munched on rice and vegetables.

“I have a task for you two,” Tsunade informed them, “I’ll run it by the Commander so you can fit this in between missions he assigns.”

Tenzo smiled knowingly, “Does it concern the Chunin Exam’s security, ma’am?”

“In function, it does. There is a Genin participant from Hidden Rock who is now under Root’s surveillance. That should essentially quell any threat this boy poses to others, however…” The Hokage put down her utensils and grew serious, “I can’t even trust that Root won’t facilitate something shady if Danzo believes it is to the Leaf Village’s benefit. Sai was part of such a bait-and-switch tactic in the past, and I want to be sure that Danzo isn’t dealing under the table.”

“This may not be an ideal time for him to do so.” Sai pointed out, “But that does not preclude Danzo-sama from trying to organize future arrangements.”

“So you want us to keep watch over Root…who is watching over this Genin suspect?” Tenzo verified, his face scrunched up as he followed the idea, “And report any type of communication or
agreements between those parties?”

Tsunade nodded, “If you see anything remotely cordial between them, come straight to me. If it is nothing more than run-of-the-mill reconnaissance on that Genin…then I’d be relieved.”

“Understood.”

“With that out of the way, how’s life?” Tsunade asked, “I’ve heard that most of Black Ops is warming up to you, Sai.”

“I think so.” Sai assessed, “Recently, Tenzo tells me when I act or speak in ways that are considered ‘rude’ and ‘unacceptable.’ This happens most often when I try to be truthful.”

Tenzo lightly slapped his cheek with his hand, “Sai, when you point out the flaws and insecurities of others, even if you’re accurate, that doesn’t foster goodwill with your acquaintances.”

“Some of them do have small penises.” Sai defended.

“At the very least, don’t make comments like that in the locker room.” Tenzo sighed.

“Fibbing is a new concept for him, eh?” Tsunade leaned back in her chair, “White lies help. So do compliments. Focus on the positive aspects in others, and avoid the negatives when you can.”

Sai had a spaced-out look, “That is difficult.”

“Exactly. Get good at it. That is, work on your charm and friendliness.” The Hokage recommended, “Heaven knows I’m still endeavoring on that subject.”

__Meanwhile, above ground in the heart of the Leaf Village…__

Gaara was nostalgically touring the streets.

Earlier, he had thanked the team of freshly post-Academy Genin that Tsunade had assigned to escort Matsuri around. Though Gaara had promised his student that he would personally take her to points of interest around the village he had grown up in, he lacked the time. He was required to return to Suna for the week and manage his duties. When Kankuro and Temari returned home from the last few days of closing work in the Tide Village, they could oversee many of Gaara’s responsibilities while he stayed with Matsuri in the Leaf Village.

Down the road, he could see Matsuri in step with Konohamaru and his teammates, Moegi and Udon. They had taken to the older girl and admired that she had made it into the Final Round of the Exam. Matsuri waved off their fawning as they went to lunch. Gaara thought to himself, ‘She’ll probably have fun with them this week. Once I return here…I will double her training.’ Gaara wanted her seriously prepared to face Lee at the Tournament.

Before departing for Hidden Sand, Gaara had hoped to have a word with Sakura. It would be downright inconsiderate to leave without giving her any kind of warning. He had wandered around in search of her, having no luck finding his girlfriend at home nor at the Hokage’s office. Tsunade was also absent, he discovered. She may have known where he could look. ‘No matter. The Hokage already knows I’ll be gone for a few days.’

The many sights of his former home were distracting. The many spots he had gotten into mischief with his friends, their favorite eateries, social hubs, and training yards. He had loitered on a few rooftops, remembering his younger days of slacking off and staring at the sky. Gaara closed his eyes
and breathed in the soft forest air. He had missed it. He had missed the gentle weather and green life of this country— longed for his precious people here. How had he stayed away for so long without going insane?

“I should move my office here.” Gaara daydreamed out loud. With a small sigh he leaned back on the stucco of the building he was perched on top of, appreciating of the mild summer breeze.

He caught himself lollygagging again. ‘I need to return to Suna,’ And before that, ‘Sakura.’

Gaara set out again and passed by the Academy, staring over the heads of gathered children. Oh. There was Tsunade. She was out in the Academy yard giving a demonstration of her bulldozing strength and taking questions. Gaara took a moment to watch before crossing past the yard’s gate and circling ‘round the youngsters (twittering in surprise at the sight of him) and he came to a halt beside the Hokage. A nearby Chunin instructor snickered at his squealing students.

“Good afternoon, class.” Gaara acknowledged the children who boomed back in unison happily, “Tsunade-sama…”

“Everyone, this rude interruption is being made by the Kazekage.” Tsunade pointed out before turning to Gaara, “What do you want? You’re pretty easy for me to guess, hold on…Tide Village funding? Letters from your team? Upset stomach? Exam questions? Lunch date? Or Sakura?”

Gaara just frowned at her.

“The last one.” Tsunade sighed and then motioned with her hand, “I spoke with her early this morning. I know Sakura should be about done with her hospital tasks, and then she mentioned errands she had to run. Check the Pailü Weapon Shop or the Green Mart. You’ll find her, Gaara.”

He nodded in gratitude “Thank you, and I apologize for interrupting your lesson.”

“Yes, well, you were looking a bit desperate.” She shooed him away, “I’ll see you next week.”

As Gaara exited the yard he did catch the chatter of students as Tsunade tried to recapture their attention.

While the Weapon Shop was buzzing with activity, he did not find Sakura there. Gaara had better luck in aisle 9 of the supermarket. At the far end of a row of toiletries, Sakura was stooped over and scrutinizing the labels of two comparable boxes. He blinked and took in the sight of her civilian clothes: a pale green t-shirt and white shorts; her slim legs teetering above heeled sandals. Gaara had a self-conscious moment in which he wondered if his long-sleeved overcoat qualified as overdressed in the summertime, ‘I should come back next week with simpler clothes.’

So focused was Sakura that she did not notice another occupant in the aisle until a voice greeted her from behind.

She flinched and held back a startled shriek, rapidly comporting herself, “Gaara!” Sakura turned and hastily crammed items in a basket, “I was, uh, going to see what you were up to after-!”

“I know how many responsibilities you have. I thought it was better to come to you, Sakura.” He assured her.

It was as if he had caught her committing a felony offense. Sakura seemed to stretch herself out in an attempt to distract him from the consumables on the shelf behind her. She spoke with a cadence that was nearly too fast to comprehend, “It’s nice to have a free day, isn’t it? Ah, that is, Tsunade-sama still asked me to do rounds at the recovery ward before I did today’s errands. Got through that
quickly but shopping for Mom takes a while, she’s so particular—”

Gaara scrunched his face at her. This diversionary dialogue was not normal. And there, in the puzzling moment she had somehow talked him into walking, Gaara glimpsed the items stocked behind her as they vacated the area. Side-by-side displays of condoms and women’s sanitary products.

He had looked away before he could determine which of those items she had picked up and Sakura, of course, slapped his hand away when he offered to hold the basket. Ignorance was probably bliss, Gaara determined.

Sakura relaxed gradually as they proceeded through aisles, acquiring the last few items she needed to bring home.

“Matsuri isn’t with you today?” Sakura asked while inspecting the sell-by date of a milk carton.

“She’s in the care of a Genin team that will be showing her around.” Gaara informed her.

“So…?” The young woman roamed towards the produce section, “Then maybe you and I could do something?” She clarified as she hovered over turnips and daikon, “Maybe lunch?”

He smiled wanly, “I’d like nothing more, but I should be going soon.”

Gaara replied to the questioning expression she wore, fumbling over vegetables.

“I have to leave and resume my duties as Kazekage. My siblings will be able to take over for me when they return at the end of this week.” Gaara explained, “I wanted to tell you before I left. Once Temari and Kankuro are available to manage the office, I will be here for the rest of the month to train Matsuri.”

“Oh, I see.” Sakura nodded in understanding.

They got in line at a register, only drawing a single curious look from another shopper. Gaara liked that his popularity in Suna was more or less absent in Konoha. Hardly any common folk could recognize him as the current Kazekage, or would distinguish him as a noteworthy person in general. It was nice to go through his day without being harried.

“Some other time, then,” Sakura figured, “In the near future.”

“Yes. Keep me informed of your schedule. I will work around it so I can see you.”

She beamed at the notion as she set to pay the cashier, who then thanked them for shopping at Green Mart. With her groceries unseen in doubled-up plastic, this time Sakura let Gaara carry a bag. He insisted on walking her home before his departure. They opted for side streets.

“I sure do miss this…” Sakura sighed, “Even if it’s as simple as walking around with you, I miss the days when I took it for granted.”

“As do I.”

“You’re handy for when it rains too. I used to forget my umbrella on purpose, so I never had it when class was over.” She gave him a sly, sidelong look, “You walked me home from the Academy no matter what.”

“Ah, so you purposefully took advantage.” He absolutely reveled in the fact that she had wanted his
attention even back then.

At his hip, Gaara unthinkingly patted a small, hyper-condensed gourd of sand that was secured to his belt. It was much less cumbersome than his former accessory. Gaara then noted, “The forecast did call for rain…”

“Yeah, but you’ll be gone by the time it starts.” Sakura’s voice faltered and she fell quiet.

They silently traveled a deserted block that ran parallel to the main avenue. In those quiet minutes under a partly cloudy sky, his free hand folded over hers and held, even as they rounded a corner. Sakura made a small appreciative sound and kept her eyes squeezed shut, internally fighting off her worries. Even if he would only be away for a short amount of time this week, missing him was still as sharp a feeling as it had always been. ‘I’ve got no real reason to be disappointed, but I might’ve gotten a little too excited to see him here…’

When they arrived at a narrow back alley that served as a cut-through to the busy street beyond, the two came to a stop, lingering in the privacy between brick walls. Around the corner was home, and of course, so was Gaara’s inevitable parting. Neither said a word as they automatically set their bags on the ground and wound arms around each other, stealing the last bit of time they could.

In the back of his mind, Gaara could hear Shukaku whispering curiously, What is she upset about?

‘We want to be around each other, and we are both equally preoccupied with other things. It’s frustrating. I feel the same way Sakura does.’

Hn, then why are you both so responsible if it’s frustrating? Just do what you want.

‘We aren’t like that.’

I do what I want.

‘I know.’

Show up late to whatever you have to do, or kill whoever she has an appointment with. Gaara could almost hear the approving nod the tanuki accompanied the statement with, That’ll cheer her up. Free up some time…

‘If it was acceptable for a Kage, or anyone, to kill appointees just to save time…the Hokage would have close to zero contacts.’

So I guess that’s a no.

‘Absolutely a ‘no.’ You and I need to review the things that warrant incarceration in this day and age.’

Yeah, I know I’m a bit behind the times. Shukaku stilled and took in the same scent Gaara did as he pressed his nose to pink tresses. Sakura had tucked her head beneath his chin and held him tightly.

She smells good. The Tailed-Beast acknowledged, Show her.

Trying not to focus on his inner-dialogue, Gaara grudgingly replied, ‘You don’t make any sense. Stop talking.’ But with that comment he had lost track of when he had sandwiched Sakura between his body and the wall, feeling her hands snake up and behind his neck.
She wants you to, see? Show her how good she smells and feels.

He could not answer back anymore. His attention was fixed on Sakura; with her head tilted up toward him, eyes half-hooded, rose hued lips parted as his mouth slanted over hers, and, There… The sounds she made, stirring him with want and closeness, they were criminal, Just a little. Gaara slipped a hand beneath her shirt and pawed at the silken skin of her stomach and hip, Soft! Wow. You said you had something important to do? Don’t bother!

By then Gaara had certainly forgotten. The third-party voice in his head made suggestions that, for some reason, he immediately acted upon. Sakura did not discourage the behavior; her hands roamed up to his hair, tugging at red locks, her kisses growing urgent while his fingertips slipped ’round her hips and stroked the small of her back.

How perfectly she fit against him with her petite frame. When Sakura had last visited the Sand Village, he had wanted this, these motions and touches that they could have used to discover each other. Desire simmered in his blood, coursing down every limb, convening low in his belly as he pressed against her… Good, now, turn her around and have at it.

The bubble of disconnected fantasy in his head burst, and Gaara blinked hard as he pulled back and stopped himself. Doing everything he was told would lead to trouble. Shukaku was miffed, What’d you stop for? Conditions are perfect!

‘No, and what do you know about any of this anyway?’

I’ve got news for ya, Gaara: you’re not the first jinchuriki I have dwelled inside of. Really…do you know how many dalliances I’ve spectated? I know more than you for sure, ya cherry-red virgin…

Oh. Input like this was going to complicate any form of intimacy a hundred-fold, especially with Shukaku pitching insults like that.

While Gaara was reeling, Sakura gently patted his cheek and tried to snap him out of his weird and abrupt trance, “Gaara?” She snapped her fingers in front of his eyes and it somehow retrieved him, “Are you okay? I’m sorry if I—”

“Whatever you do, do not apologize.” He cut her off, reaching for her hands again and securing them, “I was having a mild episode.”

“An-?” She trailed off, adopting a concerned smile, “I didn’t know you suffered from things like that.”

“Anxiety.”

“Huh, you too?” Sakura kissed him a final time, tenderly, “What a time for that to strike…it was getting good…”

Gaara agreed with a sigh, “I know.”

Their fronts were still pressed together suggestively, but Gaara stepped away and recommenced the formalities. He lifted both shopping bags with one hand and led Sakura along with the other.

“Can we do more of that when you come back?” Sakura asked, “I didn’t want to stop.”

On the main road and in view of society, Gaara gave her a pained look, “I—” Shukaku’s voice was
still ringing in his head, nosy and clamoring for attention, “I think we could.”

Sakura quirked an eyebrow at the response as they proceeded southbound towards her home. About a block away from the house, Sakura halted and pointed out the open front window. It had definitely been unbolted by her watchful mother, “Mom’s got the eyes of a hawk and if she sees you with me…” She shook her head in dismay, “She’ll invite you for lunch and hold you hostage.”

“Next time, I won’t mind that so much.”

He let Sakura take the bags from him, appreciating the small smile she tried to conceal, “It could be hours that you’ll never get back, Gaara.”

“Worse things demand more of my time on a regular basis.” Gaara assured her, “Meeting your parents is something I have meant to do.”

Her eyes were wide and glassy, and she nodded as calmly as she could. This man was serious.

“And also…” He went on, “There is…something I want to talk to you about when I return.”

Somewhere in her clever brain the buzzer went off again, and Sakura loosely connected the suggestion to Gaara’s mental block from earlier. She wondered, “Is it something bad?”

“No. It’s something personal. Something about myself that I haven’t told you yet.” He leaned in and kissed her temple, “But now I want to.”

“Oh!” How often did people hear those words come from the Kazekage’s mouth? “I look forward to it.”

He promised, “I won’t be long.” Then he turned and set off; back to trekking the desert paths and back to prosaic tasks and paperwork. Sakura watched until Gaara was indistinguishable from the foot traffic on the horizon, and then she turned back towards her house.

In timely fashion, Ino had pounced on her within seconds, “Oooh!” She caught Sakura by the shoulders and matched her walking pace, “What was he doing here? Forehead-woman, I heard the Kazekage had work to do in the Sand Village…”

“He wanted to say goodbye.” Sakura justified simply.

“Right…and also, I was told that you did some shopping today; some of that shopping involved what you and I discussed, hm?” Ino probed with a knowing look, “Well? Did you buy any?”

“I did, but he snuck up on me!” Sakura wailed quietly, frustrated, fishing through a plastic bag towards the contents in question.

“Jeez, it’s like Gaara has a sixth-sense when anything involves you.” Ino tapped her chin, “Ah, let me see what you got…” She reached past Sakura to read over the box’s packaging. She quickly frowned, “Sakura.”

“What? I’ve been embarrassed enough for one day…”

The two halted while Ino pointed out, “This box…had better be for your mother. A probiotic feminine supplement? What the hell…”

Alarmed, Sakura seized the box, “What? I didn’t-!”

“Were you even paying attention? These aren’t condoms. They’re superfluous merchandise
companies want women to think they need.” Ino rumbled in great annoyance, “Turn around and bring these back to the store. You can’t spend money on stuff you can’t use!”

Sakura covered her face with a hand and continued walking home, “Sure I can. I’m too ashamed to even care at this point.”

“Sakura. Stop. You goofed, but so what? He probably didn’t even notice or care what you were buying.” Ino pulled back on her friend’s wrist, “Easily fixable. Just go back and return it.”

“Can’t.” The pinkette shook her head sullenly, “I can’t handle anymore today. Just let me go home, Pig.”

Pushed to the end of her patience, Ino snatched the bag with the offending box. She retrieved the mistaken product and the receipt, “Go home you wuss. I’ll do it myself. And because I’m nice, I’ll disguise the real goods when I bring them to you.”

Sakura nodded in humiliation.

“Oh, and don’t leave without me for this afternoon’s meeting!” Ino called over her shoulder as she started out towards the Green Mart, “Everyone’s going to be there.”

And indeed, everyone had piled into Tsunade’s office.

An hour and a half after Ino returned with condoms and secretively passed them off to her friend, the two young women tarried a little before setting out for the Administrative Building.

They were among the last to congregate for the summons of the Hokage. Tsunade was slumped over her desk tiredly by the time all of her finalist Leaf Genin had arrived, and she asked Shikamaru to kindly shut the door and quiet everyone down. The volume in the room decreased.

“Welcome,” Tsunade pushed herself back into an upright position, “Thank you all for making it. I know that you’re all about ready to begin devoting each and every day to uninterrupted training before the Tournament…but I ask that you lend me your ears for a few minutes.”

When respectful silence answered her Tsunade continued, “I have a mission I want you all to complete.”

Then the noise returned.

“What?!”

“What mission?”

“I thought we don’t work during the Exam…”

Shikamaru, effectively the moderator of the forum, raised his hands and calmed the room again. Sakura was given the floor when Tsunade nodded to her, “Tsunade-shishou…we were told by you and our Jounin Sensei that all mission activity is suspended for students competing in the Chunin Exam.”

“Correct, Sakura. However, I would like to advise you that this is not an ordinary request, and I count this as an activity outside of the suspension parameters in place for the Exam. Really…it shouldn’t be that much work.” The Hokage defended, “It’s a simple matter. If you complete this, you will all be awarded three basis points on your Final Round evaluation.” Tsunade smiled, “Your
aptitude and judgement at the Tournament is scored; do not forget. It’s how evaluators decide who is Chunin material and who isn’t. I’m offering you all a little nudge in the right direction.”

“Three points on a scale of what?” Kiba wondered.

“That’s not something we are able to disclose to Exam participants.” Tsunade replied, “Regardless, you should all do your best.”

If it was a simple task and they were being spoon-fed points, it seemed like a home run to most everyone. The youngsters asked the Hokage what it was they had to do.

“I want you…” Tsunade leaned back in her chair and announced, “To look good.”

She got many blank stares in return, and so the Hokage elaborated, “This is a mission I am personally assigning all of you: dress to the nines. Be impeccably groomed and prim, as flashy and eye-catching as you can all possibly be when you set foot in the stadium…”

They were slowly starting to understand.

“I want you to incite furious betting on the hottest looking teams. I want those gambling suckers to spend an obscene amount of money at this event, and you are the ones who are going to make it happen!” Tsunade looked positively thrilled.

Shikamaru wisely added to the incredulous Genin, “To clarify the rules here…rigging bets is forbidden and a punishable offense, but being attractive is perfectly legal. I already read over the rule book for this one. It checks out.”

“Shishou!” Sakura was not very pleased with the idea, “Are you using the Tournament as a platform to make quick cash? We talked about this!”

Tsunade waved her off, unabashed, “Sakura, please, don’t scold me. It’s worth three points. This isn’t uncompensated work.” She added, “Besides, a huge percentage of the betting proceeds are going back into public programs in our village.”

“Is that stimulus funding confirmed in writing?” Shino was curious.

Tsunade slid a document across her desk and let the astute young man look it over.

Sakura pursed her lips, glancing around at many of her stupefied friends.

“I want you all to be seen and adored. Of course, it’s optional. Show up as plain as you want to be, that’s fine: but don’t expect me to award you anything for that.” Tsunade warned.

Sato raised his hand.

“Yes, Sato.”

“Just confirming that this definitely isn’t illegal?” The young Hatake asked, “I’m going to do it anyway, of course, because you’re the Hokage.”

“In my extensive knowledge of gambling, eligible picks that are well-dressed are completely acceptable and will only influence bets superficially. At best.” Tsunade concluded.

“Good enough for me.” Sato nodded and folded his arms.

This statement seemed to win over most of the room’s occupants. Many began to laud the idea,
growling excited, and after Tsunade dismissed them and advised they get right on it, the room emptied out.

The teams filed out of the tower and went their separate ways, discussing how they intended to “look good.”

Tenten was cringing.

Walking ahead of her teammates, she muttered worriedly to herself as she realized this task was not as easy as it sounded…especially not for her team.

“We can’t. We. Can’t.” She shook her head violently and then rested her sad gaze on Lee, “Sorry. Sorry…” Tenten muttered and stalked onward as they followed.

“Why is Tenten so discouraged by this mission?” Lee asked Neji worriedly, “I am sure we can accomplish this!”

“It’s…” Neji looked at his friend sympathetically, unwilling to comment on Lee’s prominent features and Tenten’s concern about them.

They finally stopped uptown and Tenten faced the boys, frowning, “We have to do something. We’d be crazy to pass over free points.”

“Then I suggest we go shopping.” Lee nodded.

“Everyone else will be doing that.” Tenten pointed out, “We may need to try a different approach to…find new looks. I can consult with Yugao. She knows how to make me pretty, at least.” She scrutinized Lee and Neji, “And she can probably get your hair under control too.” Tenten was speaking about the both of them.

“It will take more than grooming.” Neji reminded her.

“Yeah, I know that, but I…” Tenten’s head lolled on her neck dejectedly, “I know this team never really concerned itself with how it looked. We don’t care. It’s all about performance and skill…”

Lee added jubilantly, “And determination!”

“Yeah.” Tenten sighed.

Neji rescued the situation by stating, “We are going to the Hyuga estate. Kayato-san is a master seamstress…and I know it’s time that I asked her for a favor.”

Tenten wondered if she was imagining a chorus of angels sounding at the news. She never would have thought that Neji had the solution to looking good. Then again, the Hyuga clan had an abundance of resources that, until recently, Neji had not really let them tap into.

During the walk, Tenten then thought to herself, ‘Well, he probably doesn’t want us dragging him down in this endeavor. Of all the people on this team, Neji is certainly the most…good-looking.’ She caught herself staring from her lateral position, shaking off the thought and kept her eyes forward.

A few street lengths away from Hyuga grounds, the slow pattering of rain drops began. The team hurried and arrived at the covered porch of the Main House moments before the shower began to fall torrentially. All politely removed their shoes and followed Neji indoors.
After a quick scan with his Byakugan, he found that Kayato was in a craft room with several Branch members, meticulously dying the fabric of a new kimono. Neji reminded his teammates that Kayato was Fujita’s mother, and that she may wish to visit her son in the hospital sooner than take up another tailoring project. They accepted the notion and moved quietly down the pristine hallways of the house.

Neji knocked once before sliding the door of the craft room open. Branch members quickly greeted him, “Good afternoon, Neji-sama!”

“Good afternoon,” He gave them all a warm look before turning to Kayato, “Kayato-san, do you have a moment?”

“For the Prince? I surely do.” The woman stood and patted her ink-stained hands on an apron, “How are you, Neji-sama? Oh, and you’ve brought your teammates with you!”

“We have a request to make. It involves a task that the Hokage assigned us.”

“You don’t say…come on in, then.” She ushered them inside, greeting Neji’s friends, “I remember that you are Tenten and Lee, yes? Watch your step. We’ve made a bit of a mess in here, spreading out supplies. This kimono was commissioned by a wealthy family…it’ll take weeks to finish…”

The group carefully stepped over the buckets, pans, threads and measures, taking a seat on the clear side of the room. The Branch members continued detailing work on the sleeves of the garment.

“Now, what would a mission assigned by the Hokage have to do with me?” Kayato shrewdly questioned.

“Tsunade-sama asked those competing in the Tournament to look their best. She decided that our public appearances were important enough to award or deny points over.” Tenten explained ruefully, “And…all of our peers are probably flocking to shops as we speak.”

One of the Branch members snickered, “Tsunade-sama demands the strangest things…”

Neji and Lee agreed with a simultaneous nod of their heads.

Kayato grasped the situation, “Hmm, so I see. You three sought me in the hopes I could assist? At least with outfits I can. How much time do I have?”

“Just under four weeks.” Neji notified her.

“That’s not much time at all…” The woman cupped her chin and thought about it, “Haruhi and Himitsu here can continue this kimono without me.” She looked to her Branch associates, “If you two don’t mind taking over? You can split my share of the commission payment.”

“No, Kayato-sama, we couldn’t—”

“I insist.” She pressed, “I want to help Neji-sama with this assignment. I am glad that he has faith in my work.” Kayato grinned, “But I will need to devote as much time as possible to this project.”

Tenten felt a smidge regretful about their demand, “We can always look—”

“No, no. Please do not try to look elsewhere. I’m the best at what I do in this village.” The woman untied and removed her dirtied apron, very confident, “And as you are all friends of Fujita, I am more than happy to help you.” Kayato gestured to an adjoining door with another room, “Come with me.”
They passed through the door to the adjacent room, but not before Lee gave a gracious wave of farewell to the toiling Branch needle workers.

It was a makeshift studio-room that was bursting with stacked rolls of fabric and tools, fitting mannequins, drawers of supplies, and a table for standing work. Kayato leaned over the table and tapped a pen on a pad of paper, letting her eyes drift left to right across Lee, Tenten, and Neji. They stood in awkward silence.

“Do any of you watch movies?” The woman asked out of the blue.

Neji looked at her for a long moment before responding in the negative, “I do not.”

“Films? Sometimes Lee and I go see them with friends.” Tenten replied, displaying their elevated participation in society, “Why do you ask that?”

“I do a lot of costume work for films that are shot in the Fire Country and our close neighbors.” Kayato enlightened them, “Lee reminds me of a great film I enjoyed working on.”

Neji and Tenten exchanged side-eye glances with each other, wondering if their jaws were going to hit the floor.

“That was a fun one. I also worked on costumes for the Middle Kingdom series, did some shoots in the Land of Iron many years ago, some theater costume design…and now I get requests for the new Fujikaze Yukie movies, from time to time.” Kayato smiled at them, “I think I can make you stand out, is what I mean.”

She moved around the table and fussed at the collar of Tenten’s cheongsam top, “I like the idea of this garment…Han-style…very regal…” Kayato leaned in and inspected Lee’s face, “He has good features. Bright colors will suit you, Lee. Not this drab green…” She motioned at his jumpsuit dismissively. He whimpered sadly at the opinion.

When she stopped beside Neji she chuckled, “You avoid most color, Neji-sama. You probably just don’t know what will complement your complexion…” She fusset at his sleeveless gi, “It’s summertime. We’ll go for shorter sleeves, tailored fits…I think I want your team to have a cohesive theme…hmm.” Kayato returned to her table and scribbled on her pad, jotting notes and sketching crude lines.

She looked up, “Do you have a few minutes? I’ll take your measurements to start and then ask you to come back tomorrow. I need to find the materials I want to use for you, because I do not have them here at the moment.”

“Of course!” Tenten stepped up first and held her arms out, letting Kayato wrap a tape measure around her while the woman chattered excitedly. Tenten kept thinking in amazement to herself about how Kayato had valued Lee’s…er, strong, features. She sounded as though she knew exactly what to look for aesthetics-wise.

While Neji and Lee waited for their turns, Lee whispered sadly, “This shade of green is not so bad…”

The next day, as the Tournament-bound Genin met with their teams and respective sensei, the groups scheduled how and when training would take place.

Lee was eager to spend the next few weeks under Gai’s harshest tutelage, but also mentioned that his grandfather had reserved his time every morning Tuesday through Thursday for the next month. Gai
agreed that it was a workable schedule, and afterwards confirmed that Neji and Tenten did not mind depending on each other as training partners.

Neji noted that since they had been partners in training since time immemorial that it was no bother at all, “However, Wong Leung has also asked that we study with him Tuesday through Thursday.”

Tenten wilted at the thought of extra Wushu labor to top off a heavy workload. In contrast, Gai boomed with pride that they were all willing to push themselves.

Neji had learned from Fujita (during another hospital visit) that he had also requested of his mother outfit commissions for Ino and Chouji. At first Neji had wondered if it was even possible for Kayato to accomplish so much in the limited time they had, but Fujita assured him, “She was excited! She’s going to make a lot of money this month. She really loves what she does, you know.”

Then Neji conveniently remembered yes, he would be covering the outfitting expenses for his team. The cost was probably more than what Lee and Tenten combined could afford.

“Also,” Fujita added, “When it gets busy Mom makes Dad help her sometimes. He’s learned a thing or two.” Neji was not all that surprised that Hideyasu was willing to contribute.

That same morning while the Hyuga youngsters had been assembled, Hinata had listened interestedly about Kayato’s participation and spoke of what training arrangements she had heard about. She would be spending two weeks with Shino improving jutsu while their time was not otherwise occupied by their fathers and clan techniques. Sakura and Kiba had arranged to train together when they could, Hinata had been told.

Sato, she recalled, had immediately volunteered to work with Tama, but Hinata heard that Kakashi had muscled in and reserved evening lessons with her, to Sato’s great annoyance. Hinata imagined that Kakashi was concerned about Tama’s upcoming Final Round’s match, and wanted her to be fully prepared.

“Oh, and Sato-kun will be upcycling his grandfather Sakumo’s old clothes. Kurenai-sensei thought it was a good idea.” Hinata chirped, thinking of when Sato had proclaimed: vintage wins! Three points here I come.

With these things in mind, Neji recalled that Sato would be his first opponent at the Tournament. He stewed on this particular turn of events, knowing better than to underestimate an opponent as he had at the last Exam. When last he did that, Naruto had furiously walloped him with a sucker-Rasengan.

In many ways, Naruto and Sato were quite alike. Outgoing, sociable, talkative, fast friend-makers, and occasionally mischievous; but with fighting styles that were understandably different. All the same, Neji did not intend to let his guard down again. Neji had known since the visit to the Konoha Hot Springs that Sato had been keeping an eye on him, watching for any weaknesses he could exploit. That could be Sato’s great strength, Neji supposed. He used his gregarious nature to camouflage his discerning, hyper-critical perception of others. He was good at manipulating things in his favor, and was indirect in every sense that Naruto was direct.

‘If I go off of that fact, Sato will not bother using Genjutsu or other ineffective techniques against me.’ Neji thought, considering Sato’s preferred methods of beguiling opponents, ‘He is going to use something that I am less likely to deal with.’ And so, Neji concluded that White Chakra Sabres, the Chidori, owl summons, and other melee hazards could come into play.

Neji ran this idea by Tenten that rainy morning, asking what she thought of it.
“Oh make no mistake,” Tenten assured him, “Sato is more likely to stab you into submission than anything else. It’s all he can do against you, really, Neji. The problem is that he’s gotten really good. He’s been tutored by a Grass ninja for the last year.”

“Better than you?” He wondered.

A breathy scoff escaped her, “Pff, no! At least, I haven’t sparred with Sato recently enough to know that. But I wouldn’t expect to lose against him, as conceited as that sounds.”

“Then I want you to prepare me.” Neji decided.

“. . .we were going to train together anyway.” She gave him a puzzled look, “Do you want sword-specific drills?”

“Yes. The only way I could stop his attacks presently is with a rotation, or by using Wind Release counters against him.” The look on Neji’s face suggested that if he chopped Sato apart with Wind Release, Shikamaru would prooooobably disqualify him. “He will be expecting me to do that.”

Tenten smiled brightly, “You’re right. Everyone will expect that from you.” She jangled the hilt of Hok at her back, “I take it that you’re interested in one of these?”

He nodded and his girlfriend snickered, “It’ll cost you.”

Neji wore a very put-upon expression, ruminating on how he was already paying out of pocket for her and Lee regarding Kayato’s commission. Before he could bring up that point, Tenten poked his cheek and walked off, “Relax, I’m kidding! I think I’m the one who owes you. Let’s go to the shop. I’ve got spare swords you can try out.”

He trailed behind her for a few steps to watch her stride off confidently, silently relishing the sway of her hips. Training was going to be all well and good, Neji thought, provided that he could actually concentrate. At least for the next few weeks, they would be spending a lot of time exclusively with each other.

The rain fell lightly as they relocated. At the northeast central section of the village, Tenten stopped outside of the Pailü Weapon Shop and unlocked the front door. She kept the ‘Closed’ sign in place at the window but flipped the lights on.

“My Dad liked literature and poetry a lot. I never asked him, but I think that’s why he named this shop for poetic style,” Tenten glanced around before moving inside, “He thought that poetry and weaponry were alike in ways.”

“A profound thought.” Neji offered.

Tenten shrugged, “I never really got his artistic sense. I’m always trying to figure out why he did things the way he did.”

She led him towards a display of swords for sale and pointed her palm at the chrome racks, “Take your pick.” Neji stepped forward and regarded the variety before him: single and two-handed swords, broad and slim, some precarious in length and others with hybrid functions. There were a number of standard issue Chokuto straight-blades that most shinobi favored, with sheaths and ornaments in many colors.

Neji looked back at her, “What about something like you have?”

“A jian?” She raised her eyebrows, “I don’t sell those.”
“I don’t think that means there aren’t any here.”

“Well,” Her smirk morphed into a thoughtful expression, “There are, but I can’t guarantee the shape they’re in. Over here.”

They passed into the back room beyond the counter, where the initial entryway was storage for a plethora of weapons and projectiles, and further into the building was the sooty work station where several small, unlit furnaces sat.

Neji wondered aloud, “You’re the only person who works here?”

“Yeah. Dad didn’t hire employees. It curbed his overheads.” Tenten heaved open an upright, wooden chest, adding, “For years he was saving for a house, otherwise he could’ve justified having apprentices salaried under him.”

Neji noted, “You were an unpaid apprentice.”

“I was just happy to learn. Look here,” She tapped the scabbards of two different jian, “Dad kept these for himself and Mom, usually. They used them on missions.” Tenten lifted one and drew it from the sheath, “These haven’t been used in a while. They were probably kept for a rainy day—”

The comment slipped out, and she hoped that it did not matter to Neji that it was raining today and probably would for the rest of the week. Stupid coincidence.

He got a firm grip on the handsome weapon and was reminded of her sword. Neji distantly but fondly remembered handling Hok in the Land of Marshes. He was more inclined towards this type of weapon than he was towards those sitting on the ‘for sale’ racks.

“This one.” Neji said with certainty, passing it back to her, “If you’re willing to part with it.”

“Sure I am. Dad can’t use it anymore, so…” Tenten ripped a blank page from a supply ordering journal and made to cut it with the jian, but the paper was untouched by the dull blade, “Yowza… This poor thing has seen sharper days. Let me file and clean it up for you.”

She shuffled around and set the sword down on a work table, passing the sheath off to Neji. When he stood directionless and was fit to get in her way, Tenten pleasantly steered him towards a stool on the opposite side of the table and made him sit.

Then, she riffled around in wooden drawers, inspecting flat, rectangular stones. She retrieved one and set it atop a non-slip mat on the table, “Natural whetstone is best…and…” Tenten took a bottle of oil from a cabinet and drew a liquid line across the stone, “Some honing oil.” She informed Neji. She used a soft tool brush to disperse it across the whetstone.

He watched curiously as she easily freed the pommel from the hilt with a small wrench. It was all done with experienced ease; she unfitted the hilt and guard and slid them away from the blade. Tenten pointed to a metal extension and explained, “This is a tang. It holds the hilt steady, as you can see. This sword’s tang was shortened a bit…” She fussed at nicks and scores, mumbling to herself, and then finally lined up the sword’s edge carefully with the stone.

She skated the blade’s edges back and forth for a very long while, meticulous, frowning as she worked. Neji said nothing during that period and stared nearly without blinking. Tenten stopped after a time and soaked a small sheet of sandpaper in water she ran at a faucet. She told Neji, “This sandpaper has a much lower grit than the stone, so I’m going to use it to finalize the edge.” She smiled at his expectant face, “I’ll let you try it next time. This sword needs extra help today.”

Slowly, she ran the rough paper along the edges, her eyes narrowed, sharpening the blade from
shoulder to tip. When that was done Tenten set the sword aside and cleaned the leather elements of the hilt with wax, rubbing away at it with a fluffy cloth. She then shined the sword’s metal with polish before reassembling the guard, hilt, and pommel. Tenten sighed, swiping a last, thin layer of oil over the blade, “I hope that didn’t bore you…it can take a while, I know.”

He still seemed to be alert, “It didn’t.”

Tenten lifted the sheet of paper again and the jian cut it more easily than soft butter.

“It has recuperated!” She announced, handing it to Neji, “This is yours to keep, Neji. I’ve got to clean this mess up so please excuse me…”

He watched Tenten pittle around with the odds and ends she had scattered. While he truly did appreciate what she had just done for him, he could not peel his eyes away to look over the refurbished sword she’d given him. She was by far more interesting.

“Our father,” Neji said at length, “Did he buy it?”

“Oh?” Tenten looked over her shoulder, “Buy what?”

“Huh?” Tenten looked over her shoulder, “Buy what?”

“You said he was saving for a house.”

“Oh!” Tenten washed her hands at the sink, “It was more than that. I mean, when I was a baby he and my mom did have an awesome house…but the Nine-Tailed Fox crushed it just after we got out. Ever since then we rented and Dad meant to buy property and build on it. He wanted to make something better for us.” She dried her hands with a towel and added, “I think he bought the land about a week before he died. I still have that title lying around somewhere, if I ever need to sell it.”

“You shouldn’t do that.” His face was shadowed with grief. She didn’t see it. Tenten did not look back at him as she continued to tidy up.

Why was it that he could learn new things about her on a daily basis? Neji disdained how Tenten knew most everything about him, and how he lacked imagination, hobbies, special skills, at least in the respects that she did. She knew plenty about his family and clan, his aspirations, and what he had been through. It stood to reason that he had not asked frequently enough, or not cared enough in the past, to learn about her life.

She was multi-faceted and unique in ways that Neji would struggle to emulate. He spoke one language, he couldn’t cook, he didn’t own property, he didn’t own a shop or create things, he didn’t do much more than read in his free time, his lineage was by no means exotic, and his clan cared for him and paid for most anything he required. ‘I’m boring.’ He thought. He had not attempted much of anything outside of his comfort zone, aside from Lee and Tenten’s whimsies and Naruto encouraging him to respect others and forge friendships.

He slid the jian into its sheath and lowered his eyes. Just what had he done, or what was it, exactly, that Tenten was intrigued by? Never mind his terrible temper and barely-forgivable actions of the past, ‘How do you care for someone like me? Even I find that hard to do.’

“Hey, did you eat yet?” Tenten asked from somewhere within the bowels of a supply closet.

Neji gazed at the doorframe, where all that could be seen was her foot and ankle, tapping impatiently while she reached for things. Tenten dug through shelves and spoke aloud a list of chores she had just thought about tending to. That small action, however trivial, had captivated his attention.

Maybe, he ventured, it wasn’t worth fretting over what Tenten saw in him. If she ever took the time
to explain it, he probably wouldn’t entirely believe her or agree with what she considered positive or attractive in him. Then hell, what did it matter? Why did he need the specifics of how he had somehow, impossibly, become a precious person to someone else? Despite his shortcomings and flaws, somehow he was loved by her. Though he did not think he deserved such a thing, dense emotions flooded his senses; things like gratitude, admiration, worry: things that made his blood hot in a way that he had never felt.

“Hello over there?” Tenten had poked her head out, “I asked did you eat, Neji?”

His unwavering gaze was still set on her but he did not answer. She gulped. It kind of looked like he was some sort of predator, yes, seated on a stool, studying how best to consume her.

She smiled worriedly, “That looks like some intense thinking. Is everything alright?”

He stood up suddenly and she yipped in alarm. They stared at each other for almost a minute.

With her arms full of once-closeted supplies, Tenten advised, “Blink if you’re alive.”

Neji blinked.

“Good. What’s the matter?” She approached the table and set the items down, assessing him as he set the sword down as well. Neji admitted in a quiet voice that he had not yet eaten.

“Let’s go out and get something, then…” The suggestion stilled on her tongue when his hand slipped beneath her elbow and along her arm, drawing her close. She let her eyes drift curiously towards his face as he loomed; Neji reeling her in by her arms before she was squashed into him. It was quite nice all considered, she thought. ‘Neji doesn’t do normal affection. This I know.’

Then Tenten heard the words; they were spoken softly beside her cheek, “Thank you.”

And her stomach did some strange acrobatics while she let her hands bunch up the front of his shirt. Tucked against him, Tenten shook her head slightly, “Don’t mention it.”

He squeezed hard, and she contemplated if he could possibly be angry for some goddamned reason, but Neji went on to explain, “I never mention it. How do you know when I am grateful for anything?”

“I just—” She did not have a real answer to that, if she was perfectly honest, so Tenten only pressed her forehead to his shoulder and said nothing. But then she understood: he was cross with himself. Neji was having a tense moment of psychosocial recognition.

“For this and for everything else…” He murmured. She grew more relaxed in his hold, and made a soft chirp sound when he brushed past her earring and kissed the skin of her neck below. His lips worked slow and deliberately. Tenten wanted to curse Neji for his intrinsic skill, yet at the same time praise him for choosing the time and place to wield it so well. She was able to lay her hands just about anywhere on him without even the slightest objection, and by the time he passed her jaw and finally kissed her mouth, Tenten was ready to jump out of her skin.

‘Dear honored parents…please do not be haunting this shop or watching what I am about to do.’ She hoped to heaven, assisting Neji as he hitched beneath her thighs, lifted, and replaced her on the tabletop. Their kisses were insistent, and Tenten was emboldened to gently nip while his hands drifted from her hips to the curve of her bottom. If her keen ears were not mistaken, Neji had made a near inaudible sound or two, but she looked forward to drawing more out of him.

He pushed on her stomach, carefully laying her back, bending so he was not out of reach of her
mouth. In the seconds after that Neji had a lone thought that cautioned against further action without consent, but he did not verbally articulate the suggestion of removing clothes before Tenten yelped, fidgeting below him. Panic-stricken, he stared down at her while she shimmed and sat up again, “It’s alright, it wasn’t you…it’s whatever this—” She extracted a solid object that she had dumped on the table earlier, holding it up, “Whatever this is. It stuck my back…”

Neji paused and leveled his attention to the object in her hand, “Why did you take it out of storage?”

“There was a lot of old junk in that closet that I thought I should throw out.” She admitted, frowning at the solid-fiber ring, “I don’t even know what this thing is for.”

He gave her a you really don’t know? look before plucking it up, demonstrating, “It’s a spinner.” The outer casing spun smoothly across tiny ball bearings. It looked like it was meant to be worn as a bracelet.

Annoyed, she corrected, “It’s garbage.”

“This unwinds summoning scrolls.” Neji elaborated, “It’s something that you could use.”

“Not interested.” She tried to swipe it, but Neji easily held her wrist and slipped the spinner over her hand, “This was likely not your father’s size. It does have its place in your dispensary, though.”

“Maybe…Mom used it?” Tenten wondered, lightening up, “She did a lot of tool summoning in her day…and she was, uh, petite.” She curiously spun the device and imagined paper flying free, weapons bursting from seals.

“It’d be less cumbersome than that huge scroll Gai wants to replace for you.”

“Yeah, but it’ll take me more time to seal my arsenal in parchment this length and width…”

“One on each wrist would be optimal.”

She pouted, “You want to double my work, huh?”

“I’ll help you.” He offered, “You were more than happy to help me.”

While considering the offer, Tenten confessed, “I appreciate it…but today I…I just tried to get you alone while I could. I always have an ulterior motive when it comes to yo—” Neji had pushed her down again.

The roaming and groping resumed, and they kissed heavy, demanding kisses. It was clumsy and unsophisticated, but Neji had found a way, somehow, to magnetize himself to the places that felt best; and she was writhing under his ministrations, her fingers curling into the neck of his shirt. With a single tug, Tenten had accidentally pulled loose the collar of his sleeveless gi, the usual teal he wore, glimpsing pale skin beneath. Her eyes danced, ‘Like a marble man-statue, he is…” Neji used a practiced motion to pull it entirely off right before her wide eyes, and Tenten determined that maybe he had learned mind reading in the last five minutes.

Having carte blanche with his chest was delicious fun, she decided as she touched and skimmed. She nodded bleary-eyed assent to Neji when he held her legs just so, fingertips brushing her bottom again, their hips meeting readily as he folded over her for more devouring kisses.

A soft clang sound came from somewhere in the shop but they ignored it, both in utter and complete agreement that relations were about to ensue. Prior to Tenten’s intended removal of her now unnecessary attire (her shirt clasp-ties popped) another quiet, repetitive sound came from the
They craned their necks to look behind them, where Akamaru stood in the doorway, his tail wagging amiably... with Neji’s discarded shirt dangling from his maw.

Tenten uttered the word shit before Kiba dropped in, his voice raised in greeting, “Yo, anyone here? It was unlocked and we need to pick up... sa-some... uh-er—” He halted and blinked in shock.

Neji’s glare of instant death froze the unsuspecting visitor for a few terrifying moments before Kiba recovered, clearing his throat, and he took a shot at being understanding, “So... gotta say I’m sorry. The sign said closed... but! You left the door unlocked and the lights on. My team is here to buy stuff and I hope you can forgive an honest mistake.” He had turned around to not look at them, “Should I just tell Tama and Sakura... we’ll come back later?”

Tenten raised an arm like a flag of surrender, frustrated, “Nope. No... this isn’t... it’s... I’ll be out front in a minute. Check the re-supply sale bins before you look at the full-price items.”

“Thanks.” Kiba restrained a snicker while he commanded his dog, “Drop that, Akamaru.”

Akamaru left the shirt on the floor and trotted to the front of the store with his master.

Tenten had effectively snapped back to reality. She sat on the table and looped the clasps of her cheongsam shut (which had nearly been removed) while Neji stood in odious silence with his forehead leaned onto her shoulder. She stroked the back of his head and smoothed his hair, ’There, there...’ Listening as a growl of proposed murder escaped his throat.

“It’s kind of Dad’s fault that this happened…” She sighed and then expounded, “I need employees up front. Or Shadow Clones. Anything to watch the store so that this does not happen again…”

Neji finally moved to collect his shirt and put it on, “You’re suggesting this will happen again…”

Alarmed by the heart-crushing thought that he would forsake any advancement in the relationship, she leapt from the table and scattered the items she had pulled from the closet. “Neji. Maybe not here, and maybe not until we tackle the training objectives we set... but... but we…” Her tone trickled with distress.

Laughter was coming from the front of the store.

Neji gave her a lofty look as he turned towards the doorway, “It has little to do with time and place. It’s that I did poorly.”

“P-Poorly?” She sputtered.

“I can do much better.” He decided aloud, a self-assured smirk appearing on his face.

‘If that was him performing poorly I can’t imagine what he’ll do when he’s really trying.’ Her brain spun a little. Tenten exhaled a shaky breath and then scooped up the restored jian, returning it to him with a grumble.

She recommended, “Let’s get our minds out of the gutter.”

“For now.”
“And don’t come on to me in my place of work anymore.” Tenten added, pushing against his back and directed him out of the room, “You’re going to interfere with my sales, Hyuga.”
Bada-boom. Friendship, implied training, actual training, Scott Pilgrim, fried foods, and a lot of sin. To elaborate, the 'sin scenes' are sexy teenage flirtations and pawing that does not tip the scale towards explicit, but you may now consider yourselves warned.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Chapter Soundtrack: "Ends of the Earth" by Lord Huron

In the span of the first week, training rolled out at a grueling pace. Entire days were spent flexing muscle, spending chakra, and meals were forgotten or skipped. The only mission that the group of finalist Genin had been tasked with was not really a mission per se, and Tsunade’s "look good" assignment had not taken up too much time or attention. The 'wake up, work, sleep, repeat' routine had caught on.

One sunny morning, Gai was unnerved when Kakashi dropped by to ask for permission to leave the village with Tama.

"For training." Kakashi explained casually, "There's an uninhabited canyon a few miles shy of the border with the Land of Rivers. We're working on a technique."

"Surely you could train within the safety of our village?" Gai was stumped.

"Ah…no." Kakashi was not very forthcoming with information.

Grudgingly, Gai gave his blessing, provided that Tama cleared the suspicious request with her parents. Whatever it was, Kakashi did not want his other students, or anyone for that matter, observing what he taught the next generation of the Maito family. Gai could read between the lines.

Anything that Kakashi did not say actually said quite a lot. If he did not want to discuss which technique would be practiced in a location such as a desolate canyon, far from civilization, Gai could make an educated guess. 'Without a doubt, he will try to hone her Taijutsu. Perhaps Ninjutsu as well. Her opponent is guaranteed to be a difficult one…' He rubbed his chin in thought after Kakashi had left, The Inner Gates? Forbidden jutsu? My niece is not suited for the Chidori, but…I have no idea how Kakashi seeks to equip her against this adversary…'

Gai huffed to himself, knowing that Kakashi took just as many risks with students as he did. They had criticized each other heavily about it in the past. Now, it was standard practice to pass on high-level techniques without worry.

He looked up at the clock near the bulletin board of the Jounin Standby Station. Lee's practice with his grandfather would be wrapping up soon. There was about enough time to jog around the village before they were set to meet at their training grounds. Gai did a few warm up stretches before taking off, greeting Genma in the hallway as he literally hurdled over his old teammate's head.
When Kosuke the small, red toad delivered amaryllis bulbs from Mount Myoboku, along with Naruto's most recent correspondence, Hinata nearly did a jig. The toad merrily exited from the window to go lounge in the garden and wait for her reply.

Hinata set the paper-wrapped bulbs on her desk and took a seat in a chair, ready to devour the letter with her eyes, but Hanabi's whine sounded from the doorway of her room.

"Onee-san…"

Hinata fumbled with the parchment, rolling it up as she gave a squirrely look to her sibling, "Good morning, Hanabi. What's the-?

"No one spends time with me anymore." Hanabi marched in and collapsed on her sister's bed, "Not you, not onii-san, not Dad…everyone's busy and caught up in Exam preparations…" She brought her fist down on a pillow.

"It's only for a few more weeks." Hinata gently reminded her, smiling.

"I know that, but how am I supposed to not be tempted to steal bikes or smash Konohamaru's face while I wait?" The girl groaned, "Even when he stops by he doesn't want to spar as much as he used to."

Curious, Hinata spun in the desk chair and gave Hanabi a long stare, "Your rival comes to visit you here?"

"When he and his team don't take missions—" Hanabi stopped herself before she revealed more than she was willing to discuss, "So what? I just want something to do. Every day I have to go to the Academy I resent being there, and I resent all the students who ask, oh, you haven't graduated yet?"

She sat up and pouted at her sister, "Hmf! Hey, what's that?"

"In your hand."

She glanced down at Naruto's message, "It's from—"

"Yeah, I know what it is— lemme see it." Hanabi stood and held out her hand, "I want to know how that buffoon keeps you interested in him."

Now, there may have been a time when Hinata would have readily handed over a sappy letter to disgust her younger sister with; maybe a few months ago or last year…but today her written exchanges with Naruto had evolved into something private. Sacrosanct, she might say. Certainly not the topics a moody twelve-year-old ought to read about. 'And since I spent time with Naruto at Mount Myoboku recently, well—' Technically, kind of, she had liaised with him in the dead of night, 'What would Hanabi think about reading his reaction to that?' In his body. In the realm of sages that did not welcome outsiders, far beyond the watchful gazes of her family and clan…

Hinata slipped the scroll off of the desktop, stuffing it in the kangaroo-pocket of her sweatshirt, replying simply, "No."

Hanabi was wide-eyed, "No?"

"It's not meant to be read by anyone else. I haven't read it yet."

"Read it with me, then, Miss Secretive." Hanabi snorted, leaning over her sister's shoulder.
Hinata lurched forward and resisted when her sibling made an immature grab for her pocket.
Hanabi's interest and temper escalated, palming Hinata's face and pushing her askew to reach for the
scroll, "What's in there, huh? Oh my gosh! What does he say to you? What do you say to him?"
Hanabi cackled madly, "Give it to me! You know I won't tell Dad…"

"I know you will tell!" Screeching, she tripped Hanabi and let her face-plant on the fluffy area rug.
Hinata made a break for it out into the main hallway, running as fast her legs could carry her as
Hanabi bayed after her like a bloodhound.

Members of the Hyuga clan noted it was kind of noisy in the house today.

By the grace of a higher power, the chase was interrupted. Hideyasu halted Hanabi when she nearly
mowed down two, very full-handed Branch servants trying to clean sullied futons. The man grabbed
Hanabi by the scruff of her tunic while she writhed, and he chided her recklessness. Erstwhile,
Hiashi had given his steward free reign to discipline and punish Hyuga Hanabi whenever she acted
out; most especially in ways that jeopardized her hapless peers.

Though Hideyasu had apprehended her sister, Hinata did not stop. Not even for breakfast.

In ten minutes, she was expected to attend a lesson. Since she knew she could not safely read her
 correspondence at home, Hinata intended to read it during a break in practice and then burn it
 afterward. *If I bury it in the garden Hanabi could probably find it anyway…* She pulled on her
shoes and proceeded to the riverside training ground she had been summoned to.

Off to the right of the training area, Hinata laid eyes on Neji. As she approached his back was facing
her, and he appeared to be in the midst of a long-winded explanation to Tenten. She was seated in
the grass priming a very long, thin scroll with ink, nodding absently as she listened. A merry grin
spread on her face when Tenten saw Hinata crossing the lawn, and she paused in her work. With
that cue, Neji looked over his shoulder.

"Hey! You're not late." Tenten assured the girl as Hinata scurried up to them, "We're just always
early. That's kind of Neji's rule."

"Good, I see…" Hinata took a calming breath, "Good morning Onii-san, Onee-san…" She was on
time and Hanabi was not chasing her to the ends of the earth. It was time to relax. Hinata then looked
curiously at the scroll Tenten was winding up. The older girl off-handedly mentioned that she would
be would be employing one of Neji's ideas for the Tournament. Hinata noted the fact interestedly.

"How much time can you spend on Nature Transformation today?" Neji gave his cousin an
expectant look, "I know that Uncle has demanded some of your time as well."

"For today he won't, but this afternoon I should join my team." Hinata noted, fidgety at the prospect
of testing her Water Affinity.

"We can meet up like this briefly a few days a week, if that works." Tenten stretched her arms over
her head grandly as she stood, "So…who's Affinity do you want to see first? Maybe a demonstration
would be a good idea."

Hinata's lips puttered like a goldfish, "A-Ah…you mean to say…you have one too, Onee-san?"

Tenten quirked her face, partly abashed, "It's…not well-developed."

"If incinerating an opponent does not qualify as *developed*, then consider it *unrefined*. It has its uses." Neji snorted, "Her's is a Fire Transformation."
Hinata gasped, "Oh, like Tama-chan's!"

"Yup. Too bad Tama couldn't be here to join us. She told me that she was training outside of the village for a bit…" Tenten retrieved a scroll from her hip-pouch, "Tama suggested that we ask Sato if he wanted to practice with us, but, well…" She looked knowingly at Neji's sour face, "Neji was in no mood to humor your teammate, Hinata."

"I understand." She caught herself glancing down at her feet in mild disappointment, snapping her chin back up, "But if Sato-kun is interested in developing his Lightning Style with my help, I suppose…it is best we work together during our team hours."

"I would prefer that." Neji concurred. It was settled, and he turned with a slight gesture of his head to his girlfriend.

There was something organic and spellbinding in the way her cousin interacted with Tenten, Hinata felt. From a slight distance, she watched without a word as the two had a brief brainstorm, their gazes placidly locked, and then agreed they would perform a simultaneous demonstration for Hinata. 'Neji-niisan does not act like this around anyone else.' She fiddled with the chain of her necklace peeking from beneath her sweatshirt. Neji's guard was lowered, his countenance at ease, 'He is completely in tune with Tenten.' Hinata's mouth curved into a pleased smile. It was a Godsend. Her cousin, finally, seemed to be in his own element; away from scathing remarks and posturing in the Main House of their clan, or the chin-up bravado and coolness Neji displayed with peers and friends. This new, authentic self he was comfortable showing around her and Tenten (and Lee too, she ventured) was a marvel. It was impossible not to feel happy for him and his circumstances.

She looked back and forth on the field between the two, observing as Neji and Tenten spaced themselves out with paces measured for a duel. In spite of what they intended to do, they remained utterly calm. Hinata busied her hands in her front pocket, 'I hope that…I will be like them. When Naruto is home, I can be my true self around him…he and I can be easy and peaceful like this. Maybe Naruto-kun will finish my sentences for me, after enough time!' Naruto was getting dangerously close to it in his correspondence, and when she had met him in the Toad Valley.

The summoning scroll whirled in Tenten's hand as she conjured out a beautiful longbow. Hinata puzzled at the sight before looking left towards Neji down the pitch, where he held up a single palm aimed for his girlfriend. The fuzzy feeling in her stomach curdled as Hinata considered that, since time immemorial, Neji and Tenten had zero hesitation when it came to attacking one another. A small eep escaped her as Neji struck first during a fraction of a moment, with an assuredly unsafe Wind Release Air Palm that soared directly at the girl he loved. Tenten responded in kind with a shot that glowed momentarily blue before igniting mid-air. Hinata's hands clasped in terror inside of her pocket.

The Fire Release bolt ate the vacuum wave that was charged with Wind, and Hinata peeped in alarm and awe as the flame became a horizontal tunnel of burning devastation…turned back on Neji as he waited with an unconcerned look on his face. Ah, right, Hinata's brain blipped, Elemental weaknesses. She shrieked in panic. Earlier, Neji had not been exaggerating when he used the word incinerating to describe it.

Neji propelled himself into a timely rotation, diverting the empowered Fire Release with a shield of chakra. Though a safe distance away, Hinata fell into a crouch and covered her head. She marked that her cousin's rotation was as grandiose as her father's, the diameter of the dome well past five meters by her estimate, hurling away dragon-tongue flames without a care. Hinata deduced that in
the eyes of the clan's elders, or perhaps by anyone else's judgement, Neji had all the capability and prowess of veterans among the Hyuga.

She stood and sniffed the singed smells of the field—the grass scorched away from the soil, the crater around Neji smoking…and perhaps some of his hair was singed. Hinata glanced to Tenten who was at the far end of the yard, shielding her eyes with her hand as she whistled, impressed. She tucked her bow beneath her arm and Hinata hurried over to her cousin who was, somehow, completely fine.

"That demonstration was excessive." Hinata declared.

"It was not the first time we've attempted it, so we knew what to expect." Neji was picking at the burned tips of his hair, "Based on what you've witnessed, I expect that you understand why it is not favorable to clash with your elemental opposite in battle."

Of course they had tried this before. Because that was what Neji and Tenten were wont to do with their free time—discovering ways to unleash new levels of destruction while using each other as test dummies. Hinata did not approve of it, but totally got that they would never dare do such things with anyone else. Their sensei may have had a conniption if he'd seen it!

Hinata agreed in a squeak, "I do not wish to press my luck against my elemental opposite."

Tenten nodded in agreement as she strode past, positioning behind Neji to pluck the last bits of ruined hair from him, "For what it's worth, I promised to never use my bow on him even when I'm furious at him, Hinata."

Oh, that was reassuring to hear. Hinata bet that Neji had to proactively get that promise out of Tenten, as he likely knew what havoc she could wreak on him if provoked. His Wind was at a disadvantage to her Fire, plain and simple.

While the couple chattered about Affinity jargon, Hinata was half-listening as she measured the length of the impression Neji's rotation had left. Her small feet lined across the crater in what Sato may have labeled the 'most unfair field-sobriety test' he had ever seen. Thankfully, Sato was not within joking distance. Hinata could not whistle like Tenten could, but she would have discovered her cousin's rotation easily stretched two-and-a-half times as far as her's.

After hair-damage-control was completed, Tenten happily invited Hinata to try out Water Release, "We reserved this training area for you, you know! Show us what you can do and then I'll let you school my Fire Release with a free shot." She looked cheekily at Neji beside her, "At least someone will be able to do it."

His mouth quirked into a half-amused, half-challenged sneer, but Neji reserved his rebuttal. He'd show her later, oh he would show her.

Neji stayed back a ways while Tenten stood at the bank, hooting and fawning over Hinata's water walking (more like dancing) talent. With little prompting, the girl could wrap water round herself in shapes and orbs, directing it with gestures. It was much more precise control than Neji or Tenten could boasts.

Balancing on the slow moving creek's surface, Hinata frowned to herself. Her father had been encouraging her to perfect Air Palm, and Hinata noodled on the idea that she could combine her Elemental Affinity with it. Well, she could attempt it. The theory was there, she acknowledged, remembering how she had combined Water Release with small Jyukken strikes in the Preliminary Round of the Exam. 'I just need to stretch it farther; if I can lead that water-feeling in my chakra into it as I manipulate the shape into a wave…' She paused, owl-eyed, wondering to herself what it might
"Hey, I didn't say you could quit dancing and showing off, Hinata-chan." Tenten grinned devilishly at her, holding her bow up, "Don't make me make you dance!"

Neji's scoff came from behind her but the girls ignored him.

After a few more cartwheels and water acrobatics to appease Tenten, Hinata returned to the shore. She spoke quietly to the older girl, low enough to go unheard by her cousin, "I wonder if I can use techniques...the way that Onii-san can?"

Tenten dropped her voice as well, "He makes techniques look sophisticated...but really Neji is just good at quickly assembling pieces of jutsu. Then it's rinse and repeat." She added in a chuckle, "No pun intended. I think you can do it, Hinata. Today is just a day to try, after all."

"You're right!" She beamed at her confidant, "I'll give it a try."

Behind them, Neji was not enjoying being ignored and excluded from conversation.

With a long breath, Hinata took a stance and raised her palm, taking aim at the tree line across the river. Her father's lesson was still fresh in her mind, and Hinata capably molded her chakra with force, concentrating on expanding the energy just so.

And she may have been a bit hasty with her Water Affinity attempt, not entirely calm or poised enough to feel that droplet, that ripple, that tidal wave inside her blood and bones...she felt a whisper of it, and mistakenly applied that little bit to her vacuum wave. Her Air Palm soared, easily clearing the river and striking a tree. It had also childishly splashed her in the face, soaking her hair and front. Hinata's grumbling whimper cracked Tenten's façade of maturity. The older girl held the stitch in her side and keened with laughter. Neji finally came to stand beside them, and instead of lauding Hinata's effort, he dove into a technical explanation of what to do better.

These two. 'I know it didn't come out right...but they...' Though she adored and respected them, Hinata could not deny the combination of Neji and Tenten and training definitely had the ability to chafe her just a bit.

So when Tenten continued to chortle and Neji continued to teach, Hinata felt she was within her rights to snap them out of it. With a flick of her wrists, the younger girl willed up two threads of water from the creek and splatted her companions in their respective faces. Both Neji and Tenten fell into immediate silence.

"See?" Hinata smiled happily, "It wasn't that funny. I was doing my best, you know."

Tenten immediately apologized, squeezing Hinata in a one-armed hug, "I know! Sorry, I guess I was just excited to see you in action and I was a giggling mess." She shot a sharp look at Neji and procured a soft apology from him as well.

With the next few tries that further splashed and soddened Hinata, Neji was more constructive with his suggestions. Hinata well understood the feelingsand the nuances her cousin was articulating, but it was trickier than threading a needle from a distance: drawing in her whispering Water Affinity into the chakra she molded. 'Onee-san said that Neji-niisan makes things look easy at times, but...this isn't—this just isn't as simple as it sounds! The balance is so exact and fleeting...' Her lapse of timing, maybe, or the strain of forming a vacuum wave made it so much more difficult to echo Water Release into the technique. Catching a swift butterfly by its feet would be easier— she would have
sworn it. It was further testament that Neji absolutely had a grip on what he was doing when it came to high-level jutsu, but Hinata often believed he sought to achieve out of necessity and not out of curiosity.

No one kept track of how much time passed, but eventually Hinata stopped, rattling with heavy breaths. She did take Tenten up on her offered "free shot," and with a simple Jyukken strike successfully fused with Water Release, a wave of water consumed the bolt of fire from the Hiyumi with a hiss of vapor, and bowled Tenten over and down the pitch. Hinata squealed her apology, but the older girl waved off her concerns as she stowed away the golden bow.

Tenten wrung out her sleeves and swiped her slick hair out of her face, "You applied it perfectly just then, so don't apologize, Hinata. I'm sure you can sync that with your Air Palm after enough practice." She motioned for her two Hyuga companions to follow her, "Let's take a break so I can dry off. Good hustle, you two."

Neji wondered at her vague, Gai-like praise. Some things from their team communication would inevitably stick.

They bought lunch from a street-side stand on the way into town. Grilled, marinated eel on sticks, boxed-up, with bowls of fresh vegetables chopped and tossed in vinegar. Tenten was already three-quarters dry by the time they had reached the street that housed her Weapon Shop. It was there that the distressing incident, that which would long be etched into Tenten's memory into her older years—occurred in a quiet, ephemeral moment:

An old man with a wheelbarrow was traveling in the opposite direction, and as he passed the young trio he lost his coordination; tipping the handcart and its brick and tool contents onto the sidewalk. Hinata handed off their bagged lunches to Tenten, and she and Neji graciously assisted the senior citizen. Tenten had half a mind to put their belongings down and help, but she stood straight as a compass-point, staring down the unpopulated avenue to its end. Staring at the intersection where Huo was alone, gazing back at her.

The details and emotions flooded Tenten, oblivious to her companions while they were preoccupied behind her.

Without a doubt, the plastic bag dangling from Huo's hand came from a shop in the Han Ethnic Quarter of the village. What he had been doing there was anyone's guess, and he had been passing by in earnest likely to return to his Exam-appointed guest habitation. They had then seen each other, in some twisted instance of Koi no Yokan, that encounter that her father had described so many times about her mother…but it was evil and inverted and acrid. A singular moment of knowing that they could never be comrades. That they could never understand each other, despite what they shared. That there was only destiny that would bind them as two, and then ultimately subtract one.

Her head and stomach delivered this hideous fact to her heart, and that was when Tenten saw the young man's mouth pull into a delighted smirk. His eyes had strayed to her friends behind her. He had seen into her, somehow, and knew instantaneously just how much they meant to her. He knew exactly what to take. He knew exactly how to win.

Horrified, Tenten whirled around to Neji and Hinata behind her, mouth contorted in a near scream…and found them seeing off the old man with pleasantries, utterly unaware of danger. She whipped her head 'round again to spot the slinking leopard of a ninja down the lane, but it was as if he had never been there—the space he had occupied now empty air. She inhaled a few shuddering breaths and tried to reconcile with the fact that she understood now, more than Lee had, more than Neji had, that Huo was, by design, unique, hostile, and ready to end them.
Neji's hand on her shoulder made her jump.

She looked into his and Hinata's concerned faces, unable to form words as she clutched at the bag in her hands.

"What is it?" Neji asked, but he had mostly asked the question with his expression and how he had closed the gap between them. Hinata took the bag from Tenten and also crowded in, compelled to touch the older girl's arm comfortably.

"I thought I—" She shook her head roughly and steeled her nerves. The last thing she needed to do was put Neji on alert as he had been in the Forest of Death's Tower. Neither of them needed to fret about Huo any more than they already did, at least not when they were enjoying their time together this much. Tenten would hate to waste the geniality they had built up.

Her laugh was dry and dismissive, "I saw a ghost. I thought I did, well—" Tenten blinked her eyes to make her point and patted her two treasured friends, "It must be nothing. Sometimes I feel like my father…lurks around me."

Hinata latched onto this immediately, tittering on the sentimental notion of a guardian parent as they continued walking. Neji; not so much. He was proficient in sifting lies and truths from Tenten's words, but he was never in the habit of calling her on her fabrications. He preferred to let it linger until she was ready to admit it to him.

They took lunch in the shop with the front door locked (as Tenten had learned a hard lesson about that) and they settled on the tall-backed stools behind the counter. Neji ate and simultaneously examined the scroll Tenten had primed earlier. Tenten sneaked a look to her left, where Hinata was huddled in a seat against the wall, burying her face into correspondence.

"Is that from Naruto?" Tenten wondered.

Hinata's eyes shifted up when she replied, "I-It is. I wanted to read it at home, but Hanabi was pestering me."

Neji did not look up from his reading but snorted in understanding. Hanabi had two states of being: bothering her family or bothering her acquaintances. She had no other operational settings.

"This is as well-made as the best tool-summoning formulas I've seen my clan write." Neji informed her, giving Tenten a side-eye smirk of approval, "And you wrote it in one morning."

"It cramped my hand up something fierce." She noted.

"I'll seal your weapons into this if you want to work on the second scroll." He offered.

"That…might take you all day. Maybe even all of tomorrow…"

"That's still twice as fast as you could accomplish it on your own. And at any rate, it was my idea." Neji retorted, "My sealing skill is still shy of yours, but I hope that you'll accept my—"

"No, no, I know that you can do it." She leapt up from her seat, "I appreciate it, Neji. I really do. Wait a minute while I get the first arsenal." Tenten disappeared into the back storage room to retrieve the weapons she wanted to seal.

He ate contentedly until his girlfriend returned with an organized; rolling shelf of metal racks stocked with tools and weapons that even made Hinata's jaw drop.
"Do you make them all yourself-?" Hinata chirped in wonder.

"Of these here? I've forged twenty percent of them, and then thirty percent I bought from weapon-makers I admire." Tenten explained, rolling the arsenal to a stop in front of the counter, within Neji's reach, "The other half were my Dad's weapons. Nearly all of those he made himself."

Tenten skirted around the counter and plucked an ink dish, brush, and a clean towel from a low drawer. She set them down beside Neji as he reached for a bottle of ink from the top of a doorless cupboard. By then Hinata had resumed her letter-reading and so Tenten took her seat beside Neji once again, sighing knowingly as he filled the ink well. She flipped open the locked cash box beneath the counter and procured a razor blade, one which served a singular function in her shop.

She had cut her left thumb for a previous sealing a few days ago, so Tenten opted for her right thumb, swiping the blade over skin before Neji could say a word. He watched in surprised silence as she hovered her hand over the dish, letting generous droplets of blood mix with the ink. The level of sealing they intended to use needed an identifying trace for summoning.

"That's sufficient." Neji noted, cloaking her finger in the towel to stem the bleeding. He called Hinata over to briefly patch her up, and she hopped up and tottered over to heal Tenten who mumbled her thanks. Tomorrow, Hinata would likely not be around to restore her after they worked on sealing for the second scroll, 'But it doesn't matter to me, I have a bottomless box of bandages that work just fine.'

What was clear was that Neji was not fond of seeing Tenten in a state of disrepair, no matter how trivial. These days she would still catch Neji observing her back with his Kekkei Genkai, where her shoulder had been split open on their mission to the Marsh Country. He moodily assessed that scar some days as if he were responsible for the injury. With all of that in mind, Neji had become prone to asking Hinata for healing favors.

Hinata returned to her seat by the wall and buried her face in the letter again. Neji set to work carefully writing identifying seals over the primer, those which would serve as labels for what was stored in the scroll. Tenten stretched out a thin length of blank parchment at the far end of the counter, readying herself for round two of priming. She kept her ink well at the edge of the table top and let her thoughts roam as she worked on auto-pilot.

'I didn't want to ruin it. This...this is great. Neji has been so eager to help and, honestly, he IS amazing help with this sort of project.' She smiled to herself, 'So if I go ahead and make a fuss about Huo stalking around this part of town, Neji will lose it. He wouldn't keep the mindset to continue working on this, let alone get a wink of sleep at night. He'll wind himself up about it. Lee, too...he'd panic if I mentioned what I saw.'

While it was nearly a rational thought, Tenten pondered if she should at minimum be reporting such things to Gai or Tsunade. It was probably the kind of sighting they were looking out for post-Preliminary Matches. 'Yeah, that makes more sense. I can't pretend I'm not terrified or willing to deal with this on my own. I need to squeal to the higher ups, like sensible ninja do.' She nodded to herself as she swept elegant lines and calligraphy onto paper.

Her eyes skirted to the right where Neji held a hand seal, and tapped an identifying mark which consumed the scimitars on the page with a puff of smoke. Tenten could not resist a grin. 'And I thought I liked him years ago, back when he was uninvolved with anyone or anything...' The man was now selfless and thoughtful, more understanding of the feelings of others, 'Not to mention that deep voice...and he smells pretty good, most days. Maybe he'll age like fine wine, if his looks are anything to go by...' She determined that yes; she was unquestionably more attracted to him now than she had been as a tormented pre-teen.
Tenten dawdled in her thoughts, restraining a satisfied grin that threatened her face as she primed her scroll. She was on the cusp of irreparable carpal tunnel by that point and she did not care: she had a first-class boyfriend and it minimized all of her nagging concerns.

What she was not privy to was that Neji had become highly aware of her simpering, eyebrow wagging, and shifty glances. His best guess was that Tenten was pleased with him. He could read her spectrum of emotions and micro-gestures far better these days.

Surely she must have known he was willing to assist with an endeavor that he had suggested in the first place. Neji had a keen recognition of potential, and when Tenten had wrestled old summoning spinners from a closet, he suspected that her parents had not become elite ninja by avoiding innovation. Tenten was suited for hyper-efficient summoning, and he had been quick to embrace it. All told, any way that she could better prepare and defend herself became a priority of his. She would pay him back with swordsmanship drills, he knew.

He held another hand seal and snuck a look at her, noticing how her bottom lip was tucked beneath her teeth, her cheeks flushing. He returned his attention to the two-handed mace he was sealing. Not to read into it too much, but Tenten appeared stirred up and he was not truly sure what about. She rolled her sleeves up her arms and his eyes followed the motion. Her skin had already taken on a faint golden tan from their time outdoors. After being pummeled by Hinata's Water Release, her top sat slightly crooked from drying, resting higher on her full hips, a bit of the skin there peeking above the waist of her pants…and by the time Neji was conscious of his gaze trailing down she had caught him.

Tenten raised her eyebrows at him animatedly and said nothing. She had seen him pause in his work beside her and realized that he was ogling.

She might have told Neji that they couldn't do this here, least of all with his sweet, innocent cousin nearby, but Tenten was not a subscriber of Propriety Weekly.

Feigning a yawn, she stretched her arms above her head to hike her top up. The move was deliberate and unfair, and Neji's face slowly adopted a frustrated pout. Tenten continued scrawling ink over her page and let him fester. The plane of her stomach was exposed beneath the bunched fabric. Neji looked away perhaps for all of one second before he gave up and glanced down again, past her belly button and down…to where the sliver of black spandex shorts was visible beneath her waistband.

"You should have changed before we came here." He muttered out of the corner of his mouth, re-dipping his brush in ink and blood. He had to concentrate to write properly.

"There was no need. By the time we got here I wasn't wet anymore." She tilted her head and dropped her voice below a whisper, "Not so much now."

It did not register.

Tenten counted to five and still got no response. She supposed that his mind just could not go there, or if it was a term beyond his straight-laced vocabulary. 'Ino warned me about this. She said mine may be an uphill battle in terms of flirtation.' She had to agree on that front, 'But I'll be damned if all of the tips and taunts my friends have kindly shared…have no effect on tall, dark, and dense next to me.'

Adjusting the subtlety meter, she gave it another shot, tapping the back of her brush against her bottom lip, "You…look good today." Her mouth curved up a little, and she wondered why it was then and only then he seemed to get it.
A nervous flick of his eyes assessed that, thankfully, Hinata seemed to have forgotten they were across the shop floor, working and whispering. The girl was slack-jawed as she read her letter, which in itself could not have been a good sign.

Neji sniffed at the minx beside him, "Do not expect anything from me while we entertain my kin."

"I would never." The success of the attempt made her impish.

He gruffed in annoyance but was undeniably on the hook. His characters zig-zagged in sad ink splotches on the parchment. With a defeated sigh, Neji moved to the next primed circle to try again, but found that thought process and motor function had gone out the window. He would be a liar if he claimed he did not think of the things Tenten was suggesting, and twice a liar if he alleged that he disliked what she was doing.

If Sato knew how to push a button or two of Neji's, then Tenten had an entire switchboard she was curiously prodding as time went on. Were she kinder about time and place, he might actually have thanked her for the advances.

How had she found a way to speak below a whisper? Or maybe his hearing was just that sharp when Tenten added, "Right now…we aren't doing anything a Shadow Clone can't do."

Hell is described as a place, but Neji thinks this is erroneous. Hell is whatever this agitation is; this ludicrous game Tenten decided to play because all she wants is a silly reaction, and maybe to embarrass him. Or, maybe not at all. Maybe she was serious?

That was neither here nor there when Hinata stirred from her seat and stood, frowning worriedly. Immediately, the parent-like attentions of her companions returned full-force, and both Neji and Tenten asked what the matter was.

"Onee-san…may I speak to you in the back room?" Hinata requested softly.

For a moment Tenten assumed that the flirtations had been noticed and that they had made the poor girl uncomfortable, but Tenten soon doubted it as she followed Hinata to the work room while the girl gestured wildly to the correspondence in her hands.

"I need to get rid of this." Hinata chirped.

"What?" Tenten's mouth quirked in confusion, "You finished reading it?"

"Yes, and this is not something I can bring home. Hanabi was trying to read it…and I knew…I just knew it would have gone badly if she had." Hinata seemed to wilt in relief, "Will you please burn it for me?"

"Are you sure-? Ah…then…" Tenten crossed her arms and gave the girl a wary look, "I don't really want to know what Naruto wrote to you…and neither of us would want Neji to find out—"

"N-N-No it isn't l-like that…” Hinata stammered and rolled up the scroll frantically, "There are just some things I can't…explain…or," She muttered in clarification, "I don't want to explain…if anyone asks."

"If that doesn't sound like guilt then I don't know what does."

Hinata nearly yelped in dismay, but Tenten held her hand out for the scroll, "Give it here, if you're sure you won't miss it."
No sooner had Hinata nodded and passed it over; Tenten flipped the ignition of a furnace and tossed the scroll into the jet of flame.

"And we will never speak of this," Tenten smiled warmly at her, "Because we have each other's backs. Sorry that I teased you before. If it helps…I understand." She added with emphasis, "I really understand."

Hinata's nodding bordered on apologetic bowing. Once the scroll was reduced to ash Tenten shut off the machine.

"Stop now, Hinata, it's fine." She ushered the girl along, "Let's just...behave for the rest of the day..."

The week flew by. It had taken Hinata several days to compose a response to Naruto's very detailed thoughts about their rendezvous on Mount Myoboku. She was grateful that Tenten had helped prevent unsanctioned eyes from reading such a personal message.

By that time, Tenten had two new summoning spinners at the end of that week, fully-equipped, and she delighted in testing their functionality against Lee every afternoon. In the mornings, Neji divided time between swordsmanship with Tenten, and grueling Wushu forms with Lee and his grandfather.

Neji had learned from Hinata, who had returned to practice her Water Release applications, that she had seen Ino and Shikamaru using the riverside training ground several times. Kiba and Chouji had also joined them for practice and rotated opponents, as none of them were pitted as first-seeded combatants at the Tournament. Hinata had been inclined to join them, but was roped into training with Sato and Shino at their usual forest training area.

And Hinata may have muttered to Neji (over breakfast) that Sato's Lightning Release, which had been honed with Kakashi's instruction, was not something he should dare take lightly. Neji was highly skeptical, as his Wind Nature was guaranteed to weaken Lightning techniques. Hinata had fidgeted anxiously in front of Neji as they discussed it, insisting that Sato was well aware of Neji's strategies.

"He has been working very hard Onii-san, and I ask that you please take care." She wrung her hands and added, "When Shino-kun tested an Earth Release jutsu he had learned from his father, I..."

Hinata dusted her sweatshirt at the memory, grimacing, "I had trouble with it."

"That Nature is sure to challenge you."

"And the insects..." She peeped, holding her face in her hands, "My team is taking training very seriously. I feel like I need to prepare myself before I go back tomorrow..."

At the thought, Neji suggested that she spend some downtime with her kunoichi companions, if any were still available. Hinata took the idea to heart and set out from the Main House with a cheery wave of farewell to him.

Of the friends that she had been able to locate, not a single one had much free time to spend. Hinata was able to sit down with Sakura around noon in the third-floor break room of the Administrative building. Sakura skimmed her hands over a variety of welts and bruises she had gotten during training, explaining to her friend, "Tsunade-shishou has been pushing me to my limit..." She leaned back on an old sofa and groaned.

"The training period has only just started." Hinata said as she took the seat beside her, helpfully healing a bruise on Sakura's back that was beyond her reach.
The girl sighed in relief, "Thank you, Hinata-chan…it's a miracle that you stopped by. I haven't seen anyone since we all started getting busy."

"What about Kiba-kun and Tama-chan?"

"When Shishou lets me have time with my team, I've only gotten to see Kiba-kun, so far. Tama-chan has been going outside of the village with Kakashi-sensei for training…and by the time she gets home at night, she's too exhausted to do anything other than sleep." Sakura rested her booted feet on the coffee table in front of them, "I know she and Sensei aren't playing around. Tama's opponent isn't the type to restrain himself in a fight."

Hinata nodded solemnly in agreement. As it was their friend's first time participating in a Chunin Selection Exam, Tama had rotten luck in the Third Round lottery for opponents.

The two girls stared up at the whirling ceiling fan above and tried to think of anything other than their aching bodies, or what the final bout of the Exam had in store for them.

Sakura broke the silence, "Gaara-kun came back this morning. I haven't seen him yet…I know he wants to train Matsuri as much as possible."

Hinata smiled thoughtfully, "He will come find you as soon as he is able."

"He always does." Sakura shut her eyes and relaxed, "I'm sure Gaara will love seeing me covered in bruises, or with this lump on my head from when Shishou—" She grumbled again, pressing a healing hand to the egg on her scalp, "Tsunade-shishou is a piece of work. She insists that this Exam is reflecting on her and her ability to help our village recover…but she's beating me into the ground."

"She knows you can handle it."

"And to top it off, she wants us to look amazing in three weeks, but in the meantime we're all pulverized from training each day. Seems counterintuitive to me…" Sakura snickered, "But Ino says that's what makeup is for."

"I suppose it is. I've never worn makeup." Hinata looked sidelong to her friend, "Do you know what your team will be wearing at the Tournament?"

"We bought our outfits. I asked my mom to take in a few hems and fit things to us…but what we have is going to have to be good enough. We don't have any more time waste on fashion."

"I agree. I am sewing a few things for my team, but we are making due with things we had on hand." Hinata also put her feet up with a sigh.

"Hmm. I forgot that sewing and knitting are some of your hobbies. That's handy."

"It is, but it's a little stressful when I have to make time every night for alterations. Sato-kun and Shino-kun have grown so tall…I hope they don't outgrow the things I've fitted for them."

"Yeah, three weeks can go by and the guys could go through another growth spurt. What a hassle…"

"I think…I'm as tall as I can possibly get in my lifetime." Hinata presumed, chuckling as Sakura agreed with a tired nod.

"You know, I heard that Tama is 175cm tall. It's gotta be those legs."
"Wow!"

"I want to hate her but I just can't. That hair and those muscles...and she's as statuesque as a runway model."

"Do you remember when Ino-chan said the grass is always greener on the other side? I really do believe that now. I've accepted the way I am." Hinata stifled a yawn as she added, "I have always thought you were pretty in a way that no one else is, Sakra-chan. Ever since I was small, I thought so."

Sakura grinned and squeezed her friend's hand where it rested on the sofa between them, "Hinata...you're the best."

"So are..." Another yawn, "You...Sakura-chan."

And they snuck in a nap in the break room, which lasted about twenty-five minutes before Tsunade crept in to look for a boxed lunch to steal. She snickered in amusement when she discovered the girls hand-in-hand and snoring.

"Eh-hem! Before I take a photo to sell to local tabloids," Tsunade crossed behind the sofa and ruffled their heads, "You girls had better wake up and get back in the proverbial saddle! The hard work has only just begun!"

The next few weeks had all but eliminated leisure time, at least by daylight. The Leaf Rookies had intersecting schedules and training regimens; always in each other's business even when they were not straining and sweating together during practice hours.

Ino had gawked in surprise one afternoon to see Sato casually exiting the dance studio with a duffle bag on his shoulder. She summoned Chouji with a finger snap and they promptly confronted the Hatake, whose tank top and joggers suggested he had forgone battle preparations that day.

"Dance practice?" Ino roughly poked Sato's (now muscled) shoulder, "I thought Tama swore to me you two had put that off until after the Exam."

"Not entirely."

Chouji noted, "If he wants to get his money's worth out of a membership, maybe skipping isn't cost effective." He looked to Sato pointedly, "Right?"

"Yup, I have to go. I don't want to waste a month's tuition. And Ino, I know you're gonna ask: Yup! I took a day off." He confessed merrily, "Kurenai-sensei made me."

"Let me guess! You were starting to grate on her nerves." She jabbed Chouji gently in the side with her elbow and they both made tee-hee sounds.

"How'd you know?" His face dropped in embarrassment, "I asked Shino and he said I wasn't being too abrasive...but I guess all this time together is like cabin fever, except we're outdoors...and I was starting to recycle jokes."

Ino and Chouji winced.

"Yeah, I guess Sensei needed a break..." Sato admitted, rubbing the back of his neck.

"We're meeting Shika for lunch," Chouji said as Ino silently mimed for him not to extend an
invitation, "Do you...want to join us?" It was too late. It had slipped out.

"Heck yeah!" He clapped Chouji on the back and squeezed between him and his blonde teammate, "You're buying ri—!"

Ino wrenched him aside with a furious sneer, "Hatake...I need a peaceful end to this day, and if you are going to weasel in and tell shitty jokes, you will not in good conscience let Chouji pay for you." She warned in a growl, "Pay up, shut up, and put some deodorant on."

That night at a late and unwholesome hour, two Black Ops agents stopped on the roof of the same humble dance studio the Rookies had met in front of.

It had been weeks of uneventful surveillance at Tsunade's request, as both Tenzo and Sai had spent days and nights watching Huo roam back and forth through the village, eat at various restaurants, socialize in a foreign language, and occasionally spar with his Sensei in a designated training area. Root had kept tabs on Huo from a distance and with sensory jutsu, never interacting with their target, from what Tenzo could discern.

The Hokage had been concerned that Danzo was not genuinely suspicious of the violent Exam participant, but her two trusted stooges had uncovered no evidence to contradict the old counselor.

It had only just developed that morning: Huo had become more flighty and less focused on training. His actions seemed defensive; as if he was aware of being watched.

"It's because you smell like garlic." Sai suggested to his Black Ops supervisor, "You ate that horrible meal earlier and now the boy suspects—"

"He can't smell me, Sai." Tenzo ground his teeth in annoyance, "More than likely he was tipped off to Root watching him."

Sai frowned as he sipped water from a canteen, then pulled his mask back into place, "Root has not yet made a mistake. He cannot know they are watching. They have been extremely cautious, so far."

"We can't be sure of the Root's detection level while we're on break, so it's possible they had a lapse in stealth or judgement." Tenzo surmised, "They'll be passing through here very soon. Keep it down and we'll get to the bottom of this."

They crouched in wait for ten minutes before Huo did pass by on the empty street below, avoiding street lamps. He was blocks away from his guest-habitation and looked believably tired. Tenzo indicated with a two-fingered point where Root operatives were tailing carefully from rooftops. Sai watched as the three cloaked agents gave no indication of their presence, not by sound, or shadow, and certainly not by the stink of garlic.

As they turned their heads slowly, stock-still in their positions while watching Huo stalk south down the road... Tenzo noticed another source of movement. From where Huo had come from, likely the Han Ethnic Quarter he had frequented... two hooded youths were following, and not with enough care to go unnoticed, at least by ANBU standards. Tenzo used hand signals to communicate to Sai that they would tail and observe the two careless stalkers below.

The odd, sneaking parade proceeded downtown, with Black Ops agents of both affiliations curiously watching what seemed to be a pair of idiots pursuing the Rock Genin. At the turn of the lane into a dead-end industrial sector, lined with wired fences around a shadowy alleyway with no outlet, the two inexperienced ninja sprang for an ambush. They lunged for the brick-laid passage after Huo, their killing intent clear, certain that he was trapped in the manufacturing stock bay he had wandered
Root operatives dove down and stuck the two pursuers' legs full of senbon, stunning them and splaying them out on the pavement face-first. Tenzo gave a single nod to Sai before they too descended to investigate.

A Root ninja gave Tenzo and Sai a questioning head tilt and Tenzo quickly explained, "We were passing by on a patrol when we noticed the commotion. What's going on here?"

"Two suspects were trying to harm a Chunin Exam Finalist." The voice of a woman came from behind a plain Root mask, and she pulled back the hoods of their captives, "These are Dream ninja. Your names?" Another operative was extracting the needles from the backs of their knees.

"Eifa."

"Masugama." The young man clenched his teeth and snarled, "Let us do to him what he did to our teammate. He doesn't deserve to go unpunished!"

"That is not your decision to make." A Root commander had their hands bound behind their backs, "You'll be taken to our detainment block until our Director or the Hokage can respond. You are in violation of Exam policy, as disqualified participants. Yumegakure confirmed your return weeks ago, and agreed your visas here expired."

The Dream Genin said nothing, keeping their eyes down as Root operatives informed them what would come next.

Sai had departed from the group for the dead-end alley to coax the frightened finalist out of hiding. Tenzo followed with a lumbering stride, not surprised that heartbroken Genin wanted to settle a score. Then Sai tensed. Tenzo followed his stare into the dark, exit-less stocking bay only to find that Huo was not there. Tenzo had to remain logical and venture that Huo may have used a jutsu to disguise himself, or was taking cover in the single dumpster nestled against a wall, but his stomach twisted with veteran intuition.

"Commander." Tenzo called over his shoulder for the Root supervisor. The cloaked operative stopped beside them and peered into the passage.

"Are you a Sensor-Type?" Tenzo asked.

"I am." The commander walked calmly into the alley and turned in a circle, "He's not here. In fact, he's not anywhere near us. His chakra is not felt to me at all."

"He couldn't have disappeared. Or gone anywhere." Sai asserted with a hint of frustration.

"He couldn't have." The Root commander agreed. He ran his hand along the brick wall and gazed in deep thought at the sprawling shadows in the far corners of the stocking bay.

The commander exited and was flanked by the Hokage's ANBU as they followed behind the arresting Root operatives.

"He is odd: Sasagainu Huo." The Root ninja determined, "I should not like to explain to Danzo-sama that our objective and near-victim has no reportable end location. Unless either of you know why a Genin can go unnoticed by five members of Black Ops..." He shook his head ruefully, "That boy was never in danger in the first place."
Less than one week of training remained.

Sato was inspired to celebrate when Tama returned after what seemed like an age, following a long bout of semi-exclusive training with her Sensei. That day, after Kurenai had banished him again (on account of her joke-induced headache) Sato picked up fresh crab from the market, Tama's favorite! And returned home to steam the seafood. He had sent his wee screech owl, Aroo, ahead to make sure Tama came by his place.

An elapsed time of eighteen minutes passed from when Sato had pulled on the apron that had been gifted to him (Mr. Good Lookin' Is Cookin') to clean and prepare the kani, and Tama knocked once on the door of his flat before stumbling inside. Aroo was perched on her shoulder.

"I'm home!" She paused as she yanked her shoes off in the genkan, reconsidering, "I mean, I'm here, Sato-kun!"

His voice drifted from the kitchen, "Nah, you had it right the first time!"

Aroo flitted from Tama's shoulder to perch on the back of a chair. Then, the owl rotated his head to spy the open window of the living area, and then zipped out to hunt for his dinner.

Sato watched as she trudged into view, dirty, disheveled, and beaten, and she set a tall paper bag down on the kitchen table. His silver eyebrows elevated, "Hey Tama…"

"Hey." Her smile conveyed genuine exhaustion.

"What's that you brought?"

She tipped the bag and spilled a pile of ice packs onto the table.

"Oh." Sato set down a strainer full of crab into the sink and pulled open his freezer, "I'll cool those down for you. Do you…think you'll need all of them?"

"As many as we can velcro to my body, I'll need." She all but whimpered.

The couple stowed away the gel packs into the mostly empty freezer, meeting a few times for pecks on the lips. "Ooh, ouch." Tama scrunched her eyes and drew back, "Even my face hurts…"

"I'm sorry." He said clownishly, kissing the apples of her cheeks as lightly as possible, "Looks like we're going to be icing your face today too."

Her chuckle was weak, and he held her in his arms for a moment before snapping the refrigerator shut with a nudge of his back. "Kakashi…did he go overboard with your training or-?"

"I think it was just what I needed, and we're going to stay in the village from this point on." Her head drooped and she rested her forehead on his shoulder, "It destroyed me, but maybe that's about what I can expect from my match."

"A valid point." Sato spoke into her hair and planted one last kiss on her head, "Go take a bath. I'm making crab for dinner."

She grinned, "That's thoughtful. It's proof that you wanted me to stay here."

"Well I know your parents have probably missed you too."

"I checked on Mom. Dad's away on business for a few days, and Mom doesn't expect me home later." Tama wobbled away as Sato gave her a truly astonished face, "I said I would be staying
Inquisitive, he followed her down the hall to the washroom, "Like…she's really okay with you staying here?"

"She really is. After I found out you were inviting me over, I explained that I was too tired to go back across town tonight. Mom understood."

Sato turned his head away from his fiancée and crammed the top of his apron into his mouth, muffling a cheer, *Thank you, Maito Miako. I need to buy that lady some flowers.* By then the bathroom door was sealed and Tama had the water running. Sato fetched a worn t-shirt and shorts from his wardrobe and set them down on the edge of his bed, "Did I leave a fresh towel in there for her? I'm pretty sure I did." He steered himself back into the kitchen to start rice, steam the crab, and make whatever vegetable or addition he had lying around.

He certainly was not the best cook around, but Sato decided that he set a mean table. *It's like I was a restaurant host in another life…* Even if it did not taste particularly good, it would still look good. Not that he expected dinner to be tasteless. After all, it was hard to mess up crab, as there were few opportunities for him to interfere with flavor between steaming, cracking, and eating.

Tama returned a short while later with her damp hair clipped up, looking damn near perfect in the raggedy old v-neck and three-years-retired boxers. She referred to them as "the soft clothes," and it was not the first time she had borrowed them from Sato. He had a mind to throw them out since they were not to his liking or size anymore, but he kept them for her.

When she made a move to assist in preparations he shook his head and plopped her down into a seat. A moment later, he tested an ice pack and found it was still not cool enough, "These will need a bit longer. Think you can eat in the meantime?"

"I can out-eat anyone in the Akimichi clan, after the week I've had."

They grinned at each other and commenced dinner.

And Sato noted that she did not use her claw-cracker, at least not anymore, because she now had enough physical strength in her fingers to bend iron bars, from the look of it. They feasted and chatted, "Take that apron off, Good-Lookin's not cookin' anymore…" Made a mess of the table, and generally enjoyed each other's company.

He excused her from clean up in favor of flattening her on the couch and cocooning her in ice-packs. Tama let her hair down and sighed, "Ahh, thank you..." She had nearly eaten herself into a coma, which seemed a fair reward for killing herself with training for weeks on end. The sofa was her usual place to lounge after dessert or a long day. It may have been Sato's apartment, but *she* was the couch's sovereign ruler.

It was heavenly to freeze the pain and aches away, up until her teeth started to chatter, and she could no longer hold a conversation with Sato as he cleaned. A long while passed and she longed for a nap, as was her custom, but it was not possible to fall asleep while glaciating.

After everything had been neated, he stood over her beside the couch, amused, "Chilly?"

"Yes, and it-t-t's t-terrible and w-wonderful at the s-same t-time…"

Sato pressed his hand to the pack on her chin, "Huh, this is warm already. Want to swap them for new ones?"
"N-Not as m-much as I w-wanna b-blanket…" She admitted.

He interpreted this wish his own way, she noted, as he could have simply found a throw-blanket or something to toss over her and let her continue her reign over the couch. But Sato had scooped her up, packs and all, marched to his bedroom, and deposited her in the bed. He grinned down at her as he pulled the quilt up to her chin, "It's kind of getting late. Get comfy."

Tama noted the alarm clock askew on the bedside table, "Uh…it's e-eight."

"Yup! And it's dark outside. Bedtime."

"B-But I don't want t-to—"

"Easy there, I know. Just stay warm here and I'll be back so we can catch up. I'm going to get the new packs." As he was departing with the old wraps in hand, Tama requested he return with only three, as the nine she had been wrapped up in were just too much to bear and not at all sensible.

She laid there in the dim silence of the bedroom and let her hair fan out across the pillow. 'I haven't done this in a long time. I used to spend nights when we were young, and he was stressed and anxious…but now,' Tama exhaled and pressed the heel of her hand to her forehead, 'This means something different. To me, at least.'

Three ice packs were brought to her and Tama pressed them where she needed them most, thanking Sato again as he settled cross-legged on top of the blanket beside her.

"So inquiring minds want to know," He began, balancing his chin in his palm, "What you were really doing so far from Konoha?"

"Training with the Inner Gates." Tama replied simply, shifting to fluff her pillow, "And other assorted tricks your uncle asked me not to speak about."

"Then I guess I shouldn't ask. Maybe it's just better if I see you in action."

Her puff of breath was almost a laugh, "Yes, no spoilers."

"I figured your uncle was more skilled with the Eight Inner Gates. Was there really no opportunity for you to train with Gai?"

"Maybe he could have made time, but Kakashi-sensei feels responsible for me, and he said that he didn't want Uncle Gai to take time away from his own students."

"Hm, I get that." Sato stretched out beside her, wumping down onto a pillow, face-to-face with Tama. "I'm glad he took this seriously. I felt…worried about you going to the Final Round…just in general, I mean. Most of us are friends and we have no choice but to compete…” His nostrils flared with another thought, "And that jerk…might really try to hurt you."

"Or anyone of us." She noted, "I have worked specifically to not give him that chance."

His smile was small but slightly more assured, "You're a boss."

"Heh, we'll see."

"I mean it."

"And do you feel prepared for your own match?"
"Quite." It was dark, but Tama could make out how bright and playful his ultramarine eyes were.

"That can't mean you just stand there and tease Neji, you know."

"Are you sure I can't?"

She puffed her cheeks and Sato amended, "I know. I'm ready. Sunshine kind of couldn't keep it a secret that she and Neji were improving their Water and Wind affinities, respectively." He brought his hand up and softly tapped the tip of Tama's nose, "And I've worked to make sure 'ol Neji won't get the better of me."

"I sure hope he doesn't." Tama brought her hand up as well and let him twine his fingers with her's.

"Yeah well, Yang Release took forever to get the hang of, and he had better not know what to do about it." Sato dropped his voice apprehensively, "Or I'm shit outta luck."

"That's different. You didn't tell me you were working on that."

"I had to. Pretty much all of my other staple techniques don't affect him at all."

"True."

The ice pack around her chin drooped and he reached to adjust it for her. Tama tiredly shook her head, "No, leave it. My face is just about numb now."

"I'm sure it's not."

"Hm. That, or I have a tingling ice beard. You tell me."

He leaned in and she was able to feel the soft tickle of his breath just before he pressed his mouth warmly to hers, and Tama marveled at the plush feeling of his lips. Chilled or no, she felt it.

Sato drew back with a soft, scratchy sound as he exhaled. They were nose-to-nose, Tama staring in appraising silence at the steep slope of his jaw, the starlight silver of his eyelashes up-close, his virile, clean scent filling her nostrils. No, not even a year ago had she been affected like this, hardly aware of how it had taken no time at all for her to blink and see him, smell him, feel him as an adult. Their friendship stretched between them as a soothing, unbreakable hammock, but new, tenuous threads had formed between them.

Her eyelids were halfway shut when he leaned in again, carefully pulling the ice away from her face and setting it aside. She lost the thought she tried to mutter as Sato slanted his mouth over hers again, his hands searching, and she guided his fingertips to the places that did not sting or scream from bruising. 'He tastes like mint.' He must have brushed his teeth before he had returned, she thought, momentarily lamenting her probably shellfish-y breath. If he cared about that he certainly didn't show it. He had snuck back the quilt and slipped beneath, pressing against her with a comforting heaviness.

Tama trembled, cords of muscle in her arms, back, and stomach trying to relax in the embrace. Slowly, she felt him shift and the fog-headed kiss she had been lost in traveled down and away from her face. She tensed again at the motion, but Sato made reassuring sounds between gentle kisses, scooching back to bracket her legs between his knees.

He loomed over her in a way that looked utterly feline, his eyes glittering, his body lean, and he asked, "Where does it hurt?"
The equivalent of a neurological firework went off in her brain, and Tama was not able to communicate much to him aside from removing the bag of ice from her left flank, where a violet-yellow bruise captured his attention. He bent and pressed a cautious kiss there, and Sato felt a twitch of muscle under his lips as she hissed with a mix of approval and pain. He sought her other injuries, careful and attentive, spying vague shoe and punch marks from combat that blossomed into various purples on her sand-hued skin.

A sound escaped her that stilled him, and Sato balanced over her, electrified for an endless second, and he became deaf to anything but that noise as he leaned down again. He kissed up her arms, to nowhere particularly injured, but she let him, oh god she let him touch and trail along her willowy limbs, hoisting up the shirt to access her stomach that tensed and contracted under his lips. She smelled like the soap from his bathroom. She smelled like him, in his clothes, in his bed, saying his name like small prayers with her eyes trolling over him. Liquid fire was coursing up and down his spine, out to his fingertips as he slid them over her skin.

He kissed her mouth again, her lips soft as flower petals, listening distantly to her nonsense-talk, "Nothing hurts, nothing hurts…you made me…" Tama murmured satisfied, throaty sounds between kisses.

Sato braced himself above her on one forearm while he rested his other hand at the dip of her waist, 'Calm. Stay calm.' He was not calm. He was as taught as a bowstring, harder than he had ever been in his young life, pressed into her thigh after she had gotten the bright idea to hook a leg around him. Maybe Tama had not been precisely aware of his state until she shimmied to reach for a kiss, not knowing the rub of her body against his erection, through pants, elicited a fugitive moan from him. She stillled and stared at him, as if to get visual confirmation of the phenomenon. Sato merely made frustrated, aroused grumbles as he pressed his face into the juncture of her neck and shoulder. She could look. It wasn't as if he could deny what was happening.

"I'm sorry." His tone wavered, struggling, "Don't get…the wrong idea. I didn't plan to do this, I sw —"

"Shh, I know." She brought one of her hands up to card her fingers through his hair, "This is good. I've…always wanted to get close."

Absently, he closed his hand around her wrist.

Tama added, "I feel better."

"I can make you feel better than better."

"I bet, but this is enough."

There was an edge of desperation in his voice as he lay on top of her, in some spots that were painful for her, "How long will it be enough? How long…until you want more?" Sato's face was possessive while he was bargaining. "You've wanted…"

She slipped her wrist free and held his shoulders, allowing the kisses and the press of their hips. Truly, Tama did find it sufficient. She approved that he was a shaking, taught, growling mess, and to go further and risk losing this precious landmark memory would infuriate her.

His voice was saccharine like syrup and it made her shiver, "You've wanted me. I know I made you wait."

"You did make me wait," She gasped to inhale air while he pressed hot kisses to her wrist and the
cup of her hand, "J-Just a little longer."

"How did I waste time…not knowing how you'd look, like this?" He seared his lips onto her collarbone, "Not knowing what you can do or how you taste..." Sato's mouth ghosted over the peaks beneath the shirt material, "Tama."

The feeling that pooled low in her belly could not be mistaken, not when he said her name like that. Trembling, she let her eyes flutter closed, savoring when he pressed against her.

"I need to feel you," He whispered harshly, "I can't spend another moment not knowing what you feel like."

His shirt was hitched up and Tama became conscious of her hands flat against his stomach in a warding gesture, wordlessly pleading for space. There was a shocking amount of scar tissue, she felt; the ridges of flesh that had been mended from his traumatic injuries were jagged and noticeable even against her roughened palms. And muscle; there was tense muscle there too. Tama let herself imagine how rugged he would look naked before determining that, yes, she still needed that space. She kissed him and pushed him off with strength.

He was breathing heavily and made no move to encroach upon her again. Sato curled up and faced her, waiting for the other shoe to drop.

"Not yet." She spoke as her chest rose and fell, "I'm not ready yet. All I ask is that you honor the time you made me wait for you, and just lend me a bit of the same courtesy."

He nodded with an unnerved look, not daring to break the eye contact.

"Sato," She cracked a smile, "I want to. You really should know that I want to."

"Then why not?"

"For one thing, I'm not in the best of shape." She raised her arm and pointed to a black-and-blue elbow, "I'm exhausted. We would be much better served if we were, you know, healthy."

"Ah. Right."

"And I don't want to have to think about anything else, like the Exam, for instance. I'd only want to focus on you."

"Yeah, but afterward we'll have to think about our schedules as Chunin, so I guess…well, what I mean is…I don't think we really have to wait."

"Well I think we should wait."

He grinned cheekily, "Even though you want me?"

"Yes, even though I want you." A small, exasperated sigh.

"I'm a fine piece of ass, right?" Sato propped his head up, winking at her, "And I cook."

She blew a raspberry after trying to restrain a laugh, "Oh, a fine piece indeed. And I taught you how to cook." Tama rolled to lean into him, pulling the blanket up, "But you also understand me, and you treat others with kindness and make them feel included. There are things you do that I admire. There are a lot of things about you that make me…" She trailed off, sighing again.

"I hear ya," He pressed his forehead to hers, "I didn't mean to go so fast. I just really want to."
"I know you do."

"Think you can sleep?"

"Maybe. Where did all of the ice packs go?"

"I have no idea. Do you need them?"

"Eh, maybe in the morning." She yawned and tucked herself into his side, happily ignoring the still very obvious erection.

"Hm." Sato secured his arms around her, "Sweet dreams, Tama."

After drifting in a sublime state of cuddling, letting consciousness trickle away, Sato was able to dream with sharp clarity. He dreamed of something he had forgotten many months ago in the Land of Rain. He could recall a unique feeling he had purged from his memory.

He could remember dying.

The pain had not lasted. Maybe it was a small mercy that the man with the piercings, that soulless, odd-eyed Akatsuki member had been quick about it. That when he had been crushed into the earth with ferocious force, Sato remembered his senses had all blurred into one sense, and that sense rattled in a high frequency ring that petered off as his brain and its accompanying chemicals could no longer service his heart.

And the high frequency absorbed him into an unknowable place where, a few scant centimeters from his face, there was a giant wall of white light. It stretched up, down, left, and right infinitely. Sato wondered if he was really seeing it, or was close enough to seeing the wall of light with whatever sense dead people could boast in the beyond. But he first noted the lack of feeling: no feeling of the rain and mud on his skin, not his wounds, nor anything of the sort. For the longest time it had felt like he had stood in the vast, bright void wondering at the wall and the nothingness that echoed around him.

He touched the wall and it felt like glass and water and electricity, or something he could never describe as a mortal, only to know that it could be experienced in one or more senses. It was impassable. Sato realized it would not let him pass because he saw, on the opposite side, himself with his hand pressed to the wall of light: a living reflection.

He looked with all of his might at his reflected self, able to see the man there age; see the microscopic cell-turnover, hair growth, steadily growing taller and changing as time no longer mattered in the dimension he spectated in. And the 'reflected Sato' lost interest, walking along the mortal side of the wall, growing older, grinning and joking, stopping to cavort with friends as their images came and went, fighting battles and leading others.

It was maddening torture, running along the wall of light, his hand skimming, trying to keep up with what had been left behind, or what was leaving him behind. The possibility outpaced him; that life kept living without him, seeing his reflection walking as a middle-aged adult alongside Shino, cooler and more level-headed. Watching that reflection of his run and scoop up a small, silver-haired girl onto his shoulders, and Tama beside them with her hand raised for a high-five from their daughter, keeping a toddler boy tucked on her hip.

And their lives spun on and on, their cells multiplied, the children grew, they became older and frailer, and there were flaws, pains, regrets, and imperfections in that life…and he still wanted it.

Now faced with the impossible, the dead boy wanted that life as it flickered away and disappeared
from the wall. And there was only vast white to feel, see, smell, and hear. Nothing at all worth wanting.

He would become the void, and it was peaceful and perfect, and it was also none of those things. It destroyed identity that mortals frantically tried to craft with their borrowed time, and molded all life back into its primordial state.

Then, as suddenly as he had appeared in the vast, empty, full place, he had left it. He was screaming, because no human body could interpret the landslide signals of pain that welcomed him back to life. Bones broken, organs sundered; bled and destructed to a point that addled his brain and spirit so fiercely that staying awake was a silly task. His brain had been too kind. It shut off.

Sato sat up without opening his eyes initially, first rubbing at them vigorously with the backs of his knuckles. He dropped his hands into his lap and stared into the darkness of the room, making absolutely sure it was not that damned wall of light and the nothingness that came with it. He wished he could forget it again, but Sato knew he never would.

Tama's head rose sleepily from her pillow, assessing his anxious state, and she pawed at him until he flopped down again with a quaking breath. She pulled him close and he pressed his head into the hollow of her neck and chest, gradually calming down.

He was asleep for no more than ten minutes before the pounding on the apartment door started up.

Groaning in aggravation, Sato reluctantly peeled himself away from Tama, replacing the quilt around her as he hauled himself to his feet. The clock readout shone 11:51PM as he padded down the hallway, through the living area, and wrenched the door open. Sai was standing there with a fist raised to knock again.

Sato blinked blearily, "Something the matter, Sai?"

"No. No matter at all." They stood in an enduring, awkward silence before Sai guessed, "Were you asleep, Hatake-san?"

"I was." Sato rubbed his chin and stifled a yawn.

"I apologize. I don't know anyone who goes to sleep at this hour."

"Damn right you don't. You need to socialize with normal citizens for a change."

Sai handed Sato a laminated flier and explained, "For the party, tomorrow. I was asked to invite finalists and other diverse guests. I just finished speaking with Buns upstairs."

"Buns?"

"The kunoichi Weapons Master."

"O-Oh! Tenten."

"She agreed that she would be in attendance with Ladyhair and Superbrows. It is a celebration the Hokage put together to thank finalists for their hard work, prior to the Tournament."

"Wouldn't it make more sense to celebrate after the Exam?"

"Hokage-sama explained that if you and other participants were in states of incapacitation or other injury after your matches that not much celebrating could occur, and so she moved the date up."
"Huh." Sato managed to read the text of the flier with late-night eyes, reading that the festival was set two days before the Final Rounds commenced. He held up the paper and inquired, "Are you going to this, Sai?"

"I am. I was appointed to supervise and prevent unsanctioned activities."

"That'll be good, I guess. You can meet some people this way."

"Hokage-sama said that too."

A sound caught their attention and they craned their necks to see Tama emerge from the corridor of the apartment: all legs and a bit of t-shirt, and she was curious as to what had stolen her bedmate.

Sai gave a flat look to his neighbor, "Sleeping, you say?"

Peeved, Sato warningly hushed Sai as they greeted Tama politely, apologizing for the late night disturbance. She was intrigued by the idea of a Chunin Exam meet-and-greet, glimpsing over the flier.

"This park is close by the Han Ethnic Quarter. I've performed there before." Tama noted, "It's advertising food, games, and music…but…you don't think this could escalate or cause visitors to act crazy? A lot of out-of-towners will be in our village to watch the Tournament."

"Well, Sai said he was part of the security detail, so they probably won't allow alcohol or illicit substances. We're not going to see a rave or anything like that." He lingered on the thought longingly, "But…it would be cool if they had glow-sticks."

"I could put in a request with the Hokage." Sai suggested, "For alcohol, illicit substances, and glow sticks."

Sato nearly balked, "Uh…we can go without the first two, Sai."

"The Hokage has an appetite for alcohol and illicit substances, and she confirmed she will be attending. The third request is for you."

In the daylight hours that followed, Sakura capitalized on the free time her friends had recovered. She rounded a corner with Ino in tow and pointed her towards Matsuri. In the precious few moments before Gaara could descend the stairs of his apartment, Ino had snatched his student and swept her off to lunch with kunoichi peers. Sakura would have to thank her later.

Gaara stood on the side walk and swiveled his head left and right, perplexed. It was unlike Matsuri to rush off without alerting him first. He might have dwelled on this unusual occurrence had he not spotted Sakura ambling on the opposite side of the road. As was only natural, he crossed over to her. He thought to himself that maybe Sakura's appearance was not a coincidence.

"Good morning, Gaara." Her smile morphed into an expression of disbelief as she beheld his rare change of outfit: the dusky crimson shirt he had changed into tapered into short, fishnet sleeves. She could just barely detect, beneath the white fabric sash draped and tied 'round his shoulder and hips, the deep 'v' of the top, and the glimpse of pale skin. The black pants and sandals were practical, purposefully casual, and she discerned that Gaara was actively trying to shed his Kazekage persona for the time being.

He tapped a finger against her chin, "Good morning," Gaara added astutely, "Have you disposed of my student, Sakura?"
"Not quite. I saw Ino shepherd her off for lunch, though."

"We only had time to train early in the day. Matsuri agreed to visit the novice Genin team she befriended this afternoon."

"Then give her a day off, hm? You ground her down for three weeks. Just trust her." Sakura encouraged, and as she set off walking he tagged along. "Besides, Matsuri will want to go to the festival tonight. Finalists were invited, and some others were too, I heard."

"By extension I assume I am welcome?"

She tilted her head in delight, "I hope you'll go! If you can make the time..."

"I'll go." He consented, "Though what purpose it serves is beyond my grasp."

"Tsunade-shishou wanted to thank us for our hard work. We get to socialize with participants who dropped out of the Exam but still have their visas to spectate the Final Round."

"That may reduce any lingering hostilities—or it might not."

"We'll see. Shishou will be there too."

The sun was blisteringly bright. Squinting past the window glare of shops and eateries, Sakura made an attempt to direct Gaara to a luncheonette (their hands entwined) and then stopped dead in her tracks.

Gaara looked at her curiously, "What is—?"

"Sakura!" A woman had spotted them. Gaara half-recognized her.

A strangled noise escaped Sakura as she bowed her head and her shoulders tensed, caught in her mother's sights as the woman darted over to them with a canvas bag full of groceries.

"So, today must be the day..." Her mother, Haruno Mebuki, grinned at them and judged them simultaneously, "This is him, isn't it? Well, Sakura, go on and introduce me!"

"Mother." Sakura hissed. Her brain was snarled, having taken as many measures as possible to prevent an awkward encounter, 'Murphy's Law...' and unwittingly walked into one as if it were destiny. Mebuki had once seen Gaara up-close when he delivered Sakura to safety after the Retrieval Mission, 'And she screamed at him to get lost, Dad said.' But of course she wanted formalities to be respected now that her daughter was, ah-hem, the object of a Kage's desire.

Gaara's expression was even and unperturbed.

He waited until Sakura worked out of her internal tantrum and she spoke again, "Hi Mom, well... since we're here...this is Gaara; my boyfriend and the Fifth Kazekage of the Sand Village." Sakura exhaled when she added, "Gaara, this is my mother."

"A pleasure to meet you." His eyes shut as he briefly inclined his head. "I have wanted to meet you for some time now, Haruno-san, but my duties have detained me."

"Oh Kazekage-sama, don't be silly. I was looking forward to this, but I understand how busy you've been. And please," Her tone straddled the knife's edge of acerbic and sugary, "Call me Mebuki."

Sakura's soul nearly left her body. Her capacity for humiliation was blown-out, the meter shot of the
scale, kaput, and Gaara was sporting pleasant and cool as he stood beside her, speaking to her mother as if she was not the most embarrassing person in the universe and everyone knew it.

'How does he do it?' Sakura was trapped in silence, and somewhere in her mind she was hugging Inner Sakura tightly for moral support.

"Gaara-sama, would you please join me and my family for lunch? I just picked up a few ingredients and my husband is home. I know Sakura has no responsibilities scheduled, either…"

'Make a sound. Any sound. Protest!' Sakura couldn't. She couldn't stop it.

"Of course."

'Gaara has lost his mind.' She turned her head rigidly and leveled a glare at her boyfriend's face. He was pointedly not reading her signals. Why was he okay with this? Why could they not enjoy a private meal in peace?

Then, insanely, they were walking. They were walking to the Haruno household and Sakura could not muster up the strength or indignation to stop it.

Her mind rushed through a kaleidoscope of uncomfortable sequences she was unprepared for. They then set foot in the house, Mebuki first, and removed their shoes while sharing an agonizingly slow glance. Agonizing for Sakura, at least. Gaara, with his black-ringed eyes, made a face at her: You need to stop fretting. Everything is alright.

She shook her head at him. As she was the foremost authority on her mother's overbearing behaviors, Sakura truly begged to differ.

"Come inside, welcome!" Mebuki ushered her daughter and the Kazekage over to a low table, turning to Kizashi who was seated there with a deer-in-the-headlights expression, "Dear, look! Sakura's brought by the Kazekage, Gaara-sama—"

A weak intervention from Sakura: "Actually, you invited—"

Mebuki continued speaking over her daughter, "We were just talking about how we wanted to have him over, weren't we, Kizashi?" She gave a nonverbal cue to her husband as if daggers would fire out of her cornea.

"Uh, y-yes…I believe we were." Kizashi smoothly, and confoundedly, confirmed, "It's nice to meet you in person, Gaara-sama, if you don't mind me calling you that." He bowed his head without moving to stand, and ushered for the youngsters to sit, "It's a bit short-notice of you to stop by, though. I thought you might be preoccupied at a time like this."

"My schedule opened up unexpectedly." He sat beside Sakura, still composed, "For that I am grateful. Please call me Gaara, Kizashi-san."

"Sure, but only if you scrap the formalities. I'm just Kizashi." The pink-haired man turned to his wife, who was hovering anxiously, "Mebuki, would you like Sakura to help you prepare lunch, or—?"

"Oh, no, no! I only need a bit more time to finish up. All of you relax for now and get to know each other." Her smile crackled with electric energy, and then she hustled into the kitchen with her canvas bag.

Sakura finally took a breath and dropped her forehead into the palm of her hand.
Kizashi lowered his voice and asked, "Did she drag you back here?"

"Yes." Sakura muttered.

"Yeah…she's been dead-set on this introduction for weeks." His expression was playful as he whispered to Gaara, "That's Mebuki for you. She runs a tight ship. Sakura sometimes says that she a-sails people with her personality."

Sakura flattened her hands on the table, "Dad. Please, even if it's just for today…don't make any puns."

"Too late! Already did." Kizashi turned brightly to Gaara, "You liked that one didn't ya?"

"I didn't hate it." Gaara was roundly ambivalent. Sakura thanked her lucky stars for that.

"Right, I can do better." Kizashi frowned to himself and scratched at his beard, "So I suppose you're here to spectate the Tournament, am I right? Who looks after Sunagakure while you're away?"

"I appointed my older sister and brother to manage the office while I'm here. They are very capable." Gaara added, "I look forward to watching Sakura and my student compete in the Final Round."

"Ah! Your student is also a finalist? Very impressive. And your siblings sound like they know their stuff…” Kizashi chuckled to himself and folded his arms, "But I wonder who you'll root for if Sakura has to face your student in a later match?"

Gaara did not take the bait dangling in front of him and said nothing, not willing to confess to favoritism.

"Dad, that isn't fair." Sakura warned, "There's no reason for him to choose."

The man simpered, "Sure there is! He's only dating you, as far as I know. You should be the preference! But I get it. I won't stir the pot. Just poking a bit of fun..." He turned back to Gaara, "You seem very calm and collected, Gaara. It's no wonder that you're a responsible leader." Kizashi rubbed at his chin again, "I can see why Sakura likes you so much."

"Thank you." He accepted the compliment.

And while the two chatted peaceably, Sakura canted her head and regarded the two most important men in her life. They're...mostly compatible. They can talk. Ugh, I went into a panic when Mom was, well, Mom…but Dad...he's really easy to get along with. She dared take a breath of relief, 'And Gaara's more social and glib than he was a few years ago. He's grown so much. Gaara probably won't be bothered by Dad's jokes...especially if I take into account he had Naruto for all those years!'"

"I'm a bit curious, since you didn't mention it, but…" Sakura's attention drifted back to the conversation as her father asked, "What's your surname, Gaara?"

It gave Gaara pause. His family's name almost carried like a title, at least where he came from, and when Gaara thought a bit more on it…his surname had a ring to it not unlike the Haruno family name. He realized, a bit late, that just as Sakura's name was a play on words, so too had he been named.

"Sabakuno." Gaara supplied simply, "My father was Sabaku no Rasa, the first of our line."

"Ah…a newer family name, I see. Yes, that's right." Kizashi thoughtfully snapped his fingers, "Your
father was the Fourth Kazekage. Hmm…and that name…" A grin tugged at his lips, "Would be kind of funny…"

Sakura pointed a finger in the man's face, hoping to halt him, "Don't-!

"It'd be funny if Sakura went from a spring field to sand, wouldn't it? Merely a change of scenery-!"

Sakura stood on her knees and seized Kizashi by his shoulders while he laughed, "Quit it, Dad! I swear—"

"Heh, heh…Sakura, if you got married, imagine! Your name wouldn't change syntactically—"

Before she could lunge forward in a newly ignited fit of embarrassment, Gaara placed his hand on her arm and eased her back into her seat. He shrugged it off. She sat and wondered if her ears were smoking like a chimney stack.

"Yes, she would become a desert flower. Not to put ideas in your head, of course." Kizashi gave a blasé nod to Gaara.

Gaara appeared to be thinking about something, but Kizashi pressed on whilst Mebuki summoned Sakura into the kitchen with a harpy-like shriek.

"Sorry. I am told that I'm a chatterbox, and I can get on my daughter's nerves sometimes. Probably not as much as her mother does, but…” The man smiled warmly, "This is our family. It's a bit silly, don't you think? But we are all that is left of our spring-loving, pink-headed kinfolk. My younger brother died long ago on a mission. Ah, and Mebuki has two sisters, if you're wondering. One married and moved to Tsukigakure, some years back. She lost touch with us…” Kizashi rested his chin on his folded hands, "And my sister-in-law who remains in Konoha, Kaika…she's a real spitfire." He began to laugh wildly and Gaara wondered if he would, or more thoughtfully should, meet the person Kizashi was describing.

"That's all of us." Kizashi nodded, "Now tell me a little about your family."

"It's…a very broken family." Gaara admitted.

"Doesn't matter to me. It's still yours, isn't it?"

They fell quiet and listened to the sounds of Mebuki and Sakura bickering in the kitchen, finalizing the meal.

"My eldest sibling is Temari, and my brother, the middle child, is Kankuro." He relaxed gradually as he spoke, "I was the third child born to my parents, Rasa and Karura. My mother's brother was Yashamaru, and my uncle looked after me for a time after my mother died."

Kizashi nodded thoughtfully, his face serenely propped in his hand.

"Without mother…I could tell that no one was happy. Not my siblings, my father, nor my uncle. I was a constant reminder of the gaping hole she had left." Gaara was surprised by the statement, as if he was only just discovering it, "For that, and some…other reasons…my childhood was turbulent. I ran away from my village."

"You must have been young…” Kizashi supposed, stroking his beard.

"Not quite old enough to attend the Academy. I was discovered by Jiraiya of the Legendary Three in a tourist town in the Fire Country, and he delivered me to Konoha, where he hoped I could thrive."
He omitted some details but rounded the tale off, "And while I lived here, my two friends and fellow orphans became my brothers as well. Uzumaki Naruto and Haku."

"Yes, I know. Sakura speaks of them very fondly!"

"Now that my father and uncle have passed on…the support of my brother and sister has reunited us in Suna. We are glad to be together again."

Kizashi shook his head, a bit stirred by the story, "Hm, that's a heartfelt memoir, I'll say…the Kazekage has had a long journey. I don't think it ends there, either. His eyes twinkled, "I'm sure…Sakura is special to you as well."

Gaara nodded in reply because there was no use in forming words to try to describe it. Sakura's presence in his life was a tremendous and treasured privilege.

Following that, Mebuki and Sakura began to make trips to the table with bowls and dishes of food; not speaking in the dining room and then resuming their hushed argument in the kitchen.

With the table set, the women sat down beside their respective male companions. Mebuki gave a sharp look to her daughter which conveyed a message, and with a restrained grumble, Sakura reached for a pitcher of cold tea. She poured for Gaara first, muttering, "Chilled oolong and lemon…"

He thanked her as she poured for her parents next. They expressed thanks for the meal, and then Mebuki rambled on about the dishes she had made.

"I hope most of it is to your liking! That's cold soba in front of you, and I set the dipping sauce there, try it! Perfect for summer. Hm, hm! Oh, and my sister grew these vegetables. They're my favorite marinated with this sesame flavor—"

Sakura tried to derail it, "Mom—"

"And here, some octopus, at Kizashi's request—"

"…Mom."

"—do you care for edamame? I grilled some chicken and onions—"

There was a slightly worried look on Kizashi's face. No one was eating yet.

"Also there's-!"

"Mom." Sakura barked, and a vein bulged near her temple as she spoke, "Let him eat. Please, just let him try something first!"

"Oh." Mebuki settled down and shrunk into her seat, "Goodness, I'm sorry. I got worked up."

"Don't worry dear; we're all going to enjoy it." Kizashi's smile was genuine and disarming.

Almost immediately, there was a noisy slurp as Gaara tried the noodles as instructed. It drew three surprised stares.

He gave a quick assessment, "Indeed…perfect for summer."

Mebuki beamed at him.
After lunch and conversation about achievements, work, leisure, family, hobbies, and 'does the desert have any seasons at all?' the meal ended, and Sakura proceeded to clear the dishes from the table. Mebuki politely excused herself and asked Kizashi to meet her in the study at the end of the hall. She seemed contemplative.

Gaara was not sure what to think of the abrupt departure of Sakura's parents. To keep busy, he assisted in putting away leftovers and reordering the kitchen.

"Thank you." The pinkette sighed, "I hope they weren't overbearing…"

"They pale in comparison to the attitudes I deal with at my Village Council."

"Huh! And I thought I had a thick skin."

He supposed, "Not as thick as sand armor, but I could lend it to you if you wished."

"No thanks. That'd tire me out." She scrubbed a large serving bowl at the sink and looked over her shoulder at him, "Is it heavy? I mean, when you cover yourself with sand for defense?"

"It is."

"You don't get tired?"

"I'm used to it." Gaara stood beside her and dried plates as they came clean, "Other things tire me out."

"Like what?"

"Overdoing it at the office. Genin that protest the missions I assign. Elders." He added sincerely, "And not being able to see you as often as I'd like."

"I know. But you can always request me for a mission, when there's an opportunity. I'd never object."

Gaara smiled to himself, "I know. That only works if the Hokage is willing, of course."

"Yeah…Shishou can be a pain in the neck about it."

A piercing shout made them slow in their work. Mebuki and Kizashi's discussion at the far end of the house had increased in volume. Sakura groaned in dread, hoping to never know what it was about, or that her parents had not outright condemned her choice of a boyfriend.

Perhaps the choice to update the Haruno's home last year to central heating and cooling made this moment in time worse. The voices of two sparring parents carried through the ventilation and echoed out from an air vent on the wall. Sakura beseeched Gaara with her eyes to please, please go to the restroom, go to the family room, go stick his head in between sofa cushions to drown out the noise. Anything so that he wouldn't listen to this…

But they stood near the refrigerator like two masochists, as the voices drifted up from a low vent for them to hear.

"Mebuki, there's no need…"

"-don't pretend. Kizashi, that you do not understand what I mean! What will happen if this continues? A Kazekage can't just leave his post to come live here, just because he loves our daughter. He won't do it. We can't ask him to."
"Then surely Sakura can—"

"No! It's absurd. It's cruel and selfish to ask our only child, our child, Kizashi— to settle down in the desert, where she has no immediate family to support her. Who would help her if there's a falling out, hm? Who will care for her then? Who is there for her when she's sad and alone, or when she's too exhausted to make herself a meal after a mission—and her spouse is stuck in an office! What kind of life is that? She'll be sitting in empty rooms most days, and we'll be here...here m-missing her!"

"Mebuki..." Kizashi's tone was consoling.

"Please know...that I'm happy. I'm happy Sakura has a stable relationship, with someone truly remarkable. But I can't. I can't abide the idea of missing the events of my daughter's life because she lives in another country. I always dreamed of being there to see her happy. You know how hard it is...for me...when she goes away. Even for a little while, on her missions...I-I..."

"Now, now...it's so easy for you to worry when you don't have your hands guiding every little thing, my dear. This is not something you can control and you know it. It's hard. Of course it is, because I feel the same way."

"H-How...can you not...worry?"

"I do. I just do it a bit more quietly. By the way, try to keep it down or they'll hear...that'd be embarrassing."

Mebuki was hiccupping.

"It seems to me...that Gaara is very accommodating and generous, especially when it comes to our daughter. Don't be so sure that he won't arrange something to make it easier for her, and us, to be together as a family. If that is the decision they make at some point in time, try to have some trust in someone like him." Kizashi chuckled, "Really...Sakura could have chosen much worse here in Konoha."

A sniffle, "She could have..."

"He's a bit unusual looking, isn't he?"

"Those eyes." Mebuki agreed.

"Quite unique. I didn't feel it was polite to ask but I sure am curious!"

"Well, you're the man with pink hair. You: trying to comment on other's appearances. At any rate...save those questions for another day." Mebuki exhaled and composed herself, "I'm sorry about this, dear. I just had to get my feelings out. I nearly exploded before the end of lunch; so many emotions had built up."

"I understand. Sakura's a lot like you, in that respect."

"But really...she's most like her father..." Her voice was tender.

The door down the corridor clicked open and Sakura mechanically resumed doing the dishes, not saying a word as Gaara continued the drying next to her. Somehow, they'd have to play it off like they weren't eavesdropping pieces of trash worried about what parents thought of them.

Mebuki hurried over to interrupt Sakura's work, "Darling, I'm sorry, please let me wash these. You've done more than enough today. I just had to share some thoughts with your father."
She looked at her mother with shiny eyes, "Is everything alright, Mom?"

"Everything is." Mebuki smiled warmly, "I guess I'm just excited." She turned to look at Gaara, "Maybe I assumed too quickly that the Kazekage would be aloof and proud... that we'd have to posture and impress today... but he's quite a bit like us!"

Gaara set aside one last, fully dried dipping bowl, "I want to be. If you meet the rest of my family... you will discover they act like clowns."

"Thank goodness." Kizashi chorused at the thought.

Mebuki asked Sakura to accompany her across town to deliver food set aside for Auntie Kaika, hoping it would not inconvenience Gaara. For once, the request seemed optional.

Gaara could see that Sakura had softened, that her empathy had compelled her to touch and hug her mother, to react to her with understanding and sensitivity.

He noted, "I will be at the festival this evening and I can rejoin Sakura there. Don't let me interrupt any tasks you need to finish today."

Sakura thanked him and assisted her mother in packing a basket before they set out. Shortly afterward, Kizashi cheerfully led Gaara to the door as he was set to be on his way.

Bowing was customary, but Kizashi extended his hand and firmly shook with Gaara.

"Don't worry! Mebuki likes you. She's just an emotional bottle-rocket."

"Understandable."

"Hope you didn't hear our chat back there. It got a bit loud."

"Not at all. Sakura and I were talking while we cleaned."

"Ah, good." Kizashi twitched his nose, "Honestly, I like you too. I'm really glad you were able to drop by. Come over anytime! I could talk all day."

"Perhaps tomorrow. There will be a lull before the Tournament, which commences the day after."

"Good, good! Hmm, the Kazekage's been a real sport about all of this. And you know..." Kizashi opened the front door and lingered in the doorway, thoughtful, "I've really known you since you were a school kid. I came by the Academy all the time to watch Sakura train in the yards. I knew who you were."

"Ah." Gaara was not sure how to respond.

"You wanted to spend time with her then, too."

"I did." He would never deny it.

"So..." He grinned, "Did you always have a crush on my little girl? Was Sakura the only one for you?"

Gaara regarded him blankly for a long moment before he exited the house, stopping on the top step. He turned around and finally confessed to favoritism, "Even before the Academy... she was the only one."
"Hah! You have good taste, my man. She's my pride and joy." Kizashi was bubbling with laughter, "And I just can't help but like you because she likes you. Sakura and I are very similar, as you know. I hope someday you'll let her be your pride and joy too. You know…show her off for the entire world to see."

Gaara nodded slowly, the corners of his mouth curving up at the notion.

He pointed a finger at Gaara, suddenly serious, "No funny business at that festival, though. A Kage has quite an image to uphold."

"I'll be sure to tell the Hokage that when I see her later."

"Ha!" Kizashi was bubbling over again and wiped a tear from his eye, "I know, right? Sakura has told me…ho, ho," As he shut the door Gaara heard him say, "This guy's a riot."

Evening sunbeams skipped over rooftops like stones across a lake. The park that was south of the Han Ethnic Quarter began to bustle as the sun sank; its paths illuminated with hollow, glowing sculptures and string lights criss-crossing above stands. Though not a proper summer festival, some depictions of deities, animals, and shinobi had been pulled from storage and set aglow, lining the walkways and lawns.

Shikamaru asked Chouji to mind his step when he nearly tripped over wires laying across pavement, not yet secured by gaffing tape.

"What's all of this for? I thought we'd have taiko drums and flutes, you know, like usual?" Chouji wondered at a distant stage where amplifiers and band instruments were being tended to.

"It's not time for Leaf's Obon festival yet. The Hokage meant for this to be a smaller celebration." Shikamaru eyed the stage, unimpressed, "Something tells me there was no budget for quality entertainment."

"We got here early; don't be so quick to judge." Ino shooed them along towards game and food stands, "The music probably won't suck."

"Psh!" Shikamaru stuck his hands in his pockets, doubtful.

They were side-tracked briefly by the endless selection of food-on-sticks at a small, tented vendor, then proceeded past some juvenile games: "Hm, Shika, want to scoop me a goldfish?"

"Not particularly."

Chouji pointed out other scoop-it or throw-this-ball kiddie attractions…until down the line of games the tasks became more suited for ninja.

"Hit a target on a motor-spun wheel with a shuriken, win adorable knick-knacks!" Ino's face lit up. All three of them successfully attempted the game and walked off with porcelain idols and statues to stick on a shelf in their bedrooms and forget about.

"Huh, looks like Lee won't be leaving that chin-up test game anytime soon…" Chouji noted as they passed it by, overhearing as Lee was up to 109 chin-ups, and had probably just arrived minutes before them. Chouji supposed, "I guess Tenten and Neji should be here too?"

"I'll bet. Look! There's Hinata at the seating area." Ino hauled her teammates along by their wrists, full-steam ahead towards friends gathering at picnic tables situated beneath tall maple trees.
They passed a large, covered pavilion that had several fans blowing to keep guests cool. Naturally, Tsunade was seated there in a comfortable chair, lining up a variety of drinks, snacks, and diversions on a table that she would enjoy (and probably not share) that night. Tenzo, in his civilian garb, loitered near the entrance of the tent and made small talk with other veteran ninja inquisitively poking around the festival.

The picnic tables to the left of the pavilion had attracted the Finalists as well as many Exam drop-outs who had returned to socialize and watch the Tournament. Beyond a wide space for dancing and foot-traffic was the band stage, and beside it was a raised booth for a DJ, "That's a low vote of confidence in the band they hired…" Ino appraised. She took a bite of a chocolate covered banana on a stick and then greeted their friends, "Hinata! Cute dress. Hi Shino."

"Thank you, Ino-chan." Hinata scooched over, closer to Shino, ushering Ino to sit. Chouji and Shikamaru took the seats across the table from them and continued inhaling fried foods, "I'm happy to see you here! It was a bit awkward with so many…" She trailed off.

"What?" Shikamaru picked up on it, "All of these Exam participants you guys have creamed are back and trying to make nice? Yeah. It's only natural for them to kiss some ass at events like these."

Ino and Chouji had a good laugh at the thought, and Hinata cupped her mouth in her hands and looked around shiftily. The Grass kunoichi she had defeated, Guena, was at the next table over beside her Finalist teammate, Aota. They seemed to be making friendly conversation with Leaf inhabitants who had dropped by, also stuffing their faces. Their sensei Mahoto was in attendance and had a small boy riding atop his shoulders, likely his child.

Ino took it upon herself to get visual confirmation on the rest of their cohort. Neji and Tenten were now trying to usher Lee away from the game he was dominating while a line of complaining festival-goers had accumulated. Eventually, they had whisked him along to a balance-the-plate-on-a-pole game where, judging by Tenten's expression, the prizes were not worth the stupidity. Neji veered away towards grilled herring and squid. Tenten cursed as Lee dragged her onward.

Gaara's student, Matsuri, appeared in a fit of laughter as she spoke to Konohamaru and his teammates, joined by younger peers and— "No," Ino tapped Hinata's shoulder, "Is that your sister over there? Socializing normally?"

Hinata nodded, "Yes! Hanabi will be competitive and blunt with them…but she does try to make friends."

"Huh. I thought I was going nuts." Ino accepted the cup of lemonade Chouji handed her, "Thanks Chouji. And…where is…?" She craned her neck around in search of her own rival. Hinata giggled and pointed toward a crowd-favorite game.

A wide-mouthed, shocked smile spread on Ino's face, "That's not! That **is** What is Sakura doing?" She stood up to take a look at Sakura squaring off against Kiba in mock sumo suits, lambasting each other in faux-pudgy buffoonery as they laughed and squealed like school children. Akamaru circled the ring while barking. Shikamaru glanced towards the attraction and snorted quietly, amused.

"Oh my gosh." Ino took a seat, grinning, "That kind of…no, that definitely looks fun."

"I want to try it to!" Hinata chirped in delight, "Shino-kun, will you please consider joining me for that game?"

"Sato would be better suited." Her friend peeked at her over his glasses with sharp hazel eyes, as if to implore: *Do not make me. For your sake I would agree, but I would hate every moment of it*...
Hinata understood. She sighed, "Sato-kun isn't here yet, and neither is—"

"Hold up! They're over there!" Chouji pointed out the couple who was last to arrive, rounding the corner of a storage tent. They were dressed for summer weather as everyone else was, but their clothing was what Chouji described as "That edgy, Hip-Hop stuff."

"They must plan to dance." Hinata tapped her lips with a finger, "I hope music will start soon. I'd enjoy dancing."

Shino breathed a sigh of relief, expecting that she would not coax him into the sumo game.

Sato reached them and loudly greeted his friends, while Tama was more reasonable with her wave and smile.

"You all got stuff to eat, I see…" Sato noted, eyeing each morsel, "What's recommended?"

"Anything on a stick." Ino advised, "Shika got mackerel somewhere, I don't know, but that's what he always wants. Check it out over there— it's like Neji can't quit it with the herring. Huh. It's got to be good." She glanced down at the beverage in her hand, "And not to alarm anyone, but…this is spiked. Good, but spiked."

"Excuse me?" Chouji sputtered, surprised, "I got it at the pavilion that Tsunade-sama is sitting in! Are you sure-?"

"That just makes me more sure." Ino shook her head, "Do you know how much booze she has hoarded in there? Her security guard must have rounded up everything 'unapproved' and given it to her. Seems like some of it got back into the wrongs hands…” She took another merry sip, "Hm! I'm not going anywhere tonight. Might as well savor this!"

Shikamaru and Chouji leveled stern expressions at her that lasted a full six seconds before they too partook of the unsanctioned lemonade. Shino declared something in his cup was not even close to what he had asked for, and he handed it off to Sato to test it.

"Yeesh." Sato batted his lips, "I'm not sure…"

When passed to Tama, she readily identified it, "Whiskey. Whoa, how are they slipping this out? This isn't even mixed well."

Sakura and Kiba joined the group after their skirmish and were greeted, given snacks, and promptly informed to beware of liquids. Shikamaru voiced that if they chose to drink, "Do it responsibly. Don't play any weapon-throwing or other risky games later. Sumo's probably fine."

"Probably hilarious." Ino concurred.

Unceremoniously, Sai approached the table and dropped a cardboard box onto it. They hastily saved their snacks and drinks from tipping. Sai then stood there like a well-animated mannequin with limited manners. "Hello." He managed.

"Sai!" Sato was a helpful liaison, "Everyone, this is Sai. He's my neighbor from across the hall at our apartment complex. I don't know if he's met most of us, so…” He pointed down the line at his friends, "Sai, these are my friends! This is Hyuga Hinata, but I just call her Sunshine."

Sai nodded at Hinata, "Hello Sunshine."

"Then my best friend, Aburame Shino. And here we have Nara Shikamaru, Akimichi Chouji,
Yamanaka Ino…” Sai's stare lingered on Ino as Sato went on. "Inuzuka Kiba, and this is Haruno Sakura. I think Neji's team is still hanging by the games, but you've said you've met them already."

"It is good to meet you all." Sai parroted a phrase that Tenzo had taught him to use. Eventually, he would be able to superficially judge each of his new acquaintances to come up with nicknames that suited them.

While his eyes were still magnetized towards Ino, Sakura grimaced and waved a hand in front of Sai's face, "Is he alright? If he'd been staring at me for that long I would have stuffed him into a kick drum by now."

"Sorry. He's not well-socialized yet. Sai just joined the standard forces after being raised and trained by the Foundation." Sato elaborated, steering Sai away from Team Asuma before Shikamaru could begin to bristle. Kiba and Akamaru gave Sai a curious passing sniff each.

"Tsunade-shishou mentioned that to me." Sakura acknowledged, nodding, "I didn't know ninja from the Root Foundation…were like this."

"They might be worse." Tama supposed in a whisper, "Sai calls me Legs."

Sakura snickered.

Tama changed the subject and addressed Sai, "It's good to see you, Sai. What's in that box?"

Sai reached over and pulled the cardboard flaps back for all gathered to peer inside. It was filled to the brim with glow-sticks and glow-in-the-dark accessories.

"Kind of unexpected, but cool." Chouji decided.

"Oh yeah! You got 'em!" Sato was pleased.

"Yes, and Hokage-sama is now in possession of everything else requested." Sai noted, meaning the illicit substances.

"Well, so are we." Shikamaru clarified, "Who's sneaking alcohol out of the pavilion?"

Sai shrugged. He really did not care.

Kiba pointed out that glow-sticks would be of no use until after sunset, but spread the word to other guests in the picnic area that they were welcome to take what they wanted.

And in the few minutes after that the park became busier, more densely packed with people, and Sakura had begun turning in circles hoping to get a glimpse of Gaara, Where is he? Kiba had begun muttering with Shikamaru and Chouji about "this Sai guy" while Sai had approached Shino to engage in the most stilted, awkward conversation that had ever taken place. Ino rescued the Aburame by giving Sai an intrigued smile, quickly gaining his attention again.

"I thought only Sato liked to use nicknames." She carded her fingers down her ponytail where it cascaded over her shoulder, "Tell me how you met Sato and Tama, Sai. And how about Neji and his team?"

Shino was shocked to find that Sai became a bit more eloquent with his responses while speaking to Ino. He then batted futilely at Sato when the Hatake had begun layering glow-in-the-dark rings around his neck and head.
"You'll be the life of the party later. Just go with it, Shino." Sato assured him. He turned and began fixing glow-in-the-dark accessories to Hinata as well, "Perfect!"

"Oh!" Tama hopped in place as two grown men rushed over to her from the stage, shouting, and then wrapped their arms around her in a group hug, "You're here!"

"Little lady!" A tall brunette man in green flannel squeezed her and then stepped back, "Ready to watch our set, Tama?" He turned to Sato, "Ah, and our favorite Hatake, good to see you, man!" Sato was acquiescent with the hug given to him as well.

"Sutībun, your band's playing?" Sato's excitement was forced but believable, "And young Niiru too…you play now?"

"Nope, I sing." Niiru, in his t-shirt and jeans, spoke shyly, "Better than the rest of the band, anyway."

"Good for you, man. Nice wristbands." Sato gestured at him, "And puka shells. And stuff."

Niiru smiled and revealed he was, apparently, even younger than Sato.

Sakura held up her hands and wedged herself between Tama and the men, "Excuse me, but…who are these people?"

"They're my cousins." Tama explained sunnily, "Fudōshin Sutībun and Niiru; older brother and younger brother. They are my mother's nephews."

"Wow." Sakura blinked at them in surprise, "Nice to meet you! It's neat seeing more of your family, Tama."

Tama introduced her cousins, "Sutī-kun, Niiru-chan, this is my teammate and good friend, Sakura."

The men nodded to her, "Over there is my other teammate, Kiba-kun, and there's Shino-kun, Hinata- chan, Shikamaru-kun, Chouji-kun, Ino-chan and Sai."

"Ah, great. I hope you all enjoy our set. It's just a few songs…and we can play longer if the Hokage likes it." Sutībun wilted, "But she's not crazy about our drummer and bassist, so…we'll see what happens."

"How does Tsunade-shishou know your band, exactly?" Sakura was flummoxed.

Sutībun pointed out a man and a turquoise haired woman nearby the stage, "See that guy? That's Sano. He plays bass. Sort of." He turned and noted a game stand where two women were hurling darts, "And that's Kim, our drummer. Oh hey, Niiru, look. She brought Knives tonight. Make sure you say hi."

"I-I will. Later."

Shikamaru had overheard enough and pressed Kiba down below the table, and he also ducked for good measure, "Sano…as in…Sanomune? Oga Sanomune?" Shikamaru gruffed at Chouji who was bemused by his need to hide, "He's the dumbass we had to protect for that wedding. Remember? I told you about it."

Kiba added, "Yeah…that's him alright. Damn, I can't believe he's here. To play music. This is gonna be a nightmare…"

"You don't know that yet." Ino chided them in a sing-song voice.
"Yeah, well...I just don't want to deal with him again. Make sure he doesn't see us or he'll try to be all buddy-buddy."

"Don't sweat it. He's preoccupied with Ramo and he's only here to play." Sutibun assured him, "Speaking of wives...where's Senbō gotten to?" He scratched his beard and looked around for his spouse, his eyes scouring the flow of festival revelers, "I should have said something to her before I ran over here..."

"Well as soon as you start playing...you know she'll be front and center to cheer for you." Tama encouraged, "Is it almost time?"

"Yeah, I guess." He patted Tama's muscled arm and motioned for Niiru, "Come on. Better do a sound check and get rolling." Sutibun turned to the group of Finalist ninja, "Nice to meet you and good luck at the Tournament. Have fun, Tama, Sato!" They hurried back to the stage and shouted for Sanomune to quit loafing around.

"Your cousins seem very nice." Hinata stood on Tama's opposite side, her head tilted in a puppy-like manner, "And they get along with Sato-kun!"

"Yes, Sato is kind of their crowd anyway. Maybe not musically, but for celebrating, absolutely."

Sato whispered behind the back of his hand, "It's just...their music is unrefined. It's garage-band stuff. I can't dance to it!"

Sakura and Hinata chuckled but he shook his head at them.

"Watch out." Sato warned, "It'll give you a headache."

The band assembled on stage and curious festival-goers began to accumulate. From the corner of her eye, Hinata spied Tenten and Neji entering the pavilion and greeting Tsunade. Lee was still by a game booth, his arms already full of stuffed animals he had won. She took a seat at another table with Sakura, Tama, and Sato as the low tremolo of a guitar rumbled from speakers.

The crowd made sounds of excited anticipation, and as many settled their eyes on the small front man Niiru holding onto his microphone for dear life, the drummer, Kim (the Oga clan's faithful maid) raised her sticks and bellowed into a microphone of her own. Tama smiled warily while Sato discreetly plugged his ears with his pinky fingers. Sakura's stomach dropped at the sight.

After the screamed introduction, an assault of electric trills and overpowering drums commenced, rattling the ground and the unsuspecting crowd that had gathered. Somehow, from somewhere within the pavilion tent, Sakura could hear Tsunade decrying the show and expressing her regret of hiring a (nearly) free act.

Hinata pressed her face into Sakura's shoulder for solace, asking, "What is a...Sex Bob-Omb? And why do they call themselves that?"

Sakura had to shout her reply over the din, "I think it's an obscure reference!"

"Told you!" Sato added in a shout.

There was no respite between the first song and the second, which was so shrill in its guitar riffs and weak, inaudible vocals that the crowd in front of the stage began to dissolve and set out for other parts of the festival. Tsunade's tirade continued, prompting Neji and Tenten to evacuate the tent as the Hokage's tantrum got physical. Others exited the pavilion and fled to the far side of the park to avoid the uproar.
Ino was cackling madly when she turned to Tama from her seat, shouting, "This song is called Garbage Truck? How appropriate!"

Tama sighed in weary agreement, feeling bad for her cousins, but simultaneously praying for the end.

When an empty sake bottle soared like a bullet from the pavilion, hit the stage backdrop, and exploded into a million glass shards (thankfully not striking any of the bandmates) Tenzo rushed to restrain Tsunade. Abruptly, the song was cut short and Sutibun wheezed an apology into a microphone before wrestling Sanomune off of the stage.

"That was quick." Shikamaru noted in a normal volume of voice. His friends answered in a ensemble of groans.

A minute later, Tenzo was ejected from the tent and ordered to escort the band away, "Get that other guy up there! The volunteer who knows what he's doing!" Tsunade added in a screech.

Tenzo scrambled to mediate. The band was now back stage and Sanomune was still stubbornly playing a bassline until a cable was ripped out of an amplifier. Visitors in the picnic area began talking amongst themselves and criticizing the letdown performance.

When the way was clear, Tenten and Neji joined their friends at the tables. Lee was a few paces behind them, passing out stuffed animals to revelers who were interested in them. Tenten set down a tray of takoyaki and a very large cup, "Was that supposed to be a try-out or was there a mix-up? That might have been the worst thing I've ever heard."

"That was my cousin's band." Tama confessed sadly.

Tenten tried to backpedal, "Oh! Well, not exactly the worst-!"

"I saw Oga Sanomune was playing." Neji noted, "It was hardly her cousin's fault."

Shikamaru and Kiba seconded the notion.

Lee was down to one last toy, a stuffed fox, and Hinata gladly accepted it. He added his two cents on the performance, "Sutibun-san and Niiru-san were quite good. Oga-sama may have needed a bit more practice."

"You are too gentle of a critic." Neji insisted. Lee just smiled sedately.

The team munched on the last of their shared octopus treats Tenten had the first sip of her beverage and sucked wind in surprise, setting her giant cup down. She glanced around until Ino made direct eye contact with her, smirking, "Whoa, what...what's in this? It was supposed to be some fizzy peach thing!"

Shikamaru noted, "You must have gotten that at the pavilion?"

"...yeah?"

"Someone is distributing the Hokage's booze right under her nose. Stick to the vendors outside." Ino recommended as she stole a sip of it with her straw, "Hm, seems like they confused your order with sake and a splash of fruit. Pretty good, actually."

Lee approached curiously and Tenten batted him away, "No! Er— Lee...sorry. Like Ino said, it's best if you get something to drink from a stand near the park entrance. If you had any alcohol you
might…well…you know."

He sighed and nodded.

Tenten allowed Tama and Sakura indulgent sips before she whapped Sato in the face, telling him to get his own. When he turned around in defeat, Sato gasped as he watched a familiar face fill the DJ booth and begin tinkering with electronics.

"Hey! That's the, uh, Grass kid that I…I…" He pursed his lips and trailed off.

"The Grass ninja you roasted, Noé." Shikamaru recalled, "Why don't you go over and say hello? He's looking surprisingly healthy after the stunt you pulled."

"Quit it! I never meant to put him through that. Huh. It doesn't look like there's a mark on him! He got patched up pretty well…"

"He does look better." Tama agreed, "Maybe we can expect more from him as a musical talent?"

"I'm not about to get my hopes up at this point." Kiba chimed in.

"Well he seems like a knowledgeable guy." Sato defended, "I mean look at his clothes— he's like a cosplayer, or whatever those people are called. He speaks French and uses poison and swords. He's a classy guy."

"Classy?" Kiba repeated, stupefied, "He tried to poison you."

"You've tried to do worse." Sato provided an innocent reference to their past brawls.

"Yeah, you're right."

While Noé continued setting up, a lilting pop tune pinged and bounced from speakers, calming the frantic, distressed mood of the festival. Stage hands were packing up the band's instruments with dispassionate expressions. Sato and Tama ventured forth to secure their own festival food, bobbing along to the melody out of habit. Hinata helped herself to Neji's final bite of takoyaki before springing away from the bench, joining a small flock of optimists willing to shimmy to the (comparably) bearable music. She had left her fox toy beside her cousin.

Matsuri and her companions had also drifted into the open space to dance and gossip, and Hanabi had sidled up to her sister, stepping just as skillfully as Hinata.

"It was worse before," Hanabi noted, "But now this music is too happy."

"I think it's just to hold us over." Hinata supposed, "He is still preparing his…um…"

"That's a turntable and mixer." Hanabi droned in boredom.

"How do you know what they are?"

"I know about cool things that you don't."

"Ah." Hinata was tempted to press her fingers together in shame.

"But like I said, it sounds too happy. Do you want to play that sumo game with me until the DJ puts on something better?"

Sheer joy illuminated Hinata's face as she quickly raced off with her sister, who bullied others in line
to make way and *find something else to do!* so she and her sister could pull on the pudge-suits and duet. From afar, Hinata's friends watched the humorous spectacle.

"That is just…" Sato and Tama returned and sat down with food across from Neji and Tenten, "This is the best. I love watching people put those stupid things on."

"I had no idea that Hanabi would be interested in a game like that." Tenten could not look away.

"Any activity that can let her boast being the victor interests her." Neji explained. When Tenten hovered the straw of her drink beneath his face he narrowed his eyes at her, but he still took a sip. His facial expression suggested that he did not dislike it.

"It's not bad. I'll share." She set it down between them.

Tama began giggling wildly as Hinata took a running charge at her sister, "She still looks so cute! Mmheehee! Look at her go!"

Sato split that last bit of chicken on a stick with Tama, "Maybe we can play that game later?"

"I don't know. The line got so long…"

The DJ, Noé, made no announcement before testing the waters with a bubbling tune over deep bass. The syrupy pop tune faded into a heavy track with a smattering of suggestive lyrics, and Noé glanced around in concern, wondering if he had completely misinterpreted what the youth of the festival actually wanted to hear. His moment of anxiety abated. Two had left their picnic table and skipped over the open space, and as Noé squinted he recognized them.

'It's that twat who burned me!' Noé was tempted to shut the sound system off and have a hissy fit, but he continued to watch his former opponent, the Hatake, flirt and strut around the beautiful, tall girl beside him, *This is…* ‘Such willingness to dance actually made him, the panicking DJ, look more competent in his selection, *Maybe I'll just…stick this one out.* The gesture of goodwill made by his Leaf opponent would not be overlooked, *Either that or he likes this track.* And, graciously, his two teammates Aota and Guena were busy wrangling up more guests to dance and enjoy themselves.

By the time Gaara had arrived at the festival, as lanterns and string lights glowed against the hastening dark, he witnessed a strange migration of people away from the games and the ever popular sumo ring towards the space below the DJ's booth. He noticed that the only break in the dense crowd was just in front of the Hokage's pavilion. Gaara imagined she did not want to miss what everyone else was watching, *And this music is…*’ Was it ever loud. A passer-by had described it as *bangin.*

Gaara slipped into the pavilion tent, past some squawking, merry veterans, a pseudo-bartender and waiter, some overheated guests in front of the fan, and then stopped beside Tsunade. The Hokage was leaned over the table, watching a performance in fascination as she sipped wine. She had several unopened bottles beside her.

"Are you enjoying yourself, Hokage-sama?" Gaara folded his arms and was tempted to ridicule her.

She waved at him foggily, "'Bout time you showed up. Look at this." Tsunade motioned with her cup towards the break in the thick ring of revelers (she had ordered them to move over,) and Gaara then noticed dancing.

There was some, he would call it *conformist* swaying and head-nodding, among those gathered. But those were merely spectators with their eyes fully fixed on the two at the center, flitting with such skill, angling themselves with practiced, rhythmic beauty…all in synchronization to a catchy song
that would, admittedly, make him a fan too.

Gaara sighed as an afterthought, acknowledging that it was Sato, and also his comely fiancée, blatantly showing off. Tsunade was thrilled.

"If you had heard what shit the band before this DJ tried to subject us to..." She shuddered, "It would have been bad. I nearly knocked the bassist's head off his shoulders, but I ju-uuust missed." Tsunade illustrated with a pinch of her fingers, indicating her lack of aim with an empty bottle.

"Tsunade-sama, I should tell you that a Kage has an image to uphold, and you appear to be struggling."

"Oh?"

"Yes. I was advised to remain dignified as well this evening."

"And who..." She stifled a burp, "Is spouting nonsense like that? As if we Kage need to be reminded..."

"Haruno Kizashi."

"Ah." Tsunade paused and then her lips stretched into a grin, "That is indeed some advice you should take." She slapped his arm with painful strength, but his sand armor buffered it, "Good for you, you scamp! When did you meet Sakura's parents?"

"Today."

"And how did it go?" Tsunade began pouring him wine.

He made no movement to sit or accept the drink, "Very well. I think Sakura was anxious about the introduction, but they are hardly the most excitable people I've met."

"Well sure. You have that cuckoo councilman Soi in your village, and the puppet master Chiyo too, that old bag." She rumbled in amusement, "And Jiraiya and Naruto. Hm! Say, does Haku count? Has he ever acted crazy and I've just never—" A hiccup, "Noticed it?"

"Not crazy, but he does irritate me."

Tsunade nodded and her head threatened to swing off of her neck and fly away.

"Good, then...I am glad you are taking such an important step." She took a hissing breath and then nudged him along, "Now get a move on. I'm missing the entertainment. Go make out with my student or something!"

"Good night, Hokage-sama." He respectfully took his leave.

When he arrived at the sitting area his friends were clustered in (also apparently imbibing) Sakura must have spotted him from the corner of her eye. She wriggled out from between Ino and Tenten to reach him, pecking his cheek in greeting. She was decidedly sober but still enjoying herself, "You made it just in time! I haven't seen these two cut a rug like this since...I don't even know."

"A few years ago." Gaara recalled. The first time he had seen the pair's unexpected talent his jaw had dropped.

Another dance track bled through the previous before consuming the speakers, the sound of it a tug-of-war between a sweet, cotton-candy chorus and a sinister, sneering electronic refrain of lyrics
rebelling against marginalization. The rave tune had rustled the crowd, many of them jumping and obscuring the performing duo from view. Sakura was about to puff in aggravation of missing out on the display, but a timely beat-drop, frenetic and nightmarish, had emboldened Tama and her silver haired hellcat to clear a picnic table and continue dancing on top of it. No one was going to miss out.

"Well!" Sakura laughed in nervous exhilaration, "They can party."

And then the two spun around and proceeded to booty-shake more fearsomely than any soul on that side of the world had ever shaken. Sakura could no longer narrate what they were seeing. Gaara watched with genuine appreciation for the athleticism necessary to go from low, butt-flexing crouches back to full height for their complex footwork. He heard Tsunade shrieking ecstatically in the pavilion.

Ino had located Hinata (timidly returning through a throng of bodies) and reeled her back towards the group, "In case you haven't heard it's called twerking. No. Normally it doesn't look this good!"

Hinata squealed and shielded her eyes. Shikamaru and the young men surrounding him (excluding silent Shino) were vacillating between hysterical laughter and true, slack-jawed admiration every few seconds. Neji was quietly processing the scene while Tenten hollered her approval, allowing him to hold onto the cup and drink as much as he needed.

Gaara leaned over Sakura's shoulder and spoke beside her ear, "Can you and I go somewhere quieter?"

"Sure! You don't want to stay a bit longer?" She would be sad to miss any escalating insanity.

He shook his head, "There is something I wanted to talk to you about. Just us two."

Sakura's eyes widened a fraction and she nodded, patting his back before scurrying over to Ino. Her whisper was more of a scream in Ino's ear, just to be sure her point got across, "Ino! I'm leaving with Gaara-kun!"

"Already?"

"Yeah! I think he'd be more willing to stay if it wasn't so…ridiculously loud here."

"I gotcha! So…" The blonde smiled slyly, "If anyone asks, like your mother, let's say…you stayed over my house tonight. Right?"

Blushing, Sakura squeezed her friend's face in her hands, "Ino!"

"I'm serious! Get 'em girl! You've been planning to." She winked, "I'll cover for you."

Relenting, Sakura gave her insufferable but true friend a tight hug. She said farewell to her friends without providing an explanation, hugged Hinata as well (Where'd your little sister go in all of this?) and returned Kiba's wave goodbye before hurrying off.

She joined Gaara at the edge of the picnic area that was thin with people, and after passing beneath the park's maples they set out on a tranquil footpath, breathing sighs of relief.

After they had gone, Sai finally moved and shouted only loud enough for Ino and Lee to understand, "Was that the Kazekage?"

"Yes!" Both confirmed.
"Leaving with that flat-chested girl?"

They smacked him.

As the core-rattling party anthem ebbed away into chiming beats, Noé transitioned with a smoother, more cerebral song which the congregation readily accepted and bobbed to. Tama and Sato took a recess to finish the food they had nearly forgotten about, receiving praise from spectators they passed. They were heartily welcomed back to their table.

"As to not raise the collective blood pressure of anyone else at this festival," Shikamaru advised them, "Avoid doing any of that again. Tone it down, jeez."

Sato waggled his eyebrows, "You liked it?"

"That is not the word I would choose. I watched it. I can never unwatch it."

"No you cannot." Sato plopped onto the bench beside him, munching, "Tama and I have practiced that routine at the studio and the music was pretty close to what we use."

"It's fun." She added, also chewing.

A short time passed and most everyone was illuminated by glow-in-the-dark trinkets by the new cover of night. Tama readily instructed participants who gathered for group dances.

TenTen was not willing by nature, but she was pliant and buzzed when Ino and Hinata pulled her to her feet. Neji made no move to intervene and watched as the girls toddled towards Tama and Sato teaching steps; Lee, Chouji, and Kiba had joined as well. Shikamaru, a dedicatedly lazy soul, remained at his table while Shino observed the activities, calculating and considering.

Neji's sip on the drink straw sputtered when Sai leaned in unexpectedly from behind, _thunking_ his hands down on the picnic table, "Ladyhair."

"Sai."

"I think we must be on better speaking terms now. The Hokage considers me more trustworthy."

"I am not one to agree with _anything_ the Hokage believes, not on principal alone. _I'll_ be the judge of what I think of you." Neji asserted, "And I think your insistence on calling me that name warrants retribution."

"Tenzo uses a word called _cranky._" Sai noted, taking a seat.

Neji grunted at him.

"That may be a more fitting nickname for you, as I have a clearer understanding of your character."

Neji scooched down the bench a bit.

Sai continued and slightly elevated his choice in topics, "I have not yet had the opportunity to properly apologize to you or Superbrows about that mission. Please know that I am grateful that we met." His smile was practiced, "My life has improved. It is strange thinking and feeling whatever I want to, but I do prefer living this way."

"Bear in mind, there _are_ limitations to what you can think and feel without offending or obstructing those around you."
"Yes, I know that." He added softly, "I am beginning to understand."

"Good." Neji relaxed a bit.

Sai looked out over the crowd now stepping and turning in time to music, with its two instructors at the lead, "That is Buns, there beside Superbrows."

"Tenten." Neji corrected him.

"She was the teammate that you were missing during our mission to the Toi mine."

"Yes."

"When I spoke to her yesterday I found her to be pleasant and intelligent."

"She is."

"She did not object to the nickname I gave her. She only did this." Sai imitated Tenten's eye-roll, "What does that mean?"

"It means she did not take what you said seriously." Neji elaborated.

"Ah."

"Lee and I told Tenten about you. She had an idea of what to expect."

Sai nodded and then said, without an ounce of tact, "You two are lovers."

Neji gave him dangerous side-eye.

"It is apparent because of your pining on that mission. Also, she allows you to drink from the same cup, which is generally considered unhygienic, I am told." Sai pointed out, "Buns accompanied you around the festival this evening. I only seek to know more about my neighbor who lives on the floor above mine."

"All of that is true." Neji conceded.

"If so, why are you not over there, where your teammate and potential rival for love Superbrows is dancing with Buns?"

"Lee is our mutual confidant. He considers Tenten a part of his family." Neji was completely unruffled by the suggestion, "He enjoys events like these. I choose not to dance."

Sai reflected on the statement while staring at him for a short while, and then raised the cup in Neji's grasp a bit higher, "Drink more. Tenzo said that makes people dance."

"I would sooner pour this in your eyes."

"You do not always react to suggestions this way, do you?" Sai's face was beginning to adopt human emotion, or at least, bewilderment, "I seek to be helpful."

"The day that you are helpful to me is long down the road, or perhaps even in another lifetime."

"I have perceived that you are tired of our conversation."

"I am."
Sai stood from the bench and nodded, "I understand, Ladyhair. Also, I imagine that the one Sugar calls Sunshine is your cousin, or a relative of yours in the Hyuga clan."

Neji quirked his face in annoyance, "To whom does the name Sugar refer?"

"Hatake Sato."

"Yes, he does call my cousin that." Neji sniffed.

Without much of a farewell, Sai traipsed away to find Tenzo at the pavilion and possibly report on his continued studies of society and how to piss society off.

The music was milder in tone as the night wore on, and Lee was sent by friends to a central picnic table where a volunteer baker and food-fryer had set out a generous spread of desserts. Lee sampled bits of the treats as he picked up selections for the group.

He returned and set a tray down that was piled with confections, announcing as Team Asuma (rather buzzed) huddled in to eat again, "This is called a 'berry tart.' I found it palatable. These taiyaki have red bean filling in the center, and these taiyaki have custard. I have kept them separate. These dango are all the same flavor…"

Chouji was picking up one of everything.

"Miniature crepes, small cups of flavored ice…" He frowned, "The brownies were taken by other guests so quickly that I could not bring any to you. My apologies."

"Those must have been delicious." Ino supposed, leaning on Shikamaru for support as they nibbled at taiyaki, seeking the gooey center.

Lee nodded, "They were. I had a piece."

Shikamaru shrugged and assured him, "All of this is enough. Thanks, Lee."

When Lee returned to his teammates, they were seated a bit further back than other revelers, nestled together and watching the festivities like flies on the wall. Lee delivered crepes to them which they gladly accepted.

Hinata ushered Lee away towards the boogying crowd to dance again, explaining quietly, "I think Onee-san and Onii-san are a little drunk. We'll just let them sit and eat until they feel better."

"Of course! The night is still young."

Fifteen minutes passed and the night was not so young anymore. Nor was Lee feeling quite right enough to dance. He was feeling something, wholly unexplainable and unanticipated, and as Kiba paused to ask him if he needed to rest, Lee shook his head.

"I am well, Kiba-kun. I am simply experiencing several new emotions, about six or seven, I estimate. They do not yet have names and have not been classified by human beings at this point in time." Lee said it with a sincere and straight face.

Kiba was mildly suspicious, "That's great. Your emotions sound…totally original. By the way, you didn't have anything to drink tonight, did you?"

"Nothing other than water, as Tenten instructed." Lee confirmed.

"Maybe you should sit down?"
Lee pursed his mouth and thought hard to himself, "I do not know if I have the ability to do that right now."

"Okay…"

"Excuse me." Lee patted both Kiba and Akamaru on their respective heads. He made a bee-line for the dessert table. He only took two treats for himself, but Kiba watched with concern as Lee somehow fit two large taiyaki pastries into his mouth and proceeded to ingest them as a snake took in prey. How Lee did not choke was miraculous, and Kiba lost sight of his friend when Lee began to dart around and was lost in a shuffle of people.

"Akamaru, please keep track of him. I think I need to tell someone about this…" Kiba muttered and split up with his ninken, returning to where his friends were seated.

Shikamaru and his teammates sat in a row on a bench, chuckling to themselves and making fun of festival guests in varying volumes of voice. Kiba stopped in front of them and put his hands on his hips, "Did you guys witness Lee drink or eat anything…we wouldn't want him to drink or eat?"

"Pfft!" Ino shattered into laughter and slapped her knee. Chouji was giggling uncontrollably.

"For fuck's sake, you three! Answer the question." Kiba grumbled, "Lee is messed up."

"He might have." Shikamaru pulled himself together to reply, "Not that we saw him do it. He didn't drink anything, I'm sure. Tenten advised us not to let him, as Lee is a sloppy and destructive drunk." His mouth cracked into a grin and Shikamaru's head drooped. He snorted with soft laughter while Chouji and Ino braced his shoulders, twittering with hyena-like cries.

"Sorry." Shikamaru cleared his throat and continued, "Maybe he ate something? Where is Lee, anyway?"

"I don't know. I sent Akamaru to sniff him out."

"Poor Lee." Chouji meant it. He giggled again, but he meant it.

"Hee hee h-hold on." Ino tried to catch her breath. They gave her a full minute to simmer down.

"Lee said he ate some desserts a little while ago." She recalled, "All the brownies were gone before he could bring us anything." "Shit." Kiba swerved around and strained to spot his dog or their friend.

"What?" Chouji snickered.

"Brownies are the peerless chow choice of stoners." Kiba announced, frustrated, "He ate one of those, you said?"

"Just a piece, he claimed." Shikamaru noted, wobbling to his feet, "This could actually end very badly unless he's supervised. Lee has no tolerance for anything like that."

"An innocent lamb like Lee on drugs…" Ino clucked her tongue, "What'd he do to deserve this?" She and Chouji roared again and held each other in a drunken hug.

"Leave them." Shikamaru said, "They won't be useful. They had more to drink than I did." He glanced around and rubbed his head, trying to reinstate his leadership settings, "I'll ask Hinata to look around for him. Go tell Tenten and Neji about this, for now."
Kiba thanked him and proceeded towards the next table. Initially he did not spot Lee's teammates where he had last seen them, and that was likely because they had rolled off of the bench and ended up in the grass on their backs, where Tenten was neatly tucked in Neji's arms. Kiba stood over them and restrained a laugh. Neji's eyes were shut, but he still seemed to be awake, super relaxed, and stroking the pad of his thumb over Tenten's lower lip.

Tenten was awake, her eyes were open, and with kitten-like satisfaction she had taken a loose strand of Neji's hair and balanced it beneath her nose as if it were a mustache.

"So guys, we have a problem." Kiba announced, trying to ignore their abnormally carefree appearances, "I lost Lee…and Lee is high."

Recognition flickered across Tenten's features, "Lee is what?"

"He's high." Kiba sighed, "I should've realized it sooner, but he slipped into the crowd. He told me some crazy stuff that tipped me off."

Neji sat up with a moan, displeased with the news. He and Tenten had a difficult time finding the strength to stand, and also the willpower to address what potential hazard lost-and-high Lee was.

Kiba explained the situation briefly and Neji scanned the fairgrounds with his Byakugan.

"He is eating." Neji reported, "At this moment, he is leaving a vendor on the east side of the park."

Tenten shrugged her shoulders, "That's not a problem. He's just…really hungry."

"He said six or seven unclassified emotions." Kiba reminded her.

Neji led them around the back of the pavilion to take a short-cut towards food stands, "We should watch him. How Lee reacts to alcohol is predictable, but we do not have a precedent for—"

A towering, glowing tiger sculpture was knocked over. People cried out and ducked for cover. Lee had pulled the sculpture's tethers loose accidentally, and Akamaru had stopped tracking him after being distracted by fallen food on the ground.

They picked up the pace. Neji could not intercept Lee quick enough before he had merged again with a dancing crowd, trampling enough feet to incite a furious mob. Lee attempted to join Sato who was tutting his fingers to a jazzy hip-hop tune, and Lee attempting to replicate the dance was about the same as Lee beating the daylights out of Sato. Horrified, Tama tried to pry the two apart and was unsuccessful.

Neji was watching with his Byakugan and pressing through the crowd, Tenten and Kiba close behind.

Tama was unable to snap Lee out of his babbling, and before he squeezed the life out of Sato (while describing starburst feelings close to his Inner Gates) Tama used her outstretched, iron-bar arm to remove Lee with a lariat.

Neji and his recovery team halted in the open space to behold Lee soaring through the air, and he struck the pavilion's top at an angle. The jostled tent began to sag and collapse, dumping Lee to the ground. Tsunade howled furiously as she was forced to save what sake she could before making a run for it. The tent imploded and Lee was buried somewhere beneath the tarp.

The Leaf finalists all convened once again near the ruined pavilion, digging Lee out of the rubble. Tama was apologizing profusely as Sato, beside her, rubbed his neck tenderly; glad that he could
"Lee?" Tenten (pretending not to be drunk) pulled him into a sitting position, "Are you alright? We heard you…ate something…and now you aren't feeling well."

"Forgive my carelessness." He whimpered in her arms, "Flying is so tricky and I…I…"

"Shh…"

"The takoyaki vendor says I owe him 150 ryo."

"You probably do." Kiba imagined, "How did you eat that much in ten minutes?"

Lee's eyes were watering as if to weep, "What do you mean? I did not eat anything! I am famished."

Tenten sighed. His breath stunk of seafood.

Lee pressed his hand to the side of Tenten's face and made uncomfortable, searching eye contact, "Do you feel that?"

"I'm…not sure." She swallowed a drunken hiccup, "Is it like a spinning feeling?"

"Yes, but it is internal. This section of the universe inside of me is turning clockwise."

"Lee…" Tenten struggled to stand and handed him off to Neji, "No. Mine is definitely external. Everything is spinning around me. I think it's time we brought you home. Okay?"

"Okay."

"It's not your fault." Neji tried to comfort his friend but his knees felt like they might buckle as he lifted Lee. What good he and Tenten would be to their badly tripping friend was questionable.

Most everyone was still angry and the Hokage was pointing her finger and stomping. She demanded that Lee's team leave the festival. While it was not the best idea, Tenten and Neji accepted their responsibilities and hauled Lee away, each taking an arm of his around their shoulders to support him as they walked. Tenten mentioned a takoyaki vendor needed to be paid for the food Lee had eaten, but Tsunade whisked them along, growling that she'd take care of it.

Shikamaru took Tsunade aside to explain, emphasizing that Lee did not voluntarily consume a mind-altering agent.

"All the same, he ruined my set-up!" Tsunade's head snapped towards Tama, "Actually, this vixen over here ruined it!"

"Hokage-sama, I'm—"

"Shush! I'm goin' right over..." The Hokage plopped down on a bench, a bottle clenched in her fist. Tsunade made a sound-effect as her bottom met the seat, "Pshoo. Here." Then she motioned for the crowd to part so she had a clear view, "You!" She pointed at Noé in the DJ booth, "Keep playing," She pointed at Tama and Sato, "You! Dance. Refrain from…beaming people."

They did as instructed.

It was not much longer before Shikamaru recommended to his friends that they turn in for the night. While gathering their belongings, Ino teetered beside the picnic table and discovered an odd item. She stared at Sakura's mini-purse in her hands, "What's this doing here? She left…without it."
She turned to Chouji, stymied, "You know, I just...can't remember why this was so important. I am fuzzy inside and out right now...but I am sure Sakura needed this tonight for some reason."

"Not if she didn't take it with her." Chouji bumbled.

Ino released her apprehension and was content again, slinging the bag's strap across her shoulder with the intention of returning it the next day. She hobbled home arm-in-arm with Shikamaru and Chouji.

Hinata had shepherded Hanabi off to return to the Hyuga compound, asking Matsuri and her companions to get rest as well. Kiba barely got a word in edgewise to Tama before he departed, not so inclined to interrupt or witness her rather intimate dance with the Hatake. He and his ninken took off for home.

In the meantime, Shino had enjoyed leftover snacks and un-spiked lemonade. At the table adjacent to him, Tsunade was leaning with her head propped up, sipping the last of her celebratory sake. They were both content to sit quietly and take in the sights.

The dense pack of people attending the festival had dispersed; music maintained a dreamy mood, easing into the darker stretch of night. The majority of those who continued to dance were couples, prospective sweethearts, or those who had no intentions of going home alone.

And in-between the drum beats of one track and the plucking, gentle notes of the next, Sato had maneuvered Tama through the gap between a storage tent and the stage, towards the rear of the platform that was devoid of watching eyes.

They tottered like unstable fawns as they walked, tired out, bumping into the reverse stage wall a few times until coming to a complete stop together, kissing noisily. Sato's hand ringed around her wrist and pinned her arm above her head, fitting the line of his body against Tama's. She made soft sounds that brought him to the brink. Dancing was a ritual of theirs, a single, perfect talent they used mainly to resonate with each other, occasionally to boast, and on some days they could get carried away a little, of course, 'But it's never been like this.' Sato trailed his free hand up her sleek waist, brushing smooth skin. She had lost her jacket somewhere and it gave him more to touch.

She kept no secrets when she moved; Tama danced and it spun a story, told him where she'd been, where she'd go, and what he had to do; and everything she had communicated was an amalgam of need and joy and intrigue that wrapped around him and he could feel nothing else. She, so impossibly, darkly beautiful, that Sato wanted to pay tribute to every inch of her, including the flaws and bruises, his breath hitching when she touched him back.

Tama snaked her hands up his front and around his neck, sighing against his lips, every nerve ending she had flaring with sense and want. He had been magnificent, lithe, and coveted. She had heard women in a tizzy from the crowd, piqued, impressed, and objectifying Sato and how he looked like starlight, like fragments of night sky assembled into a man. He was luminous under her fingertips; he was exquisite beneath her mouth. She paused, at last conscious of how her shirt was lifted up and bunched above a fitted, black sports bra he could do nothing with. Sato instead moved to her waistband, and Tama patted his chest to get his attention.

"Consider...the time and place," She mumbled, still accepting his kisses, "The festival is over and..."

He stopped and pegged her with midnight blue eyes, exigent and pulse-pounding.

"Come home with me."
Tama answered slowly, "To…"

"To do this. To be us, together." His voice was husky, kisses feather-light along her jaw.

"We danced all night."

"Night's not over." Sato reminded, taking her pinned hand down to plant kisses on her knuckles, "Our dancing is never over. We don't have to—"

"Sato-kun," Her voice was clear, "I can't go with you. I promised my mother I would be home, and you know she waits up." Tama presented the sobering facts, hiking her shirt down, "I need to—"

She resisted a kiss, still trying to speak.

He pulled back, his face crashing with need, devastation, impatience, "We both—"

"Yes, we both want to, but let me honor the promises I make." She smiled at him, trying to neutralize the disappointment, or whatever cloudy feeling she felt come over him. It did not seem to work so well.

"Fine, then." A bit forcefully, he let go of her wrist and hip, "We're always a trapeze act, going back and forth. I get it already."

"Sato, I'm not trying to—"

"I said it's fine." Sato's voice switched to be soft and gentle, "I'll be alright."

She gave him a long look before kissing his cheek, then mouth, caressing the side of his face, "Don't be upset. I'll see you tomorrow—whenever you want."

He nodded, weighed down with a sickly, blundering feeling as Tama gave a sweet goodbye and jogged out into the dark in the direction of home. His imagination never accounted for such an outcome, not after reeling and reaching, not after the fantasies and an evening of fun and togetherness. It was crushing to return to the front side of the stage and act as if music mattered in her absence.

But the sting and the heaviness subsided, bit by bit, with the minutes and sounds, with the fresh air, with the sake, with the shochu, with the drop-outs and friendly conversation, with the games and all those distractions…that should not have mattered in her absence.

Shino had lingered even past midnight to watch him. In the block of time since Tama had gone home, Shino certainly noticed Sato drink and cope, forgetting his best friend and the Hokage were still nearby. He was a social butterfly and such a disposition would spare him from loneliness, Sato seemed to think.

But Shino knew that neither Sato nor butterflies are really like that.

By the time the festival shut down and the last revelers departed, Sato was drunk among drop-outs walking towards their guest habitations and hotels uptown. Theirs was the same route that Sato would take home, and Shino followed several meters behind them, a respectable berth, and watched.

Close to the building, Shino thought of the phenomenon his mother termed intuition. He felt it stirring. It felt like worry and pity, and maybe also profound empathy he had with his best friend who loves coffee and sweets and photography. His best friend who had died once, and that same friend who always wanted to include him in events while most forgot he ever stood there. But tonight Shino knew that Sato was upset enough to forget him, just this once. And he felt that nagging in the
back of his mind, nudging to at least get Sato into the door of his home.

Sai crossed the street and exchanged words with Sato down the road. Shino fell still.

'He will be fine.'

As Sato and the uncivilized neighbor Sai were destined for the same building, all would end well. His father's insect was perched on his shoulder by then, anyway. His parents would still be awake and interested in what he had to say about the celebration. He was wanted and expected.

Shino turned for home under a waxing moon.

A Bit Earlier…

"We're almost there, Lee." Tenten was puffing in exhaustion and seeing double.

"…not quite." Neji informed her, "We missed the turn." He nearly tripped and knocked the whole operation over, but they caught themselves.

She froze and balked at the corner they had passed, "Wha-? I swore we made that right…"

"Your depth perception—"

"Stuff my depth perception, Neji." She hissed from behind her teeth, "Right up your butt. Stuff it and your…your—" She heaved a breath as they lugged Lee, limp as a sack of potatoes, "Ugh. This is the longest walk of my life."

"I'm here too."

"Yeah, fine, our lives."

Lee was muttering and vaguely frightened, seeing things.

"Shh, Lee. It'll be alright. You can wash your face, drink some tea, and go to sleep." Tenten consoled him. At the corner, their slow, ungainly walk was then a straight shot down the lane towards Wong Leung's house at the end.

Tenten braced a hand along a building's brick wall as they shuffled.

"Before we arrive," Neji added blearily, "We should discuss the mode of delivery that makes most sense."

"You mean…how to get Lee inside?"

"The door will be locked and Wong Leung will not humor intruders in his house."

"Let's knock and let his Grandpa take him." She gruffed, as if it were so simple.

"And what will he think when he sees us in this state?"

"Who cares?"

"Tenten, he believes in corporal punishment."

"…you actually think Wong Leung will beat us or-?"
"There is a difference between thinking and knowing, and I know him very well now."

"Fffppffff..." She exhaled furiously, halting, and dropped Lee's right arm, "Then...a Shadow Clone. Yeah. Why didn't I think of this sooner?"

"You're drunk."

"And you're a bad drunk. How are you still logical right now? Never mind." Tenten held a hand sign and produced a single clone, "There. We'll send the bunshin with Lee to the door...then we make our escape."

Neji grunted. Solid plan.

They continued their approach as the Shadow Clone walked ahead of them, swaying.

Tenten noted, "My clone is drunk."

"It is." Neji agreed feebly.

The Shadow Clone ambled sideways, completely disoriented, and then careened into an alleyway. Beyond their line of sight they heard it slam into a garbage can and a cat meowled. The clone dissolved at the impact.

"Fuck it." Tenten declared, slowly marching on.

Neji burped and lurched in a panic, as if he were about to empty the contents of his stomach all over the sidewalk.

"Oh suck it up, Hyuga..."

After an age, and thankfully no puking, they came to the end of the street and ascended the small step in front of the house. Neji suggested they set Lee down, knock on the door, and make a run for it. Tenten refused, "He's our friend, Neji! He would never do something like that to us."

She knocked on the door and they waited there with Lee. Shortly before midnight, the team rocked to and fro pathetically until Wong Leung finally answered.

The old man was in checkered, full-length pajamas and a nightcap. He stood silently in the doorway and assessed them.

To try to smooth things over, Tenten attempted to speak Hanwen in the hope it would diffuse the situation. *Honorable Grandpa...*

He cast a stern look at her.

*Lee ate...an evil pastry...he became very sick at the festival...*

Neji was shocked she could manage it while drunk. Granted, he had almost no clue what she was saying.

*We wished to make sure...home safe...* She slurred her words, *Unbuttered. Please forgive partridges.*

Wong Leung twitched his nose like a rabbit and then stepped away to allow them entrance.

"See? It's fine." Tenten whispered to Neji. With Lee indoors, the two assisted Wong Leung in
maneuvering his grandson into an armchair and Wong gave him a cursory examination before turning to the kitchen.

Worn out, Tenten and Neji sat in the chairs at the kitchen table. Wong brought a bowl of congee to his grandson, fitted a spoon in his hand, and then affectionately patted Lee's head as the boy apologized tearily to his grandfather.

Now, now, Lee. The old man said softly, I know that you never do these sorts of things. I made this for supper. Eat it and be well again.

Lee thanked him and tucked into the porridge with sub-par motor functions. Wong ignored the two dozing teens in his chairs and went to a low cupboard, quietly extracting two basins. He moved to the sink and filled both buckets without a word. When both heavy pails of water came to a rest on the tabletop, the rattle hardly disturbed Neji and Tenten.

Until…Wong Leung grabbed the backs of their shirts, one in each fist, and dragged them to their feet.

In their stupor, the two (usually) poised ninja could not resist Wong's powerful motion, in which he cleanly dunked their heads in unison into frigid water. They came up for air, screeching, and then Wong dunked them again. And he repeated the therapy. Angrily.

After about a dozen dips into the icy buckets, Wong released them and began a verbal tirade.

YOU, my grandson's friends and keepers, his MOST treasured people! He shoved Neji and Tenten back into their seats while they sputtered, both hyperventilating, Treat him with greater care! Would Lee have eaten an unsafe pastry if you had not been near him to prevent it? Well?

Soaked, Tenten tried to get her bearings to answer, "W-We…"

"What did he say?" Neji rasped, not daring to wring his hair out onto the man's floor.

"He said that as Lee's friends we should have taken better care to stop something like this from happening to him." Tenten relayed the message and confirmed, "Grandpa, you are right. We should have. I'm sorry that this happened. We were drunk and not paying attention, and then this happened to Lee."

And why is it acceptable for you to be drunk at a festival, young lady? Certainly your honorable parents taught you better.

They did. Tenten commanded Hanwen again, I was with friends. I had fun. My judgement is not always perfect, Grandpa, but please understand…my heart could never bear anything happening to Lee or Neji.

The man sighed and folded his arms behind his back, I know that.

She sniffed, dripping with water and starting to shiver, May we…have something to dry off with?

Absolutely not! The chill will help keep you sober for the walk home. Wong crossed to the door and jarred it open, gesturing, For bringing Lee to me safely, I thank you.

She sighed in defeat and stood, ushering Neji out. Before Wong Leung shut the door behind them, Neji held a hand up to him in a bid for peace.

"I am equally to blame." He insisted, "I must care for Lee too, as my closest friend…I would never
stand idly by while he might suffer. Going forward, we will not neglect such a precious responsibility to our friend, Shishou."

Tenten wanted to arch an eyebrow at Neji's deeply respectful title for the man who regularly beat and battered him, but she gawked when Neji took a stab at rough Hanwen he had picked up and correctly uttered, 'I'm sorry.'

Wong Leung nodded, 'I forgive you, Neji.' He shut the door.

Neji turned slowly, letting his own personal disapproval sink in, considering how poorly he had comported himself that night. Tenten caught him by the shoulders and kissed him full on the mouth. He looked at her in surprise.

"That was great!" She grinned at him, setting out in a careful, quivering walk, "I bet you could pick up the language if you tried."

"I already am." He noted, not at all proud of it.

"I think he really appreciated that, and you know Lee will be fine. Congee fixes everything."

"Does it?" Neji chuckled darkly and then glanced at her, "I will walk you home."

"We're close by already. You don't have to——"

"There are certain visitors in this village who would be delighted to find you alone on a street at night, unarmed and weakened." He reminded her, tugging her along, "I insist."

"Alright, but let's face the facts…we're still not quite 100 percent, and in a fight we'd probably end up…" She trembled and wrapped her arms around herself, trying to scurry without falling flat on her face.

Luckily, the two made it to her apartment complex without incident. As Neji was a highly suspicious person, he made sure to accompany her up the three flights of steps and to her door. They would have looked foolish to residents; their upper halves drenched and disheveled, eyes bloodshot, hair sodden and unkempt. Tenten quickly hurried into her home and snapped lights on, ready to find him a towel.

"I don't need anything." Neji maintained.

She returned to the doorway and inspected him, supposing he would keep warm enough on his way back to the Hyuga homestead. "Thanks for coming with me, Neji." Tenten tiredly rested her head against the doorframe, adding, "To the festival. For spending time with all of us, even if the music was louder than you like…and for drinking with me, which you don't normally do." She smiled, "And for walking me home."

"I would again." He said in all seriousness.

"Yeah, but maybe not tomorrow."

He shook his head in the negative.

"Do you…have anything planned for tomorrow? Other than us picking up our outfits for the last fitting, I mean."

Neji examined the tilt of her head and the change of pitch in her voice. Her face was a bit flushed.
"Nothing other than that. Perhaps recovering from…this night."

"Right, well…” She spoke carefully, looking up at him from beneath her lashes, "Would you like to stay here?"

Was she ever bold, even after the trials and tribulations they had survived. Her chest was heaving, her breathing quickened, and Neji did not have to dwell long on the thought to know what exactly Tenten wished to do if he consented.

"I won't," He told her, "Though I want to."

The brief flash of disappointment in her expression softened, satisfied with the admission, "Some other time?"

"Yes."

"After the Exam. How about it?"

"Yes."

She gave him an incredulous look, "Do you understand what I'm actually asking?"

Neji leaned down and captured her mouth, his untamed, damp hair streaking coldly along her cheek while he kissed her as if starved, or as if he were about to push her inside and act upon her suggestion. He did not.

He pulled back again and said, "I know exactly what you are asking."

Tenten blinked slowly, "Huh. Then…that's settled."

"Goodnight, Tenten." Neji set out and she lingered in the doorway to watch him go, also bidding him farewell.

She called out when he did not head for the stairs, "Hey! Where are you going?"

He indicated a window at the end of the hall, the same one that Tenzo had dragged him out of once upon a time (though she did not know that.)

"Oh. Careful there. That fire escape is rickety."

Neji acknowledged her warning and exited through the window. A second later, she heard a clatter and crash. Tenten hurried down the hall and peered outside. It looked as if he may have slipped (still wet from the dunking) while trying to make a leap from the trellis to a nearby tree. He had fallen down one ladder's length of steps to the next level, and was sorely pushing himself to his feet.

"Whoa! Are you okay?"

"Fine." Embarrassed, Neji safely continued down and met the ground again, doing his very best not to stumble home.

Chapter End Notes

Lee had a bad trip, poor guy. Bless his heart. Please let me know what you think!
Festival Tracks:

200% by Akdong Musician

Booty Man (Cheek Freaks Remix) by Redfoo

Venus Fly by Grimes (feat. Janelle Monáe)

My Friends Never Die by ODESZA

World Princess part II by Grimes

Horsey by MACROSS 82-99 (feat. Sarah Bonito)

Genesis by Grimes

We Can't Move to This by Ellie Goulding

Realiti by Grimes

Bâtard by Stromae

Oasis by Crush (feat. ZICO)

Childs Play by Drake

Eureka by ZICO (feat. Zion T)

Ave cesaria by Stromae

A.D.T.O.Y by 2PM

Too Good by Drake (feat. Rihanna)

Night Air by Jamie Woon
Reach the zenith, then the downward spiral…

Use caution ahead: There is an explicit scene in the first half of this chapter; skip if you so choose, or feast your eyes for some avant-garde character development.

On the evening of the celebratory festival for Chunin Exam finalists, Sakura may have said she was a bit disappointed to leave. Disappointed that she had missed the chance to play silly games, to dance to pounding music, to drink and laugh with friends, to poke fun and eat desserts.

But now she could not. She could not claim to be close to disappointed about Gaara taking her hand, leading her beneath a starry sky through the park. There was no better way to spend the night, she was sure.

“This road lets out near the Hot Springs?” Gaara confirmed, trying to remember his way around.

“It does.” She smiled impishly, “Did you want to go for a soak?”

“No, but it will be quiet there.” He presumed, “And the view isn’t bad.”

“It isn’t.”

“I’m sorry to take you away from the festival…”

“We won’t miss much.” Sakura waved off his concern, “I prefer spending time with you, honestly. It just would have stayed loud and crazy back there.”

“Did you have anything to eat?”

“Not since this afternoon.”

He frowned, “You should eat.”

“Well, if we must, we can go somewhere after you tell me…” She skipped in front of him, smiling, “Whatever it is you wanted to tell me!” Her heeled sandals clacked over the wooden boards of a bridge, and they came to a stop over the stream that fed the onsen ryokan.

The lampposts outside of the inn and along the stone-cobbled walkways stretched long shadows over garden boxes and deserted paths. Gaara settled at the edge of the bridge and Sakura leaned against the railing beside him, smiling and expectant.
“It was good to meet your parents today.” Gaara told her.

“I am so relieved it went well.”

“You are a part of them, Sakura. I have no idea why you thought I could have possibly disliked your parents.” He went on, “And they were completely fair to me, and were gracious enough to hear me out…in spite of the fact that I am a rare beast in their eyes.”

“They weren’t sure what to expect. I think maybe they thought you’d be this prodigious dignitary, when they tried to imagine what the Kazekage was like.” Sakura explained, “But I just kept trying to get it into their heads that…” She tilted her face to look at him, “He’s just…he’s my best friend.”

Gaara stared at her and then broke the eye contact, trailing his gaze down to the spring water bubbling along beneath the bridge. His reflection looked positively terrified.

There was a small, nearly unnoticeable tremor in his voice, “Thank you for saying that.”

“You feel that way about me too.” She stated it as a fact, her eyes bright and happy.

“I certainly do.” Gaara took a breath through his nostrils, composing himself, “But I am more than just your best friend or the Kazekage…there’s something else about me…” A twinge of puzzlement crossed her face as he struggled, “Something about me…that you don’t know yet.”

“Oh.” She clasped her hands and leaned on the railing, preserving her amenable exterior. ‘*Not time to panic yet.*’ She thought, but Sakura was dearly hoping not to go home in tears tonight.

She witnessed Gaara plant a firm, somewhat crazed look on the water below, scowl at his reflection when he saw it again, then tilt his head up to look at the sky; sounds dying in his throat before he could make them. Whatever Gaara wanted to get across, she could tell, he was faltering in his resolve. He was actually scared.

“You know it’s just me, right?” Sakura reminded him casually, “I’ll always listen.”

He nodded, attempting to get a grip, and then turned around to keep his back at the rail. Gaara gazed out at the trees on their right, the illumination of the festival seeping through the park even at a distance.

“Sakura…” He tried again, “Do you know how I came to be in the Hidden Leaf Village?”

“Yes. Gama-sennin brought you here when you were small. That was when I first met you.” She replied confidently.

“And where did he find me?” Gaara ventured.

Sakura frowned thoughtfully, “I…never got that detail.”

“I should explain.” His voice was a touch quieter, “I had arrived in a tourist hub called Kuro on the edge of the Fire Country…because I ran away from Suna. I was unwanted by my own father, and he considered me dangerous.”

“At that age? You couldn’t…” She trailed off and restarted, “Well, you couldn’t have been more than the *Fourth Kazekage could handle.*”

“I was. Even Temari and Kankuro were frightened of me, back then.” He confessed, “I could barely control my powers. I was in crisis and no one in my village could help me. No one wanted to help
“You told me once that your mother died when you were born.” Sakura brought up a delicate subject, “If she had been around, I’m sure—”

“I don’t care to speculate about that. I don’t know what life would have been like if she had been around to look after me.” Gaara roughly shook his head, “But when I landed in Kuro…unfed, sick, and a full-blown insomniac…” A growling sigh, “I was hardly the kind of child anyone would want to approach or assist. But Naruto and Haku didn’t seem to understand that they should have been afraid of me…afraid of what I could do…”

Sakura leaned her head on his shoulder and continued to listen as they faced opposite directions.

“They vowed to stay with me, after they found me. The man who had been caring for Haku looked after us for a short time…until, in passing, Jiraiya considered us a very suspicious group of children.” Gaara elaborated, “He recognized our shinobi lineage and potential, and he felt obligated to bring us to safety.”

“That’s when he brought you here.” She noted.

“That is how and why it happened. And…the Hokage was not very inclined at all to accept me at first. I was a liability and a potential catalyst for conflict with Sunagakure…but he and Jiraiya-sensei made a great effort to help me with my…problems…”

“Well of course they did! The Sandaime and Gama-sennin were never heartless.” She shifted beside him, facing him fully to get a good look, “But Gaara, what does all of this have to-?”

“You told me after your mission to the Hidden Star Village that you had learned of the ancestry of shinobi, and the origin of modern chakra…and while you may find it all compelling and factual, with nothing at all to fear,” He seemed sharper, more defensive, “Do you really believe any of it?”

“I believe what I read—what I learned, completely.” She felt slightly provoked and balled her hands into fists, “I wasn’t spinning stories, Gaara!”

“I know you weren’t.” He assured her, “All of it is true. As Kazekage, I can confirm that what you learned about chakra and Tailed Beasts is as real as the bridge we stand on and the air we breathe. None of it was fantasy, and it surprised me…that so much was accurately recorded in text.”

“I guess someone…wanted to keep the record straight?” She frowned again, “But what is it that’s making you…so anxious?”

“Think back to the previous Chunin Exam, Sakura. Remember my participation in the Final Round against Sato.” It was a visual he could provide her without being too heavy-handed, “I was out of control that day, not unlike how I had been as a child. And my reaction to that losing battle was not simply my power over sand or me feeling upset. It was more than that.”

Gaara pushed away from the rail, only a step away from her, and leveled his eyes with hers, “I am something that a village can use as a weapon, if authorities see fit.”

Sakura’s understanding of his tale was tumultuous, then, her thoughts wild and keeping pace with the hints. She stared back at him breathlessly, forgetting to press her mouth shut when it hung open. She understood, or at least, believed she understood as much as she could without absolute confirmation from Gaara.

She certainly did remember the strange transformation with sand he had undergone, although she had
never tried to hazard a guess as to what the cause was. All she had cared about then was that the
fight was over, the invasion was over, and everyone had been safe.

“I am something that can be used for defense, if the lives of villagers are in peril.” He illustrated
further, “By design, I am a shinobi who must sacrifice so that the age-old traditions and inherited
power of the Sand Village are preserved. Because of ancient agreements between the first Kages…
my life and freedoms are at the discretion of councils and elders.”

“Gaara, you don’t have to exp-!” She reached for his arm, but he plodded away over the boards,
upset and keeping his head tucked, arms straight, and hands grasping.

Visibly ashamed but unable to retract what had been said, Gaara paced over the bridge, too cowed to
look her in the face as he spoke, “Because of decisions I had no part in, I was made into something
that other children taunted and called a monster. My connections with others and even the people I
loved were strained, and my family became compelled to whisper behind my back, my uncle to
resent me, my brother and sister to fear me—”

“Gaara!” When she stepped toward him he evaded, harried.

“My father was determined to kill me when I could not control my actions, and when that endeavor
was botched…when negotiation or advocacy on my part seemed pointless to my father…” His voice
fluttered in anguish, “I was to be thrown away. What difference would it make…if a failure was
buried…or if it disappeared and was never seen again? It made no difference to him that I could only
find compassion here, only receive a competent seal here, only have a chance to prosper here, when
to him I did not exist anymore. He never knew any of that. I was only a figment of his imagination,
then.”

She caught his wrist and held, “Gaara.” Sakura had strength enough to pull him back towards the rail
and keep him still, “You exist. You matter.”

His eyes winced open a fraction to glimpse her, “Not everyone would agree.”

“Ah, well…whoever they are: screw ‘em.” Sakura announced.

“You shouldn’t love someone without knowing the full truth about who they are. It was unfair of me
to only shed light on the parts of myself I thought were worthy.” Gaara took a few quaking breaths,
“I am not always kind. I was violent, and in some ways I still am. I was callous and antisocial…and
now I am lenient and desperate to please. I am short-sighted and cowardly. I am nothing without two
people to stand on both sides of me…Kankuro and Temari…or Naruto and Haku…”

Though it felt impossible to achieve, Gaara slid his gaze up again to meet hers, “To stand in front
of you and only you…all by myself…is so hard.”

“Because you don’t think I want to stay with you.” She surmised coolly.

“I am the jinchuriki of the One-Tail.” Gaara stated, “The people who are content to stay with me…
are usually crazy.”

Sakura went quiet again, rubbing at her nose as she considered what she had been told. After a
moment she frowned at him, aggrieved, “Do you know how rude it is to call me crazy indirectly?”

“I’m sorry—”

“Nuh-uh! Sh-sh-shh!” She waggled a finger in his face, “You sure do throw an emotional tantrum
when you worry. I thought this was going to be…I don’t know…like you were marrying Shishou
for political reasons, or something!”

Gaara blanched, “Never.”

“Phew!” She relaxed, “So…the One-Tail?”

“Yes.”

“Now it’s making sense.” Sakura nodded and held her chin like a scholar, “There were plenty of things I still wasn’t sure of, but! Let’s see…Ichibi…is Shukaku…”

“…yes.” He swallowed an insanely, sublimely happy laugh, his eyes glassy.

“Shukaku’s form is a tanuki…and of sand, as is fitting.” She recalled, going back into the catalogs of her brain and the libraries-worth of information there, “He is the firstborn, attuned to Wind and Earth, and— oh! *Oh!*” Excitedly, Sakura took Gaara’s face into her hands, “The markings on your eyes!”

“That too—”

“It makes sense.” She crowed, almost triumphant in her knowledge, “Gaara! You’re a bit like a raccoon dog.” She squished his cheeks once before releasing him.

“He isn’t the *spitting image* of a tanuki, just so you know.”

“Well it’s got to be close enough, right? Someone wrote that down.”

“Creative license.”

“Yeah, I guess.”

This was going better than expected.

Her nostrils flared again in annoyance as a thought occurred to her, “Gaara…to think you were worried about how I would feel about this…it’s almost an insult compared to you meeting my wacky parents! *That* was much scarier.”

“You’re entitled to your opinion.”

“Really! I mean, come on, what is there to be afraid of— *especially* at this point in time?” Sakura griped, getting a hold of him again, “I heard old stories and some people claim you’re dangerous, and ooh! I’m scared! *What are you going to do to me?*” She squealed sarcastically, “Take me to lunch?” She pecked his nose, “Hold my hand?” She kissed his cheek, “Do my dishes?” She kissed his mouth and lingered there, feeling tension leave him.

“You.” Sakura said as she flattened out after standing on her toes, “Are completely in control…and very domestic, might I add.”

A sigh rolled out of him that could have started an avalanche. Gaara folded his arms tightly around her and pressed, not too hard, but made it evident that he was still a tad unnerved. Sakura could feel his breathing gradually even out beneath her palms, humming happily as he squeezed her. ‘*CHA! I did good! Re-eaal good!*’ Her inner specter was applauding the achievement, ‘*Doesn’t this floof of mine know I care about him more than I could possibly fear anything on this planet? What a worrywart…*’

The night was punctuated with cricket song and the occasional *warm* of tree frogs. Sakura was not sure for how long they stood without breaking the embrace, feeling Gaara’s cheek pressed against
the top of her head as he digested what had happened.

She asked curiously, “What does it feel like?”

He angled his face incredulously at her, “What does *what* feel like?”

“Well…you have a *living being* bound to you. Shukaku is real, as in, would have his own body if he wasn’t stuck inside of a seal.” She explained, “The mechanics of that really are amazing!”

“It’s…” Gaara trailed off.

“Sorry. Maybe not so amazing since you had no choice in the matter, but…you are a living, tangible example of something I only considered myth for so long. Just try to see this from my point of view.”

“I do understand.” Gaara stroked his hand up her neck and then cradled her chin in his hand, “I will only describe how it feels nowadays…as it was not so pleasant when I was younger.” His mouth pooched for a moment as he considered it, “When the day is calm…and I want to sleep…he is there. As plain as you are standing with me, I feel Shukaku. He is huge, grounded, and steady, but he is also energetic and mischievous. We can also speak to each other with our minds.”

“Wow. That doesn’t freak you out?”

“Not anymore. It’s good to have someone to talk to, when no one else is around.” Gaara noted, “His input can be very helpful. Or morally backwards by today’s laws and standards.”

“That can happen when you’re hundreds of years old.”

“He’s gotten better.”

“So what is Shukaku like? Not resentful that he’s sealed inside of you, is he?”

“He was, once.” Gaara confirmed, “But we have since come to an understanding. I vowed that when I pass on and the seal restraining him fails, Shukaku may be free of shinobi squabbles and return to the home he knew during the time of the Sage of the Six Paths.”

Sakura braced her hands on Gaara’s shoulders, nerding out, “That’s all he wants?”

“No one ever asked him what he wanted. He was never to be set free. And if Hidden Sand’s bureaucrats combat me on this decision, he may be sealed again after my death, regardless of what we agreed upon.” Gaara fiddled with a strand of her hair, deliberating, “I should establish a failsafe for such an outcome…perhaps notify the Hokage…”

“I’m sure your village will respect your wishes.”

“Unlikely. Suna clings to assets and military strength. It has little else to call its own.”

“Then maybe you should have them make a pact? Could they conscript Shukaku as a paid military force? Then there’d be no need for a jinchuriki in Suna. He’d just be like a giant, local police chief.”

Gaara’s face flat-lined at the suggestion.

_That is fucking brilliant._ Shukaku echoed somewhere in his head, _Shit, I’d work for those fools if they paid and fed me!_

_‘There’s no point to an agreement like that if the Akatsuki are still around.’_ Gaara squashed the idea with the sobering truth, _‘Until they are eliminated, your personal freedom will always be_
jeopardized."

*I don’t think I have ever actually been paid before, though. I’ve been like an unpaid intern forever.*

‘Quiet.’

“You alright, Gaara?”

“I’m fine. I was getting feedback.”

“Oh!” Sakura brightened, “Did he like the idea?”

“He did. Though there are intricacies that would potentially thwart that elegant solution, the proposal is fundamentally sound.”

“Glad you think so.” Her smile faltered when her stomach gurgled with hunger.

“We should eat.” Gaara remembered.

“Why? We were having such a nice heart-to-heart.”

“We can still talk.” He assured her, “Let’s go to my apartment. I can make something.”

Sakura nodded, feigning composure, and relished the whirling, red alarm blinking and blaring ‘round her insides. It felt as though her stomach would drop out, leaving her lighter than air so that she might float away. ‘Now we’re…going to his place. And he’s happy…and I’m happy.’ Since their fingers had threaded Sakura perceived how her awareness of Gaara was expanding, the touch of his skin now tickling her when she was certain it hadn’t before. He walked along with an expression that was placidly happy and kinetic at the same time.

While following a northwesterly route through town, where the streets were empty at that hour and the neon of bar signs were the last lights buzzing, Sakura allowed herself to accept the overwhelming fact. ‘Things will change now.’ She was sure. Gaara was not a trusting person, and she perfectly understood why that was. Even Naruto and Haku, who she imagined would know his secret, probably did not know the small, excruciating details Gaara had shared with her that night. His identity and personal struggles were to be kept in confidence, and Sakura was awed that she very well could be the only person to know such privileged information…until they were both dead and buried.

‘Okay. Maybe his secret IS a bigger deal than meeting Mom and Dad. And whoa, I still can’t believe we tackled all of this in a day.’ Then again, it was debatable when they would next have the chance to be in the same place for an extended period of time. ‘We’ve got to capitalize on a day…and night…like this.’ She gulped, ‘He made things so serious…I wonder if I should still try to make a move? I don’t know if he is emotionally equipped for something like that right now…”

Sakura rapped her nails along her lips, wondering, ‘Or if I did…how he or the Ichibi might react? He mentioned that stress made him lose control in the past. If Gaara has boundaries like that I want to respect them.’ She snuck a corner-eye glance at him and then pouted, ‘Erg…but then he’s got some nerve looking that hot and angular in summer clothes! What am I supposed to do?’

Gaara stopped suddenly. Sakura stutter-stepped to a halt while lost in thought, and then wisely followed his line of sight far down the road. She saw Huo’s back and queue of hair as he retreated into his guest habitation for the night.
“Huo wasn’t at the festival.” Gaara noted keenly, “Though that comes as no surprise. He has only contempt for his fellow Finalists.”

“He gives me the creeps.” Sakura linked her arm with her boyfriend’s, “Lee told us that he said…he wants to kill us all.”

Unruffled by the statement, Gaara continued walking, “He must mean it.”

“Won’t he get disqualified for something like that?”

“Idle threats are one thing. But if he acts on the threat—”

“Gaara, the boy he fought died shortly after their match. Huo may not be breaking the Exam’s rules, but he still knows how to inflict delayed fatalities.” She was agitated, “I don’t want someone like that being Tama’s first ever Exam opponent!”

“Your sensei would not allow her to enter her match unprepared. Kakashi knows what kind of foe that Rock ninja is. And if things take a bad turn, he and the other Jounin are more than ready now to intervene during a match. Faster than even the proctor, I’d wager.”

“Well, yeah…I know they’re ready for something like that.”

“Put it out of your mind, for now.” Gaara suggested, and began to climb the outdoor stairwell of the building. Doors of homes they passed on the way were darkened and quiet.

Sakura asked if Matsuri would be asleep in a spare bedroom, but Gaara shook his head, “She has a guest habitation at the Magnolia Hotel that Tsunade advertised. I invited her to stay here…but Matsuri is enjoying her time without me and making friends.”

“Ah.” Sakura could feel her heartbeat in her throat.

Maybe she should not have been surprised that Gaara had a spare key besides the original he had gifted to her. Sakura tried not to make stupid faces of excitement as Gaara unlocked the door and let her step inside first. She slipped off her sandals in the genkan, considering unfamiliar shapes in the dark, and blinked rapidly when he snapped the lights on.

“Are…a-are we in the right place?” She exclaimed, her green eyes wide as saucers.

The chipped, cracked walls…the worn furniture…the cluttered, outdated arrangements that Sakura remembered from her last visit…gone. Even a wall or two she recalled that had once sectioned off the living area, ‘They were knocked down! It’s all open. Holy shit, someone painted in here…’ A stately, muted shade of blue-grey, the molding contrasted in white, ‘And hardwood floors…’ As she stepped with bare feet it was warm to the touch, ‘Oh! Radiant heat. How much did this cost? Yeesh! When did he get all of this done?’

Gaara dropped the key ring on a hook after taking his shoes off, following her into the living space, “I had it remodeled a few months ago.”

“I can see that.”

“I was saving. I paid for it myself.” His eyes swept around as if he were not impressed with it, “Naruto and Haku will adjust.”

“You didn’t consult with them?” She was aghast and also running her hand over the top of a sofa sectional that still had showroom smell. Sakura watched him untie the hyper-condensed sand gourd
from his hip and gently set it down near a display of pottery.

“That would have complicated it.” Gaara crossed toward the kitchen, “Haku is too fond of breakable antiques and Naruto is too fond of orange.”

Sakura launched herself face-first onto the sofa, beyond his line of sight as she laid belly-down, “Ah! You’re right.”

“Of course I am. What do you want to eat?”

Her head poked up, “Anything my mom did not cook for us today.”

He took it as a valid answer and began rummaging around the fridge and cupboards. Sakura lowered herself down onto cushions again, refusing to squeal aloud in astonishment, ‘I keep forgetting that he cooks. And since when does Gaara have an eye for design? This place looks like a model home!’

Gaara asked her if she would like water or tea, and when she declined a drink he advised her to stay comfortable. Sakura remained on the sofa, her arms folded on the headrest, balancing her chin to stare at him from across the room. He seemed calm. It was an electric sort of calm; she felt his feelings prickling at her strongly as if they carried through airwaves. Her lips curled up, watching him in silence,

‘I feel lucky…’ She exhaled dreamily, ‘He’s been through so much, but Gaara trusts me. This has to be reciprocal. I feel like I can tell him anything I need to…’ Though nothing immediately came to mind.

Her eyes scanned across items around the apartment that were familiar. The old and reliable rice cooker that the three boys had owned since childhood (its steam vent gently puffing,) bowls and glasswork that belonged to Haku, framed photos and artwork, Naruto’s potted plants flourishing on shelves above the sink…

‘The interior may have changed, but their belongings are still here.’ She wondered if the bedrooms had also changed, not that she had ever seen those rooms before.

“Gaara-kun, do you still keep a lot of your things here?”

He looked over his shoulder at her, “Some things. I’ve outgrown old clothes and I did not keep those.”

“Don’t get rid of the sentimental items, though.” Sakura recommended, “That’s the…proof of your life here in Konoha.” Proof of his time with them, with his team, and with her.

Gaara turned back to the pan popping with heated oil, replying, “I will always keep those things.”

She inquired as an afterthought, “Should I…bring your Leaf headband here?”

Gaara said nothing for quite a while. Sakura observed him frying battered eggplant, tumbling in his thoughts. He would never be a Leaf ninja again, not without instigating an insane, unprecedented resignation and defection from the village he was now sworn to protect.

“I would prefer if you kept it, Sakura.” He said in a small voice. He wanted that memento to be hers; wanted it to be dedicated to her.

“Okay.” She was smiling and rocking her chin side to side on her folded arms.

Sakura took a guess that the silver-fleshed fillet he had placed in the fish oven was scabbard fish, but she wasn’t exactly sure. ‘I haven’t had it in a while! It’s so popular this time of year it’s always sold
out before Mom and I can pick it up at the market…”

He drifted between kitchen tasks and setting the low, traditional table in the dining area. Gaara’s eyes flicked over to her a few times, ice-green and lit with levity.

When he tended to the last of the eggplant, Sakura frowned to herself, giving the young man the up-and-down, ‘I wonder…’ She pressed her lips to the back of her hands, spying, ‘If he has other features…from the Ichibi…?’ Aside from his dark-rimmed eyes, which Sakura found a most subtle feature, ‘I didn’t see any claws or ears or fur…’

Her eyes trolled down to his lower back, ‘He probably…doesn’t have anything else.’

But, as she recalled carefully turning the pages of an old, oversized tome in Hoshigakure, Sakura acknowledged real descriptions of those with horns, sharp teeth, and flowing manes. She slipped up from the sectional and took conspicuous, lilting steps towards Gaara, ‘I just keep getting more curious…and I don’t want to make it weird by out-right asking him! Sure, like I could say— hey Gaara! Are you hiding a tail somewhere? Just a thought…pff…’

“Nearly done.” Gaara informed her, making a pleased sound as she pressed her cheek against his shoulder blade and hugged him from behind. “You’ve been awfully quiet.”

“I’ve just been thinking a lot…” She traced her fingertips over the shell of his ear, which checked out completely normal.

“I don’t blame you. What I told you is not something easily accepted and dismissed.”

Sakura felt around his nail beds and found no claws, trying to play it off as a girlish touch, “I’m glad you told me, Gaara. I consider it an honor.”

He plucked the finished vegetables from the oil with chopsticks, and then turned the gas off. She heard him make another soft, happy sound.

Then, before Gaara could find something else to do and walk away, Sakura did it briskly: hooking a finger into the waistband of his pants and undershorts, tugging them free an inch to glimpse down the plane of his back…finding no tail at all. Her eyes did linger as there were two perfect lower back dimples above his ass, which was distinctly paler than the exposed skin of his face, neck, and arms. She had never known such a charming feature could exist on a man. Gaara froze at this odd, uncalled for contact and she patted his clothing back into place, laughing apologetically.

“What are you doing?”

“You don’t want to know.” She took a serving bowl from his hand, “U-Uh, let me help! Sorry about that. Just an exam I had in mind—”

“Sakura…”

“Pretend it didn’t happen.” She insisted sunnily. Sakura was already at the table organizing food and tableware.

Gaara left the pan’s cooking oil to cool on the stove and fetched the fish from the oven, pressing his mouth into a thin line. Sakura was not at all reacting to him with uncertainty or trepidation, as he might have expected. Instead, she had become handsy and somewhat invasive of his personal space…not that he could complain about it. ‘But why did she-?’ She had blatantly stole a peek at his bottom and he did not know how to feel about it. How was this any way to react to the things he had told her?
He set a plate of scabbard fish on the table, giving her a narrow-eyed look. Sakura, he ought not to forget, could be rather sly and impetuous when the mood came over her. Oh, he knew that well.

Beyond that, Gaara considered himself plain-looking with little talent for attraction, but he was slowly starting to suspect that Sakura had latched onto something, whether it was his admission, some kind of mystique she thought he had, or even the understated way he had dressed—she was ogling him shamelessly, almost grinning.

He might have felt uncomfortable about it if it wasn’t so fucking wonderful. The night could have gone in the complete opposite direction.

Gaara distantly heard her excited “Itadakimasu!” from across the table before the clattering of dishes started. Sakura hurriedly plopped still-hot foods onto his plate first before helping herself. He frowned at her again.

“How traditional. I don’t care much for that custom.” He replied and poured her tea before she could touch the pot.

“Thank you.” Sakura sat back and smiled appreciatively, “So how did you get the tachiuo? Every time Mom and I attempted to buy it these past few weeks it was all gone. Crazy women in town form a mob in front of the store…and we don’t want to stoop as low as them.”

“When the Kazekage requests scabbard fish, he is given scabbard fish.”

“If I didn’t know you so well, Gaara, you’d sound grossly entitled right now.”

“Sometimes it is worth taking advantage of your station…for I have seen that mob you spoke of.” Gaara acknowledged, a small tremble passing through him, “We do not have shoppers like that in Suna.”

“I guess people in Suna are used to not being able to find the things they want at the market.”

“Exactly.”

“Do you have summer-time fish like these to eat out there?”

“Very rarely, and at great expense. It’s getting easier to find as trade improves. The Tide Village has been complementary to our commerce.”

“I bet!” Sakura took a bite of the fish with rice and slowly shut her eyes to savor it, “This is wonderful.”

“I should hope so. Or that it’s at least as good as festival food.”

“Honestly, festival food gets old after the first hundred times you eat the same damn thing.”

Gaara nodded and his facial features were lightening in amusement.

“I think Ino was a little drunk by the time I left…” Sakura recalled while nibbling eggplant, “Actually…everyone seemed a bit tipsy. Except for Hinata, of course, her father would give her a diatribe at home if she did something like that.”

“Then why would the Head of the Hyuga clan not scold Neji for a night of drinking?”
“Hyuga-sama would scold him.” Sakura wagered, “But I think Neji was prepared for the consequence…especially since he had his beautiful girlfriend saucing up with him. It was probably worth it for them. Heh!”

“I am still surprised.” Gaara said, somewhat out of context.

Sakura quirked an eyebrow at him, “About what?”

They chewed for a few beats before Gaara elaborated.

“Surprised that his teammate, Tenten, got through to him. I still remember Neji as a closed off person.”

“He isn’t really like that anymore. He’s just bossy and brotherly. Much easier to talk to now, the girls and I agree.”

“How did someone like him come to acknowledge a friend and teammate he formerly took for granted?” Gaara was surprisingly abreast on the turn of events. He rounded off the thought with a swig of tea.

Sakura smiled cleverly, as she had a first-hand account of the catalyst, “Well, Neji had to lose her first! I forgot you missed all of that.”

“Lose her?”

“Yeah. Shishou was compelled to rearrange their team after a rogue nin tried to target them, although she didn’t give me the full story. She did say that Neji got into an insubordinate argument with her when she removed Tenten from Team Gai.” Sakura was chuckling, “She was SO mad. But she also really understood how upset he was. Lee was also in shambles. I remember watching the two of them mope around like the world was ending.”

“Interesting.” Gaara was sincerely intrigued, eating dinner as if it were cinema popcorn.

“Also, they weren’t permitted to communicate with each other. Tenten was the saddest I had ever seen her. We girls tried to hang out with her and cheer her up. Their team was apart for a while and Neji and Lee grew closer.” She explained happily, “But I think when they reunited, Neji had been shaken up enough to admit that he had it bad for her. They started dating!”

“How unusually mature of him. He didn’t throw a tantrum to win her affection?”

“I don’t know about that…He’s still, you know, Neji. Tenten keeps him in check.”

“Lee is a good friend to them.” Gaara recognized.

“Yes. He really is the best. Chouji too. He looks out for Ino and Shika.”

Gaara leaned his head back in thought.

“Much like them…Naruto always wanted me to confess to you.” He disclosed.

Eggplant slipped from her chopsticks. Gaara continued eating, unabashed.

“I’m sorry— what?” Sakura sat up straighter, more attentive.

“Naruto and Haku knew.” He said simply, “How I felt about you. While Haku was encouraging and championed discretion, Naruto thought I had nothing to lose, and that I should have told you.” Gaara
added before a final bite of fish, “For someone so utterly blind to his own admirer, previously…Naruto was sure that I was meant for…”

He trailed off and regarded Sakura’s rosy cheeks, and how she began to smile toothily, “…Naruto, huh?”

“In his infinite wisdom.”

“Man is he nosy!” She was thrilled, “But he was right! He was right about you being my match.” Sakura reached her hand out and settled it over his, “Naruto actually has some very good insight, when it comes to those sorts of things. I should thank him.”

“He does.” Gaara agreed, relaxing again, “And while he may have been correct with his hunch, it did not change the fact that I wasn’t ready. I never had any expectation or delusion that you would feel the same—that you’d feel just as much as I did, in spite of how close we were. I did not value myself at all, and that constantly hindered my ability to connect with others. Shunning the possibility of rejection meant that I wouldn’t have to relive Suna all over again.”

Sakura gazed at him and said nothing, introspective, and then drew her hand back to begin tidying empty dishes. In those slow seconds that passed, Gaara also rose to help clean up. He wracked his brain, concerned that he had said something stupid or too revealing. ‘What is she thinking about?’

At the sink, Sakura spoke, “You’re still like that, you know.”

Gaara wore an owl-eyed look, confused.

“You’ve grown. You’ve matured and opened up, no doubt about it…but that one weakness of yours did not change.” Sakura shook her head, gently chiding. “You still hesitate to value yourself, Gaara. If you had felt surer of your worth: your accomplishments and your flaws alike…would it have taken you as long to tell me about Shukaku?” She wondered, “Or for that matter, would have it hurt you so much to finally talk about it?”

“It would have hurt no matter what.”

She let him take over the dish washing as she poured the cooled oil into an old tin can for disposal. Sakura was still gnawing at her lips with more to say.

“I want you to…” Her voice rose in frustration, “I want you to see yourself the way all of us see you, and not cleave to that image in your head of when you were a kid that no one wanted.” With a bump of her hip she guided him to step aside, taking over the other half of the sink to scrub the pan in her hands, ‘Gaara, put all of that behind you now. You’re the Kazekage, and you can be damn sure everyone in Suna knows who and what you are. If people here learn that you’re a jinchuriki over time, your actions will speak louder than their prejudice.” She added, “Haters notwithstanding, as there will always be an unjust critic or two…”

Gaara craned his neck to give her another astounded look, laying clean bowls on the drying rack.

“What?” She was annoyed further, scrubbing.

“To tell the truth…I care less about public opinion than I do about your opinion.”

“Then you should be all set now.” She motioned for the dish soap and he passed it to her. Sakura began to simmer down again, “Sorry. I just hate how you vilify yourself. There are leaders and shinobi in this world who are real monsters…and your only crime was being subject to a decision you had no part in.”
“I am by no means guiltless.” He reminded her.

“Who isn’t-?”

“I have killed people in the past that likely did not deserve to be killed. I’ve been callous to those I’ve called my friends and pushed them away. I’ve even said cruel things to you, all in defense of my ego.” Gaara dried her clean pan with a dishtowel, “Every day that I live I try to make up for those things.”

“Well I did do stupid shit like gossip to Sasuke about every little thing I knew.” Her anger rebounded as if to varnish herself with harsh words, “I wanted to help him. I really did. When we spent time…” Sakura grunted furiously, “He…he knew what to say to make me believe I was important, and everything he did proved the opposite. Genius that I was, I played into that. Every time I slighted you was an offense worth the hurtful things you told me. Your feelings mattered, and I just wasn’t getting that. Not then.”

Regardless, he vowed, “I will never speak to you like that again.”

“I acted like a dumb bitch and I don’t disagree with anything you said.”

“Sakura—”

“No.” She stopped him, tipping the last few drops in the teapot down the drain, “We will fight. Even if we stay together forever, maybe up until our last breaths, you have to know that we’re going to fight. That’s just what we’re like. We think too much, berate ourselves, criticize others, try to do better, and then end up arguing until things smooth over.” Sakura grinned at him, “It’s like a dream come true.”

“A dream, you say? You’ve dreamt of someone you could argue with?”

“Yeah, especially if he’s a handsome redhead.”

The look on his face fluttered with several conflicting emotions, and Sakura set the teapot aside to settle both of her hands behind his head and kiss him— really kiss him, as ravenous for him as she would have been whether or not he had admitted to being a jinchuriki. His hands scrambled for her face and waist, eyes blithely closing. Gaara tasted rich and aromatic on her tongue, tilting his head down to deepen the kiss as her nails traced a racetrack through his hair and down his neck.

She was murmuring as she drew back to peck the corners of his mouth, toying with his bottom lip, glimpsing between her slitted eyes as the sensation of it had him rioting, quickly shedding timidity, holding her tightly…

Sakura withdrew and a soft puff of air escaped her, “Puh.” Gaara eyeballed her puckish, satisfied face with wonder, starting to imagine that she had designs for him beyond just accepting his jinchuriki identity. She was silken, smelled sweeter than the blossoms of a fruit grove, and oh…what was he worried about again? He had forgotten.

“I always aspired to have a man who I could fight or argue with— constructively…and even if we sting each other with hard truths and criticism…I would never doubt you still loved me.” She slid her fingertips over the line of his shoulder and under the fabric of the desert-style sash there. He was acutely aware of the touch, “So yes, fighting was part of my check list. If I can’t be imperfect and scream at you, then maybe we aren’t for each other.”

“Do your worst.” He taunted.
“That’s what I thought.”

When a deep, pleased rumble came out of him Sakura gave him a well-informed, entertained look. They stood there for nearly a minute without asking about or trying to explain the growl.

She finally questioned its source, “Um…I’m not so sure if those sounds are purely you anymore…”

A sigh dropped out of him and he had to admit, “No.”

“I believe I have heard you do it before.”

“When I…am riled up…there is some overlap between us.” Gaara clarified haltingly, “Shukaku… and I.” He tried not to remember the Tailed-Beast’s participation in a previous, back-alley make out session from weeks before. That was not something he really wanted to fess up to.

“Hm.” Sakura noted it. She took a tour around the kitchen’s new appliances, skirting the quartz-topped island counter, and the gorgeously furnished living space, tugging Gaara along by a few fingers as if he were a locomotive car.

In front of framed photos on the wall near the hallway she asked, “Is it just…noises? From the Ichibi?”

“Mostly.”

“This will sound stupid, but…is there a tail?”

Mortified, but stone-faced he said, “Yes. When I let Shukaku express it.” And Sakura tapped her fist in the palm of her hand victoriously, as if she were a detective on the trail, “Don’t tell me you were checking for it?”

“I can’t help but be curious about these things! The name suggests that Biju really do have chakra tails, so I wondered if you’d have a feature resembling one. It’s reasonable.”

He shook his head weakly but could not debate it with her.

“Does anything else happen? Anything that you can show me?” She wondered, “You won’t let me talk to-?”

“Not tonight…give that some time.” Gaara deflected the request, “Shukaku does not have a way with words. You may talk in other circumstances, some other time.”

She nodded.

Again, he sighed heavily, wondering if it was worth revealing a glimpse of Shukaku’s features to her. She clearly wasn’t scared and had asked him directly. On a personal level, Gaara had about enough of the discussion centered on his jinchuriki identity, ‘But I can’t simply brush it under the rug when I don’t want to talk about it. Sakura will ask questions. That’s in her nature.’ Would it do any good to could compromise on the matter? ‘If I humor one request, then maybe I can ask her to leave it at that.’

Gaara resolved out loud, “I will show you something, but then no more. If you wish to see other features, I ask that you let me demonstrate at a later date.”

“Sure!” Elated, Sakura took his hands in her own again, wearing an expectant look.

His shoulders dropped a bit as he exhaled, shutting his eyes.
“Is this okay?” She wondered, gesturing with his captive hands.

Barely moving, he replied, “It’s fine.”

Gaara was statue-still and Sakura darted her green gaze up and down, seeing no changes whatsoever. ‘Seems like he’s about to fall asleep…maybe I should just leave it alone? I don’t need proof from him, anyway. I completely believe him after what he told me. Gaara’s probably feeling exhausted.’ She pouted, regretting her nosiness, ‘How much can I put him through? I’ll just tell him —’

He opened eyes that were not his own.

Her hand instantly travelled up to his cheek and Sakura moved in close, thrilled to inspect the phenomenon. Where once his irises had been glacial celadon, they were molten gold; the pupil tilted and squared—the sclera consumed in black. She patted her thumb beneath his eye, intrigued, “May I ask…how’s your vision? Better, worse…?”

“About the same.” Gaara guessed, “Things seem a bit magnified…and wider-looking.”

“The pupil tilt could give you a more panoramic view. Like a creature that needs to look out over long stretches of desert and horizon.” She guessed, “Please tell Shukaku his eyes are very unique!”

“He heard you.”

“Oh.” She dropped her hand and was smiling timidly.

Gaara blinked his eyes and they were his own shade again.

“Very interesting.” Sakura cupped her chin and began to pace the hallway, “Every trait has a purpose, at least I want to think so. Every beast’s features are to its advantage…and I read that some of the Biju are very unusual in appearance.”

“That is absolutely true.” Gaara agreed, thinking of how Shukaku was roughly the shape of a cauldron, with about the same level of agility to boot.

She nosed around the doorway of the darkened bathroom and paused in her investigative monologue, “…oh…” She skittered into it and from the corridor Gaara saw the lights flick on as she prospected.

“Am I echoing?” She called out to him, “It’s very spacious in here.”

He folded his arms and stood nearby, listening to her bumble around; the click of cabinets opening and closing, faucets being tested, pushing buttons for temperature control. Gaara heard her muttering about something smelling good—perhaps soap, he guessed. He let her fiddle around until her inquisitiveness ebbed.

Sakura switched the lights off as she exited, “The tile in there is very nice.” Her eyebrows were aloft from her wide smile, “Have you actually bathed in there yet?”

“Yes.”

She turned her face away from him as she bit her knuckle. At that point, Gaara was almost positive he knew what she was thinking about. Sakura surveyed down the hall to its end where Haku’s room was, and she nudged inside to look around. There was no need to tell her who it belonged to—she would be able to tell by the calligraphy scrolls adorning the walls. Lights flicked on and off, and it
did not sound like she opened anything to snoop around personal belongings. Gaara returned to the living area while she explored. Sakura had always been equipped to take in massive amounts of information. He was in favor of letting her roam and commit the modernized rooms to memory.

And also he felt just a touch nervous; a Lilliputian tingle in his stomach. Gaara busied himself by washing out the teapot that had been left on the counter.

There were some considerations to be made on his part, chiefest among them was what was going to constitute ‘Good-night.’ The options seemed to indicate they would either: say such a thing as he walked her home and bid her farewell at her doorstep…or that he would mutter it (or maybe even forget to mutter it) as Sakura stayed in his home and fell asleep. With him.

Gaara set the teapot aside to dry. Swallowing felt more difficult. He genuinely felt he was splat in the middle of a maelstrom of decency, expectation, and desire; peppered with a dash of surrealism. Sakura had taken everything in stride and definitely did not seem inclined to leave. Her ease with the whole situation was overwhelming him.

Gaara crossed over to an adjacent wall panel’s light switches, twiddling around with them. More or less light? Total darkness? No, that was just downright suggestive. He became frustrated with his dawdling and grunted, dimming the recess lighting to leave it somewhere in-between the two extremes.

Then again, such mood lighting still seemed evocative, but to hell with it, he thought. Gaara crossed the room, determined not to agonize over it.

You’re thinking way too much. Shukaku drawled lazily.

‘Withhold your input for now. You’ll just make me think more.’

You let her see my peepers and she said they were unique. She is clearly not worried about anything. You fascinate her.

‘That’s what worries me.’

Gaara, there is nothing to worry about. You were treated with more dignity and kindness in one night than I’ve seen in three separate lifetimes. My other sacrifices have had shit compared to you, ya whiner…

From the corner of his eye Gaara could see Sakura had migrated to Naruto’s room and was snorting in laughter at a collage of photos. He entered his bedroom, its lights off, and stood beside the window to stare at the roofs and skyline of the village he had once called home.

‘Sakura will want to—’

Fool. Do exactly as she wants. Did she not do everything that you wished for earlier and then surpass your expectations? You’ll use every bitch excuse you’ve used before. Shukaku rumbled as they both peered out at buildings speckled with glowing windows. Lame excuses: that you’ll distract her from the Exam, that you mustn’t dishonor her maiden body, that you’ll be in pain to be apart from each other, once this time has passed. When you must return to your respective duties, your hearts will ache! Fuh.

‘You should not make light of—!’
I don’t. I told you that I’ve seen men go through worse. Lose everything. Never have anything to start with, and then die with nothing. When you worry about such petty things it makes me sick. You heave and haw at your good fortune.

Gaara was surprised that he felt rather humbled by the notion.

If you want to keep someone, simply do it. Father always said that even time and space can be subject to our will. They are not obstructions. Your will is strong. When you were a weeping child you resisted me every night. Grown ninja have folded to me sooner, before you.

‘Your encouragement is almost uncalled for.’ He admitted, sheepish.

So is your hesitation.

A relenting sigh sounded that Shukaku took as Gaara’s yielding to the point.

You won’t hurt her. You no longer have the capacity to do harm to someone you worship. Seems like you only know how to hurt yourself, Gaara. You still try to find reasons to hate yourself, like she said. A yawn, Anyhow, I will not be involved in whatever you try to do now. I’d like a nap. Enjoy some privacy and don’t be so loud that you wake me up.

“Hush.” Gaara said out loud, piqued and abashed.

Shukaku had retreated, good as his word.

A hint of the waxing moon was visible above a patchwork office building across the residential avenue. He tried to focus on it; tried to be as calm and still as that celestial sliver.

“Gaara?” Sakura lingered near the door, illuminated by the hall’s light behind her.

He startled, but Gaara turned on a bedside lamp to dispel the darkness and his brooding. He gave her a boggled look. It made her want to laugh again.

“Naruto has some hilarious photos.” She proclaimed, half-envious, “Sato probably took most of them. I should ask him if he has any spare copies…”

As she had with other spaces, Sakura prowled around his bedroom, ghosting her fingertips over a dresser, desk, bookcase, bins, and keepsakes of his youth. Her eyes had snuck almost a full appraisal of the bed behind her. She stopped to regard the correspondence on the desk, which looked official, “What’s this here?”

“An invitation to village leaders.” He explained, standing ramrod straight, bordering on awkward. He realized it. Gaara remembered to exhale-inhale-exhale and sat on the edge of his bed, rubbing at his forehead as if it would erase the anxious, on-the-precipice feeling he was fighting.

“Who sent it?” Sakura wondered.

“The Hokage. She sent several invitations to village leaders that she wanted to attend and spectate the Tournament.”

“Ah!” Sakura was pleased, “Who’s invited?”

“You’ll have to wait and see for yourself.”

She puffed her cheeks at the response but accepted. Maybe it would be a delightful surprise to see
which other leaders she could impress on the day of her match. It was reward enough that Tsunade and Gaara would be there.

Continuing her inspection near the desk, Sakura picked up and turned opalescent sea shells over in her hands. There were also sunglasses, a tiny ship in a bottle, and a figurine of a seagull in shinobi attire. She hazarded a guess that it was all memorabilia from the Tide Village.

Sakura scanned a few other odds and ends from the Sand Village and then the closet before crossing to the bed. She pursed her mouth as she beheld Gaara, as he had all but crumpled into a ball on top of a luxurious white comforter. She climbed up and kneeled beside him, having an inkling that maybe he wasn’t feeling entirely right about something…or maybe everything.

Without a word she commenced rubbing his head, starting at the crown, ‘This might calm him down a little. Why does he get so rattled?’

He croaked softly and melted into her touch.

‘That’s better.’ Sakura looked around the half-lit room, finally spying an incriminating detail she had overlooked.

“Gaara.”

“Hm…?”

“Nice painting.” Her smile was audible.

Hung on the wall space above the bed was an enormous canvas, its composition of a cherry blossom tree and its extending branch brightly in bloom. Oil-based paints cheerfully lopped into petals of blush, rouge, and fuchsia. She simply thought, ‘It’s me.’

She bent down to kiss him, positively flattered, but Gaara caught her shoulder in his palm, stopping her before she could reach him.

“I need you to tell me what your intentions are.” He flat-out hurled the query at her, “…for this evening. Understand that in my position, I can make no demands of you. Whatever you want to do I need you to be explicitly clear about it.”

Her heart was harnessed securely to a bungee cord, bounding up and down her insides. Gaara handed her all the power. Sakura suspected that he was still feeling vulnerable, and he probably did not want to be the one to make a serious, progressive move, ‘Even if he is the Kazekage...’ Sure, he had confessed about his identity, taken her to his home, had dinner for two, and let her roam around like she owned the place…Gentleman that he was, Gaara was not one to assume that meant he would be taking any liberties with his girlfriend.

She, on the other hand, initially had only one goal in mind after she had walked away from the festival that night. ‘I can’t tell what he wants. He really seems on the fence about doing anything with me. Maybe I should hold off and…just go home?’

Sakura glanced down at the auburn locks in her hands, watching him breathe as calmly as possible with his eyes closed.

‘No. No sulking home!’ Her resolve strengthened. Maybe it was because Ino was a bad influence, and maybe because she had waited for about as long as she could stand. ‘Gaara is shy. I won’t assume anything without asking him first.’ Her gut instinct suggested he wasn’t opposed to doing anything, rather that he was unsure of how to go about it.
“Is it alright if I stay here with you?” She kept her voice even, glass-smooth.

Gaara cracked an eye open at her, “You may.”

“I didn’t really want to go home tonight. We have one last day off tomorrow.”

“Your parents will wonder where you are.”

A slight shake of her head, “They won’t. Ino had my excuse planned.”

Both of his eyes opened, “Did she?”

“She’s an incredible advocate for most of my causes.”

He agreed with a noncommittal grunt. The Yamanaka deserved thanks. Maybe. If this went well.

Sakura stretched out beside him, her hands slowing in their work against his scalp. She was not precisely aware of when tension began to gradually, painstakingly eep out of Gaara. He emerged from his scrunched position, straightening, and reclined into her embrace. But after that Gaara did not move a muscle, tranquil enough to fall asleep, and that was not what she was going for.

‘Please, sir, please pay attention to what I’m doing…’ Her nails grazed down the back of his head and neck, roving to his shoulder. As ordinarily as she could, Sakura slid the sash down past his collar bone, where it gathered in a bunch at his chest. Gaara reacted under her hand and rotated to be on his back, a lured expression on his face. Unrepentant, Sakura smirked at him, ‘What? You don’t need it on anyway…’ She was gratified when he slipped the unnecessary fabric tie free of his arm and laid there. Her hand meandered from his wrist and up, up, up until she cupped the side of his face. She pressed her lips to the skin of his shoulder and grinned.

“Sakura.”

She batted her eyes defensively at him. ‘Don’t warn me to stop. Don’t send me home. I just want to peel clothing off of you, is that really so bad?’

His head was angled toward her, mollified, “Do what you want.”

“You said I had to be explicitly clear about what I wanted.” Sakura reminded him warily.

“Then tell me.”

She bit her lip. Her hands stilled on his soft crimson shirt, and it was so, so warm. ‘Hm. Maybe he can handle this after all?’ The rise and fall of his chest was incrementally calming.

Sakura worked up the nerve to answer him, and slipped closer to nuzzle his neck, “I want to…” She exhaled bashfully and lowered her voice, “I’d like to take your shirt off.”

“Ah.” He said with enthusiasm, for it was as he suspected.

Then she draped her leg over and past his, pivoting above him until he was pinned, and Sakura let her smile curl more nefariously, “Actually, I’d like to tell you what I was thinking about most of this afternoon.”

Gaara was cognizant of that last fleeting moment he was allowed to be hesitant, worried, or unsure. It drifted off into nothingness, a pointless mental block he had formerly believed to be essential. The feeling of Sakura hovering there, bracketing him with her arms and legs, felt a million times better than staring out of a window, resolving not to touch her. And because Gaara felt comfortable enough
by that point, and he did not truly want to resist the slippery slope, he prompted her, “Do tell.”

“I wanted to get you here, like this, alone.”

“I think I knew you wanted that.”

Her lips migrated beyond his neck, pressing against his temple, and then ghosted over his mouth, “I wanted to take your clothes off.”

In total agreement, Gaara arched to assist with the near ripping removal of his top, and Sakura flung it and the helpless eggshell sash across the room. Her hands slid, cruelly slow, down from either side of his neck down newly nude flesh, finally letting him reach for a kiss. He was frantic about it. The sounds she made were by far more pleased than earlier, and Sakura’s trailing touches halted on his abdomen. She sat back for a moment to appreciate him. Her gaze soaked in the handsome attributes she had only been able to imagine for so long; a chest paler than she would have guessed, unmarked and flawless, the arrangement of muscles that were slight in appearance, arrowing down above his tense stomach.

Upon looking back up, she realized he was staring at her, stumped on what he should do. Gaara’s face was starstruck and sincere.

Sakura added as if to explain, “I wanted to look at you.”

He swallowed and managed to speak, “If that’s all—” Gaara cradled her face in his palms, drawing her near again to be kissed.

Her nails nipped at the flesh of his ribcage, making him shiver. Sakura interrupted, “Hey, no, that is not all—” She broke away from a tantalizing, syrupy sweet kiss, “There’s more on you, isn’t there? If you’re feeling shy tell me, but otherwise…” She hitched at the waistband of his pants and was worryingly proficient at pulling them down.

His shorts remained intact, but poise was failing him, and Gaara rose to a sitting position to topple her over. He forgot that wrestling with Sakura was a waste of effort, rolling and crinkling above a fluffed comforter, and his pants were lost shortly after she pinned him with one powerful arm, flattening him onto his back again. She was thrilled, positively smug, “You can say something, Gaara, if I’m too fast.”

A bit tired, Gaara huffed, “That startled me more than it should have.”

“Sorry! I may be overenthusiastic.”

“Perhaps a bit.”

“I don’t know how often you hear this, but…you are stunning.” She offered in consolation, leering, “Really. Can I please have a portrait of you to hide under my pillow?”

What flattery.

Gaara decided he liked it. He managed to get his pinned wrist free, fitting his hands to her waist, and up along her exposed back. Gaara pawed curiously at the collar-like fastener of her mint halter top. He was now favoring her potential disrobing to match his own, but admittedly had no idea how her shirt worked.

Sakura pressed down to be flush against his front, giggle uncontrollably, kissing the cove of his jaw and ear. “Keep trying.”
“You’re better at this.”

“I know. Men’s clothes are easy.” Her calf drifted along one of his legs, assessing how it felt, “There’s not much hair down here. Huh…” Her fingers were skimming and exploring his chest and arms, “And not much of it up here either.”

“Hardly any.” He acknowledged, “I never decided if I cared or was disappointed about it.”

“It’s just the way you’re made. I like that you’re smooth.”

Gaara’s hands gave up on the blasted, solitary collar around her neck. Shirt or no, he felt the valley of her chest pushed into him, soft motions and wriggling, her breathing driving him wild.

Her fingers kept busy along his stomach, inching up along an invisible ladder, examining the tiny dell between pectorals. It registered to him that it tickled, but brain functionality stopped him from reacting to the feathery touch. A boiling chemical reaction sibilated in his veins, heating every inch of skin, and by way of accidental fiddling Gaara eventually pulled open the two buttons of Sakura’s collar. The halter slid away from her neck, fabric creasing in a heap at her clavicle as Gaara could think of nothing but to fasten his mouth to the pulse point of her throat, to that ceramic-blush skin so perfect that only he would know.

She made breathless, muttering sounds of approval. With nary a moment’s notice, Sakura abruptly peeled back to pull her shirt off, where it disappeared with a toss into the dim room. She dipped back to him, resuming with cautious kisses on his lips, studying them. Gaara’s hands stopped on the back pockets of her shorts as a new detail strayed across his senses. Such a detail pressed flat and warm to his chest.

Gaara did not mistake the lack of undergarment beneath Sakura’s skimpy, summer shirt. Her breasts were a delicate size, from what he could assess as they brushed his skin. He felt her smile, felt her lips draw away from his as she sat upright, straddling him; conjuring, for the first time in her life, some true pride in her slim, petite form. Sakura was nine-tenths certain that he would appreciate seeing her bare-chested, and judging by his stare, yes, yes he was.

In fact, she could not divide her attention from Gaara’s singular, bordering-on-enlightenment gaze at her. Sakura took some time to muse while atop the lord of the Sand Village, ‘I looked at him. Now he can look at me. Gaara may very well try look for forever, but I think I’ll have to live with that.’ She noticed his hands slipping from her backside ‘round to her navel, his eyes blown wide, shiny and glacier-hued.

She was compelled to answer his silence, “I don’t…have to wear much during the summer. Small-chested people can get away with quite a lot.”

“What an incredibly underrated gift that is.” His fingers circled her bellybutton.

“Thank you, it took some time for my friends to convince me, but I’m finally starting to believe it… I’ve got a good thing going on here.” Sakura’s grin was fiery.

Gaara nodded and let his hands roam as far as her ribcage before he stopped himself. She signaled with her face and eyebrows, indicating that he was south of the mark.

He could afford some coherent thought before diving completely overboard, “This is more than you suggested earlier, Sakura.”

“I know.”
“Is this also what you want?”

“It is…and…I know it’s not exactly what you had in mind for tonight.” Sakura rubbed her thumbs along the backs of his hands, “It’s a lot to put on you after what you told me…and honestly…this was all that I could think about since the afternoon. I never expected you to…it’s just! You and I hardly ever get the chance to…” She gruffed, rucking over and plopped face-first into cushiony blanket beside him, “I’m sorry. I’m sorry, Gaara…you’ve been through so much. How empathetic am I to hear you out without a single concern, understand your pain and worry—and then not alter my plan at all just so I can sleep with—?”

Gaara had turned toward her, his arms strong and bare and pulling at her; and Sakura’s regrets died on her tongue. Her livewire nerve endings zinged at the temperature of his hand sliding past her face, carding through pink strands as he kissed her, and his other hand was busy introducing itself to her chest. Her attempts at speech garbled into encouraging noises, and Sakura sidelined her dominance so that she might learn what this intriguing, formerly-shy man could do to her.

Eyes narrowed, breaths deep and rumbling, he exalted the petal-soft curves of her and tasted his way down her lips and neck, latching onto the juncture of her shoulder with his mouth. Licentious sounds escaped her while Gaara kneaded one breast, teasing the nipple of the other, dusky rose and pert. She was electrified by the ministrations, and Sakura could do little else than curl her toes, rake her nails down any free space that she could reach— feel Gaara writhe at her clawing. He was only emboldened. He kissed downward, mouth lingering near the underside-arc of a breast. Testing his lips there, Gaara set his eyes on her face to watch Sakura’s reaction, and found her expression did not give away nearly as much as her grip did.

She had gotten a handle on his head, hands fisting in his hair, on the precipice of accidentally crushing him with legendary strength. Gingerly, Gaara reached up to guide her by the wrists, settling her hands elsewhere for his own safety. Her apology was a breathy mutter, “Sorry…do you still have…all your brain matter?”

“For now.” He resumed exploring the moon-pale curve beneath his mouth.

“That feels…good.” She was gulping air and shuddering.

He moved lower, “And here?” His mouth traced down her stomach, lovely and ticklish. Not so gently, Sakura pulled him back up by his chin and replaced him at her chest. Gaara kissed and licked and prodded as his curiosity warranted, and also however Sakura guided him, as a few times she forgot her own strength when she squeezed his hands, shoulders, or back. He deliberately made sounds of pain to remind her that yes, she could break a bone and then some.

While her fingertips torched the skin of his flanks, the sensation so good that it couldn’t be real, Gaara slid his hands under her back and requested, “Arch for a moment.”

She bent and provided space enough for him to deftly remove her white shorts, noting not an ounce of reticence from Sakura. Perhaps it made more sense that she was wearing underwear, plain beige and unadorned. She was humming and growling when he shimmied back to kiss newly exposed thighs. Happily, Sakura allowed the distance and traced patterns in his hair until a lucid thought hit her.

She raised her head up, “Ah, uh…just confirming that we…” She recalled the need to oxygenate and inhaled, “Whew. We’re doing this right? You won’t be coy about sex?”
He blinked up at her. At some point her panties had been slipped down and free of her ankles, bunched in the man’s hand as if he had been reveling in the accomplishment. She flushed with mild embarrassment when Gaara stated, “There is no stopping unless you say so.”

“What about you? What if you say-?”

“I won’t.” Gaara assured her simply, inspecting a small triangle of pink hair between her legs. He touched with enticed curiosity, descending, his ears perking up at her mewl when he met wet flesh. There was nothing about this that could even remotely convince him to stop, Gaara determined. She was a divine creature and she wanted him and all that he was…

Sakura flailed her arm out as if she expected something to be within reach. With a confused mumble, she patted around her discarded clothing at the edge of the bed. Then she stilled. Out of respect for the whirling-in-thought woman Gaara did not proceed, and watched as she worked out a potential problem.

“Did you…” Her voice had to pass through frowning lips, almost in a hiss, “Did you see my purse? Maybe in the living area?”

“I don’t think I did.” Gaara admitted. He pressed a helpful kiss to her inner thigh, holding her legs dutifully.

“What about near the Hot Springs…? I must have brought—” She gritted her teeth in realization, “The festival.”

“The one we left.” He agreed unhelpfully.

“I think I left my bag there.”

“In all likelihood that is the case.”

Her palm slapped against her forehead, perturbed, “As I was saying before, I had all of this planned…”

In the midst of glaring at the ceiling Sakura missed the pleased look on Gaara’s face.

“I had condoms. That’s a responsible precaution, right? Up until I, you know…don’t bring them along for this.”

“I can send a Shadow Cl—”

“Don’t.” Sakura replaced her hands in his hair, where his head rested on her stomach, “No one would question it if they saw you…but it’s late…and I guarantee that Ino picked up my bag for safe keeping.”

“Are you sure she did?”

“Yup. I am. Even drunk, I’m confident that girl would never neglect an accessory. Also, she knows.”

“Ah.”

“They’ll be home by now. Shikamaru isn’t the out-all-night type and neither is Chouji.”

“Unfortunate.” Gaara echoed her sentiment. There was always the option of a late-night convenience store run, but the two seemed to wordlessly agree that their collective ego would not withstand such an ordeal, let alone be up for intercourse after scrambling uptown for contraception.
'And this was all on me. I shouldn’t have been in such a hurry to leave…and then all of this, and Gaara was willing and ready!’ She wanted to scream. Sakura took a moment to plug her mouth with a fist to muffle all expletives.

Her error felt like a modern proverb. An eternally bright kunoichi who would capsize her ship of wisdom on a night so pivotal…

Sakura snuck a look down at Gaara, his arms lassoed around her midsection, using her stomach as a pillow. ‘Maybe we could still…erg…jeez. I can’t keep pushing everything tonight!’

She felt his stray, consoling touches breezing down her back, ‘For him I would push it, though. I must be nuts. It’s just…I am one of a generation who’s been indoctrinated with caution…and right here, right now, consequence doesn’t mean diddly-shit to me.’

She glimpsed down again. ‘Hm…but give it nine months and consequence might be born with red hair, Stupid.’ Sakura thought to herself, ‘That’s how all of this works. If I could afford being an idiot, then Shishou never would have given me the time of day…’

Responsibility is a nag. It is the thunder crash warning of their youth, the inconvenient distance between their doorsteps, it is her will as a kunoichi: in the rosy dawn of her career that she would sooner do battle, innovate healing, and gain rank than spoil her efforts and training with an impromptu family; and the Kazekage: an avatar of the interests of Suna, expected to be unattached and conscientious, certainly not the type to ever risk parenthood while he must manage— while he must devotedly juggle interests, alliances, hazards, and the judgement that elders and officials pass on him daily…to not let these balls drop if his life were to take a reckless turn.

Sakura resolved quite simply, “We won’t…be doing that.”

Swiveling his head, Gaara looked up at her, “This is precisely why you say stop.”

“It is?”

“I wasn’t even thinking of being cautious.”

“It’s easy not to think about it. I find that scary.”

Gaara freed his arms and climbed over her, their faces level again, and then he dropped beside Sakura. “I am not disappointed.” Gaara announced before pulling her close, “I have too much to be grateful for.”

“I know, but the cherry on top wouldn’t have hurt.”

He gave a slight shrug, kissing up her nose and over her eyelids. Their hands slowly, tortuously resumed explorations of each other. In little time at all, Sakura was a coiled spring again, quivering, twisting at voracious touches; breasts well-studied and admired, nipples raised into peaks. His canny hand was on a downhill coast, and the muscles in her belly rolled inward in anticipation of the feeling, baited breath hitching as his fingers teased between her legs. It elicited sounds from her that would absolutely bother neighbors in the building. She pressed her forehead to Gaara’s, her eye contact shameless, her mouth gasping, conveying the sensation however feebly she could.

Her reactions were forceful and Gaara held onto her with a free arm before she could thrash her way up the wall. Instead she wound against him, vine-like; stirring intense, lightning-rod pleasure in him when she pressed her stomach to the erection straining in his boxers.

Even in daydreams he had not gone so far; never envisioned Sakura so bold and vulnerable, pale and
pink, never imagined her lips so close to his ear, making the sounds that she was. No, not even in the farthest-flung fantasy he’d had behind closed eyes at his desk in post-work hours…his thoughts had never come close to what Sakura was doing now. What she had asked him to do…

What a strange new reality this was, Gaara thought. He held a long kiss that muffled a whine she made, grinding into his front, her hand a powerful, inescapable cuff around his wrist that held his hand just where she needed it. Though not very learned in such things, Gaara estimated that her arousal was about as urgent as it could get. Where their bodies pressed together a slick spot was left on his upper thigh, his hand damp as she shuddered and twitched around his fingers. If it weren’t out of the question, there was no doubt in his mind that he could slide into her with no resistance. The thought alone nearly undid him.

His breath came in a rasp, lightheaded from the friction of her stomach against his length, both desperate for any means to relieve the pressure, the mounting sensitivity—“Gaara.” It was nearly impossible to resist, not while hearing his name softly groaned, aware that his limit was burning a short-fuse to begin with. Desire dripped with each of her words, “There, like that.” Sakura arranged his hand, reacting with a toss of her head, her hips weakly bucking at his touches.

Within a short passing of time, several things happened. Her back bowed, eyes fluttering shut with a low cry, scraping painted nails up his arm in an attempt to hold onto something. The hot, damp walls around his fingertips contracted, Sakura writhing, fixing her mouth to any bit of his skin she could reach—chest, neck, jaw. The feeling he had restrained mounted absurd new heights at the sight of Sakura cresting the peak, flushed from her cheeks to her chest. He was caught up in the craze, the sounds of her, the scent of her pleasure, the red scratches she etched into him, the bliss of her stomach sliding against the most brutal erection of his young life.

Gaara held a thought for a millisecond: to perhaps apologize for how roughly he had clutched at her bottom. It felt like maybe he had sprouted claws from his fingertips; a narrow, subconscious prickling from Shukaku, but he couldn’t tell. Maybe he had hurt her. Maybe not. It likely didn’t register; she was winding down and sleek with sweat, nuzzling him. Sakura smiled against his lips before she planted a loitering, sinister kiss, barely tracing him with a feather-light touch at the ‘v’ of his stomach; Gaara came fast and hard, head tipped back and mouth parted, definitely eliciting a yelp of pain when he clawed her ass.

He relaxed, boneless, and slurred an apology as he pried his nails out of her skin. Sakura sniffed at him, unamused, “That’s going to leave a mark.”

Gaara rolled flat on his back and noticed, with what little brain power he could muster, the mess he had made of his undershorts. Well. It was mostly her doing. He had some strength left to pull his clothing off, very casual before Sakura’s wide eyes as he wiped his stomach, and tossed it, missing the hamper on the other side of the room. Nope. No hand-eye coordination to speak of.

Unashamed, he laid there as his eyes struggled to remain open, feeling the last of Sakura’s moisture drying from his hand and legs. He turned his head toward her, realizing that she was ogling his fully naked form. Gaara watched her unflinchingly, quite satisfied with the new plateau of intimacy.

“I wasn’t sure before, with you being so smooth all over…” She noted, reaching to stroke dark oxblood hair that stretched down below his navel, “I see you have a treasure trail.”

“That’s about all I have.”

“You’re a natural red.”

“And you: pink.”
“Just as I suspected.” Sakura nodded, tired but victorious.

“Was it good?” He brushed a knuckle gently along her cheek, “Was it enough?”

“It was. I’m sorry it couldn’t have been more. We probably would have liked it.”

Gaara shook his head, “At the very least you’re prepared for the next encounter.”

Sakura smiled and then bit the corner of her pillow, thrilled that he had been fully converted to her miscreant ways. Nonchalantly, she went about a superficial healing of her bottom and he apologized again.

“In case you haven’t noticed I got you pretty good too.” As she concluded a hasty repair of her now-porcelain-again ass, Sakura brushed a healing palm up his arm, “Sorry! I couldn’t think straight. Thought I was going to fly off and crash into the ceiling…”

“Entirely possible.”

“So…was that…?” She frowned curiously and pointed out, “Those weren’t your normal nails.”

“Sakura, I didn’t mean for that to happen. Shukaku meant to leave me alone, but some things might slip through.”

“It seemed pretty minor.” She shrugged, “I would have even forgiven a tail.”

“No.” He deadpanned.

“Relax, I’m kidding.” Sakura burrowed beneath the ransacked comforter and assisted Gaara in the pilgrimage as well, “Well, I don’t care what happens. You won’t hurt me, Gaara. And you can’t make it awkward since I am now fully informed.” She reached to snap the bedside lamp off.

Sakura did not resist when he greedily pulled her into his arms, wrapping her securely. Gaara felt her tiredly drape a leg over his, settling her head on his shoulder. Her right hand drew the symbol of the Leaf Village over his bare stomach. On a sympathetic reflex, he yawned just after Sakura did.

“Your tummy is sticky.” She stated out loud as she realized it. When she reflected on her words Sakura sucked her lips shut in embarrassment.

“So are my hands and legs.” He was totally unruffled.

“Oh. You know, when I imagined this, I pictured it to be less messy.”

“When I imagined it, nothing I thought of was nearly as good as this was. Maybe I lack the vision? Or maybe, Sakura, you are…” Gaara sighed and caressed up her sides, elevating up to her arms and down again, “I never intended to pressure you into anything while I stay in Leaf.”

“There is no you pressuring me. I would have liked it if you suggested it, though. You know, dropped some hints for me…”

“I was afraid to.”

“Well you shouldn’t be now, Gaara.” Her cloud-nine smile pressed to his chest, “I’m always going to love you. No matter what you tell me, or what you do, I want to love you.”

His hand drifted up to the side of her face to cup her cheek, and Gaara let the words hang in the air while he shut his eyes and replayed them in his head for a long while. Sakura just kept drawing
shapes on him, utterly content.

It was a simple fact to him now. She couldn’t be afraid of him. A basic premise of fear was that humans were prone to fearing and fleeing the things they did not understand, ‘And Sakura... understands so much.’ Someone so highly educated, who so enthusiastically embraced the origins of chakra, ninja, and other tales, and who never personally witnessed destruction that Bijuu or Jinchuriki could unleash, ‘She was never predisposed to be afraid of me. Not even when I first met her, she never reacted with fear.’

The miracle walloped Gaara over the head. He felt dizzy and weightless. It was a rare thing that the girl he had been curious about since arriving in Konoha, later being frustratedly attracted to as a friend, thereafter loving her and all her imperfections and mistakes, then longing for her while hundreds of miles divided them…she loved him back and he knew she meant it. But it felt so feeble to reply in kind, to try to articulate the insane, intangible gravity that pulled him to her, that feeling that made him wise and stupid all at once, the single great, positive motivation that whispered to him even from his darkest corners.

As she began to doze off he roused her with soft touches along her face, watching her brow crinkle in response. Sakura battred her lips and rolled her eyes up towards him, giving him her attention.

“Why did you notice someone like me?” He wondered, “When I was a stranger and homeless, running with a pack of orphans?”

“What kind of question is that?” She poked his stomach in annoyance, “You…noticed me first, I guess. You were always staring, but you never taunted me or rejected me. That was my routine, back then: get publicly humiliated at the Academy every day. You broke the routine.”

“I didn’t stare.”

“You’re a stare-er. From way back.”

“I loved you before I even understood it.” Gaara’s hold grew a touch tighter around her, “I was helpless to express it. I had no means. No one had taught me anything beyond violence and suspicion.”

“Naruto and Haku definitely helped with that.” She hummed.

“They at least molded me into an acceptable person, but only by my own effort could I become worthy. In retrospect…it was a very poor showing and I condescended far too much to just about everyone.”

She gave a small shrug, “It’s what you do. Being in charge of a village has helped you grow into it. Besides, I looked up to you a lot, growing up.”

“I was thick-headed.”

Sakura raised her hand above him, motioning for a handshake, which he fuddedly obliged. “Hi pot, I’m kettle. Childhood was a scream, wasn’t it?” She shook with him and then pealed with teary-eyed laughter while she regarded his face. No one was perfect, least of all them. ‘Ugh…and…I’m exhausted.’ She thought in surprise, yawning again, ‘I know it wasn’t too much, but I really want to sleep...’ Sakura moved to nestle in closer to the junction of his neck and shoulder, but Gaara used two hands to reposition her and kissed her slow and deep.

“I love you.” He said softly against her mouth, “Are we going to do this again?”
Her sleepy eyes widened a fraction, “Oh, uh, you mean like right now?”

By the sound of it that wasn’t what he’d meant, “If you want to.”

“I honestly do not have the energy at the moment.” Sakura raised her eyebrows suggestively, “But tomorrow morning you’re free, right?”

“I am.”

“I have a team fashion meeting tomorrow at one, but that’s about it.”

Gaara accepted the answer and then drew her close, felt Sakura wriggle and adjust until she was comfortable, and after their nerves and excitement trickled into steady, drumming heartbeats they found sleep.

Morning came and poured a pitcher of liquid sunlight down through every window in Konoha. The rays squeaked through a crack between the drawn black-out drapes in Hatake Sato’s apartment, shining a diagonal line over his bare chest, over his heart.

He jerked from sleep when he was smacked on the shoulder.

A nasal voice complained, “I’m gonna be late!”

The drapes were pulled back with a clatter, spilling morning light into the room, and it jarred him into an awakened state. Sato rubbed at his eyes with the back of his arm, muttering swears, and heaved himself into a sitting position.

His waking mind registered, bit-by-bit, as the blanket rolled back how it was the only modesty covering his (equally) naked bottom. It prompted him to ponder, ‘When did I…get undressed?’ Sato braced his hand at the back of his head; it throbbed from a woozy hurricane of a hangover. The bed was in disarray, and at the foot of it was a grimacing, impatient stranger tucking a blouse into a too-short skirt.

“How do I get to the Memorial Fountain from here? Isn’t it like four blocks east and a—”

Sato held his hands up defensively, wincing when his head rung like a church bell, “Who’re you? Do I-?”

“I’m your date from last night, dunce.”

“I don’t date.” His voice rose in pitch, incredulous.

“No? Well fuck, then this makes you my souvenir from Hidden Leaf.” She rolled her eyes, snapping a hair clip into thick, ginger hair, “If you don’t remember my name then you don’t deserve to be told it.” The girl had a Grass Village headband tied around her waist. She bent to pull sandals on that had been strewn near the bedroom door.

Swallowing the uneasy feeling that rattled in his throat, Sato kept one guarded eye on the stranger while he reached for discarded shorts on the floor. He was coming up with shockingly few details of what had occurred shortly before midnight and thereafter; he knew he’d been drinking too much, talking too much, and overdoing damn near everything else after his friends had gone home. Sato was certain he did not recognize the Grass kunoichi, yet he undoubtedly felt her on his skin, which
had the sudden urge to crawl off of him.

He pulled on pants before she returned her agitated attention to him, “The Memorial Fountain. Should I say it slower? How... do... I... get... there?”

Sato stood near the window, skittish, confused, “Did we-?”

“Yeah, stupid. I’m not getting any younger here; I have a ticket scalper to meet at the Fountain in twenty minutes.” She hissed, “Directions please? Also... how’d your chest get so fucked up? I didn’t notice it last night, but when it ain’t dark it’s... pretty nasty.”

Anger bubbled up from beneath his bemusement, “I’m sorry— I don’t think I signed up for an evaluation from some drop-out groupie.” He rounded the corner of the bed to stand face-to-face with the scowling girl, “My scars are from fighting against the Akatsuki. How about you? Got any battle wounds from whining?”

“You’re a goddamn peach.” She growled, taking a seat to buckle sandal straps, “Much nicer when you’re drunk. Just tell me where the fuck I’m going.”

“I don’t want to help you. Get out of my flat.”

“Hmf.” The kunoichi puffed a strand of hair from her face, standing, looking rather disheveled. The clack of her shoes hurt his ears as she crossed the wood floors of the home, down the hall and out into the living area. Sato followed her to ensure no funny business or violence was in store, but the girl stopped at the genkan as she wrenched open the door.

“Know what, Silver Cat?” She smirked over her shoulder at him, “Next time, stick to your caliber of loser. You are the worst lay I have ever had.” She clip-clopped her way out and the door slammed behind her.

He stood for a whole minute in silence, the volume of air throughout the home weighing down on him with peculiar force. Sato crossed to the kitchen and quickly filled a glass with water at the tap. He downed all of it before filling a tea kettle and setting it on the stove. ‘Hydrate. No coffee today. Makes headaches worse sometimes.’ He’d have tea. He never had tea. ‘It’ll help me think.’ When he caught sight of his convex reflection in the kettle he flinched, ‘No. Don’t think. Don’t think.’

He returned to his room and discerned which belongings were out of sorts. The girl had left a small, woven basket with festival trinkets in it. It sat on the desk near the door, likely where they cast things aside before messing around. Sato acted with animal detachment; eyes unseeing as he stripped the bedding to be washed, tossed all items the girl had brought into the garbage. She was never there. He never wanted her to be there and he could make it that way.

But the act was still clinging to his skin. In the shower room he scrubbed himself raw and pink, all of his body from top to bottom. Sato lathered his hair and rinsed several times; worked soap under his nails to be sure nothing was left. He shed the touches and smells. He brushed his teeth twice before looking in the mirror, wondering what the actual fuck he was doing.

Like some prey animal trying to evade a predator, he was trying to disguise it, as if he were rolling in the mud of the wilds to hide himself— hide something.

Sato dried and dressed in shorts again, anticipating a change into the clothing he and his team agreed would get attention at the Exam. The attire that was passed down in his family, the white-and-red mon of the Hatake clan.

Seated in the kitchen again, he steeped chamomile in a mug and held his head, bracing his elbows on
the table. The tea came from a canister that Tama had left in the upper-right cabinet, for whenever she felt like having it.

Tama.

He didn’t want to think about it, but whenever his stream of consciousness tried to skirt the apparent problem, something in his home, or any lone thought that crossed him was free-associated back to her. Someone so instrumental in his life was bound to stay on his mind.

And it was not sitting well with him that he had been unfaithful to the woman he promised to marry.

He thought it and then he could not unthink it. He could not avoid it. After Sato had doggedly pursued Tama’s attention and consent for weeks, playing with her, craving her, seducing her at every opportunity, it had been an easy trade to find a willing floozy after midnight in the park. No, he found, it had not taken the edge off. No, he admitted, it had not been worth the regret and shame. No: it couldn’t have happened, he wanted to scream, but he did remember it a little.

It had felt rash, it lit him up, it had been completely satisfying for all of fifty seconds, even if he didn’t know the person— actually quite disliked the person by morning. No, it wasn’t what he thought it’d be. And yes, if he’d known all of this newly-initiated information several hours ago, he would have held out and begged the person he really loved to consider him or at least dump a bucket of ice water over him. That would have made sense, Sato believed it down to his bones, but he couldn’t take back what he’d done.

He sipped the tea anxiously.

There was a chamber in the dim dungeon of his brain within which he resented Tama. It was amazing how she had found so many ways to avoid sex with him. Always a good excuse, well-thought out, and earnest…but she’d tempted him and touched him and had gone with him to the edge of intimacy. There was no question that she wanted it. But Sato could not reconcile her demands of waiting when it was she who had pressed him to be serious about their relationship, back when he’d been ambivalent. It had been her, training him with the demanding, impure kisses of an adult; her friendship and laughter that made him confident, she who knew him better than anyone…that he’d realized it would be a joy to be married to her now that he could see it for the privilege it was and not the burden.

Their two esteemed families wished to unite. It was something both of their uncles were proud of, and a testament to their indomitable friendship.

As honor was an especially precious thing to her kindred, there was no doubt that any knowledge of this transgression would permanently damage both his and Kakashi’s relationship with the Maito family. Sato took a gulp of tea and set the mug down, ‘I fucked up. I…I don’t know if anyone witnessed me…well. Sai was around, I think. I can ask him what he remembers, but he probably wouldn’t talk about it even if he had a clue…’ No one could know, ‘Everyone else hardly knew me or noticed me…at least I think so. It seems safe to say this won’t get out…’

It had to go beyond denial. He had to live and think and breathe as though it had never occurred. Destroy evidence, confirm the lack of witnesses, and then move on. No dishonor. No discord. Stick to the plan their uncles had set forth: as he now realized it was a very, very good plan.

Sato sipped the tea, gradually acknowledging that while he intended to save face, he wanted to consider Tama’s feelings above all else.

He could not beg for forgiveness in a fit of guilt, desperate to clear his conscience— could not ask
her to absolve him of the misdeed. This was the person who had stood by him all of his life, and had vowed to stay by his side until her death. There was no space for penance or her acknowledgment. Tama had been raised by Maito Ken and looked up to Maito Gai, neither of whom accepted betrayal lightly. Sato didn’t have to ruminate on it long to know that Tama would not forgive him; that she had not the means to forgive him after caring for him and supporting him in the wake of his mother’s death. None of the adults had looked out for him in those years: it had been her putting food in his mouth, clothes on his back, contributing money to heat and light his home: from eleven years old and onward.

This was not how he repaid her.

‘I will live with the guilt. I’ll hold my tongue.’ He decided, sliding his chair back, ‘I don’t want to hurt her that way. I love Tama and she deserves someone better than a screw-up like me, so might as well BE that guy. Be the better guy. I could never do something like this again, and if I put it behind me…if she doesn’t know…I won’t make her unhappy. I know I can make her happy.’

He set an empty tea cup in the sink, inhaling deeply through his nose.

It was an odd exercise trying to commence the day as he would have normally. He’d been too nervous to eat. He stuffed the linens, sheets, and blanket roughly into the washing machine, the setting cranked to hot water. He cracked the living room window to wait for Aree and Aroo to report the whereabouts of his friends to him. He mussed his silver hair into place in the bathroom mirror. Sato mused at his reflection again, making a concerted effort not to hate it—not the dark blue eyes his father had given him, or the delicate silver coloring his mother had passed down. The shape of his face was like those of the men before him, ‘Like my uncle and grandpa.’ Sato jerked back from the sink, startled by the resemblance. The two famous screw-ups before him, and he was starting to resemble them in more ways than one.

He padded down the hallway; shoulders slumped, and then pulled the vintage clothing from hangers in the closet. Maybe the new attire would separate him from the person he’d been last night. Maybe he could be new.

‘If I can look it...maybe I can act it.’ Sato hoped, slipping on a black shrug of full-length sleeves, the hybrid cuffs looped around the middle finger of each hand, and then knotted the shrug tight across his chest. ‘Gee. It’s old school. Not actually new...but from Grandpa’s days...’ He tugged on a white and red gi-tunic and fastened it closed, ‘I never got to know Grandpa. Kakashi has a hard time talking about him...but Mom used to say he was super polite and really nice.’ The black pants were slim and tucked snugly into knee-boots. Supply and tool pouches hooked to the belt at his lower back, and he clipped his short swords at his sides, starting to frown with worry.

‘I’m not a new person because of what I’m wearing. It’s because of what I did. I feel...’ Sato shut his eyes and could see flashes his actions. They choked him with disgust, sorrow, and loneliness. He was adrift, completely alone with the knowledge and guilt, and if no one else ever knew about it, it really was going to be an indefinite tango with self-reproach that he danced until his last breath.

His eyes scanned over the shoulder seams of the tunic where Hinata had taken in the fabric, remembering it had once belonged to a broader, older man. Sato worked up the courage to examine himself in the full-length mirror of the room one last time. Grandpa Sakumo blinked back at him for a moment, glinting in the sunlight, and it felt good. It felt like home. It felt familiar. Then the cloying, warm emotion flushed away and something else replaced it.

Abject humiliation coursed through him. ‘That’s not you. That’s a fake. A pretender! You always want to point out and make fun of the flaws of others, and now you’re cowering in the corner! Hatake Sato: lighthearted fun and jokes, easy to talk to, great dancer, amateur photographer,
aspiring Jounin, and a true friend: when you overlook what a filthy fucking cheater he is!’

He blinked a tear from his eye and glowered at himself. ‘You don’t deserve to feel sad or scared. You have to own your mistakes. You have to hoard them like an ogre and conceal them from those they can hurt. Maybe that’s what your ‘Ninja Way’ is. Coward.’

Aree had soared into the room from the hallway and perched on his shoulder. Sato cleared his throat and rubbed at his eyes, asking, “Where’s…eh-hem…your brother?”

The screech owl tooted and he walked with her aboard towards the living area.

“Ah. A squirrel outside? I hope you had breakfast too.” He sniffled, trying to dry himself up, “Hm? Nothing’s the matter, girl. Did my team gather at our field yet?”

A soft brrrummttoo.

“Right. I’m off to meet them.” Sato motioned the small bird off of his arm and out the window, “Go eat. The both of you meet me later.”

She flew off. He shut and latched the window, exited the home, and locked the door behind him, hoping no one else unexpected would ever set foot there again.

Hinata clapped excitedly when she saw him.

She exchanged a wide grin with their Sensei, Kurenai resting her hands on her hips, and then tittered as Sato came to a stop beside Shino in their huddle. The cacophony of birdsong was almost distracting, blaring from the massive flock flitting around the maples of their training area. Shino kept his insects safely tucked away.

“How perfectly it suits you.” Kurenai smiled at him, “I’m feeling a little nostalgic, Sato. I remember being a little girl and listening to stories about Konoha’s White Fang.”

“Yeah?” His reply was weak, not genuinely enthusiastic, “Thanks, Sensei. Those shoes are too big for me to fill.”

“Ah, but the clothes are not.”

“Guess not…”

Shino had turned his head and was considering him, pinning him with a hard, wondering look. Sato swallowed, took a breath, and began somewhat believable conversation with Hinata, complimenting her updated attire.

“Father wanted our clan’s mon all over it…” She sighed with mild embarrassment, spinning around. The Hyuga clan’s crest was embroidered on the breast of the short yukata, on both sleeves at the shoulder, and sewn in a huge insignia on the back above her obi. The garment was functional but opulent, white blending into lavender, thistle, and amethyst; her long shorts were tight and dyed a deep violet. She had kept her standard black sandals, her supply pouches and weapon holsters in their usual stations.

“Absolutely rad.” Sato assured her, “Does he want you to tie your hair up? Just in case someone misses an emblem?”

“I think Father mentioned that. He’s really looking forward to Neji-niisan and I competing in the
Tournament.” She pressed her fingers over her mouth to stop herself, as if her cousin were a taboo subject.

“It’s alright, Sunshine. You can talk about Neji.” Sato shrunk a bit as he spoke, “He’ll probably whoop me ’good.”

“That’s not what you were saying yesterday.” Shino pointed out.

“I was hyped yesterday. Now I’m…” Sato looked between his Sensei and teammates, grasping for the word, “I’m tuckered out.”

“Did you enjoy yourself at the Festival last night?” Kurenai smiled knowingly, “The Hokage was telling me about it this morning. She spoke of its highlights and low points.”

Hinata stayed quiet but recalled Neji looking haggard when he returned home the night previous, sopping wet and bedraggled. ‘I know that he brought Tenten-oneesan and Lee-kun home…but what happened to him?’ She had not seen him at breakfast a few hours ago, and inferred that he was still scrunched in a ball in bed, recovering.

“Yeah, it was a nice way to unwind from training. Tama and I danced pretty much the whole time.”

Kurenai was pleased, “I heard. Tsunade-sama adored the performance.”

Shino was still looking at him.

“I hope Lee-kun is alright…” Hinata fidgeted with her sleeves, “He seemed so sick and confused.”

Kurenai asked to be filled in and got a laugh out of it. She assured the girl that no lasting damage could befall Lee. Sato had turned his attention to his best friend, doing a double-take as he examined Shino’s transformative change.

Overcoats and bulky clothing were preferred by members of the Aburame clan, this Sato knew. But his friend had been shucked out of his typical coat, and Sato observed him for the first time: dressed in a form-fitting jumpsuit of heavy combat material. He too had put on knee-high boots.

“Oh. Oh. Hold on.” Sato prodded at the material along Shino’s arms, reasserting a bit of his usual temperament, “I think Hinata put more work into your fitting, man, wow.”

Shino said nothing as Sato fiddled with the hood attached to the suit, pulling it up and down, ruffling Shino’s hair. “Sturdy.” Sato noted. It came as no surprise to him that Shino would feel more comfortable with something covering his head, like usual. The ensemble made him look taller and formidable; outlined in black from shoulder to ankle, deep hunter green contrasting in hexagon patterns at the torso and hips. His updated sunglasses were modern, visor-like, gleaming and just purchased. Sato unclasped them at the back and pulled the glasses from his friend’s head to try them on.

“Damn, Shino! What’re these?” He gasped, “Dude, are these polarized?” His head swung around to stare at the horizon as the sun crept up above the trees. Zero glare.

“They are.” Shino said flatly.

Kurenai and Hinata were staring at his face while Sato (off to the side) gawked at surroundings in his distinctive Sato-way, and Shino looked back at them questioningly.
“My, my…you have grown up.” Kurenai chuckled and cupped her chin, “Shino. You may benefit from not concealing your face in the Final Rounds.”

“Would you consider it?” Hinata squeaked, “Your eyes are beautiful.”

His cheeks pinkened.

Sato removed the sunglasses and weighed in on the matter, “You really are a stud, Shino. I say you wear these on your way into the stadium and then take ‘em off…slay some ladies in the audience when they least expect it.” He grinned, Kurenai and Hinata chirping in agreement. “We could get double the points from just you doing that!”

“I doubt the compensation would be so steep.”

“No. For real.” Sato insisted, “Just try it.”

Shino took a steadying breath and replaced his glasses when Sato handed them back. To be fair, Kurenai assured her students that they were all highly attractive and sure to instigate competitive betting. She’d expected no less of them, puffing her chest proudly as she tried to digest how grown-up they looked.

Kurenai took up most of the morning going over theoretical outcomes with them. The “if/then” scenarios of how duels could play out determined the possibilities of who they would face later as opponents. There was a concerning likelihood that, if Hinata proceeded to the second round, that she could potentially face Sato, Neji, or Lee as potential opponents. She whimpered at the idea. Kurenai added that Shino could advance to the second round to face Tama or Huo, and beyond that point, any of the victorious Leaf kunoichi or perhaps the Grass ninja, Aota.

“Don’t sweat it, Sunshine. I’ll do my damnedest to make sure you don’t have a grudge match against your cousin.” Sato patted her shoulder.

“I know you will, Sato-kun. But no matter what these matches will be very challenging.”

“I am confident my team will go far. I am also confident I will see one of you as the Champion.” Kurenai boasted, “I will be putting money on all of you.”

Shino gently reminded her that the odds of winning were irrespective of favoritism, but Kurenai tsk, tsk’d him. She had a shrewd gambling instinct and an itching left palm.

After some lengthy discussion and minor strategizing, Kurenai asked to see demonstrations of jutsu she had been monitoring and critiquing for the last few weeks. They took turns displaying Ninjutsu and the like, and by noon she had invited her students to join her for lunch at her favorite izakaya.

While walking through town, Sato and Shino followed a few paces behind Kurenai and Hinata, who was soliciting a fervent pep-talk from her Sensei as nerves started to get to her. Sato was listening in until he felt Shino poke his side with an elbow.

His tone was soft and attentive, “What happened?”

“Huh?”

“What happened to you?” Shino clarified.

“Er…nothing…?” Sato was smack-dab between unsure and evasive.
“I thought it would have been in your best interest if I escorted you home last night. You were… highly intoxicated.” A disapproving sniff, “But Sai-san was with you. My father was expecting me home and I returned…but I know I shouldn’t have.”

“What are you talking-?”

“You needed help. You were among strangers.” Shino said simply, “And I left you when I shouldn’t have.”

“N-No, it’s not like that! I’m fine, Shino, really.” He tapped his chest with both hands, “See? All in one piece.”

After a beat, a wise retort, “Not on the inside.”

Sato settled a distressed, side-eye glance on his friend but admitted to nothing.

“What happened to you?” Shino asked again.

They traveled a block in silence, lagging behind the other half of the team.

“It’s stupid.” Sato dropped his voice, “I’ll get over it.”

“Your demeanor suggests exactly the opposite.”

“Yeah, well, I can’t be happy all the time—”

“That’s who you are. You are carefree. In the Academy, I watched you. I saw you on the day your mother died, and you returned to class the same afternoon with a counselor. You were different. This is like then.”

“No…it’s n-not—” His voice faltered into a warble.

“I take responsibility for your pain.” Shino spoke with surety.

“Don’t.” Abruptly, Sato latched onto the arm of Shino’s uniform, holding tight, “Only I can do that. I fucked up. You can’t be blamed for going home, Shino. That’s what smart people do.”

Shino regarded him with a head-tilt, pausing to think, and then said, “Tell me what happened.”

“N-Not here.”

“Not here. The conservatory will not be busy in the afternoon. We’ll go there.”

“I don’t…really want you to know.” Sato coughed softly, trying to clear a thickening throat, “I don’t think I can handle…anyone’s judgement. Least of all yours…”

“If I had wanted to condemn you for acting foolishly, I would have done that long ago.” Shino assured him.

“It’s bad.” Sato insisted.

They stopped outside of the entryway of the pub, hearing Kurenai’s call for them to hurry and be seated so they could order.

Shino peered at him over his glasses, “There is nothing my friend can do…that would inspire me to forsake him.” He pushed aside the door’s noren, “You are far too precious.”
An hour later, a few miles northwest of Kurenai’s favorite pub, Lee arrived at the Hyuga compound. He had spent most of the walk recalling, in surprising detail, what bizarre feelings had overcome him before the end of the festival. It was a bit blurry when Lee tried to remember how Neji and Tenten had gotten him home, but he did remember his grandfather caring for him and sending him to bed.

Lee rubbed his chin, “Hm. I remember…screeching. As if Tenten and Neji…had been shouting in my house…” That did not make much sense to him. Surely he had dreamed it.

At the corner veranda of the Main House, Lee spotted Fujita sipping tea and eating cherries from a breakfast tray. He greeted his young friend and Fujita waved to him with a mouthful of fruit.

“Fujita-kun! Are you feeling better?”

“Good morning, Lee-kun! Almost completely better.” He smiled childishly, “It helped a lot that Mother allowed me to eat my favorite things for four weeks.”

He gestured for Lee to help himself to a cherry. They munched and spat seeds into a refuse bowl.

“Ah. Thank you…do you know if Neji is here? I know we had one last appointment with Kayato-sama.”

Fujita inclined his head, glancing back at the house, “You know…he wasn’t up at the normal time today. Hinata-sama was long gone before I saw Neji-sama appear.” With a quick scan of his Byakugan, Fujita reported, “Ah. He is washing his face. He seems…lethargic today.”

At Fujita’s suggestion Lee walked ‘round the house to the correct side and took a seat on the engawa to wait outside of Neji’s room. In the same second Lee thought of Tenten arriving on time, she trudged around the bend.

“Good morning Tenten-!”

“Shhh.” She held up her hands and squinted, “Go easy on me, Lee. Try to speak softly.”

In a whisper, “Whatever is the matter?”

She plopped down beside him on the porch.

“You don’t remember? Neji and I…well…we were drinking last night. I can’t believe we got you home safely.”

Lee half-bowed to her, “Thank you so much for looking after me.”

“Please don’t thank us. We’re part of the reason you suffered.” Tenten mumbled and then smiled, “We’ll do better next time, Lee. We have your back.”

“You already do.”

“Well yes, but next time we won’t be drunk.” She resolved, rubbing her temples. Drowsily, Tenten keened over and rested her head on her friend’s shoulder, “Ugh…what were we thinking?”

Lee was smiling, “You were both having fun.”

“It was fun. I even liked some of those silly dances. Maybe next time I’ll get Neji to join in.”
“It will take coaxing.”

“That’s what I do. I coax him.”

Lee made a sound of utter skepticism. He could hardly imagine his committed, square-of-a-friend participating in a dance.

“Oh god, just look at my face!” Tenten rumbled, lifting her head up and gesturing to the bags under her eyes, “See these dark circles? I’ve never had ‘em before. I don’t know how to get rid of them.”

“Sleep!”

“I did that.”

“Water?”

“I don’t know! I have no practical experience with vanity and women’s tricks to preserve it.”

“Then perhaps you should ask Yugao-san? You mentioned that she was going to assist with grooming our team, no?”

“Uh.” Tenten sat upright again, “You’re right. She can probably fix this.”

“By tomorrow you’ll be—” Lee trailed off as they watched Neji shuffle out of a porch door and slide it quietly shut behind him. He stood before them in his sleep clothes.

They stared until Tenten chose to greet her boyfriend, “You look swollen.”

“I fell down a fire escape.” He defended.

Lee gasped.

“Relax. It was just one ladder.” Tenten filled Lee in, “Neji, you look to be badly in need of some hangover remedies.”

“My uncle said that as well.”

Tenten and Lee inhaled sharply in fright.

“It was a mild scolding.” Neji assured them.

“Good morning, by the way.” Tenten remembered her manners.

“And to you, good morning, I suppose.” He groggily cupped his face and tried to massage the pain away.

“As soon as we complete the fittings we should return to my house. Grandpa already has meals prepared for you both.” Lee smiled slightly, “He wanted to thank you for your help last night.”

Tenten was aghast, “Really? What did he make?”

“Pu’er tea, ginger pancakes, and more congee. How curious that he made so much! It is as if Grandpa expected this would happen.”

“It wasn’t really a wild guess.” Tenten figured.

They followed Neji (still in his pajamas) through his bedroom to traverse the hallways of the house.
Tenten had let her eyes linger on her boyfriend’s tousled bed, picturing herself there reclining like a queen, and then treaded after her teammates in silence, a tad hot and bothered. ‘No. Stick to the task at hand! Don’t start imagining that stuff!’ Her eyebrows knitted in a frown, ‘It’s bad enough I wasted an hour masturbating last night when I should have been sleeping. I need to cool off.’

At the end of the central corridor, Kayato had prepared two rooms to allow the teens to try on their outfits. She stayed with Tenten to assist with shrugging and tying the young woman into her clothing, and the boys changed in the adjacent room.

“How are the sleeves? Better, I hope! I know they nearly cut off your circulation last time.” The woman was chuckling, “You put on some muscle, dear. It threw off my measurements!”

“Perfectly comfortable, now. The wrists were a bit long and constricting, and I need space to wear my spinners.” Tenten explained.

“Yes, Neji-sama told me.” Kayato heaved and squeezed the half-rigid obi into place.

It was a Hanfu dress of candy red with form-fitting sleeves, the collar was relaxed like a fighting gi, and the garment was held closed by a flexible, tight obi of bright white and gold. The belt was adorned with a crimson obijime, knotted in a bow at the front, long tassels loose and free. At her back, the obi had been crafted with space for tool scrolls and holsters which Tenten was eager to fill. She pulled on slim, white capri pants beneath the dress, for some modesty where the dress ended mid-thigh. Embroidered in threads of gold, sandstone, ivory, and indigo, a dragon wound up the hip of her dress, across her chest, coiled above her heart.

“This could be…my proudest work for a kunoichi.” Kayato sighed, patting Tenten around the belt’s edges, relaxing the fabric where it bunched. “Isn’t it beautiful?”

“It is! My mother never had anything like this…and she wore some glitzy stuff on missions.” Tenten was grinning uncontrollably even before she stepped in front of the wall mirror, “Kayato-san, will you forgive me if I stick to reasonable footwear?”

“I ordered the red sandals special in your size.” The woman’s face dropped.

“They pinched.” Tenten pursed her lips, apologetic.

“That’s because they’re new! Wear them around today and break them in.” The woman patted Tenten on her shoulders, “It’d be a shame to ruin this ensemble!”

“Okay. I just thought I’d ask.”

“I heard you’ll have your hair done in the morning?”

“Everyone is getting their hair done in the morning. And Yugao may need to apply makeup too…” Tenten supposed, gesturing to her face, “Um…can you tell me how to get rid of dark under-eye circles?”

“Oh darling, I’ll write you a list of my remedies. Raw potato, cucumber, almond oil…”

“I don’t think I own any of that.”

“Then it’s time to buy some.”

The adjoining door slid aside and Neji stuck his less-puffy face through. Kayato turned and bit her tongue gleefully as the heir of the Hyuga clan blinked in astonishment at the beautiful girl she had
dressed.

Tenten grinned and waggled her eyebrows at him mischievously, “I’m a dragon.”

He took a moment to regain speech, “I see. That.”

“Are you two all set?” Tenten asked.

Neji opened the door fully so that Tenten and his esteemed aunt could see for themselves.

Hanfu had also inspired his attire in a design similar to Tenten’s, the top stark white with black trimming and clasps, loose sleeves, and belted by sashes in three vivid shades of blue. A red-crowned crane was depicted in a silhouette on the right shoulder. At his back, the Hyuga clan’s crest was striking, where it could be glimpsed from beneath his hair. His pants were black, tied and tucked into fleet-footed Han boots. Tenten made several faces at him, ranging from aesthetic approval to untamed attraction.

“Just as I envisioned.” Kayato nodded and motioned for Neji to step in, “Let me see how the back fits, Neji-sama. I wasn’t pleased with it last week.” She prodded around obliviously while Neji and Tenten had a few discreet seconds of eye intercourse.

“You both look amazing!” Lee declared as he rushed in to join them, drawing his friends’ gazes immediately.

Lee was a movie star.

He was precisely fit in a canary-hued jumpsuit a la ‘Game of Death,’ as Kayato had made good on her wild claim of designing for film actors. Black bars dripped down the flanks and arms of the jumpsuit; bold contrast that drew attention to Lee’s height and lean figure. A dark belt was secured around his hips, saddled with weapon holsters, and there had been no need for him to change his footwear. Lee looked positively modern beside Neji and Tenten’s ancient martial arts costumes. The friends gawked at each other.

“This assures me that I have done my job well.” Kayato beamed and tittered with laughter behind her hand, proud and ladylike, “I quite enjoyed this! You’re all fitted now. Please remember that I’m sending my photographer to find you three in the morning. This work is going in my portfolio.”

They agreed stupidly and profusely before Kayato ushered them along: she was expecting a string of appointments.

Across town, a short time later, Wong Leung nearly went into cardiac arrest at the sight of them.

Remarkable. He muttered to Lee, fussing at Neji and Tenten as they entered the house, I have never seen clothing here in the Fire Country that looked so much like the styles of my homeland! Although, Lee… I am unsure what you are wearing.

Lee explained, Miss Kayato said she designed this costume for a movie star.

Is that so? Such work was not done cheaply. Wong motioned for the youngsters to take seats at the table and help themselves to a spread of food.

Neji was kind enough to pay for us. We thanked him for his generosity. As Lee explained, he smiled unthinkingly at his friend, and Neji could only scrunch his face in the usual I-don’t-know-what-you’re-talking-about expression he used for most Hanwen conversations.
Tenten smiled and chuckled to herself knowingly.

*Good. He’s obviously rich.* Wong Leung snorted, *He should be taking care of you and Tian-Tian.*

Neji’s ears perked up. Tenten’s name in a foreign tongue was still recognizable.

Wong Leung’s rude remark was met with admonishing expressions from both Lee and Tenten, but the grandfather frowned back at them as he stood by his opinion. They tucked into their food and tea while the old man stood by with his arms folded behind his back.

He asked curiously, *None of you are competing against one another in the Tournament?*

*Not in the first round.* Tenten assured him, *But maybe we will in subsequent duels.*

*Hmm.* Wong Leung pattered around the kitchen as he considered it.

*Grandpa, would you be interested in spectating the conclusion of the Chunin Exam tomorrow?* Lee wondered, growing excited, *You could see the fruits of our hard work!*

*Normally, the quibbles of ninja do not interest me…and they fight like barbarians…* The old man gruffed, *But I do want to see how much you’ve all grown.*

*We have a spare ticket for you.* Tenten added cheerily.

*Thoughtful girl! Thank you.*

Neji could only pick out the words ‘tomorrow,’ ‘you,’ ‘we,’ and ‘thank you.’ It did not reveal much.

Lee translated for him, “Grandpa told us that he would like to watch our matches tomorrow, Neji. He also wanted to thank you for generously compensating Kayato-san for our outfits.”

“Think nothing of it.” Neji replied, eyeing Wong Leung, suspecting that was not exactly what the old man had said.

“Actually,” Tenten amended with amusement, “Wong Leung said he’s happy you’re rich.”

“Ah.” That cleared up Neji’s suspicion.

The hangover-cure foods indeed did help. Wong Leung seemed to have completely forgiven Neji and Tenten’s drunken delivery of his stoned grandson the night before, and after the meal he exited the home with them and accompanied them as far as the Han Ethnic Quarter’s market where he set out to shop.

The team continued uptown to the ticket office near the stadium. Gai had said three tickets were on reserve for guests, but it outnumbered the potential spectators they would be able to invite—or so they’d thought. Lee queued up in a somewhat short line to secure his grandfather’s complementary ticket. Tenten and Neji watched interestedly as some of their friends and fellow finalists circled near the box office as well.

Gaara was handing over what could have been pocket money to his excited, chattering student, Matsuri. Sakura was a few steps away, giving recommendations to the girl on places to see before the day was out. Other youngsters were nearby waiting for Matsuri to join them.

Tenten tapped her lips in thought, ‘*Where did Sakura and Gaara go last night? They didn’t stay very long at the festival…*’
She turned to Neji, “Do you think-?”

“They did.”

“How can you tell?” Tenten muttered, “Maybe they’re just…well rested?”

“I can see…” Neji trailed off and decided he didn’t want to explain.

“What? What?” Tenten was instantly nosy and curious, “Neji. You can’t leave me hanging. Spill.”

“There are incriminating marks and scratches on them.” He assessed with a flash of his eyes.

She sighed wistfully, thinking, ‘That could’ve been me and Neji...’

“They had the right idea to leave early.” Neji considered.

Tenten nodded in agreement, certain that they could’ve gotten someone to babysit Lee and avert disaster. Alas, the opportunity had passed, and now they had to fight for glory and Chunin promotions, possibly against each other.

Ino appeared in a full-pelt run, bounding at least two blocks ahead of Shikamaru and Chouji behind her (who definitely had no idea what the rush was.) When she entered the plaza, chest heaving, her new, flashy outfit in place, Sakura complimented her blonde friend while Ino caught her breath.

Shaking her head apologetically, Ino handed a purse to Sakura, “I am…so sorry. I wasn’t thinking! I should’ve brought this to you-!”

“It’s fine.” Sakura smiled meekly, “We’re fine. It wasn’t your responsibility Ino, and I’m too forgetful for my own good.”

“Not my responsibility?” Ino grumbled, looking between Sakura and Gaara, the latter looking more human than ever beneath her discerning stare. Ino dropped her voice as Shikamaru and Chouji trudged into the plaza behind her, “I’ve spent months trying to get you laid. It’s been, like, the most personal, impossible mission I’ve ever undertaken.”

“Thank you.” Gaara said sincerely.

Sakura hung her head in embarrassment and tugged her boyfriend along, muttering gratitude to Ino as well. As Sakura slinked away, in possession of her purse and its crucial contents, Shikamaru scratched his cheek and gave Ino a blank look.

“That’s it? You had to return Sakura’s bag?”

“Don’t make me explain.” Ino warned, watching her pink haired (and likely) newly-laid friend trod off into the bowels of Konoha with the Kazekage.

“I think I get it.” Chouji said innocuously.

“I don’t think I want to get it.” Shikamaru supposed.

“Yup, because it’s really none of our business.” Ino determined, marching towards the growing line, “We’re going to need extra tickets for our parents, right? You both had better wait in line with me, or at least get me a smoothie or something.”

Whipped, her teammates acquiesced to Ino’s demands. They queued up behind Kiba and Tama, who were making small talk with Hinata ahead of them.
“Where’s Stupid and Shino?” Kiba wondered.

“Don’t call him that, Kiba-kun!” Tama sniffed in aggravation and her teammate wilted in apology.

“I think they said they were going to spend some time in the nature conservatory. They’ve been talking a lot today.” Hinata noted, “They went there right after we ate lunch.”

“Huh. I really thought Sato-kun would find me first thing this morning…” Tama was perplexed.

“He will find you as soon as he is able.” Hinata soothed her friend.

“You’re right. I did promise Kakashi-sensei one last strategy-talk after we drop off his ticket.” Tama recalled, “I’ll see Sato later, for sure.”

“Speaking of our team, where’d Sakura go?” Kiba noted.

“She went somewhere with Gaara-kun. I know her parents asked them to stop by.” Tama giggled at the thought, “She keeps blushing and looking so embarrassed! I wonder if Gaara asked her dad something important?”

Kiba and Hinata chorused in astounded gasps.

“Maybe!” Tama laughed.

The Finalists in line continued to chat and compliment each other on some very snazzy outfits while they waited.

And though Sakura and Gaara did spend most of that day shooting the breeze with the eternally pleasant Haruno Kizashi, no: Gaara did not ask any important questions. And no, the condoms in Sakura’s purse were not used, nor was there an occasion for her to use them whilst occupied so. Gaara was coerced to stay for dinner, dessert, and wine before he went home alone and fell asleep. Sakura had also retired early on account of her parent’s offering of sake. It seemed strategic.

No, Tama did not see hide nor hair of Sato, not even after she and Kakashi had gone looking for him. Little did they know that Sato was laying low at, of all places, Shino’s bedroom after he had broken down into a sobbing, shameful mess. Shino had been very understanding, as he’d vowed, and did not parse the recollected events that Sato had confided. He listened. He brought coffee. He summoned some butterflies into his room and listened more to his friend.

Tama spent the evening with her parents, battling the acute ache in her chest as she missed her beloved, and allowed her mother to complete an alteration to her mysterious and so far unseen Exam outfit.

Kiba visited his father in his post-trial-conviction jail cell and happily informed him of his plans for the Chunin Exam Tournament. Nichiyo conversed with him civilly, still apologizing for his crimes, and the two got on surprisingly well considering the circumstances.

Hinata and Neji were subjected to the hubbub of Main and Branch attendees at a celebratory clan dinner. Nearly all of their extended family wished them the best of luck at the Tournament. Elder Haburo was distinctly absent from the festivities.

Tenten dropped off braised chicken feet and dumplings for Lee and his grandfather to enjoy for dinner, and then stopped by the Memorial Stone to ask for her parents’ guidance in her matches the next day. She returned home that night and polished her jian, Hok, as she played old recordings of
her mother’s bar crooning as well as magnificent, soprano performances for the daimyo of the Land of Fire.

Kakashi and Asuma kibitzed at their favorite bar until it closed at an ungodly hour.

Kurenai slept soundly until Asuma returned to her and curled up on his side of the bed, muttering sweet nothings, futilely proposing marriage for the twenty-third time.

In the wee, dark hours of morning, in ANBU uniforms at the pre-security checks of the stadium, Tenzo gave a variety of examples to Sai about how to treat others with kindness.

Huo did not sleep. His Sensei slept trembling in fear of him.

Tsunade dreamed and snored with a smile on her face, as if Dan were still there.

In Nanakusa, Haku rose before dawn to assist Hiroshi with preparing and opening his tea shop. Pua returned to her master with a much friendlier message from Temari, and his heart leaped.

In Sunagakure, Kankuro woke up late while Temari was on-time, organizing Gaara’s desk; wondering why she’d sent such a weak, sappy bit of correspondence to her once-not-exactly sweetheart.

In Shincha, as the sun rose, Obito awoke to the sounds of Rin and Yuma arguing about what was for breakfast.

Kakashi woke in the morning and cornered his nephew, wondering what was wrong, “Won’t you tell me what’s bothering you?” And the boy denied that anything had unsettled him.

Naruto learned from Fukasaku that the great Toad Sage was named Gamamaru, and that Gamamaru was older than dirt and knew billions of tidbits for trivia games. No, it wasn’t time to meet him yet. They returned to the Toad Oil pool for another day of training, and Naruto tried not to think about how that day, his good friends were going to clash for the title of Chunin without him.

He smiled with homesickness, muttering as he climbed the stone steps, “I’ll be right behind you guys.”

26th of June, 8:49AM— Konoha Sports Stadium

With the Tournament set to commence at 9:00AM, most all of the finalists were completely dressed, powdered, and preened; gathered in a designated participants-only lounge on the ground floor of the stadium.

Those assembled counted it a blessing that Huo had not appeared. Even the Grass ninja, Aota, said that he was relieved the Rock genin was avoiding public spaces.

Shizune occasionally paused in her pacing to reply to transmissions on her two-way radio, Ton-Ton skittering behind her near the entrance of the roped-off concourse.

“Right…” The woman took a breath to settle her nerves and then addressed the Genin, “Please listen, everyone. Tsunade-sama notified me that her high-profile guests are now seated in the VIP booth with her. I’ll be given a signal in a few minutes to send you out for the grand entrance, just like we discussed.”

Sakura added to the thought, “And we can enter solo or with our teams, right?”
“You can. I’ll radio ahead to the announcer a few seconds before he welcomes you to the arena.”
Shizune nodded, “It’s a lot of fanfare, isn’t it? But the stadium is packed to capacity. This event drew even more fans than the previous Exam…and I certainly do I hope things go smoothly this year.”
She’d heard the tales of the *Konoha Crush Invasion*.

Soon after that they were shepherded into a discreet passageway that would allow them into the arena, its dirt floor dusty from recent leveling, cracked and dry in the morning sun.

Perhaps because he was in the minority by being on his own, the good-looking brunette, Yanagisawa Aota, waved obligingly to his peers before setting out first. A distant voice sounded over surround speakers, reverberating through the narrow hallway, and the announcement was drowned in the excited roar of the opening ceremony.

And Sakura indicated with mouthing and finger pointing (at herself) that her team would enter next. Shizune nodded and signaled when they could proceed.

The sounds of the revved up audience were disorienting, as it was nothing Sakura or Kiba had experienced before. Tama was waving and laughing nervously as she looked around. Akamaru trotted handsomely ahead of Kiba, tail wagging, head low. They walked to a spot on the ground marked with spray paint, where they stood as brief biographical information was shared about each participant.

“Does anyone see my parents?” Sakura asked from the corner of her mouth, head turning in all directions as they waved.

“Nope. See mine?” Tama wondered.

“Nope.”

“I *think* that’s my mom.” Kiba corrected himself, “Nah. That’s a guy. Maybe we should have checked a stadium map to see which levels our families had tickets for? We might’ve been able to pinpoint ‘em.”

“Why would we do something intelligent like that?” Sakura griped.

They walked off to allow Ino and Chouji to soak up the limelight after them.

While climbing a stairwell to the second floor viewing alcove, Tama picked a few white dog hairs off the back of Kiba’s crop top.

“Thanks, Tama. *Someone* rolled over my clothes this morning.” His toothy smile was dashing.

“My pleasure.” She and Sakura had already commented on their teammate’s ripped stomach about a dozen times, and were by then pointedly trying not to look at Kiba’s exposed midriff. He was certainly very appealing in form-fitting black that faded into silver ombré at the cut-off sleeves and hips.

Sakura was carefully trying to snip away a loose thread from the hem of her red *qipao* with a kunai. Tama was aware that her friend had undershorts beneath the daring floral dress, but she figured most eyes would be on her friend’s legs; tall, thigh-boots of black were sure to grab attention. Sakura removed the thread as they arrived at the top of the stairwell, and tucked the kunai away into the utility pouch secured to the belt ‘round her midsection. She fussed at the fingerless gloves on her hands, “I don’t suppose…we’ll be able to spot anyone from here?”

Her team stopped beside an open-air handrail to look upon the crowds in the stands. Curious,
Akamaru reared up on his hind legs to gaze out from the balcony as well. Sakura could hear Chouji and Ino’s voices echoing from the stairway just as Hinata’s team ventured into the arena.

Her team looked radiant and a fair share more attractive than their predecessors, Sakura opined. Hinata was a vision in lavender and violet. ‘Wow! Sato is a quintessential Hatake down there, and Shino…’ Her thoughts veered off course when Shino flicked his glasses off, and screams of delight nearly inflicted permanent hearing damage on Sakura and her peers. Kiba and Akamaru tried to seal their ears in response. ‘O-kay! So Shino was concealing a very handsome face for this day. That card was well-played…’ He did put his glasses back on, but the point had been made.

Kurenai’s students continued to the stairs after their introductions. A moment later, Sakura peered down to the passageway, spying Shizune looking around frantically as if she had lost track of a group. ‘Is everything alright down there?’ Sakura folded her arms as she watched, ‘No one got cold feet, did they?’

Resounding cries of confusion rose from spectators as two utility scrolls fell from great height, mysteriously tumbling, opening in a whirl towards the center of the arena…and Sakura reached over to hold onto Tama as she watched a billowing flash of smoke dissipate, allowing Team Gai to make a very memorable appearance. At the VIP booth, Tsunade had raised a fist and was shouting as if they had gotten it right. Sakura exchanged glances with her friends, snickering yet impressed with Lee vibrantly framed in unforgettable yellow between Neji and Tenten, bookends of antiquated fashion beside him.

“There’s Gai-sensei.” Kiba pointed out a figure in green hollering his head off in the distance.

“Oh! And I see Kakashi-sensei there too.” Tama squinted her eyes. They could safely assume all Jounin Sensei would be gathered within the same vicinity.

Following Neji’s team, Matsuri made her debut, staunch and solitary. She locked her eyes on the Kazekage in his seat beside Tsunade, determined to make her teacher proud.

Tama was touched by the obvious gesture of faith between master and pupil, but she whipped around as soon as she remembered that Sato would be up the steps any second. In a timely manner, Hinata bounded up the stairs excitedly with Shino in tow, raving to her friends about how Neji- niisan’s team had looked and she’d been watching with her Byakugan.

Sato lingered near the room’s corner after making it to the top, and nearly flinched when Tama embraced him. Her smile was a mixture of worry and animation, “Sato, I didn’t see you all day yesterday! Are you alright?”

He nodded woodenly, chancing eye contact with her, “I am. Sorry that I flaked out on you, Tama. I know you wanted to see me.” Sato added, “And sorry about the festival…towards the end, I…”

“Why are you apologizing so much?” Her voice was light and easy, “Relax a little. I really am happy.” Tama touched her forehead to his, “You’ve made me so happy. I promise we can do more after the Exam. Just like I promised, right?”

“Er…” He feared he would swallow his tongue.

“Get over here! Don’t miss the view!” Tama steered him to a space between Shino and Sakura, where she also filed in, “It’s a shame you didn’t get to see Neji’s team appear. That was a crowd pleaser!”

“I bet.”
Shino gave his best friend a half-concerned, I-am-right-here-please-breathe sideways glance. Sato inhaled. Nothing need be said. Definitely not here and now...not ever.

On the opposite side of the arena’s circumference, another mezzanine housed Aota and Matsuri. Everyone seemed to simultaneously deflate when Huo calmly stepped into the pit for an introduction.

Judging by how his friends had fallen silent, Neji took a guess as he arrived in the viewing area, “Huo is here, then?” Lee and Tenten followed shortly after.

Kiba nodded, “Yeah. Can’t say I would’ve been disappointed if that guy never showed up…”

The Leaf compatriots watched in prickling silence as their common adversary stalked to the opposite stairwell to join other non-Leaf combatants on a balcony.

Ino’s sigh broke the lull, “It can’t be helped! Tama-chan is just going to have to mop the field with him. I am looking forward to that.”

The eldest kunoichi nodded with total composure and beside her, Sato had stiffened in terror. All of the things he was trying not to think about were slapping him in the face.

As the gathered female ninja crowded in to lend Tama words of fortitude and confidence, Chouji curiously batted the turquoise tassel of the jian slung on Neji’s back, “Pardon me, but I do not recall you depending on swords much, Neji.”

“It’s a new skill.” His smugness was almost imperceptible, but Chouji, Kiba, and Shino still detected it. Sato was not looking at Neji and not saying anything, trying to make one less painful acknowledgment.

“...slay him.” Kiba muttered, hopeful. Down with Sato; up with Neji, Kiba decided then and there.

“Within reason and good taste, I will attempt to.” Neji concurred.

Lee chimed in, “I have not yet witnessed Neji’s swordsmanship, but if he adheres to Tenten’s capable instruction I am sure he will be most adept.”

“If adept is here,” Tenten measured with her hands about 20 centimeters apart, “And I am here...then Neji is kind of in the middle, closer to adept.” She described it with her hand scissoring the imaginary line.

“So he doesn’t suck.” Kiba said gratefully.

“No, Neji doesn’t suck. He’s just not on my level.” Tenten smiled sublimely as her boyfriend pouted in annoyance, “His sword is named Mo-Ye. It’s the female of the pair my parents used. I think my dad would have liked for him to have had it.”

The conversation was derailed when a storm of cheering kicked up again, and Shikamaru had descended to announce rules and welcoming remarks.

Ino pledged to tell her boyfriend later that he had an unusually suave and composed voice over the microphone. His disclosures eased her nerves, his voice rolled over her in warm waves.

Likewise, Sakura had calmed significantly. ‘Ino and I are up first. I’m kind of glad I can jump right into this!’ While examining the lofty luxury box from afar, she noticed the person seated on Tsunade’s left was Natsuhi, the lovely Hoshikage, and to Tsunade’s right was Gaara, and on his right— Tazuna the bridge builder, ‘I wonder why the old man got a VIP invite?’
Shikamaru’s announcement wrapped, “The first match will be between Yamanaka Ino and Haruno Sakura. Opponents, please report to the arena in five.”

Amicably, Ino took her friend by the hand, “Let’s do this, bitch! I have been waiting my whole life for an official piece of you!”

Laughing, Sakura reveled in the sound of her friends’ clamors of support and excitement, and hurried down the stairs with her rival— the truest advocate for her causes and dreams.

Bonus Soundtrack: "One Day They’ll Know" (ODESZA REMIX) by Pretty Lights

Chapter End Notes

It’s your party now and you can cry if you want to. The ass-kickings shall now commence. Another rare chapter title in Latin, for it has long been said: to err is human. Please lay that review on me, good soul!

The bonus song will seriously get you in the mood for this shiz.
It was an odd feeling knowing that both the Hokage and Kazekage were not rooting for her. Ino wondered, as she stood a few paces away from Shikamaru (his foot tapping,) how many people in the audience even bothered to bet money on her. She probably looked too pretty—too approachable and likable to win. Sakura likely had that same stereotype counting against her as well, come to think of it. This was not a major money-making match.

The money didn’t matter, Ino told herself. She wanted her parents to do a double-take of surprise as her victory was announced. Her sensei, her teammates, maybe even her distracted friends and peers might be a bit appalled by her ambush-win, not expecting her to so vehemently triumph in this round. What would people think of a kunoichi taking down her closest friend, the Hokage’s star pupil? That perhaps they’d look more carefully at the array of seemingly docile participants in the Tournament, and weigh their odds with squinted eyes.

She had been planning this for months.

‘I’m not going to trip up here. I’ve been there for her, I’ve been the shoulder to cry on—the sympathetic confidant…” Ino watched Sakura’s face as the girl distractedly looked up toward Gaara in the VIP seating, ‘She’s content. I got her laid. I got her relaxed. It was the kind way to do this.’ Ino had knowingly let her dear friend pull ahead in terms of success and studies, making sure to set trap-wires in Sakura’s proverbial path. Now that she had caught up to Sakura here, now that they could face each other as equals… ‘I can prove that this is my time. We finally get to face each other in a match, and I have always been ready for this. She’s been so busy being pulled in every direction, stuffing her head with more than she can handle…I’ve been waiting to take her down.’

Sakura returned her gaze to Ino amidst the din of the crowd’s continued cheers, and Ino promptly smiled again, comforting, keeping up the charade. ‘I don’t want her to take this personally. It’s not like she has to win to get promoted. Even I am going to tap out in Round 2 to avoid excruciating injury…”

She had discussed this idea with Chouji and Shikamaru only. Shikamaru was still tapping his foot like a loon because he knew what he could anticipate. Sakura was making it worse by looking so genuinely sentimental and mushy, pitted against her friend and rival, overcome by the Hokage’s and Kazekage’s attention on her. And while he might feel a bit bad about watching the match, Shikamaru could admit he would get off a little on watching Ino unhinge and pounce on an adversary she’d been forbearing and coddling since childhood.

“Are you both ready?” He cleared his throat first so it wouldn’t crack.

The girls nodded, grimacing at each other in that moment; and Shikamaru motioned for them to commence before retreating, “Begin!”

Ino predicted the punch and its follow ups, almost as if she had a roadmap of where to step and tumble to avoid Sakura’s legendary swings. She had practiced with Chouji until her eyes crossed,
until she could write essays and slit throats with her left hand, and deflected Sakura’s projectiles with a kunai nestled in her left-palm. Easy, balanced, taking the ribbon-darts from her leg holster with her free right hand, and volleying back at Sakura.

Sakura had been throwing shuriken two-handed, which Ino had accounted for in training, and it afforded her a moment to snap a hidden string and loop multicolored ribbon around Sakura’s neck and shoulders, which shook loose from her darts. The Hokage’s apprentice did not consider the move to be more than a diversion, and Sakura attacked again without pulling off the ribbon.

They waltzed and dashed with almost no exchange of sound, the crowd by then dead quiet, and the girl in red gouged craters in the arena floor during her efforts to pummel Ino, a vision of spring green.

Sakura must have begun to suspect, while tripping over her own feet and slowing in her motions, that she may have overlooked a strategy her opponent was employing. Ino dashed to get close and she reacted, rushing through hand signs, “Katon: Grand Fireball jutsu!” Sakura aptly swept to the side, guessing where Ino would try to evade, and caught the girl (or at least a clone) in the huge orb of flame she exhaled.

Then she turned on her heel, lightning-quick, calculating that Ino would jump her from behind. It was a wise call, and Sakura blocked a barrage of whirling kicks before swatting at another distracting snare of ribbon and vines with yellow flowers. She was already sickened, Ino was sure. Slowing, tottering, still not sure what type of oil and fragrance the ribbons wrapped around her were giving off. But Sakura shrugged free and turned her healing talent inward, sweeping herself for the problem. In that moment, Ino attempted a follow-up strike but came too near another timely fireball—Sakura’s intent to burn off plant matter that was irritating her.

Stepping carelessly, Sakura treaded over a corsage-bomb or two, still disoriented and her head spinning, rolling to put out the skirt of her lit qipao.

Ino’s incoming whip of flowers smacked Sakura on the side of her head, the poor girl too dizzy to avoid it, and Ino grinned to herself as she spun to catch Sakura a second time. She only hit a clone and watched as it fastened paper-bombs to the end of the tendril. Ino abandoned the plant weapon as it erupted with a bang, smoldering and useless, and palmed two more kunai the instant before she felt hands around her ankles.

Shrieking, Ino felt the ungodly, frightening pull downward into softened rock in the arena floor. The Headhunter Jutsu had caught her completely off-guard, stuck her up to her neck in soil, but Ino thanked her lucky stars that Sakura was keening over and retching violently after she had successfully immobilized her rival.

“How’s opium poppy treating ‘ya? Or that Laburnum flower? You’re covered in at least four poisons, Sakura.” Ino tried stalling as she clambered clumsily and much too slowly toward freedom.

“Working on it.” Sakura reported, her hands lit with green light, pawing at her face and chest.

“That won’t be enough. I have an an-ti-dote!” Ino warned her in a sing-song voice. While Sakura’s eyes trailed away from her for just a moment, Ino substituted herself in the hole.

She made a rush for Sakura’s blind spot as the pink haired kunoichi turned back to her supposed rival in the dirt, but Ino’s pitch of kunai hit empty air. She rolled and looked around frantically, immediately wary of Genjutsu even before she noted the walking-in-circles effect. With a hand sign and mutter of release complete, Ino dashed again like a garden storm with her final Laburnum whip, and hit nothing again as Sakura was loitering beside the headhunter crevice.
‘Sneaky Forehead…’ Ino blinked hard and gathered her wits, ‘Multi-layer Genjutsu. That’s a nice way to bide time while you’re trying to fix yourself…but you’ll be blind in ten minutes, at least temporarily. And even if you get well enough to run and see me…there are some side effects that you can’t deal with here.’ Ino smiled, breaking down the mental controls Sakura had implemented, breaking out of the illusion within which she had forfeited the match.

The next time Sakura keened over again, Ino knew it would be from something painful and embarrassing, ‘And that affords me an opportunity for Mind-Body Switch. I may have to slow her down more so she can’t keep healing…’

She was freed from Genjutsu precisely when a 180 degree volley of flame-coated kunai vectored down, crisping her ponytail, and Ino evaded into a front split. Low to the ground, she retaliated with her own projectiles and somersaulted again while drawing out her newest weapon from a back pouch, ‘Don’t hate me, Sakura…’

Another fireball distracted Ino from a Tsunade-class punch which clipped the ground she stood on, hurling Ino like a ragdoll, and she willed herself to stay quiet to not give away her substitution. It did not last. Sakura was onto her, moving faster, feeling clearer, ready to corner her with strength and Taijutsu when Genjutsu seemed moot in their equally stubborn brains. Ino ate dirt when Sakura rounded about faster than she’d hoped, slamming her front-ways to the ground with a back-hand swipe. Sakura made a grab to pin Ino’s arm behind her back, and then fell away with a cry, having closed her hand around the waiting butterfly knife.

Face dirty, Ino sprang up again, snapping the weapon in her hand, drawing the blade across exposed skin, joints, getting a clean slice at the back of Sakura’s knees when she tumbled.

Sakura made a crazed punch that Ino bent away from like a piece of rubber, eyes focused on timing, and stabbed the blade into the back of her opponent’s unharmed hand; Sakura opened her fist with a peep of pain. She skidded in the dust and tried to collect herself.

‘Like Chouji, the easiest way for you to win is to get in close and overwhelm your target. But you’re feeling too weak to overwhelm me now, Forehead.’ Ino rubbed a spot of blood on her fingers onto her outfit’s skirt, feeling less guilty than she’d expected.

Sakura was watching her, concentrating harder now, processing in her head how on earth Ino was so incredibly willing to hurt her after the laughing and hugging of fifteen minutes ago. By then, Sakura had worked it out. Not all of their friendly interactions had been fake, but Ino had decided to take advantage of those good feelings. She had gone into the match fighting harder and nastier than Sakura had. It was underhanded, yes, but still brilliant, she yielded. Sakura had been thinking a game of Janken or a staring contest could settle it, as friendship outweighed rivalry in her own heart.

Shaking and half-way mended again, Sakura rose to her feet and leapt out of range of Ino’s next knife thrust. ‘Fine, Ino. You want to do this? I’ll hurt you so bad you’ll think three times before you ever mess with me again!’

Tsunade was not at all surprised when the close-quarters brawling of the kunoichi got bloodier. She could sense Gaara squirming in his seat beside her. He was not accustomed to this side of Sakura—this unchained warrior that Tsunade had groomed to have the fuck you-attitude of a Kage, and the stamina to take hits and abuse. Tsunade watched from the corner of her eye as Gaara flinched, alarmed when Sakura reached again to throw herself onto Ino’s weapon to stop it.

With the blade stuck snugly in her arm, Sakura wrenched it away from Ino with a splatter of red. Ino cursed and consequently took a high-power kick that shot her to the far side of the arena.
Scowling, Sakura stood calmly and pulled the knife free of her flesh, closing the wicked thing and storing it in her pouch to be retired. She healed the gash on her arm moodily and watched as Ino heaved herself to her feet again. The crowd began to titter in expectation.

“I apologize for saying this because I know your mother is up there…” Sakura exhaled roughly, gesturing at the stands, “But way to be a conniving bitch about this, Ino! I’m feeling violated.”

“That means it’s working.” Ino was ordering her hybrid yukata, dusting dirt from it.

“You’ve been an angel to me this week!”

“No shit, Forehead. You’ve known for a month that we were going to do this.” Ino barked, “It’s not my fault you came at me soft.”

“I’ll break your legs, Pig!”

Somewhere in the stadium, Ino’s spectating mother went sheet-white.

“Be my guest! I’ll win before you get your hands on me to snap me, you ape.”

Gaara could swear he heard Mebuki railing in the distance, even if he couldn’t spot her. Tsunade was pleased as pie. Natsuhi and Tazuna, both strangers in this strange land, were not sure how to feel about the insults being hurled.

Shikamaru waited on an observation deck at the edge of the arena, palming half of his face as he listened to the mud-slinging followed by another volley of weaponry. Maybe he’d set his expectations too high to think Ino and her childhood rival would postpone their usual banter to have a clean, regulation match. ‘I can’t believe I thought that’d happen…’ He beheld as Sakura and Ino’s respective paper-bomb kunai clanged off of each other and detonated, billowing a cloud of smoke they rushed into. He could hear the grunting, snarling, and name-calling though.

And then, Ino took an acrobatic, sideways tumble out of the gray haze, pulling with all of her might on her last Laburnum whip. The force pulled Sakura out of the cloud, skidding over dirt before she righted herself and struggled to free her tangle-knotted arms. As if by instinct, Shikamaru knew in that moment the subtle motions Ino took; her bending to kneel, back straight, hands poised in her clan’s trademark seal— and shot her consciousness at Sakura before the girl had a spare moment to react.

‘…Ino got her.’ He shut his eyes and sighed to himself. Though it had taken a crazy, messy effort, he felt relieved that Ino made the mental jump successfully.

His stomach churned when he noticed Sakura shaking off the Mind-Body Switch effects within seconds, seemingly in full control of herself. Shikamaru abruptly realized what Ino was probably discovering while her consciousness floated in search of a body.

‘It’s a clone. It’s a fucking clone!’ Ino lamented, probing into what was an Earth Clone, which Sakura had snuck into the fray during the aftermath of paper-bomb explosions. No wonder she had lassoed it so quickly— Sakura wanted her to have it. ‘Where is she? Where is she?’ Frantic, Ino tried to backtrack as rapidly as possible toward her own impeccably dressed vessel, but Sakura was looming over her body, prodding at her back, ‘Get off of me, Sakura!’

Sakura was working oddly slow, her face drawn into a pained grimace, sweat streaking down the sides of her face. Ino could feel the medical-type attack on the nerves in her neck and lumbar, Sakura trying to sabotage her ability to move. Ino reinserted her consciousness in the nick of time, and snapped her head back into Sakura’s face. The pink haired kunoichi stumbled and fell over, trying to
push herself back up to her feet.

Likewise, Ino was a twitching, useless cluster of limbs that could not obey the signals of her brain. ‘Great. I can barely walk!’ She tested her hands and fingers and found it painstaking to perform hand signs, ‘If I can just choke her out or something…” Ino smiled to herself, ‘Those plant poisons finally got her. She’s beyond the point of being able to heal herself…at least now that her symptoms are too distracting.’

Sakura observed her Earth Clone order itself and shredded the Laburnum whip Ino had been using. She was stock-still in a defenseless crouch, perspiring, eyes narrowed. ‘I can’t move…” Sakura took stock of her most pressing physical issue, ‘Or I will shit myself in front of everyone here.’ Her parents, friends, teachers, boyfriend, audience, and all of heaven’s creation; the vile plants Ino accosted her with had seeped toxins into her blood and nervous system, wreaking havoc. ‘The variety she hit me with was too much to sweep with healing jutsu while fighting her…” She tried to take steady breaths and watched as Ino flailed around.

To avoid the humiliation of having a public, involuntary bout of diarrhea, Sakura elected to forsake Taijutsu and Ninjutsu, even though those options were more effective against Ino than Genjutsu. She hastily crafted an illusion and kneaded chakra ‘round Ino’s brain again, knowing it could not last for long, ‘Ino can break out of this…but I only need a few seconds…” Sakura didn’t want to think about how she was going to get out of this stadium without shaming herself, or without possibly losing the match or arriving at a draw.

But by some curious whimsy, or perhaps because of Ino’s malfunctioning nerves and signals, the Yamanaka kunoichi did not undo the low-level Genjutsu that made it seem like Sakura was charging for her. Ino reeled back in her best and most unnecessary defensive stance, stepping right into the lingering Earth Clone behind her. The blessed clone winched its arm across Ino’s neck in a stranglehold, and then pinned her to the ground. Still snared in an illusion, which was now not the primary concern, Ino wrestled weakly to fight whatever was asphyxiating her.

Pearls of sweat clung to Sakura’s brow, ‘Restroom. Wait for me. God, please…not in front of Shishou…or Gaara…I will forsake all vanity and every shred of dignity in my future, if I can just hold it!’

Shikamaru flitted down and restrained the Earth Clone with his shadow, “That’s enough…” Ino flopped front ways, gasping. After completing its intended use, the clone broke apart into dusty fragments.

The crowd made sounds that indicated they were not very impressed with two kunoichi collapsing all over the place, but cheered when Shikamaru called the match, “The winner of the match is Haruno Sakura!”

Thanks to the beseeching look on Sakura’s face, Shikamaru gathered that he ought to call a medic-nin to escort her away as well. Ino and Sakura were collected from the arena without any obscene spectacle occurring, but in the halls of the stadium’s interior, Sakura all but screamed to be brought to a ladies restroom. Her path diverged from her fallen opponent’s, where Ino was shepherded along for an examination in spite of her spewing of indignant remarks and frustration over the outcome.

In the Exam-Finalist treatment room that was off-limits to the public, Ino argued and snapped at her caregivers. Within ten minutes, she was freed and cleared by the medic tending to her, and Ino stomped down the corridor to the nearby restroom. Thank goodness only a single person was inside of it.

“Forehead!” She screamed, on the verge of a sob.
“I’m sorry!”

“No you’re not!”

“Can you acknowledge what is happening to me right now?” Sakura caterwauled from the stall furthest into the tiled bathroom, empty save for her and her defeated rival.

“You should have surrendered! That match was mine.” Ino declared, “I had you down from soup to nuts.”

“Except for the part when I, uh, could still trap you in Genjutsu.” Sakura countered pithily.

“What’s so wrong with you just backing off for once? Out of respect for the fact I’ve hooked you up and pampered you for weeks?” Ino reasoned feebly, leaning on the commercial porcelain sink. When she caught a glimpse of her reflection in the mirror, Ino tsked and began fixing her ragged hair. She pointedly ignored the terrible sounds coming from the far end of the restroom.

Sakura groaned at length, “Ino, how could you do this to me? Is this really how you wanted to beat me? By humiliating me in front of everyone? I almost…out there—!”

“If you had quit before then that wouldn’t have been an issue!” Ino pressed.

“Get real. No matter how nicely you treat me, or how savagely you attack me, I don’t surrender to you, Ino.”

“Not even for your imploding bowels.”

“Not even then.” Sakura confirmed. But boy was it a close call.

It went quiet, mostly. A poor middle-aged woman who wandered into the bathroom was promptly turned away by Ino and sent packing. Ino returned to the mirror to straighten her ruffled clothes.

“How bad did it look, while we were out there?” Sakura asked curiously, “When it ended?”

“Pretty fucking bad. No finesse at all.” Ino reported, “We both looked like hell.”

“Huh.” It was about what Sakura had estimated.

Ino continued to bemoan her loss, “If I could have just gotten to the second round…”

“Ino.” Sakura gruffed, “You would have surrendered in a second round match no matter who your opponent was.”

“So what? I’m allowed to do that.”

“It’s a waste!” Sakura critiqued, “I plan to fight in the second round.”

“You do realize it will only get more difficult? And potentially ruin your outfit?”

“YOU nearly ruined my outfit.” Sakura roared. A courtesy flush.

“Pff.” Ino retied a honeysuckle bow around her waist and remembered that, yes, she had kind of sickened Sakura intentionally.

“Whatever.” Ino concluded, “If you want to fight any other battle-crazy knuckleheads even when you can do less to prove yourself worthy, have at it, Sakura.”
“Time frame of when this toxin wears off?” Sakura asked.

“About thirty minutes, if you are actively trying to heal. I guess.” Ino admitted, “I lied about that antidote. We’d have to take time to derive one…so…please fix yourself.”

“Yeah. Still working on it.” Sakura grumbled, “This may have been your meanest tactic yet. I’ve got to say. Can we call it a truce from this day forward?”

“Truce. At least physically. I can say whatever I want to you.”

“Fine.”

Shortly after that, Sakura was well enough to exit the stall and run her hands under scalding hot water at the sink for a full minute. The sting of burning water hurt less than her constricting stomach. Displeased, Ino made her soap up and finish with cool water, labeling her a masochist.

Sakura asked her friend to examine her and make sure her appearance was entirely presentable. Ino did some minor edits and tugged at Sakura’s clothing, and then whisked her along, “Back to the mezzanine. We’re not telling anyone what you just experienced, right?”

“Not a soul.”

“We should make sure we know where the nearest bathroom is on that level…”

“Yup.”

“So that was something.” Chouji assessed.

“Pretty sure she poisoned Sakura-chan. Bad.” Kiba held his chin and considered the match, “I thought she wouldn’t have been able to finish Ino off.”

“Genjutsu.” Neji explained succinctly.

“Usually Ino-chan is good about dealing with illusions…” Tama noted. She regarded Sato at her side, thinking that maybe he’d have some input to provide based on his Genjutsu expertise, but he said nothing.

Tenten and Lee agreed it was a downright slugfest between two rivals, and about on par with the antics they’d expected. Hinata was still whimpering and hugging herself with her arms crossed, having found it hard to watch. Her friends had not gone easy on each other. It had been silly to think they would.

Some small discussions rippled amongst the friends and competitors; speculating what was to come, because it was no secret that Tenten’s match would be next. Her opponent from the Grass Village was still somewhat of a mystery to them in terms of ability. Shino termed the second, soon-to-be-announced duel a ‘mirror match,’ for all intents and purposes. Two weapon-masters ready to outdo each other, unless one or both had an ace up his or her sleeve.

This notion slightly unsettled Neji. Up until the idea was uttered aloud, he’d been relatively at ease with Tenten’s impending clash against an older, clearly talented Bukijutsu specialist. He had a bad habit of assuming Tenten could handle most anything, at least from his personal experience. But he hated the feeling of knowing so little about the Kusa nin, Aota, and what he could use in a fight beyond weaponry. Neji’s thoughts rattled away as if on a freight train, passing through the possibilities that Aota may be gifted with Ninjutsu, Grass Village poisons or plant techniques,
perhaps Taijutsu that could overwhelm Tenten…

Tenten poked his triceps discretely with a finger, muttering, “Calm down. My intuition is telling me this guy is a scrub and I can beat him."

A fair rebuttal, “Really? That’s not what my intuition is telling me.”

“Then we agree to disagree.” She smiled at him reassuringly.

“He’s the best on his team and he’s seen one of your strongest jutsu already.” Neji reminded her, “There is no doubt that he’s prepared for you to use it against him.”

The sentiment annoyed her, but Tenten could not deny that Neji had a point. Aota had seen her preliminary round match against Ga-Fen, in which she had relied on Dance of the Crescent Moon. Reciprocally, she had not seen Aota perform anything beyond basic tool-summoning from scrolls.

Tournament-style battles had a troubling effect on participants who revealed too much of their talent early on, and afforded future competitors the chance to counter them. The Leaf Rookies’ cardinal rule of Chunin Exam matches was: do not place all of your cards on the table, at least until the Final Round.

While Tenten noodled on the subject, Sakura and Ino clambered up the stairs, a mess of gripes and friendlier comments now that their match was over. Hinata, Chouji, and Kiba gravitated toward them quickly as they were not pressed up against the balcony railing to spectate. Both kunoichi were smothered with congratulations and praise. The two perked up and merged again with the group.

Shikamaru’s announcement followed shortly after that on stadium loudspeakers, calling for Tenten and Yanagisawa Aota to report to the arena. Neji made his best attempt to appear as cool as ever, while Lee professed his full confidence in Tenten. She gave Neji another imperceptible poke before hugging Lee, as he had motioned for it. “You will bring us another vibrant victory!” Lee forecasted.

Her friends wished her well with some hooting sounds, and Tenten proceeded down the stairwell. ‘I am noticing how Neji needs a dose of reassurance before I enter a fight these days.’ She thought to herself, ‘He wasn’t always like this. Though, it’s not like he gave me any encouragement before a match. Ever.’ She had a feeling he was genuinely nervous for her.

‘Weird how he grew up and matured, then began to have human emotions. I’m still not used to it, sometimes.’ Tenten chuckled to herself on her way down the stairs, ‘With Lee, it’s normal. With Gai-sensei, it’s automatic.’ It felt amazingly good that Neji cared. Even if his concerns seemed trivial in her opinion, she appreciated them nonetheless.

Tenten did some self-reflection on the last flight of steps that stretched down to the ground floor.

Maybe she was way too cocksure about kicking the Grass ninja’s ass. It felt like she would, but that was due to the chemical signals in her brain and body indicating her good mood, and not necessarily examining the actual, concrete logistics of the match like Neji had. ‘Even if I lose, all I have to do is exemplify the qualities Tsunade-sama wants in a Chunin.’ Tenten considered, ‘Winning isn’t imperative. I just want the Hokage to believe she can rely on me!’

It happened again. She stepped through the archway and felt a surge of butterflies in her stomach just as she had at the first Chunin Exam. Shikamaru had outclassed her at the previous Tournament, and now he was the supervising proctor for her second attempt. ‘How time does fly…’

The stadium’s crowd was buzzing, more excited by the male-female opposition, and perhaps because Tenten looked like a stunningly red, Han-style dragon with a frown on her face. She was frowning
for effect, primarily because the sounds of the audience were making her anxious. ‘*I’ve got to pretend like there aren’t nine thousand people up there watching…*’ She breathed in and out of her nostrils, ‘*Come on, Tenten. Put your best Hyuga face on. Grumpier is better. People love serious-looking ninja.*’

Strangely, Aota was smiling when he stopped at the arena’s center within a few steps of her own arrival. A piercing screech of feedback *zinged* from the loudspeakers, and the Grass ninja winced just as Tenten did.

‘*Oh shit, we’re both human.*’ She realized, frustrated. Aota smiled at her again while measuring her up. Shikamaru had shut off his shirt-clip mic and was testily speaking into a two-way radio, giving someone hell about the stadium speakers acting up. Even with his microphone off, another sound interface was making unwelcome noise.

The feedback persisted. In the VIP booth, Tsunade had curled her hands into fists in her seat, scowling. If Shikamaru did not reprimand the audio-tech responsible and have the problem rectified, she would be beating that tech to a pulp in a few minutes.

In what was too amicable a gesture, Aota closed the gap to have a word with Tenten while electric squealing echoed in the arena.

“Ours is going to be a great match today.” He surmised.

“I hope so. Let’s try not to embarrass each other.” Tenten recommended.

“You look beautiful, by the way.” Aota added.

Oh. So it was *that* kind of attention again. Or just the typical *get-in-her-head* tactic for the match, Tenten suspected. She shrugged at him as thanks for the compliment.

Tsunade’s voice was now crackling over Shikamaru’s two-way radio. Heads were about to roll.

“*That guy up there, the Hyuga fellow—*” Aota looked up to the mezzanine and she followed his line of sight, “*You’re dating him?*”

“*Pardon my manners, but I came here to beat the crap out of you, Yanagisawa-san.*” Tenten confirmed, “*Not play twenty questions.*”

“So you are dating him.”

“On the down-low, I am.”

“Ahh.” Aota rubbed his lips with his thumb, thinking it over.

“So, you and Huo…” Tenten jested.

“I don’t think he’s into me.” Aota adopted a faux valley-girl voice, “*He’s a douche.*”

Damn him. Tenten bit her tongue to halt any small sibilance of laughter bubbling up.

“Since you’re on the DL with Hyuga-san, and we’re waiting for an optimally funded sound system to reboot now for our match…” Aota rested his hands on his hips and bent a bit, accentuating his lanky height, “*Maybe you want to consider doing something with me after the Tournament?*”

“I don’t date men with buzzed under-cuts.”
“Oh, so that’s it.” He determined, snapping his fingers, “You like beautiful men.”

“You bet I do.”

“Like, you two kind of have matching outfits.”

“It was intentional.”

Shikamaru, waved both of his hands between the competitors to ward them apart, “Speakers are up in 30 seconds, and for the love of all that is holy, do not flirt in this arena. I’ll disqualify the both of you!”

Positively offended, Tenten gave Shikamaru a hurt look, “I wasn’t! I’m trying to tell this hipster off.”

“You’re not doing it right.” Shikamaru notified her.

Aota agreed, “Not at all.”

“You,” Shikamaru pointed a finger at the Grass ninja, “Shut it.” He then eyed Tenten, “And you had better not incur Neji’s wrath in any way that makes him unmanageable for me. Got it?”

Tenten was deeply irritated by the implication, “Are you kidding me, Shikamaru? I would never-!”

With a rumble, the speakers were back online. Shikamaru switched on his microphone. The screeching feedback had stopped and Shikamaru proceeded with the match, “Are you both ready?”

He was given two simultaneous nods.

Shikamaru gave the word as he stepped back, “Begin!”

Tenten would swear on an obscene amount of money that she was three-quarters of a second faster than Aota when it came to snapping open a tool-summoning scroll. The spinner on her wrist was more accessible, she figured. Within moments, they were strafing in opposite directions and hurling all manner of weapon curiosities at each other. The crowd was moderately thrilled with the aggression.

Aota was practical with his motions, aiming, evading, and deflecting incoming projectiles, never hustling needlessly. Tenten looked like an acrobat by comparison, rolling, leaping, and stepping on scroll parchment to hold it in place for trick-hand shots, two of which had already sliced Aota’s cheek open.

The young man’s levity from before the match began to ebb. His brow was furrowed, concentrating on keeping up. Her next bombardment of spinner-scroll projectiles had colorful tassels and zip-ties attached, misleading Aota’s line of sight. He was cut again, a superficial hit on the arm, and he backed away as he realized Tenten knew the game already and wanted him distracted.

His half-dozen retaliatory fuuma shuriken seemed appropriate. She was a bounding, whirling beast in red fabric, avoiding his volley while returning one of her own with a great leap: a rain of morning star spike-balls. As Aota tumbled away from the metal meteor shower, Tenten fetched a small cable from her hip pouch; a centimeters-long, bladed hook attached. She lashed out like a fly fisherman while he was rising to his feet, and caught the streaming parchment of Aota’s scroll. Her hook ripped it down the middle all the way to its end, snagging on the wood cylinder, and Tenten jerked the ruined scroll from her opponent’s hand.

The Grass ninja was trying to ignore the pleased cheers of the audience. It was obvious to him that Tenten was trying to bait out his other techniques. She had him so plainly cornered in terms of
Bukijutsu skill that she was testing for other threats. Playing into her scheme, Aota formed hand signs as he ran, rolling and ducking into the cover over a rapidly growing patch of giant Allium flowers. Tenten closed in with a single Shadow Clone, the two sharing a segment of her summoning scroll as they forced Aota into the spreading thicket of flowers and sprouting greenery.

Tenten crinkled her nose, ‘Kind of stinks like onions…’ She had sent her clone in and watched as it was shredded by the proximity-triggered flowers, purple orbs firing off razor sharp petals in all directions. ‘So Neji was correct in assuming Aota would have a bag of tricks for this match.’ She tossed a homemade grenade into the flower patch and watched as Aota sprinted out into the open to avoid the explosion, ‘I’m going to empty that bag of tricks!’

When the two finally closed the distance, Aota slipped a curved dagger from its leg holster and parried Tenten’s strikes with Hok. His eyes nearly crossed as he stared down the kunoichi who was strong enough to bend him backwards just by pushing with her jian, “Woman, where do you come from? I didn’t think you had enough space in that little body to hide muscle!” She kicked dust in his eyes and, though blinded, he managed to duck her swing for his head.

“I train… with guys…” She puffed as they parried and slashed, “Who are ten times as strong as you…”

“Huh, I figured a girl like you would hate it if I went easy on you in a fight!” He was rubbing at his face and trying to cry the dirt out. Before Tenten could puncture his lungs when his guard opened, a green flower tendril snaked around her ankle and tripped her. Tenten caught herself before she could faceplant, but Aota pegged her with a brutal roundhouse kick to the stomach. She flipped and crumpled backwards over sprouts and tubers.

He had time enough to stow his dagger and procure his back-up tool scroll, summoning a fresh volley of kunai and shuriken as she clambered up and dashed away, knocking several weapons out of the air with her jian.

Keeping in mind she had used up more than half of a single spinner scroll already, Tenten hoped to use her remaining weapons less wastefully. She drew two smoke-bombs from her back pouch and hurled them at Aota’s feet. The Grass nin cursed and staggered when the flares went off, billowing black. Tenten used the cover to maneuver behind him, delaying the materialization of a pair of Shadow Clones. When Aota reappeared, performing another jutsu, she and her replications rushed forward in coordination for Dance of the Crescent Moon.

The timing and positioning were perfect. Though Aota had commenced a technique that was transforming the arena with pond flora and several feet of water, she had taken the liberty of avoiding his kidney after stabbing him in the back. Her clones had gotten Aota in the shoulder and chest with their jian. The audience went nuts. Tenten withdrew her sword immediately, watching as Aota dissolved into a human-height tower of green stalks and vivid lilies.

The Lily Clone unfurled and reached for the nearest victim, a Shadow Clone, and wrapped snugly around it. She took a few curious swings at the plant clone to see if hacking it apart mattered, but it swiftly began to regenerate. Close by, large lotuses and lily pads sprang up to the water’s surface, and Tenten supposed Aota was taking cover underwater. Tenten kept moving as the giant lotus nearest to her opened up and fired an array of hidden weapons. ‘Have to hand it to him, that’s pretty impressive.’ She and her remaining bunshin swatted projectiles aside with their swords. When she tired of the exchange, Tenten sheathed Hok and drew out a smaller utility scroll to summon the Hiyumi.

While her clone obediently taunted attacks to itself, Tenten set up her shot with the bow and then fired at the Lily Clone and each lotus, savagely roasting them with her Fire Release. Her Shadow
Clone had spied Aota and tossed another grenade towards him. It flushed him out of his hiding place near a lily pad. He jumped and got his footing on the water’s surface, ready to run and unload more weapons from his tool scroll...but Tenten’s Shadow Clone had borrowed her hook. She had snapped it forward twice before catching the parchment of Aota’s last scroll, and he cursed creatively as the wily clone tore the length of paper all the way to its end.

“You know better than anyone how much time and effort it takes to prepare these!” Aota groaned, playing tug-of-war with the Shadow Clone. He gave up and let go when another fiery shot came soaring for him, lighting up the scroll, and the bunshin tossed it into the water where it turned to pulpy ash.

“That may have been the rudest thing that’s ever happened to me.” Aota pointed two fingers from his eyes toward Tenten, “I’m onto you, Mini-Dragon. You’re going to be real sorry that you didn’t play nice.”

“I think you’ve forgotten what we’re here for!” Tenten warned, bow raised, watching as he produced another pair of giant lotuses meant to occupy her Shadow Clone behind him. She fired again as he was rushing to summon from a utility scroll, his face more serious. He had slipped into the makeshift pond again before she could blow him up.

Tenten ran across the water’s surface to take a better position, her draw hand tucked under her chin, and she released the same moment Aota sprang up again with a new weapon in hand. Her Fire Release crashed over him, eliciting another roar of excitement from observers, but Tenten felt a pang of regret that she had flat-out shot a decent adversary. That remorse was quickly replaced with astonishment as she watched a tuft of vapor dissipate into the air where Aota stood, protected by a sphere of water.

He spun the polearm in his hand and the watery defense he had raised splashed back into the pond. “You got noticed at the last Tournament, didn’t you know?” Aota pointed at her with his weapon, “I memorized what you could do. I lucked out when I got pitted against someone who can’t possibly beat me in the Finals.”

She shot at him again, ticked off. Aota spun the weapon round his arm to condense another water shield, sloshing off the fire arrow blast. He smiled as he had before, “Hey, I didn’t want to be a jerk to you. I wanted to make it as fair as possible. You really know what you’re doing.”

“Flattery and talk aren’t going to help you win!” She tried to regulate her breathing and did a mental audit of what weapons she had left at her disposal to deal with the new problem.

“Kyūrei has been passed down in my clan since the founding of Kusagakure. This weapon is one of the treasures of my village.” Aota clued her in, “And you shooting your literal Will of Fire at me isn’t going to get you anywhere.” He raised a hand up in a peaceful gesture, “So why don’t you let the proctor call it now? No disrespect.”

“He just got comfortable. I’m not going bother him.”

“You won’t be the first Leaf ninja Kyūrei has drowned.” Aota added, a touch darker and more impatient.

Sick of the talk, Tenten poured what was probably an unwise portion of chakra into her next arrow, and released it before she launched herself into a sprint. She felt her eye twitch when she tweaked the arrow mid-flight with the channeling Hayate had taught her, and converted the single bolt into a Scattershot. Twenty burning missiles vectored in all directions, closing in around the Grass nin. It scorched most plant life on the far side of the arena, but Aota was again unscathed. He turned toward
her, still wreathed in steam, and swung Kyūrei in a full-length arc that produced a pressurized jet of water, precisely aimed for her.

While on the run, Tenten put away the Hiyumi, knowing better than to risk empowering Aota’s Water Release with her own nature. As far as intuition was concerned, hers had been far off the mark. She may have sensed his inferior skill when it came to summoning and pitching weapons, but she had not accounted for his Ninjutsu and legendary weapon. ‘Neji pretty much nailed it.’ She admitted, directing three new Shadow Clones in different directions, ‘It’s one thing to guess if an opponent has an array of skills, but Neji is good at gauging the magnitude of skill someone has.’ Just by looking at them, he could make snap judgements like that. ‘Aota has been a Genin for a long time. He isn’t young. He must’ve been watching previous exams to know how hard to push himself…’

A wave of water rolled up from the pond in an attempt to sweep her clones away, but they escaped to the wall of the arena and ran while attached with chakra. Tenten considered the issue of the naginata itself: aside from the possibility of Water jutsu, it was a long weapon perfectly suited for staving off enemies and eliminating close-quarters, ‘But I have to…I have to get close enough to disarm him!’ She rushed ahead in synchronization with her bunshin, the last bit of chakra she could spare for Dance of the Crescent Moon.

In the same moment Aota swung to cut in a wide arc, as he could not accurately judge the speed or vicinity of her Shadow Clones, Tenten successfully came up behind the Grass ninja. Her clones were cut apart, and Tenten extended her arm to thrust Hok forward and strike true. Without even looking to see what was behind him, a jet of water shot out of the back of Aota’s polearm, walloping her in the sternum. Her jian flew out of her hand and spun, landing with a pat on the top of a water lily disc. Tenten fell backwards and wondered if the weapon detected her approach, or if there had been some kind of giveaway to tip off her opponent.

Before Aota could make a snarky remark, or Tenten could act on the bright idea to combine Sōshōryū and paper bombs, she plunged underwater, gulping down a disgusting mouthful of pond slosh.

Her brain needed a full second to make sense of it. A Lily Clone had been hiding beneath the surface, and had snatched her out of the air to drag her under. She pondered the absence of her jian, her legs kicking wildly, the futility of cutting at the curling, vine-arms of the clone with the knife she had managed to pull from her holster… ‘This is dandy. I can’t pry this thing off!’ She had swallowed an unsafe amount of water while screaming, losing air. In a lucid moment, Tenten recognized that if she fell still and stopped struggling that Shikamaru would more than likely descend to call the match. That option was looking pretty good. Equally disappointing, Neji was probably watching the match and thinking she was a complete idiot. Her friends were probably mortified by this 180-turnaround of a Grass ninja hipster who had played her like a fiddle. Lee, on the other hand, was maybe still gunning for her, however futile it looked.

‘I’m at the bottom of my bag of tricks.’ She noted. Anything more and she would have displayed most all of her jutsu for her competitors to ruminate on. It would be desperate and petty to push herself further just for the sake of winning. At this point, a win may not even afford her enough points with evaluators to be worthy of a promotion. Even a loss like this could count negatively. ‘But if I can fight in future rounds, I still have a chance to earn points. I am not walking away from this stadium as a Genin, today!’

Tenten bit her thumb and formed hand seals, struggling, kicking back against the Lily Clone, and stretched her hands out for the arena floor— now muck and mud. It was a rash, classless action to
take and not even guaranteed to work. ‘Fine. So I’m trash. I’m a sore loser! What good is an heirloom weapon if I’m not using it?’ After the flash of a summoning matrix spread, a hole opened beneath her hands and water funneled into it. It still took another unbearable chunk of time for the water level to drop enough for Tenten to inhale fresh air, and the sword that poked up from pond scum was just barely reachable as she thrashed in the clone’s hold.

She flicked the sword out a fraction from its sheath and fell to her knees, gasping, relieved that the clone instantly withered and fell away from her. Tenten coughed and gagged, hating the feeling of water in her ears.

While her back was turned, Aota shot her again with Water Release. The crowd whooped in surprise and delight as Tenten rolled and splattered through the mud, sliding to a stop. Shikamaru had dropped into the arena and held up a hand to the Grass ninja.

“If she doesn’t get up in ten seconds, you won’t need to keep doing that.” Shikamaru informed him.

Aota obliged and stood with his weapon raised upright, and leaned Kyūrei against his shoulder like an old-school samurai or monk.

Shikamaru had to hold in his aggravated grumbling as he trekked over mud. Any of his muttering complaints about the arena’s state would be broadcasted over loudspeakers for all to hear, unfortunately. When he was about two meters away from where Tenten was splayed, her outfit no longer pristine, the girl began to haul herself up. He raised an eyebrow at her stubbornness.

Tenten took a deep breath and pretended that she didn’t care how she now looked like a swamp monster...or that the fate of Kayato’s hard costume work was in the hands of a brave drycleaner she would find after the Tournament.

“You might want to…” Tenten gestured at a Shikamaru with a shooing motion, “Back away for this one, Shika.”

“Are you sure you can keep going?” He was skeptical.

She nodded, feeling a loose strand of pond-muck hair smack her face, “Yup. I need a bit of space so this doesn’t affect you.”

He accepted the answer with a shrug and retreated to the observation post.

Aota was not pleased, “Too proud to quit?”

“I’m really most concerned with the evaluation portion of this.” She replied, but could have added, yes, she didn’t actually want to give up. She’d prefer being knocked unconscious if she had to hand him the win. Neji’s inflated ego had rubbed off on her, Tenten acknowledged.

She unsheathed Susumajin fully, exhaling, and glanced around at the remaining puddles and plant life Aota had at his disposal. Maybe he even had enough chakra left to refill the arena with water, but he wasn’t going to have that ability for very long. Mindful of her breathing, Tenten sank into a Wushu stance and extended her leg in front of her for balance, which was a bit trickier in mud. The black jian was laid flush across her arm, the point rising past her shoulder. It was already prodding at its surroundings for energy to absorb, stretching out influence in an invisible field.

Aota spun and positioned his naginata again, prepared to bombard her with the next round of Water Release. His eyes widened in shock at the rapid decay of flora his jutsu had created, dying and crumbling throughout the floor of the stadium.
She was just standing there, not actively trying to change the environment, and it seemed that the Leaf kunoichi was wielding a last-resort weapon. When he fired off a jet of Water Release aimed squarely for her head, Aota balked when the jutsu petered out before connecting. ‘She’s siphoning chakra from me. It’s passive…she isn’t using a jutsu!’ Aota attacked again with a cry, frustrated by how his Ninjutsu had diminished, ‘She’s using that sword to do it.’

The suffocating, slow choke on his chakra reserves was going to weaken his techniques. Close-quarters appeared to be tipped in his favor, thanks to the length of Kyūrei, and so he charged in the hope that he could part her from the black sword.

Footsteps squelching, breathing labored, the two closed in and Tenten rotated the jian around her arm and forward, letting it skim and deflect the water-neutered polearm up and off of her blade. Aota keened to the side and let the back end of his naginata come swooping down on her, though she stepped away lightly from harm. He began to swing unthinkingly, petrified by the amount of chakra that had been shaved away from him, not thinking clearly enough to trip or disarm her.

Tenten ducked the next swing and smashed him in the face with her sword’s hilt. Aota yelped softly when he landed on his back, suctioned into mud from head to toe, feeling flimsy and dizzy. He quieted when she poked his throat with the point of the black jian, pressing hard enough to draw a bead of blood. Kyūrei was stuck and slowly sinking into marshy earth nearby.

“We’re both too proud to quit.” Tenten observed, just loudly enough for him to hear. There was uproar from the audience which they had both tuned out. Tenten sheathed Susumajin to make it safer for Shikamaru to approach.

The proctor gave her a bemused look before crouching down to examine Aota, “You okay, Yanagisawa?”

“I’ve been better.” The Grass nin was trying to wipe mud from his chin, but just smeared it everywhere.

“Want me to call it?”

“I’ve got about as much chakra left as a baby might have, so do me a favor and get me out of here.” Aota advised.

Shikamaru stood up again and pointed a hand to the Leaf shinobi, “The winner of this match is Tenten!”

After tossing Susumajin to the ground, where it was promptly swallowed up for safekeeping, Tenten braced her legs and helped Aota to his feet with two hands. She nearly slipped and fell over, but Shikamaru assisted them before dusting muck from his hands.

Aota sighed and unsummoned Kyūrei, shaking his head at her, “Round Two is going to suck for you.”

“Tell me about it. And my clothes are filthy.” Tenten gruffed and picked up Hok. They plodded towards the arena exit while Shikamaru departed to have a quick word with the Hokage.

She watched Shikamaru leave and then trailed her eyes up toward the balcony her friends were waiting on. Contrary to her theory, they were actually cheering. Even Sato had reanimated, hooting and brandishing a thumbs-up as Lee did the same. Neji, as she had been half-accurate in her guess, was not looking at her. Tenten curiously followed his gaze, turning her head towards the opposite side of the stadium. She peered right into the staring face of Huo.
Matsuri had made herself scarce, as she had probably not wanted to be anywhere near the Rock ninja by herself. Huo was alone on the foreign-combatant mezzanine, pacing back and forth like a wildcat.

Tenten mulled over the significance of it as she looked away. ‘He’s paying awful close attention to me. Of course that didn’t get past Neji.’ She thanked Aota when he gestured to allow her passage first through the doorway into the stadium’s interior, ‘Was it my match or-? Did he...did he recognize...?’ Tenten felt tightness in her throat as she thought, ‘He would know about our clan's treasured weapon. Probably. And maybe it isn’t a coincidence at all that he’s at this exam. If only other Sasagainu ninja can use Susumajin, maybe Huo wants it for himself?’

An exam attendant ushered her and Aota into a private room to clean themselves off a bit and offered them dry towels. There was little helping her muddy clothes, and Tenten undid what remained of her braided updo and stuck her head under a faucet. She scrubbed mud from her hands, scalp, hair, and face, kissing goodbye the sophisticated eye makeup Yugao had applied.

‘That must be what he wants.’ Tenten reasoned, ‘He wants to face me in a later round. He wants me to use the sword.’ She gulped, unnerved, ‘Could he actually take it from me?’ She shuddered and then Aota hung a towel over her shoulder.

“Here you go, Mini-Dragon. Good fight. No hard feelings.” He sighed heavily, “Sorry it was such a mess out there.”

“The mud was my fault.”

The somewhat-clean Grass nin cocked his head, acknowledging, “It kinda was. And you know, the offer still stands for after the Tournament…”

“My boyfriend will damage your organs if you come near me again.” She warned, “He’s not very patient or understanding.”

“Got it.” Aota saw himself out with a small wave, “Good luck for later. You’ll need it.”

Tenten resumed her scrubbing and futile soaping up at the basin sink. Afterward, she glanced at a wall mirror and was troubled by the mess she saw reflected in it, “Oh, that’s a look.”

She cleaned off Hok as best she could before replacing the sword in its scabbard. The attendant directed her back towards the stairwell and Tenten made the tired climb up. She was arriving at some conclusions about the Tournament and a scheme that was fast coming to fruition, ‘I can’t fight Huo. I’m already too exhausted to think about what I’m supposed to do in Round Two. It’d be stupid to risk giving him what he wants if by some chance we do get pitted against each other.’ She’d be more than happy to forfeit, ‘And Tama still has a chance to knock him out of contention. How would he react if he lost? Would he jump me on my way home tonight, like a lunatic?’

“I bet he would.” Tenten mused out loud.

She brewed in her thoughts on her way up, and when she entered the second floor viewing area again she was surrounded by her Leaf peers. Lee swept forward to hug her and then stopped himself, realizing she was still tragically dirty.

“Yeah, try not to touch me or anything. I couldn’t get all of it off.” Tenten advised her friends.

Ino and Sakura chorused their displeasure over her ruined outfit. Hinata was more concerned as to whether or not she was in any pain. Lee found a clean spot on Tenten’s shoulder and repeatedly patted it, very proud.
“Did you know that guy had a Water Affinity?” Kiba checked, “Because he almost…kinda…had you.”

“He did.” Tenten admitted, “I suspected he had some jutsu I was unaware of, but I didn’t realize he was fully prepared to fight someone like me.”

“That black sword worked fine against him.” Chouji noted.

Neji filled in the space beside Lee, critiquing his girlfriend, “You never should have summoned Susumajin. It’s inappropriate for the exam.”

“I know.”

“You’ve depleted most of your chakra.” He added.

“I know.”

“You drew attention to it.” Neji didn’t even have to elaborate whose attention he was referring to. Tenten was nodding at him, hoping he would simmer down and stop bitching at her.

“Neji, lay off her.” Ino pushed her way past Tenten’s teammates with a comb in hand, and went after Tenten’s loose, tangled hair, “I thought it was great! We kind of gathered that weird sword of yours ate chakra. No one is going to want to mess with you after seeing that—”

Neji interrupted, “That sword depletes all chakra within its range, which is substantial. With enough time, it would have eroded our chakra, the Hokage’s, and that of everyone else gathered here.” He stated with finality to Tenten, “It’s inappropriate. In spite of the fact you won’t be disqualified for using it, you should have the sense not to use something like that in this setting.”

“Alright already!” Ino yanked hard on her hair, pulling Tenten’s head back painfully, “You can’t even congratulate her for winning, but go ahead and criticize!”

“It’s fine.” Tenten winced as Ino manhandled her, “Neji’s right. It has no place here.”

Ino muttered to herself and Sakura tried talking her down before excusing herself for the restroom again. Within minutes, Tenten had two, very basic buns tied on top of her head, which was a moderate improvement. She thanked Ino for her service. Shikamaru was still having a conversation with the Hokage about a concern of his, but it looked like it was wrapping up. He was headed back to the arena floor.

Meanwhile, Tenten beckoned her teammates over to the corner of the room and huddled in with them.

“I have more self-criticism to add to your commentary.” Tenten spoke in a low voice to Neji, “Aside from the fact that I might’ve hurt bystanders.”

The young men wore fuddled looks, surprised she wasn’t seeking an apology.

“Huo is descended from the same clan that I am.” Tenten blurted it out in a whisper, “I didn’t really know how to bring it up. But letting him confirm that I own our ancestral sword…maybe made things worse.”

Frown lines intensified on Neji’s face and Lee’s mouth formed an ‘o’ of bewilderment.

“I think he’s here because he’s been looking for it—for me.” She clarified, “And he wants it for
himself.”

Neji’s anger seemed a bit more three-dimensional, “And you did not find it prudent to tell us this earlier?”

Lee hissed in a breath, “The Hokage should be informed-!”

“There is no way the Hokage is unaware of it. Tsunade-sama has my file and family records. For some reason, Huo was allowed to participate anyway, which means…” Tenten counted off on her fingers as she cited the possibilities, “She doesn’t believe Huo is a threat. Or, she has security monitoring him while he’s here. Or, she wants to let this play out to see what his actual motive is. OR, and this is not as likely, she spoke with him already and got him to agree to be civil?”

“Not that last one.” Lee determined.

“Again,” Neji repeated, “Why not tell us?” He bumped his shoulder with Lee’s to get the point across.

“I…” Her eyes shifted between the two, “I was scared.”

Lee pursed his mouth worriedly and Neji finally did simmer down.

“I didn’t want it to be true. Maybe the sword is involved, but he…he doesn’t want to just fight me and hurt me.” Tenten explained in a low voice, “He showed me that…he wants to hurt me through you. My friends. He’s willing to kill you because he knows that I…” Her voice fluttered and she trailed off, remembering the look of glee on Huo’s face when he’d laid eyes on Neji and Hinata, then deciding to target them.

Lee pushed the group further into the huddle until they all touched foreheads; an adequate alternative to hugging. “Tenten…” Lee spoke a few quiet words in Hanwen to calm her, and then switched back to Nihongo, “Making yourself face this threat alone could be exactly what he wants you to do. Please depend on us more!”

“Depend on us.” Neji echoed, watching her nod and sniff in weary agreement. He then asked, “How did he show you?”

“Huo…” She hesitated and cleared her throat, “I’ve seen him around the village. He stalks…well…anyone I care about. He wanted to know what mattered to me. And then…” She stopped speaking, remembering something.

“What?” Lee’s eyebrows raised a bit.

“It was like he was never there. When I would look for him… it was like he disappeared.” Tenten recalled, straightening, rubbing her chin, “Like my dad.”

Lee’s face went blank in confusion. Surely she could not draw a parallel between her beloved father and worst adversary? Neji pressed ahead, deriving her meaning.

“He can do something your father could. Is it a jutsu?” Neji gathered.

She shook her head, “I’m pretty sure it isn’t. Sometimes my dad would just…disappear. I don’t think my mom did that, when I was a kid.” Tenten raised her hands as if to dismiss her memories, “What am I talking about? That makes no sense. It’s just because I’m spooked. He’s gotten into my head. That asshole…”
“I don’t think you’re wrong.” Neji was willing to vouch for it.

The group was distracted by the sound of Shikamaru’s announcement for the third match. Sakura had returned to the room in time to see a morbid assortment of worried looks fall on Tama. She had finished speaking quietly to Sato and then turned to her friends, totally unruffled by the silent concern. She accepted hugs from Kiba, Hinata, and Ino.

Sakura pulled her aside and held her hands, frowning like a stern mother, “Remember—”

“I know. Kaka-sensei made me rehearse it top to bottom.” Tama smiled at her, “Don’t worry, Sakura-chan.”

“I don’t know how to not worry about this.” The girl’s voice cracked, “Please beat him…or don’t be too stubborn to surrender. We’ve never fought anyone like him before.”

The older girl nodded and quickly set off. The Leaf Rookies had a moment of wordless introspection which ended with Sato scuttling away from the railing, setting out down the stairwell after Tama.

She heard his voice and stopped on a landing, allowing him to catch up. Sato looked at her helplessly; still not quite able to accept that she had been given the toughest match up of the Tournament. Tama was dressed in a sporty, full-length jumpsuit of black, with electric blue designs up the sides and arms. Her sleeves were rolled up, displaying how meticulously she had wrapped her hands in tape. She was grinning at him.

“You’re really worried about me.”

“Yeah.” His voice drifted back to its pre-pubescent tonality, mostly due to fright.

“I prepared for this. Sensei said he really thinks I can win.” Tama informed him, “And Kakashi-sensei usually doesn’t think anyone can win anything because he considers most people incompetent idiots.”

“Like me.” Sato offered.

“No.” She stepped up to him, letting him wrap his arms around her and rest his forehead on her shoulder, “What I mean is that…he and I took what we saw from Huo’s match in the preliminary round…and made sure I was twice as ready for that on a good day.” Tama added, “Sensei really beat the daylights out of me.”

“Yeah, I noticed. God, he’s such a jerk.”

“But can you…really do it? If you can’t win, Kakashi’s prepared to intervene, right? Or you won’t, maybe…” Sato suggested frailly, “Reconsider?” He felt her hand brushing his cheek, so reassuring. He couldn’t fall apart and cry about how miserable he was feeling, or that he had undermined their relationship with senseless, drunken actions. But the fear was more extreme an emotion—boiling in him, teasing the possibility that she was marching towards destruction.

He let her kiss him, even though he felt sad, still felt unclean—because no matter how terrible he was feeling, Sato understood her feelings mattered more, and he had to embrace and protect what she felt. Despite the inner turmoil, he noticed it was a very good kiss. Tama leaned back and gave him another unbearably confident, heartening look.

“See you in a little bit, Sato-kun.” She pulled away but his hand was closed tight around her wrist.
He did this a lot, she noted. Tama raised her arm up and kissed his knuckles before prying his hand away, “You’re trying to get me disqualified for being tardy, huh?”

“No, no.” He cleared his throat, “Sorry.”

She gave him one last pat before bounding down the last of the stairs. Sato made the solo journey to the second floor without bawling, although he was on the precipice of an emotional breakdown. His breathing evened out when he noticed one of Shino’s insects perched on his tunic, checking up on him.

By the time he had returned to the balcony, the entire Leaf congregation had stuffed themselves against the railing to watch. Shino respectfully gave Sato his spot so he could observe the match.

“That jumpsuit is so on trend.” Ino broke the silence, watching as Tama exited onto the arena floor.

“Lee’s is too.” Tenten built on the comment.

Lee perked up at the statement, “Tenten, does that mean you—”

“Nope, never.”

Shikamaru was having an inner logical debate about surprises and his ability to be surprised. Huo and Tama were both still making their respective walks towards the stadium’s center.

‘I actually want to be surprised today.’ Shikamaru told himself, ‘Tama is going to have to put in some major legwork to wow a skeptic like me. And on the other hand…Huo won’t have to do much to scare me into timing-out this match. Maybe. I haven’t seen enough of either of them to know how to call it for sure.’

Both combatants arrived and stood a reasonable distance apart. Shikamaru turned his head to look between the two, hyper aware of the tense silence and the full-blown staredown. Keeping in mind recommendations from Tsunade and other Exam regulators, Shikamaru steeled himself and raised his hand, “When you’re ready…”

The volume of the audience increased; many eager fans had actually wagered significant money on this first round match.

“Begin!”

As was most natural to Tama, she took an offensive stance that Lee and Gai often fell into. The only detectable change on Huo’s part was his impassive face drooping in disappointment. He looked at Tama impatiently.

From the observation post, Shikamaru was trying to determine what the holdup was. He returned to the two unmoving shinobi in the arena and stood by during a verbal exchange.

“You.” Huo spoke pointedly at Tama, “There is no need to keep up appearances.”

Without altering her pose in the slightest, she bit back, “Sorry, but I don’t know what appearances you’re referring to.”

“You are standing here like we are going to fight.” He clarified, “Forfeit the match now.”

“I have no intention of doing that.”
“You are the most inexperienced amateur of your group and an unworthy opponent.” Huo frigidly informed her, “I am not in the habit of providing warnings to foolish ninja. I make examples of them. Thanks are in order for my patience with you.”

The audience soaked up the sentiment and began tittering, able to hear the comments well enough through Shikamaru’s transmitting microphone that projected from speakers. Tama felt ice cold panic drip down her spine after being openly insulted, and the crowds seemed to be responding to Huo’s attitude. When she made no motion to surrender or apologize for her alleged blunder, Huo turned his back on her and faced the opposite direction in protest. Static noise in the stadium grew louder, piqued, and Shikamaru’s complaint for Huo to take his match seriously was drowned out in Tama’s ears.

‘I look so dumb right now.’ She swallowed hard, trying not to crack the cool exterior she was somehow maintaining, ‘He has no interest in fighting me. He thought this would be a free victory!’

Shikamaru had switched his mic off, frustrated, and was speaking in low tones to the uncooperative Rock ninja.

She had no clever comeback or snappy remark to make. ‘Not that I’m fond of provoking people…but this is embarrassing. I don’t want to wait for Shikamaru to DQ him for refusing to fight me...or for Huo to change his mind and try to assassinate me because I was stubborn.’ Then what to do? Shikamaru was muttering into a two-way radio and about to walk over to her to illuminate the situation.

‘Well...I could fan the flames of his stereotyping and judgement and see how that goes.’ Tama considered, borrowing a page from Sato’s book. She would go with that.

The kunoichi dashed faster than Shikamaru could blink, replacing herself in front of Huo with her back facing him. Her in-kind dis got Huo’s attention. Tama girlèd it up from that point.

She pulled her hair into a high ponytail and secured it with an elastic band. She rolled her shoulders to relax, did a few side bends and hip rotations, then taunted her adversary with highly suggestive squats.

Shikamaru, taking the unusual, snide warm-ups as some kind of subtle hint for him to back up, did indeed put some distance between himself and the competitors. He turned his mic back on and watched in bafflement.

Though she couldn’t see what Huo was making of her actions, Tama supposed it was somewhat inflammatory. Commotion from the audience suggested that she was being a delightful brat and they liked it.

Tama dipped into a low, frontal leg extension and then hurled herself backward with an explosion of speed. She had sprung to full height and snapped her southpaw at Huo’s jaw before Shikamaru had opened his eyes after blinking. Huo had raised his arm disinterestedly to block the strike. Tama rolled with it; her lightning-speed punches were no joke, and utterly uncommon of most men, let alone kunoichi. Shikamaru wisely vacated the premises when he realized Tama had things under control, for the most part.

Huo was blocking with one arm. She got it. She understood he was trying to discourage her; he was trying to make her angry and feel inferior. Tama kept up with a blink-and-you’d-miss-it boxing routine intermingled with standard Leaf Hurricane kicks more in an effort to annoy than to harm. But when he tried (and missed) to stomp on her foot, Tama was a bit galled herself.
The Leaf kunoichi began to run literal, superspeed circles around Huo, almost daring him to try once more to hit her. His monolid eyes were dark and devoid of life, but Huo was watching and keeping track of her movements and positioning. He wasn’t childish enough to halt her with an extended arm to clothesline her, so he waited inquisitively to see what she would do next.

And in the sliver somewhere between his blind spot and peripheral, Huo saw her breaking free of the spiral. She charged in with her tape-wrapped fist, like some storybook hero for little girls she probably thought she was… He caught that fist in his hand, which was hot to the touch, and simultaneously copped a full foot in his mouth and cheek as a sneak-attack Leaf Hurricane caught him on his opposite side. The kick launched him sideways, and as he soared Huo realized she had snuck a Fire Clone into her high-speed encirclement, probably behind his back. He had caught the clone’s punch…then she’d kicked him in the face.

Huo somersaulted in the air and wiped his lip when he landed neatly on his feet. Tama, by then accompanied by an entourage of six Fire Clones she’d taken the time to create, bore down on him with a series of gymnastic, coordinated assaults.

He became less stingy about defending himself, whirling and dipping in Wushu forms, blocking the attacks of Fire bunshin with both arms. He couldn’t be bothered with destroying clones that would burn out within a few minutes— but the corner of Huo’s mouth twitched in astonishment when he evaded a clone and flung it…only to be locked into an arm-bar hold that pulled him to the ground. He rolled backwards, up again to his feet, trying not to be wrestled into submission, and flexibly rolled his neck and head away from thunder-clap punches being thrown at him. Huo was slippery quick and avoided Tama’s attacks, but it took more effort than he’d wanted to expend to pry the arm-bar clone away.

When he got a grip on it, the Fire Clone in question began smoking. Huo kicked off of it with two feet, soaring above the heads of the kunoichi doppelgangers, and escaped the clone that had been secretly patched over with paper-bombs. The explosion rattled the ground of the stadium and produced thick, acrid smoke.

In clearer air, the original Tama had begun fighting him in earnest, faster and stronger than she had let on initially. At least to himself, Huo amended his previous belief that this was an amateur, boring opponent. She was actually funny. This was funny.

Huo smiled to himself and entertained a brief kicking duel with her, outspeeding her efforts, clipping her chin with his heel, and then dropped to sweep her legs out from under her. Tama toppled, but her Fire Clones dove in to stave him off from landing a finisher. She provided them with covering fire of projectiles as she rose to her feet.

His tone was conversational, “Have you noticed that the Ninjutsu most shinobi use has terrible economy?” Huo ducked another southpaw, “Well, have you? Your clones will expire within minutes. Clones are breakable, unreliable. And most Ninjutsu can only channel through and command a finite amount of matter…”

She had no idea what he was blathering about, but that last kick almost had him. Tama wheeled about, keeping up with the Rock nin as he tottered around and avoided the Taijutsu mob.

Huo flipped away elegantly, a good sprint away from the gang of Tamas, announcing, “Tao Arts are not wasteful like Ninjutsu.” He motioned with his arms relaxed at his sides, slowly raising them up past his stomach and chest in a scooping motion, gathering energy, taking a deep breath and then exhaling, “Would you like to see?”

Tama had some good sense to stay behind the pack as her clones charged. She watched Huo as if he
were sucking through a straw, inhaling, and drew in her clones— degrading them into wisps of amorphous flame as he swallowed the fire. With each bunshin devoured, Huo’s cheeks were comically puffed. Tama grimaced and supposed that he wasn’t done showing her what his Tao Arts could do.

He exhaled a jet of empowered flame that most members of the Sarutobi and Uchiha clans could scarcely conceive of with hand seals. Tama made a break for it, running as Huo swept the horizontal column of burning catastrophe close behind her. She boldly ran up the arena’s stone wall and flipped off of it, bounding over the fire stream, and began running in the other direction.

‘I bet he has a Fire Nature, like I do. Unless his Tao-techniques can manipulate any element, and I doubt that, he’s just showing off!’ Tama also recalled Huo had put out Sato’s burning Grass opponent in the Preliminary Round, so she stood by her deduction. She was flustered by how long Huo continued to breathe fire, ‘I hope he can keep it up! I’m going to borrow some of it!’

She stopped running and made hand seals, fully prepared for Huo to scorch her as she had provided him with the opportunity.

Her friends watching from the balcony, however, thought Tama had signed her death warrant.

“What are you doing?” Sakura bellowed, thrashing her arms and pointing, “Tama!” Kiba and Akamaru were poised to leap the rail, howling and jabbering, and beside them Ino and Chouji were also having a conniption.

All Tenten could manage was to cover her mouth to hold in a petrified screech. Lee was wincing but withholding commentary until any damage was confirmed. Shino was silent. But Neji seemed to gather from the look on Sato’s face that something amazing was afoot.

The Hatake leaned on the rail, blue eyes glimmering, face lit with anticipation, “Do those hand seals look familiar to anyone?”

“I have not seen that exact configuration before.” Neji acknowledged, “What is-?”

“Right, because then she’d be using one of my jutsu.” Sato grinned, “But it looks like Kakashi let her revise it a bit!”

Down below, Tama held her wrist, letting a massive quantity of chakra and hissing Fire Release well up without any coherent shape manipulation. She ran at Huo with Gate-assisted speed and the pink-hot bonfire in her hand cut apart his fancy Tao-Fire like butter, absorbing and refining what he donated.

“Honokiri!” She barreled into the Rock ninja and hurled the Blaze Cutter at his ribcage.

Tama could feel the rustle of Huo’s shirt at her fingertips, his heart a short, fatal jab away— but her hand went no further than that. A repulsive force was pushing back just as hard, forcing her off, and the kunoichi narrowed her eyes as she spotted the faint glimmer of iridescent Hanzi characters. They ringed the translucent, lambent shield around Huo with several Tao Arts prepared long in advance—a concealed defense.

Both competitors darted apart, startled. The hissing, furnace roar of the Honokiri faded away as Tama took deep breaths, acknowledging that the assassination technique that Kakashi had passed along would do no good until her opponent’s chakra barrier was eliminated.

Huo looked at her for a long moment, reevaluating his prejudices.
“You’re not here to win.” He observed, “You are only here to stop me. Did your teacher put you up to this? To prevent me from advancing to future rounds? Even if that means killing me…he condoned such a thing?” Huo was plainly affronted, baring his teeth, and he raised his hands to rest in a limber stance, “Despicable. I should report you to the proctor.”

“You threatened to kill all of my friends! Lee told us.” Tama handed him a counterpoint, “I won’t stand idly by while I know what you might do to them.”

“What a sickeningly quixotic goal you’ve set. I don’t feel like letting you surrender anymore.” Huo sneered at her as he slipped through hand seals.

His transition into true Ninjutsu was alarming, as Huo followed one Earth technique after another, hurling geometric slabs of the arena’s dry dirt floor. Tama could not evade all of the hunks of earth in rapid succession, resorting to vault over one still-muddy slab to catapult herself into the next with a shattering punch. The stone crumbled under her blow. As dirt rained down, Huo rushed at her between two upended pieces of the stadium floor—a makeshift alleyway. His Wushu was polished and vicious; clipping her twice in the face though she blocked and weaved away from him.

Tama smashed an exit through the wall of stone to her left, and took the close-quarters brawl out into open air again. She rallied; swinging, jabbing, and kicking faster, lighter—feeling the sweat on her skin hiss away into vapor as she discreetly drew on the power of two Inner Gates. When Huo flipped away from one of her right hooks, his queue of hair streaming as he looked away from her only for a split second…

The Rock nin wheezed at an impact, just as she vanished from his sight, though he felt where she had reappeared—beneath his chin: knocking him mercilessly through the air with up-ladder kicks. He was dazed for a moment as he soared like a kite through open air, and the watching crowd ooohed at the sight. Tama replaced herself under his back, “Shadow of the Dancing Leaf!”

She had begun to snare him with arm wrappings, ready to get a firm anchor on him to dive into Front Lotus, but the bandages burned as he exhaled fire. Huo’s arm snapped out, grabbing her forearm, and he leveraged himself to spin and face her as they fell. She lost count of how many punches to the stomach she took before striking the ground hard. Huo hopped lightly away and dusted his clothes off.

Tama saw double, staring up at the sky framed by the stadium’s circular top, her vision rippling as she sought the willpower to stand and take a breath. There was a great rumbling through the ground as Huo used another Earth Jutsu several meters away from her. She felt the shudder, heard the cracking of stadium floor being torn up. Tama rose to her feet and beheld a slab, three-quarters of the dirt floor they had to stand on—loosened and tossed up as Huo completed hand signs. Her brain could hardly reconcile the feat, something that maybe elite ninja might do to squash a threat, and tried to calculate her response.

Huo leaped, a figure in black, surreally attaching himself with chakra to the bottom of his giant, rocky stamp, and with great strength, flipped it ’round its axis to smash it flat-side down onto Tama, “Stone Press!”

The kunoichi determined that there was no sensible direction to escape in. Drawing on a third Inner Gate, Tama launched herself at the threat instead, excavating through the earth slab with jackhammer kicks, “Blooming Lotus!” As the rocky floor tumbled apart, the two combatants sailed past each other in opposite directions.

From the observation area, Shikamaru was trying not to stress too much about how the arena had gone from a simple, level floor (briefly irrigated to be a pond) and then ended up as a dry,
disheveled, mountainous mess after Taijutsu experts had their way with it. Unless Tsunade complained about the occurrence being a disruption to future competitors, there was nothing he as proctor could do about it.

Both adversaries skipped down towers of stone toward opposite sides of the arena, not in clear view of one another. Huo suspected that what he’d glimpsed of Tama was actually a Fire Clone that she was trying to draw his sight to. And with that in mind, Huo was only half-surprised when he landed, watching with a frown as a pair of hands darted up from the tilled soil to pull him down into the ground with the same, low-level *Headhunter Jutsu* the pink-haired girl had used.

He made no move to free himself, observing in annoyance as Tama was above ground to pounce on him. Her pile-driver met the Rock nin’s *Tao Shield*, as did her follow up kicks, and as Tama affirmed the absoluteness of his cheap and foreign defense, she retreated again.

‘How do I break through that?’ She wracked her brain for a solution, ‘I don’t even know what it is. That isn’t a typical jutsu— he’s been calling it a Tao Art. He must have had it in place even before our match, and it blocked Honokiri without a problem...’ Tama took deep breaths, composing herself on a rocky ledge, ‘The characters on that defense sphere...one of them is dim now. One of eight is gone. Maybe he didn’t have the chakra to support whatever technique it had been, after a while. So then...he has limits. If I can push him past his limits, that shield has to go away at some point.’

It was a very optimistic theory, but she hoped it would serve as a solution. Tama relaxed, deciding then to open as many Inner Gates as she could manage, keeping an eye on Huo below as he popped up from his dirt prison and dusted himself off again. He seemed to be aware of what she was preparing to do.

“When someone tells a joke out of order, giving the punchline first, mistakenly...” Huo made sure she could hear him, “That’s what this match feels like. It was supposed to be amusing, but you’ve ruined it.”

“Two problems with that: one, you don’t have a sense of humor.” Tama pointed out, “And two, this isn’t a joke. You wouldn’t know one if it rolled up and cut off your braid!” When she opened the Fifth Gate, her skin flushed red, stones clattered around her feet, and her ponytail thrashed widely as steam surged off her skin.

Not to be outdone, Huo bent into a low, regal posture and flicked his hand over his translucent ring of *Tao Arts*, scrolling through what remained. He tapped two characters and exhaled, letting the arts convert into an aura, simmering above him in soft blues, greens, and orange light— the burning silhouette of a phoenix that he would be happy to show off to any of his competitors and all of the audience. Because if this Leaf shinobi really wanted him to take her seriously and fight with his true strength, and she intended to pound the daylights out of him with the Eight Inner Gates— she could learn some much-needed humility from *Fènghuáng Wushu*.

He darted around when she did, the girl probably thinking she was quick and safely out of reach. She probably didn’t care that he was glowing and colorful, the same way he didn’t much care she’d become a steam engine— their reflexes equally acute, speed doubled. They replaced themselves multiple times around the arena, trying to decide how best to engage each other— the rubble they’d displaced was quite the bother.

He copied her when Tama took a perch near the top rim of the arena’s wall, much too close to audience seating for comfort— by the look on the Hokage’s face. But they were safe behind Leaf’s cozy, unseen Sealing Corps barrier, although Huo would make no mention that he knew it was there, indeed for an occasion such as this. When Tama began to charge like a human bullet, circling around
the circumference of the wall, Huo likewise imitated her fleet-footed rush, round and round each other until they closed in and met.

Air particles shook when the ensuing flurries of punches and kicks collided. Cheers were deafening in the stadium, thrilled that the proverbial gloves had come off.

Huo’s hits were connecting. Not as if his attacks were any more precise or quicker than Tama’s furious close-quarters devilry—but he could bend and slip in ways that were unlike the Taijutsu of ninja. She was pressed to keep up with him. His firebird cloak flared briefly as he poured his strength into a bulldozing effort, pummeling her with phoenix-boxing that chipped away at the earthen structures around them, pushing her through physical obstacles like a hydraulic press with no escape in sight. If she didn’t act, she would certainly be smashed into paste against the stadium’s wall, or be punched through and out of the building, if the proctor didn’t stop it.

While Huo was mid-way through a turning kick, she took what was perhaps the singular opening she had during the onslaught. Tama double-kicked her legs up to hook both feet behind Huo’s neck, swinging down with her full weight and Gate strength, and she flung the Rock nin like a pebble in a slingshot.

He skipped like a stone over dust and debris, rolled up an incline, and then acrobatically caught himself. Huo landed on one foot and held a stork pose, still glowing with chakra, his face smug. He didn’t bother reacting to her initiation of Reverse Lotus. Tama’s sledgehammering, beastly efforts kicked Huo and his intact sphere-barrier around the arena like a child’s ball. When she reached the height of her climb, ready to snare and double-strike him back down to the earth, Huo finally reacted. With a minimal phoenix-boxing jab, he flicked her off with his extended aura and vaulted above her, vectoring down with an inhumane comet kick.

Tama crashed through a stone pillar on the way down before she was lodged, out of sight, in a pile of overturned boulders and soil. Huo could hear the furious, indignant shouting and taunting of her Leaf comrades as they watched from their balcony.

Huo landed lightly and then charged, imagining what he would do when he found her crumpled up and whimpering from the Inner Gates recoil. ‘Five Gates is a bit much for you, isn’t it pretty girl? This day should teach you that using Inner Gates is the dead man’s preferred Taijutsu. When you can’t move and bear the pain…you bring more of it unto yourself!’

He flicked his eyes left and right as he closed the distance, puzzled by the odd phenomena occurring in the arena. Stones were skittering and bouncing up from the ground, and with a great rumble, Huo witnessed the kunoichi launch herself up with a mighty jump, ‘She opened another—!’

A first, second, and third fiery punch hit him so hard and fast that, as Huo rolled and tumbled in the safety of his Tao Barrier, he had to define the locations of ground and sky again. Once right-side-up, he could see the full, extending glory of her Sixth Gate Taijutsu spanning in a fan of ignited punches, “Morning Peacock!”

The sheer volume of it would surely crack his defense, Huo noted sourly, weighing his options in all of a heartbeat. Now aware that the kunoichi was more than just a Taijutsu enthusiast, ‘A lunatic—that’s who is willing to subject themselves to jutsu that cripple!’ Huo decided to use a technique he had meant to keep to himself, if spending more chakra meant he could save the integrity of a waning shield. This art he could only use once, for it took an entire day to prepare and rejuvenate it. Huo slid his hands in opposite directions, diverting energy into a circular motion, and willed a reflective Tao Art into a glinting, icon of yin and yang. When Tama’s assault struck, he braced himself on steady legs as the icon spun on his outreached fingertips, bouncing back the attack from whence it came. The arena’s invisible Sealing Corps barrier contained the resulting blast.
At the VIP booth, Tsunade was fanning dust bits and smoke from her face after the Morning Peacock barrages had crashed together. She spoke sidelong to Gaara over the din of the stadium, “I am honestly debating if it’s a good idea to send Shikamaru back in there. I need him to call this…but it won’t look good if he comes out of there with a shiner.”

“You think that’s all that would happen to him?” Gaara didn’t like how she minimized the potential danger for her proctor. What was going on below was approaching tectonic activity in terms of power output.

“I can’t send you down there to end it. You’re a guest and it’d have to be pro bono, since I didn’t add you to Exam payroll.” Tsunade tapped her nails to her lips, “But you’d come out of there in one piece, Kazekage-sama.”

“Send Shikamaru.”

“Fine. You puss.” She waved at Shikamaru insistently where he stood on the level beneath the Kage’s booth. The Nara gave her a concerned look, thinking at least a *Hail Mary* was in order before he jumped back in. Shikamaru was wise to hang back for safety’s sake. The rumble had continued.

Huo took a mighty swing at empty air and it prompted a chorus of confused twittering in the audience. Greatly peeved, the Iwa nin glanced around to look for the lunatic kunoichi who had not yet collapsed in pain. At this point, he would prefer a sitting duck to a mobile opponent. With his *Yin-Yang Reflection* spent, he could potentially tread much thinner ice in future rounds, ‘And I cannot thank her for that.’

And there, skirting just beyond a toppled pillar of rock, Huo spotted her and then sprang, phoenix cloak glowing, and smashed the earthy pile apart when he landed. He’d come up empty handed again. ‘She hasn’t made any clones. I know she isn’t trying to distract me.’ He kept watch from the corner of his eye, certain that she was simply trying to prey on his blind spots before she toppled over and gave up. Stones underfoot were still skittering, he noticed.

Yet he wasn’t facing front when it would have behooved him to, and some booming force bashed him in the face, hurling him back. He was starting to feel pain. The *Tao Barrier* was sagging under pressure, relying on the last dredges of chakra he had allotted to it. Huo spun like a feline to catch her with a brutal kick as she went by, but that too hit nothing.

Huo realized, as he pitched forward and was knocked akimbo by another ungodly force, that it was because he was moving and seeing too slow. He was hit twice more before it occurred to him to invest fully in his *barrier*, realizing he could indeed wait it out— that she wouldn’t last. Though, if she had time and strength enough to continue for a few seconds, neither would he.

This time Huo did clothesline her with the wing of his glowing aura, and watched with satisfaction as Tama slid the radius-length of the arena straight into a wall— too fast to stop herself. Huo’s face dropped when she bounded off of it and blunted away from his sights again. He then perceived that they were rolling and tousling at a high speed he could not personally achieve, but he had knocked her in the chin several times as they grappled and snapped apart in a meteor-shower of Taijutsu. When his *Tao Barrier* glimmered apart without a sound, Huo felt his first kick of the Exam wallop him in the stomach. He weathered it well— but before he could roll to a complete stop in the dirt and hope she’d do the same, Tama hurled herself over him.

His eyes were watering, so he was unsure if he imagined her gleaming with the outline of some beast. Huo contacted his faculties, replenishing what he could of his defense, and simultaneously gawked as Tama balled her two hands together as a hammer, raised above her head, and brought them down on him with horrific force, “Noon Tiger Cub!”
The debris and dust cloud that billowed up was so pervasive that Natsuhi kindly formed a chakra wing and fanned her fellow village leaders for some fresh air. Tsunade had seen Shikamaru head down to determine a victor of the match, if anyone was left. He would probably wander through dust and wreckage for a while before he found anyone.

Gaara apprised that the match they had witnessed was *not* characteristic of Chunin. “It exceeded many Exam parameters in an almost punishable sort of way.” He reported.

“It was…a public safety concern.” Natsuhi agreed.

“What am I paying the Sealing Corps for?” Tsunade gruffed, “So it smells a bit smoky— everyone is safe and sound.”

“I give this match full points.” Tazuna decided aloud, “I don’t know jack-all about the jutsu we just saw, but it didn’t look like the shit Genin or Chunin in the Tide Village can use. I don’t think I’ve met a Jounin yet who can do *that*.” Hidden in a paper bag in his lap, the old man discreetly cracked open a beer can. Everyone still heard it.

Back on the ground, as the dust was still clearing, Tama had tottered away and shut her Gates after the coup de grâce. She collapsed to her knees, shuddering violently.

So that was it. That was about exactly what Kakashi had in mind when he’d asked her to incapacitate Huo in as lethal a way as she saw fit. They had both agreed it was for the benefit of her group as a whole, even if it would take her out of contention.

Tama had prodded at the very limit of the Sixth Gate, reaching far past what was sensible. Much of it had been improvisation, but she held out long enough to stuff Huo in a hole somewhere. And now the pain had caught up. Tama tried to recall how to breathe properly, tried to somehow block out the sensation of nerves revolting, haranguing the damage to her muscles and bones. She felt patches of skin had rubbed away through her jumpsuit. She let tears roll freely and silently down her cheeks, completely unashamed.

‘I’m pretty sure…*my left hand is broken.*’ She considered her right hand, which didn’t have much feeling in it. There was no way to tell how long she’d be out of commission, or when she’d feel comfortable enough punching a dummy or sparring partner again.

Within the dim, dusty cloud, Tama looked across the craggy pitch to where Huo lay. She swallowed hard when she noticed him twitch. A sniff of air caught in her nose as she watched him slowly, so slowly, heave himself forward, weakly slipping his legs under himself again.

She had the bright idea to call Shikamaru over, wherever he was in the cloud, but even her voice wasn’t working correctly. Ah. She’d nearly bitten her tongue off earlier, since she’d hit Huo (and been hit by him) so hard. Her heart pounded as she watched Huo rise and stand in the shade of a jagged, displaced boulder. And then, a thousandth of a second later, he was standing in front of her.

Her brain tried to process it. *’No…that’s not…speed. He isn’t fast. He walked over here like there was a door. Like the distance was so short…’* He could never hold a candle to her speed, she was certain. But Huo stepped into the long shadow cast over him and then emerged beside Tama where another long, yawning shadow stretched on the arena floor.

He looked furious. He was positively livid— his hair yanked and frizzed out of its queue, clothes dirtied, his chin and hands bruised.

“Insubordinate cunt.” Huo hissed and pushed hair out of his face, “You’ve spoiled six— Six Tao
Visibility improved for onlookers, and many spectated the tail end of Huo completing hand signs for his *Stone Press Jutsu*. On the inconveniently far side of the area blocked by debris, Shikamaru was hurrying to reach the combatants.

In her seat, Tsunade beheld a scattering of movement within the stadium— involving those who were most invested in the match.

As the earth slab from Huo’s retaliatory attack crashed over his defenseless target, Shikamaru snatched him a hair too late in a Shadow Bind. The proctor stood dazed for a moment as he held Huo rooted to the spot, watching as Kakashi and Gai arrived in the same split second. Gai moved to exhume his niece from Huo’s *Stone Press*, and Kakashi had rushed past Shikamaru on his left side.

It was only then Shikamaru noticed the suffocating killing intent of the person coming up behind him, and Kakashi was gracious enough to intervene on behalf of the heedless proctor and his captive.

Wide-eyed, Shikamaru watched as Kakashi caught Sato in a run and tried to halt him, only to be dragged several meters as his nephew tenaciously tried to wrestle away from him.

Not that he had any true desire to protect Huo, but Exam protocol demanded that he, as a proctor, keep participants of the Tournament from harm— especially third party attacks. Shikamaru stepped sideways over stones, very carefully puppeteering Huo away from the strife.

A string of spit flew out of Sato’s mouth as he screamed his head off, pushing back against Kakashi as his uncle disarmed him of a drawn chakra sabre. All manner of nonsense was uttered from the young man’s mouth, as he demanded, with some believable authority, that Shikamaru hand Huo over. While the audience buzzed all through the stadium during the unofficial timeout, Kakashi managed to drag Sato to the nearest passageway back into the building’s interior. Since Shikamaru and Huo were no longer within earshot, Sato decided to shout at Kakashi instead.

“—it was *cheap!* He shouldn’t have been *anywhere* near her, then *he was*! Let me—!”

“You need to stop this—”

“I need to stop? Why aren’t you out there for her? You *made* her fight in this match! You let Tama act as a cushion for the rest of us, Kakashi.”

“She told me she wouldn’t back down. I couldn’t convince her otherwise—” Kakashi got knocked by a sharp head-butt for his trouble, and in response he flattened Sato against a wall to hold him still, “Don’t even *try* to cross me here and now. I’ll put out the word for you to stay a Genin for the *rest of your days.*”

“Then *do it.*” Sato spat and continued to struggle in the bear-hug, “I don’t care anymore! *Let me go out there.* I need to *be there,* Kakashi, she’s mine…and if she’s…if she…” Sato’s voice clattered as if he had a throat full of marbles, “…I won’t…d-do…anything to that asshole…but I need to be with her.”

Hearing what he wanted to hear, Kakashi released him.

Immediately, Sato bolted out of the doorway with no weapons drawn, as promised. He came upon Gai and Kiba having successfully dug through the earth pile, and they laid Tama flat under Sakura’s outstretched hands. She kneeled and bent her head above Tama’s face, calling her name, pinching Tama’s wrist in her fingers to find a pulse.
She was brutally mangled. While Gai and Kiba could hardly look, so profoundly disturbed by the sight, Sato stared without flinching when he came to a stop beside the girl he loved. It seemed as if her lower body had taken the worst of it. Maybe she’d found the strength to block and protect her head and chest? There was no way to tell. Sakura had her hands everywhere, working double-time, muttering things to Tama about shopping and girlish charm and damn, even Tsunade never hit that hard. But she did. Everyone had seen it, Sakura told her.

By that point, Kakashi was persuading both Kiba and Gai to stop staring at Huo as if a bullseye had appeared on his face. It was making Shikamaru anxious. After briefly deliberating the consequences of murder in broad daylight, in front of nine thousand spectators, the men decided against it. Greatly frustrated, Kiba rejoined Sakura as Tournament-assigned medic-nin began to flock to the fallen kunoichi. Gai exchanged brief words with Kakashi before going to locate his brother, Ken, who was probably racing through the building to find a way to reach his daughter.

A staff medic listened to Sakura’s comments and then had Tama placed on a stretcher to be moved. They would take her to emergency care at the hospital, the medic clarified, and they would also keep her team informed of her condition. Extensive internal trauma had put Tama at risk, and they would check again for signs of brain injury even through Sakura had not detected any.

Sakura held Kiba’s arm as he shook with anger, and she turned to Sato to speak as rationally as possible, “Stay with her, Sato. Kiba-kun’s match is next. This is…I don’t know what we—”

“…Shino…” Sato muttered under his breath. He looked at Sakura as if he was splitting in two, and then kept pace with the retreating medics who were removing Tama from the arena.

Kakashi returned from speaking with Shikamaru, passing along news to his two quaking students, “We can’t pin him with a technicality. Shikamaru doesn’t have him dead to rights since he couldn’t classify what technique Huo used as a gap-closer…so we’re going to wait for the officials to have the last word. That should have Huo disqualified, hopefully. Then in a short while, Kiba,” He said pointedly to the boy, who seemed to snap out of his fury, “You’ll enter your match with a level head. Got that?”

Kiba nodded wearily.

“Let’s head inside for a minute.” Kakashi advised. He led them along into the junction hallway of the stadium where restrooms, refreshments, and staircases to upper levels mingled. The man patted Sakura’s shoulder as she lowered her chin to her chest and sniffled.

Kakashi gave a long sigh and noted, “This won’t be good. No one is going to be thinking straight from here on out. Ken will be at Gai’s throat; that I’m sure of. It’s really me he should be taking issue with.”

“Tama said she never planned to surrender. You didn’t force her.” Kiba reiterated.

“Yeah…but I asked her to try to stop Huo from advancing. That effort may have jeopardized her needlessly.” Kakashi ran a hand through his hair, vexed, “While I feel that she’s put quite the dent in him…I’d hoped for more. I wanted to put you all in a better position in later rounds…to face each other civilly and not go against foreign competitors.”

“I still don’t understand how…his jutsu worked…” Sakura cleared her throat and straightened.

“Not all of what we saw were true Ninjutsu or Taijutsu…” Kakashi acknowledged, “I have no insight on how to deal with Tao Arts, I’m afraid. I want you both to be cautious going forward. Forfeiting a match will not disappoint me. Please know that.”
They nodded to their teacher, and as they were about to consider a concession stand’s green tea bottles, just beyond a non-public checkpoint…a rabble began between a wayward spectator and two guards. An old man was clamoring at them to allow him into the participants-only concourse. His Nihongo was terrible and heavily accented. Sakura squinted and recognized the uproarious intruder.

“I think…that’s Lee’s grandfather.” She rapidly began to imagine why Wong Leung would have left his seat on the upper level and try to trespass in a restricted area.

Kiba caught on, “Think he’d know something…? Like, about what we just saw?”

“Yup.”

They turned to Kakashi in unison.

“Alright, alright…” The Jounin loped over to the guards and politely fibbed to them, “Hey there. I’ve asked this gentleman to come down here to consult with me, actually. I’ll bring him on through.”

A chubby guard was adhering to the rules, “He’s got no credentials—”

“He can’t cause any trouble. He’s a hundred years old.” Kakashi chided.

Wong Leung frowned.

“No ID Pass, no entry—” The stalwart guard sputtered and toppled over beside a turnstile. When his companion blinked into Kakashi’s exposed Sharingan eye, he too gently settled himself on the floor for a nap.

“Hmph!” Wong Leung folded his arms and imperiously proceeded past the checkpoint.

“You’re Lee’s grandfather, is that right?” Kakashi asked as he proceeded with the old man towards the stairwell.

I am. I need to speak to Lee right away. Wong Leung stopped himself and grumbled, trying his luck in a second language, “Talk to Lee.”

“Er, yeah. Come along then, Mr-?”

Enough chit chat, you great bag of stuffing. I could’ve gotten past those fools myself. Wong Leung was making his way up the stairs just a bit stooped over.

Kakashi gave a bemused look to his pupils before ushering them along.

Sato had kept up with the medical evac crew for as long as they tolerated his fluttering presence, snapping at him to stop touching their unconscious patient. They made a brief stop in the Exam-Finalist treatment room and transferred the girl to a rolling gurney, contacted the hospital a few streets south of the stadium, and continuously checked her vitals.

His fingertips skimmed Tama’s forehead protector on her brow before he was pushed away with finality, and ordered to return to the concourse. Sato stood in the corridor with his heart in his throat, wondering what would happen as the medics wheeled her off. Would Tama wake asking for him? Could she move? Would her pain be unbearable, like what he recalled of his injuries in the Land of Rain?

He took a few rattling breaths and then turned back, watching as Gai and Ken filled the space ahead, speaking in hushed tones and moving briskly— like when Kakashi and Gai competed in pointless
footraces. But Ken’s haste was not pointless. When his eyes fell on Sato, Ken diverted his path and stopped beside him.

“Aren’t you going to the hospital?” The man sniffed.

“I…I was told not to. I’m expected to compete.”

“How self-sacrificing you are.” Ken observed.

As Sato flinched and took the jibe, Gai intervened, “Ken, we can’t leave without the official ruling and knowing if the Tournament will proceed.”

“Of course it will. Why would the Hokage try to interrupt this monetized circus for my daughter’s sake?” Ken spat, “Miako took the south exit. She and her brother will meet me at the hospital. And…” He turned to Sato, “You stay here. We don’t need you there.” He glared back at his brother, “And I don’t need you there either.”

Ken stormed off.

Sato watched the man round the corner and disappear. Gai exhaled loudly through his nostrils, filled with clashing emotions.

“As soon as this is over, we will join them.” Gai advised calmly, “My brother is upset. He was concerned for Tama-chan well over a month ago…and I am sure he never imagined that she would fight so fearlessly today.”

They backtracked through the hallway together, and Sato mused at the night and day difference between Gai and Ken. Gai always treated him like family. Ken always treated him like deadweight.

“Would he have felt better…” Sato thought out loud about Ken, “If I had attacked Huo? If Kakashi hadn’t stopped me—”

“I told him to stop you.” Gai said.

Climbing the stairs in silence, it occurred to Sato that, yes, maybe Ken may have felt a shred of vindication watching his daughter be avenged. He was the hard-nosed, confrontational, surly type who would appreciate such a gesture from his future son-in-law. Naturally, such a notion curdled Gai’s blood.

Upon reaching the Leaf Finalist balcony, a highly unusual scene unfolded before them.

Lee was there surrounded by his peers in a semi-circle, and his short grandfather stood beside him with his arms folded behind his back. Some sort of conference was being held.

Gai approached Kakashi and asked if allowing a spectator into the Finalist-only area was permissible.

“If it isn’t,” Kakashi supposed, “The officials don’t need to know about it. Even we shouldn’t be up here right now. But we’re still waiting on the match determination so we have some time to kill.”

“Gai-sensei,” Rather somber, Lee greeted his mentor, “This is my grandpa Wong Leung. He was alarmed by the last match. He says he wants us to be as informed as possible about Huo and the Tao Arts he uses.”

Gai could not muster the strength to grin as he normally would have, but he gave his gratitude to the
old man, “Thank you. We are in fear for our students.”

That damn Hokage won’t stop this Tournament, will she? Wong Leung wondered, Not even if teachers ask her to?

Lee translated, “Grandpa asked if the Hokage will not consider ending the Tournament if Jounin Sensei request it?”

“I doubt it.” Kakashi replied thoughtfully, “While she has her concerns about that Rock Genin, she would warn any competitor who fears for his or her safety to surrender the match.”

“She has invested much in this Exam.” Gai added.

Surrender. Fuh! What if that brute doesn’t accept surrender? Wong Leung chided, Lee, tell everyone this. Your friends. Tao Arts are formulas. I had no idea there would be a competitor here who could perform them at such a high level. It shocked me out of my seat when I saw it.

Still listening to his grandfather, Lee echoed, “Formulas?”

Yes. As a child, I watched in awe as Tao Masters in my homeland wielded them, but I have never seen a soul use them in these lands. That Rock ninja was taught by a master. I myself can hardly form a script if I tried, and yet he had a ring of verses prepared for his duel. The only way to stop Tao Arts is with Tao Arts: they must be undone, like unwinding a knot. To cancel one another. Therefore, none of you can stop the techniques he will use against you. Wong Leung announced.

“Ah…” Grimacing, Lee relayed the explanation, “Grandpa says that he has not seen anyone use Tao Arts here to the degree that Huo has…outside of the Middle Kingdom. We cannot stop it. Tao Arts can only be halted by other Tao Arts.”

Not Ninjutsu. Wong Leung added.

“Not Ninjutsu.” Lee added.

Kakashi acknowledged, “I couldn’t copy those techniques with the Sharingan.”

Building on the idea, Neji recalled astutely, “He could absorb Fire Clones with a breath.”

Yes, exactly Neji. The old man nodded to him.

“Wait, what do you mean we can’t stop it?” Kiba protested, “That dick is outnumbered. If we each fought him in subsequent matches, he’d be finished by the Final Round.”

What sense is there in risking your death? Wong Leung thrashed his head and his queue swung, That scoundrel is as dishonorable and abhorrent as they come. He won’t obey the same rules that you Leaf children do. He will kill you if it pleases him. What he seeks in this village is not contingent upon his victory in the Tournament. It is apparent.

Lee parlayed the counterpoint.

“All the more reason to confront him now.” Neji was aligned with Kiba’s reasoning.

“Excuse my input, but I was watching that match very closely,” Kakashi tapped his hitai-ate concealing his Sharingan eye, “And Tama did stop a Tao Art. At least one, at any rate.”

Wong Leung tried to brush that statement off, The boy’s chi expired. She did not stop it.
Lee passed on his grandfather’s retort.

“Well, that counts as wearing him down, doesn’t it? He can be injured. And that’s all that it will take.” Kakashi reasoned, “Brute force would stop anyone who’s out of chakra.”

*The point remains...you would try to challenge and weaken him at your own peril.* Wong looked to all of the young, fresh faces watching him, *Do teachers truly care so little for their pupils in this country? Was that young woman a sacrifice to feed your pride?* He turned to look at Sato, who was wilted beside Gai, *Is that young man’s suffering not obvious? Why don’t you ask him to fight the scoundrel, and let him die and be put out of his misery?*

Shocked, Lee was at a loss for words. Everyone stared at Lee and waited for the scandalous proclamation.

Instead, Tenten repeated Wong Leung’s statement, “He said: We will challenge Huo at our own peril. Do our Sensei really care for us so little in this land? Was Tama just a sacrifice to feed their pride?” As she spoke, Lee motioned for her not to complete the paraphrasing, “Is Sato’s suffering not obvious?” All heads turned toward Sato, who perked up in embarrassment, “Why don’t we ask him to fight Huo and let him die…and put him out of his misery?”

Hinata balked and tearfully covered her face. Shino grimaced beside her. Many of those gathered quietly retreated into themselves. Kakashi appeared relatively impassive after hearing the biting remark.

“Old man,” Sato rumbled, “That’s not fair. If our sensei didn’t care about us they wouldn’t be standing here now listening, would they?” He gestured to Kakashi and Gai, “Won’t it be worse to let Huo run rampant through this Tournament without any opposition? You said yourself he doesn’t subscribe to rules. He’ll wait until this is over.”

*And then your Hokage will have security take him.*

Tenten repeated that.

Sato threw his hands up in the air, steamed, “Then you know what? You’re right! All of this is about pride! Look around you. We all want a piece of that bastard. No one wants to punish him more than me. He hurt the person that is most important to me. I don’t even know if she’s going to live to see tomorrow!” His nostrils flared, “And as someone who’s already died once, trust me on this: I don’t give a fuck if someone kills me again. Let me at him.”

More silent, uncomfortable, yet impressed staring.

Wong Leung chuckled to himself, *I didn’t think picking on him would do much...*

*Please do not taunt him, Grandpa. He is very sad.* Lee recommended.

*He’s more than sad.* Wong Leung noticed, *And maybe that is good. For all of you.*

*Grandpa,* Tenten interjected, *For transparency’s sake, I should mention...I have a blood tie to Huo.*

*Oh?* The old man’s white brows raised enough for his crescent eyes to appear.

*Yes...that’s part of the conflict. I wonder if I could diffuse the situation if I...gave him what he’s looking for?*

*That jian?* He quickly guessed it, *Dear girl, do not EVER assume that giving in will quell discord.*
Imagine what he would do with it! Wong Leung criticized, That would by far be worse than challenging him.

Neji was straining to hear any Hanwen words he recognized, but there weren’t many. Wong Leung identified the concern on Neji’s face and sighed, Tian-Tian...Lee...fight with sense. You and all of your friends take great care and use your best judgment. Overpower Huo and defeat him as many, as a village, like this pinwheel-eye scarecrow suggests. But whatever you do...The old man warned sternly, Don’t give him what he came here for.

The two youngsters nodded fervently. Lee moved along to escort his grandfather down the stairs and to the concourse, and Tenten relayed the last message Wong Leung imparted.

“So...to not put too fine a point on it...” She concluded, “He said we should go with Kakashi-sensei’s plan. Brute force. But also, exercise our best judgment.”

“We were leaning towards that anyway.” Chouji spoke up.

“How many more people...could he...?” Hinata’s voice wavered, frightful, and then a crackling announcement sounded over the loudspeakers.

It was not Shikamaru’s voice, but one of the officials of the panel, Mitokado Homura (at least by ears that recognized it.)

“After review of the techniques used and stopped footage, the panel has agreed that the winner of the match is Sasagainu Huo.”

Gai gnashed his teeth and stomped down the stairwell. Kakashi gave a long, growling sigh as he heard the last of the broadcast: “Tournament matches will continue.”

“I know we were prepared for it, but it fucking sucks to hear them say that.” Kiba gripped the guardrail of the balcony, “Who’s on that panel anyway?”


“Does Tsunade-shishou not get any say in a match’s calling?” Sakura wondered, stupefied.

“Probably not as much as her peers. Even if she and Gaara appealed it, and I bet they did, on what basis would Huo be disqualified? No one died in the arena and the techniques used were sanctioned based on the rulebook.” Kakashi stuffed his hands in his pockets, “Seems like the Exam framework they use for rulings was worded...opportunistically.”

Neji gave the man a hard look, trying to pry into his implication, but then he turned his attention back to Tenten. She was trying to keep the other kunoichi calm. Hinata seemed terribly shaken, Ino, somehow, had gone silent, and Sakura was swinging between terrific anger and tears. How typical. Tenten had the target on her back, and there she was comforting others. When was it her turn to soften and weep?

Never. He had never seen her do it. Not really. Neji searched his memory banks and remembered when he had asked her to attend Hikune’s funeral, and how she had gotten close to showing grief... But no. Tenten preferred sticking her chin out and keeping her back straight, internalizing her turmoil. Maybe, his brain ventured, he ought to bring the subject up to her at a quieter time. It genuinely troubled him.

Shikamaru’s next announcement sounded, “The fourth match will be between Aburame Shino and Inuzuka Kiba. Competitors, report to the arena.”
Sato and Hinata sidled in beside Shino, who stood motionless beside the balcony, and offered their words of support. Kiba accepted a hug from Sakura as she lightly pounded a fist on his shoulder, mumbling, “Don’t be stupid. Don’t overdo it. We’ve got to realize we shouldn’t be fighting each other.”

“Not while that asshole is still breathing.” He spoke of Huo, and squeezed Sakura reassuringly, “I will, Sakura-chan.” Kiba slipped by and called Akamaru with a soft sound, descending to the lower level with his ninken. Shortly after that, Shino also exited for the stairwell. He’d passed Lee by on his way back up.

Sato watched from the corner of his eye as Lee rejoined his team at the left side of the balcony, noticing how they clustered together and spoke quietly amongst themselves. Sometimes, they acted more like a family than a squad that took missions together. Sato shut his eyes and heard Sakura voicing her concerns to Ino and Chouji near the back of the room.

Hinata patted his arm as he leaned on the guard rail, “I know you’re upset.”

“Sorry. I’m trying not to drag you and Shino down.”

“You’ve been upset for two days.” Hinata clarified.

“I…” He cleared his throat, “Yeah.”

Her already soft volume lowered to a near inaudible whisper, “Did you have a fight with Tama-chan? Is that why-?”

“It’s not…exactly like that. I just keep…messing up. Now that she’s—” Sato’s voice cracked and he fought for his normal tone, “Now that she’s hurt so badly…I don’t know how to make anything up to her. I’ve been so scared of losing her. Lately I’m all about self-actualization…but all I seem to discover is how shitty and spineless I am.”

“Shino-kun and I don’t think of you that way.” She chided quietly.

“Well you can’t, Sunshine. You don’t have the full story.” To his right, Hinata leaned her head on his shoulder.

Sato smiled weakly and exhaled, “Thank you. You and Shino are too good to me.”

“You have always been good to us. Shino-kun told me he grew up feeling excluded and overlooked most of his life…but you always acknowledged him and spent time with him.” Hinata straightened and canted her head toward him, “I never felt ostracized on my team…the way I felt at home.”

They watched below as Kiba and Shino crossed the tossed stones and debris towards the estimated center of the arena.

“Shino can win.” Sato wagered, “He’s been keeping his cool. I know that Kiba’s frazzled.” He frowned to himself, “I came here today completely ready to surrender. Now I don’t think I can.”

Hinata’s groomed eyebrows danced above her pearly eyes, “You’re going to-?”

“I need to fight for Tama. If I can continue into future rounds, I’ll take Huo down.” Sato explained, “And sorry, but I’m gonna kick your cousin’s ass first. I didn’t see the point in trying before.”
Curiously, Hinata glanced in Neji’s direction and saw that he was focused on the match down below. She could not soundly rule Sato out when she had once witnessed Naruto, then the underdog by most accounts, unexpectedly clobber Neji and take the victory. And yet, today’s Neji was far more mature and skilled. *Beating Neji-niisan won’t be easy…*

“Hey.”

She turned her attention back to Sato.

He nudged her with his elbow, “You and Shino need to fight as hard as you can. I can’t do this without you guys.”

“We will, Sato-kun.” She had a brainwave with her dear friend, thinking of how Huo would quail at the force of friends and those with bonds, “For our team. For Tama-chan.”

On the way down to the ground level, Shino reflected on possible strategies to apply to future rounds. Specifically, reasoning with his Leaf compatriots about establishing a pecking order, having volunteers surrender, propel their strongest contenders into matches against Huo, and approach it from a logical perspective. It would be a much sounder way of dealing with the Rock ninja.

And though Team Gai seemed to have some inklng of what made Huo so dangerous, they’d been furtively huddled near the balcony and disclosed little to their peers. Shino was quite certain they knew something had attracted Huo’s interest. He was disappointed they were not forthcoming with the information.

To complicate the matter, his two teammates, Kiba, Sakura, Ino, and Chouji had reacted angrily and fearfully after listening to Lee’s grandfather. No one was in the right frame of mind to consider his suggestion, Shino deduced. He believed that if they discussed the matter together, if they set aside their emotions for a brief period of time, they could come up with an effective counter.

Unfortunately, Shino had not spoken up and advocated for his idea. He laid the blame with himself, knowing he was too introverted and passive to take a stand and demand the cooperation of his friends. He’d never done it before. Today could have been the day, for he truly felt compelled to act, but once again he had kept quiet and drifted on— carried on a current to whatever fiasco lay ahead.

By the look on his face, Kiba was swirling in rancor after what had befallen Tama. There would be no reasoning with him before the match, Shino presumed. Kiba would probably be incensed if he suggested they organize match victories in favor of Team Gai— to pit them against Huo in later rounds. Stepping out of contention and asking others to consider it (which Shino was personally unopposed to) was now out of the question.

Among the rubble and tilled stone of the arena floor, Shino came to a stop and faced Kiba. Shikamaru arrived shortly after that, twiddling with his shirt-mic to make sure it was not yet switched on. The proctor looked between the two, his frown indicating that he was no longer enthusiastic about Leaf ninja battling each other. It was only natural that Shikamaru, another avid noodler, had drawn conclusions similar to Shino’s. He cleared his throat and asked, “You guys sure about this? Doesn’t look like you’ve put much thought into upcoming rounds against the psycho…”

“I have.” Kiba huffed, “I’m going to take him on.”

“Neither of us are suited for such an opponent.” Shino pointed out, coaxing one of his insects from his hood and onto an outstretched finger, “It would be wiser to encourage those more experienced with Wushu and Tao Arts to advance.”
“What, so you’re just gonna stand by and usher Neji’s team ahead? I’m Tama’s teammate. I deserve a chance to fight him.” He was bristling, and beside him Akamaru had also gotten riled up via osmosis.

“Neji and Lee can deal with Huo, in all likelihood.” Shino confirmed, “If Tenten has any strength remaining, she may also be a reasonable choice.”

“And the rest of us just sit it out?” Kiba was baring his teeth a bit too much.

“Yes.”

“Easy for you to suggest— you don’t give a damn about anything that’s happened!”

Shikamaru cleared his throat again to signal he’d gotten the “okay” to commence over his radio, but Kiba continued shouting.

“Our advancement can impede that of a team that can retaliate against Huo.” Shino clarified, “Use some sense.”

“—! Are you—? Are you trying to preach to me?” Kiba snarled, “Well you can be damn sure you aren’t going to Round Two, Shino. Now you can count on that.”

“Alright.” Shikamaru interrupted, “Mic’s going on now— shut your fucking faces— thanks.” He flipped the microphone on, “Are you both ready?”

Two swift nods and then Shikamaru dropped his hand to start it, ducking away from the action.

Kiba had a knack for redirecting his anger at people, Shino conceded. While he’d known his suggestion would not be received well, it seemed as though Kiba was making an effort to plunge his hate through the current match (and whoever it involved) to let it reach Huo later. Also, he’d wasted no time loading Akamaru up on a food pill and making the ninken transform into his likeness. They came crashing down on the spot Shino had been standing in with horrific force and speed. Light-footed, Shino slipped away and let his insects disperse in the air, keeping track of the human and dog in disguise.

Kiba was shouting things like, “Surrender if you think it’s such a good idea!” And, “You know you can’t take a hit!” Indeed, Shino actively avoided the whirling Fang Over Fang offense that had leveled the last tall boulders and slabs to a roughly level surface again. For some curious reason, Kikaichu insects were having none of Akamaru. The cloud of bugs skirted around the dog as if repulsed. Shino suspected some kind of repellent had been applied to the dog…and maybe to Kiba as well, according to disdainful reports from his colony.

When Kiba came too close for comfort, and his ninken had tried to corner Shino from the rear, it provoked a long, consecutive chain of Substitutions from both competitors as they bashed each other and retreated. By Shikamaru’s estimate, Kiba had replaced himself (and his dog) twelve times and Shino, a bit more slippery, fifteen times. The proctor rubbed his chin in thought, ‘I don’t know if that just broke a Chunin Exam record for most Substitutions, but I’ll confirm that later…’

Somewhere in the distance, Sato was heard cursing and not exactly cheering. It was bellowing in favor of Shino. Kiba gritted his teeth and did his very best not to get pissed off at the Hatake he hoped to wipe the stadium down with later.

Without warning, Akamaru charged off in the wrong direction and slammed headfirst into the broad side of a boulder. Dizzied, his transformation wore off and he swayed on his feet, whining. Kiba
called to his dog while charging through a swarm of disinclined Kikaichu insects, diving at Shino, ‘What’d he do to Akamaru? He couldn’t have gotten a hold of him with his colony…’ He went with his gut that maybe, as a student of Kurenai and confidant of Sato, Shino was employing Genjutsu to keep master and ninken apart.

Kiba’s suspicion was proven correct as soon as he patted the dog’s head, releasing Akamaru from a sensory-scrambling illusion, ‘Shino’s crafty but he can’t fight worth a damn!’ He acted quickly to have his dog transform once again, and Shino slipped through hand seals for his clan’s advanced Ninjutsu.

With a shudder, a quartet of huge parasitic beetles, each about 3 meters in length, emerged from the ground and were not in the least dissuaded from approaching Kiba and his look-alike. Kiba felt a very slight but persistent nibble on his chakra as the insects scuttled toward him. Even worse, he stepped back and fell right into a hidden, excavated trap the bugs had dug earlier.

“Ah, fuck me.” Kiba growled and clambered to his feet, looking up at the trap door. A huge insect crawled over it as if to trap him underground. “Really original… not like Kaka-sensei hasn’t stuck us in a trap hole a thousand times…” Kiba formed hand seals again and exhaled a violent fireball, and as it struck the underside of the beetle, the insect screeched and darted away from the hole. For good measure, Kiba leapt above ground and hurled the bug with his clan’s Taijutsu into the stadium wall. He dusted his hands and turned back to watch Akamaru nimbly avoiding the other giant nuisances. Shino was nowhere to be seen, but Kiba still had a faint whiff of his scent.

With a short whistle, Kiba had called Akamaru back to his side, “Ready boy? Let’s fry us up a snack!” The dog placed his transformed paws on Kiba’s back, leaping up and over the young man as he completed hand seals, and the two engaged in a simultaneous, sweeping Fire Jutsu, “Wolf Flame Tongue!” The wave of fire scorched the giant insects and sent them skittering for the edge of the arena, two of which retreated back underground.

After completing their fiery pounce and sniffing out Shino’s hiding place, they accosted the Aburame with Taijutsu that sent him hurtling — the hood of his suit slipped back. With some impressive athletics, Shino rolled over a flat stone top and bounded off of Akamaru’s shoulders to avoid a pincer move, all the while summoning from a utility scroll. Kiba perked up at the sight of a weapon, “Oh? So you’re serious now? What was all that talk about giving up!”

Shino’s colony produced a Bug Clone that squared off courageously against the repellent-stinking ninken. Meanwhile, Shino singled out Kiba, twirling and slashing with a short polearm that cut doily designs into Kiba’s new outfit.

“Hey! Knock it off!” With a roar, Kiba parried the bladed weapon away with a metal arm bracer, sparks pinging everywhere, and spun to land a mighty kick that knocked Shino to the dirt. They dove for each other again, no longer sportsmanlike, hacking and pummeling one another. Shino’s nagamaki cut a clean, horizontal line across his opponent’s exposed stomach, the blood splattered across Shino’s sleeve as they parted.

Kiba did not look at all concerned and reached for his back hip pouch, “I’ll hand it to ya: you tried. But there’s no point in us wasting time when we both know I need to advance!”

At the Leaf Finalist balcony, Sato was still cursing and also apologizing to Hinata for the profanities he used. “Shit!” He slammed his hands down on the rail, fuming, “Sorry Sunshine! It’s just—damn Kakashi!” Sato watched with supreme displeasure as the Inuzuka used the Earth Summon: Tracking Fang Jutsu that Kakashi had passed on to Kiba, scroll spinning and hand seals completed, “My uncle is a useless, flip-flop traitor for giving Kiba that!”
What surprised Sato even more, and Hinata eeped in shock beside him, was the appearance of Kakashi’s own ninken pack, all eight dogs charging up from the earth and launching themselves at Shino who had gone into full retreat. Sato cursed less but complained more that his uncle would sign his student to his Dog Summoning Contract before his family. Hinata kindly pointed out that Sato already had a Summoning Contract, and Sato quieted down when he remembered that. “Yeah…so maybe that deterred Kakashi—but still! Kiba’s from the Inuzuka clan so he doesn’t need dog reinforcements!”

The pack closed in on what was actually a Bug Clone, cleverly coated with stray droplets of Kiba’s blood. As the dogs lunged and snapped, the clone scattered apart into thousands of insects. Pakkun, ever the wise dog, redirected his pack mates from the dupe and locked-on to another source of their tracking scent, “Bull! Bisky! All you mutts! On your left-!” The pack charged behind its leader.

Bull was nicked in the shoulder by Shino’s nagamaki, but the massive dog swatted the weapon out of the ninja’s hand. As the smaller, quicker dogs sunk their teeth into the back of Shino’s legs and forearms, intent on immobilizing him, Kiba had initiated another jutsu. Shino had a few moments to watch Kiba with his ninken and a hastily produced Shadow Clone for a Three-Headed Wolf Transformation. The physical force of the attack would be monstrous, and Shino supposed Kakashi’s dog pack was aware of that fact. They would retreat before the strike landed.

And as that moment in time surely came, when Kakashi’s dogs retreated and Kiba bore down in the tremendous, earth-sundering form that was sure to win the match…Shino had been plopped down into safety into a trap hole dug by a lingering, giant insect from earlier. The ground shook as Shino exited through another hole, patiently waiting for Kiba’s costly transformation to wear off in a puff of smoke.

Breathing heavily, Kiba rounded about in his slighter, human form, glaring at Shino from across the arena. In the meantime, none of Kakashi’s dogs had been sprayed with protective insect repellent, and were wasting time fleeing and nipping at a cloud of Kikaichu insects. Kiba set to spring for another assault with his ninken, and then abruptly fell face-first to the dirt. Retching, he pushed himself up to his knees and looked up again with blurred vision. Off to the side, Akamaru was distracted with the same few giant insects that had burrowed up from below ground.

Shino adjusted his visor glasses on the bridge of his nose, standing serenely, “I am not the one who should be giving up this match.”

Stubbornly, Kiba heaved himself to his feet, “Quit your-!”

“The bleeding has stopped.” Shino spoke of the gash on Kiba’s stomach, “My insects clotted your wound for you.”

Kiba’s mouth hung open, bewildered.

“Additionally,” Shino added with his hands in his pockets, “They are infiltrating other systems of your body as we speak. Your joints will freeze. Breathing will become difficult. You can try to win, but rest assured that you will not be advancing to future rounds.”

In that moment, Kiba made an election not to be overly dramatic even though it was tempting. His head was spinning, still shocked that he had not noticed his infection by Shino’s insects, which he supposed were a much smaller variety than normal Kikaichu. Stood up over and glaring angrily, Kiba motioned to Shikamaru, “Hey proctor. I don’t want to pass out like a wimp in this stadium, so go ahead and call the match.”

Shikamaru promptly returned, giving Kiba a cursory examination, “You can’t continue?”
“Nah. He did something gross to me.”

Shikamaru tried not to think about it…but he thought about it. He declared Shino the winner and then beckoned the Aburame over while shutting off his shirt microphone. Giant insects retreated, Kakashi’s dogs poofed home, and Akamaru rolled onto his back to scratch an itch—no longer in a fighting mood.

“Shino.” Shikamaru said flatly, “You can fix him, right?”

He fiddled with his glasses again, “I can.”

“Good. Walk him to the treatment room and do that.” The proctor commanded.

Akamaru caught up to his master as Shino, rather pleasantly, pulled Kiba’s arm over his shoulder and helped him walk off. As he had served as a chew toy for eight dogs a short time ago, Shino was trying not to limp from his injuries.

“Ow! Shit! Don’t pull so hard.” Kiba hissed, the cut on his stomach still smarting, “Did you seriously…infect my body with bugs that live in your body?”

“I did.”

“Dude—”

“There is no cause for alarm.”

“It’s the principal of the thing.” Kiba griped, “You’re used to having stuff inside of you, I’m not.”

“You have trillions of microbial fauna in your body at all times.”

“Your body’s organisms are inside of me.” Kiba rationalized down the hallway, “It’s too explicitly intimate!”

“You are suggesting this is sexual in some way.” Shino pointed out his defeated adversary’s discomfort, “Asinine and incorrect. Even if it were, you would physically not come to harm from a co-mingling of our bodies. Not in the way your ego sustains damage from such a notion.”

“Shino. You’re a weird dude.”

“That is why...” He pushed Kiba through the treatment room door and towards a patient table, “Sato and I get along.”

“Holy shit.” Kiba realized, “That’s right.”

After that, Kiba calmed down considerably but could not look as Shino coaxed tiny, mite-like insects out of the wound from where they’d entered Kiba’s body. It didn’t hurt, Kiba conceded, but it made him feel squamish. A uniformed medic-nin healed cuts, scrapes, and bites on the two young men before shooing them out.

‘Maybe I owe this guy…a little more respect.’ Kiba thought to himself, ‘He’s not a jerk. He’s been trying to think ahead…and he didn’t have to do much at all to make me eat my words.’

With that in mind, Kiba asked as the climbed the stairs back up to the second level, “Hey…Shino. Did we just completely screw up future brackets for this Tournament?”

“Are you asking because there was a definitive winner?” Shino replied, “Not necessarily. I can still
surrender any match in the rounds to come. However…I doubt others will be so willing to give up for the sake of pitting logical opponents against our common enemy.”

“You mean **Sato** won’t give up now.” Kiba gathered.

“Correct. He will not surrender. Not after what Tama-san went through.”

Kiba ran a hand through his hair, gruffing, “Great…and we actually **need** Neji to advance.”

“It would be prudent.”

“Can Sato beat him?”

“No.” Shino confirmed, “He can’t.”

“Then why do you still sound concerned about it?”

“Because even if Sato cannot win…” Shino elaborated, “He may not see the sense in allowing Neji to advance. He may try to impede Neji from doing so.”

“Then let’s hurry the hell up,” Kiba pushed on Shino’s back, nudging him up the stairs faster, “And talk to that idiot!”

And back at the balcony, they discovered Sato was not present. Kiba and Shino bee-lined for Hinata, only stopping briefly to accept congratulations from Sakura, Ino, Chouji, and Lee. Tenten and Neji were on the far side of the room, having a low-volume conversation.

“Hinata.” Shino returned a hug from his teammate when she squeezed him, “Where is Sato?”

“He went to the restroom.” She took a step back and gave Shino a searching look.

“That’s convenient.” Kiba noted, “Guess he’s not coming back before his match, is he?”

“Probably not.” Sakura interjected, “He’s been acting awful flighty today…although it could have something to do with Tama’s—”

“That’s what we need to talk about.” Kiba motioned with his hands to all of their companions, getting their attention, “Maybe we should have thought about this before, well, Shino did—but we need to discuss who should be fighting Huo in future rounds.” He made eye contact with Tenten, indicating that she and Neji join the public forum. All gathered in timely fashion.

Hinata tried to offer a vote of confidence, “I think Shino-kun can.”

“I would attempt to injure and impair him to the greatest extent possible; if I thought it were a sound idea.” Shino agreed feebly, “But I would surrender, regardless of my chances.”

Hinata wilted at the thought.

“Sato probably shouldn’t.” Sakura supposed.

“Definitely shouldn’t.” Tenten seconded the notion.

“Yeah, but-! Couldn’t he do some serious damage? You know— drop a huge bird on that jerk?” Ino suggested.
Lee cut in, “Sato-kun could do that. Though it may serve us all to remember my team found a giant eagle in the Forest of Death completely dismembered…and we are fairly certain Huo was responsible for that.”

Vexed, Ino tossed her ponytail and shrugged, “He has the Chidori! And a heart full of vengeance. Just point Sato at the guy and he’ll get plenty of work in for us!”

“He might die, remember?” Tenten sniffed.

“This time Shika can step in to—”

“He can’t.” Neji also presented sobering facts, “Huo uses some kind of technique to reposition himself close to opponents. Shikamaru will not be fast enough to stop him.”

“And someone here is going to have to put up with that.” Chouji added.

Tenten cupped her chin in her palm, “Yeah. That’s true. Someone has to bite the bullet. We may need those who have better defenses or stamina to fight Huo just to be safe enough to surrender and avoid that gap closer we couldn’t see…”

“So…Hinata.” Sakura suggested.

Lee watched as the color drained out of Neji and Tenten's faces and then waved his hand, hoping to amend the proposal, “Ah! Perhaps not! Hm. I am willing…if only to do as much as I can before forfeiting.”

Hinata was looking between her friends, her cousin, and Tenten, who seemed to be whipped up in a new bout of mental turmoil.

“Lee may be a better choice.” Tenten agreed reluctantly, “But…Huo definitely has jutsu and maybe other Tao Arts we haven’t seen yet. No matter what it’ll get ugly…”

Shino offered his idea to the group, “Team Gai is best suited to deal with this threat. Myself, Sato, Hinata, Sakura, and Chouji…our intervention is not advisable. While our participation may become necessary in Round Two or Three…our forfeiture is essential. Based on who advances after Round One, we can convene again and assign each Round Two Finalist the amount of damage they must inflict to Huo if he continues to advance. Also…”

Kiba raised an eyebrow as Shino went on.

“Any defeated Finalists waiting here…Kiba, Ino…stay alert for opportunities to interfere, should Huo pose a threat to a comrade’s life again. As Shikamaru may not be able to predict when and how to intervene in critical moments that Huo will take advantage of…your vigilance could save a life.”

Shino nestled his hands in his pockets, concluding, “Those who are defeated and well enough to spectate: watch out for our friends.”

“Sure, but…that could get our people disqualified if we step in before a time-out.” Kiba noted.

“Then so be it.” Shino was unruffled by the idea, “We all know, just as the Hokage does, our lives are more valuable than celebrity in this Tournament.”

Neji nodded gravely in agreement, his eyes shut and arms crossed.

“So then!” Ino patted Lee and Tenten on their shoulders, “Not too much pressure on your team! We’ll throw ourselves at Huo if we have to, and step in if we have to…but in the end…you have to
deal with him.”

“Right.” Tenten warbled.

“While this plan sounds kosher and pretty dependable, someone still needs to relay it to Sato.” Sakura reminded her peers, “Hinata-chan, Shino…do you mind finding him before the next match begins?”

“Of course we don’t!” Hinata squeaked, tugging on Shino’s suit sleeve, “Shino-kun, let’s hurry.” She darted off and searched with her Byakugan, her teammate quietly tagging along.

The groups filed off again as silence prevailed, Sakura patting Akamaru’s head absently as she asked Kiba about what Shino had done to him in his match. Ino and Chouji muttered amongst themselves while Lee listened in to Tenten’s whispering comments to him and Neji.

“This is scary. We have to make it to the Final Round. Ideally, two of us will have to lay the hurt on Huo. That should do it.” Tenten admitted sheepishly, “And honestly, I don’t know if I’m the right one for that job.”

“Also!” Lee raised a finger, “Neji must advance past this match. We will need his strength.”

Tenten clapped Neji on the back, “Seriously. We need you, Neji.”

“I know.” He grumbled, arms still crossed, “But if Sato does not listen to reason as Hinata-sama explains a widely-accepted scheme to defeat Huo…he will hamper my efforts.”

Tenten thought on it for a long moment, “Well…I could always ask Ino to poison him before the match so he craps himself and gives up.”

Silence.

“That is certainly an alternative.” Lee yielded.

“If I were in his place…” Neji imagined, speaking to Tenten, “And it was you who were fatally injured by the brute terrorizing this Exam…I would not surrender to anyone. I would demand cooperation and be certain I had the opportunity to avenge you.”

“How very sweet of you.” Tenten praised him, “But that won’t fly here and you know it.”

“Sato will make things difficult.” Neji insisted.

“Hinata-chan and Shino-kun have a good chance to persuade him!” Lee disagreed.

Neji shook his head. Lee and Tenten sighed in unison.

Ten seconds later, Shikamaru announced the Fifth Match. Then Neji sighed. The group was very skeptical that Hinata would find her teammate in time to transmit the plan to him. Those gathered wished Neji the best, and Lee gave his good friend a confident nod and smile. The Hyuga heir moved to the stairs and Tenten trotted ahead of him, saying that she was going to get something to drink at a concession stand. She seemed a jittery, muttering mess, pointedly not looking back at him as they descended the stairs.

At the concourse, before she could turn a corner into a public area to drink and eat her troubles away, Neji gently reeled her in by her crusty sleeve and pulled her close.

“I’ll get you dirty.” She warned him.
“That doesn’t matter.” He asserted, “I have some requests.”

Tenten felt his chin resting on her shoulder; could feel him breathing more harshly, nervously as he held her from behind.

“Requests. Plural.” She noticed, “Of me?”

“Of you.”

Her skin tingled. Tenten asked, “What can I do for you, Neji?”

“Leave it to me and Lee. Do not fight Huo if you have the option to forfeit. I am personally asking you not to fight him.” Neji bent his head a bit, his mouth ghosting just behind her ear, “If you have to…do not use that sword. Promise you won’t.”

“I promise I won’t.” It was easy giving him that one.

“Openly discuss future rounds with the others. Be prepared to account for changes and unforeseen circumstances.”

“Sure! Hey Neji— you’re making it sound like you don’t think you’ll be back up here in twenty minutes or less.” Tenten pointed out.

“I’m not sure of that at all.” Neji confirmed.

She swiveled around to face him, frowning, “Well I think you should be.”

He shook his head, “I don’t take anything for granted anymore. It was my great mistake at the last Exam…and I’ve been fortunate enough to have friends with patience and persistence guide a hopeless fool like me.” Neji gave her a curious look as Tenten began to squeeze his upper arms, fidgety and listening to him intently, “I will do what I can. For all of you.”

Tenten scrunched her eyes shut, willing liquid back into tear ducts and drying up the silly emotional response. Dry-eyed, she moved her hands and patted her thumbs at the corners of his mouth anxiously, and asked, “Do you think any of us will get promoted?”

“I believe we all will.” He answered honestly.

She released a rumbling sigh, “Ah…then that’s good. Now we need to try not to die or play into Huo’s games.”

Neji nodded, very aware of her fingers playing over his lips. A breath of a kiss passed over them to reassure her.

Tenten held his gaze, her frown softening, “Okay. I’ll do everything you requested, and maybe do you a few better. I can be quite clever.”

“I know.” He conceded, amused.

“Full disclosure…” She gave him a preamble to a confession, “If only to give you something to think about while you’re out there…”

Neji looked at her expectantly.

“I am into you. Extremely, distractedly into you. You’ve pulled it together. Neji, at some points in the past you disappointed the hell out of me…and there were days I scratched my head and asked
myself, What am I thinking? Him? Really? Want to know what I’m thinking now?” The kiss she planted on him was swift so she could continue explaining, “You’ve turned out better than what I ever dared to hope for. You’re the greatest.” She could feel him smiling, “This outfit looks amazing on you. You’ll probably ruin it, but I’ll always remember. Huh. When I think of all that you can do and of what you will do for others…if you mix pride and euphoria, I guess that comes close to what I feel.” Tenten had to stop talking because he was kissing her.

“I don’t deserve that kind of praise.” He said softly, his face hovering close.

“It’s not really praise. It’s just stream-of-consciousness. Genuine Tenten-thoughts.” She termed it for him. Her brain was recording how Neji was smiling and she was smiling too, right back at him and no one was ever going to see it.

“There is no comparison— nothing brings me joy the way you do—” The start of Neji’s heartfelt return fire was cut off when Tenten shushed him, pointing towards the archway of the concourse.

“Shikamaru will disqualify you if you don’t get out there in the next few seconds.” Tenten snapped him out of it, “Believe me, I do want to hear you say mushy shit to me. Hold on to it and let it percolate, then tell me later, alright?”

“Alright.”

With a parting kiss, Tenten shoved him off and down the corridor. He looked back at her over his shoulder in a way that was wholly unlike Neji’s former asshole persona of old.

She winked at him and then darted off for the concession area, feeling rather proud of herself, ‘Hopefully that got him in the right head space! We can beat Huo. Fuck that guy.’ Tenten stopped in a horseshoe of snack stands, ‘Great, where do I have to go to get mango bubble tea? I need to hurry or I’ll miss something in Neji’s match!’ She dispatched two Shadow Clones to assist in her search, noticing her reflection in a shined kitchen appliance panel, ‘Whoa! I’m blushing like an idiot. I meant to tell him that stuff later, but I just went and blurted it all out. Smooth. Good thing he ate it all up! …God I need to get laid. As soon as possible.’

“Lee’s grandfather?” Kurenai was listening to Kakashi and Gai recount an anecdote of what transpired after Tama’s match.

“Yeah, his Nihongo isn’t very good. The kids translated.” Kakashi confirmed, his eye alternating between Icha Icha Paradise and the vacant arena below the stands.

“So what’d the old fella say?” Asuma pressed, “Something helpful, hopefully.” He had an unlit cigarette resting on his lip. They were seated in a non-smoking section of the stadium.

“He elaborated that Tao Arts can only be neutralized by other Tao Arts. Our students should seek to exhaust and overwhelm Huo with brute strength, if they intend to defeat him.” Gai filled his fellow Jounin in, “But Wong Leung advised against them jeopardizing themselves to fight an opponent who lacks honor and respect for rules.”

“Well put.” Kurenai concurred with the idea, “There is no need to fight Huo at all. He seeks to goad our pupils into believing they must.”

“They’ve been goaded.” Kakashi noted, “A few have, at least.”

“How would it look if a barbarian from Iwagakure won this Tournament? Purely for the sake of
shaming Konoha?” Asuma referenced the past war and lingering bitter feelings, “Administration is going to hate it if our Finalists don’t stop him.”

“Then let them hate it.” Kakashi voted.

“Those tensions should remain in the past. To put our students in danger, merely to subdue a historical enemy…” Kurenai crossed her legs and tipped her nose up, “It is beyond childish.”

“Childish sums up Administration to a T.” Asuma observed.

Kakashi noticed that Gai was staring down into the arena as Sato appeared from an odd entryway, and shortly thereafter, Neji also exited from the typical access point. While Gai could certainly relate with Sato’s anguish over Tama’s injury, he was by far more invested in Neji’s success. Similarly, Kakashi felt no urgency to cheer on Sato in this bout, and was still hoping his nephew would quit and duck out early to be where he was needed most.

Kurenai seemed quite sedate, yet she had not let on to any of her Sensei companions if she expected Sato to proceed seriously or not. She kept her expectations under wraps.

The Jounin watched as the two opponents crossed the trampled dirt of the stadium to convene at the center. Sato was a silent, glowering figure in white, contrasted by red triangles adorning a tunic that Kakashi knew very well had oft been worn by Konoha’s White Fang. It did tweak a nostalgic feeling in him. Neji seemed a true reciprocal to the mon of the Hatake: tall and also in white, trimmed in blues and blacks both tranquil and intimidating, the sigil of the Hyuga clear for all to see.

‘If these two saw things the way that Gai and I do…’ Kakashi thought to himself, stowing his book away, ‘They would realize they are already equals. They would know that their mentors and village leader would prefer watching them resign in peace than demonstrate their fighting prowess.’ He watched as Shikamaru came to a stop between the competitors, ‘What a shame. Neji and Sato never got along, and I don’t expect that to change now.’

Kakashi could only hear a bit of Shikamaru’s voice over the loudspeakers as the audience began to trill in excitement. With that, the proctor began the match and vacated the area. Kakashi, much like his friends seated beside him, who all wished the best for their students, was very surprised as Sato drew a single chakra sabre and pointed it at his adversary.

And Neji stood there and did not move a muscle.

Chapter End Notes

Match Tracks:
Sakura Vs. Ino- “Battle Frenzy Dance” by sakuzyo
Aota Vs. Tenten- “Hey Boy Hey Girl” by The Chemical Brothers
Tama Vs. Huo- “Squats” by Bombs Away, Oh Snap! & “Panic” by Dirt Cheap, Krunk
Shino Vs. Kiba- “A-Un” by Atomic
The Gambit

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Chapter Soundtrack: "One Day They'll Know (ODESZA Remix)" by Pretty Lights

& More, See Bottom of Page

"I'm not joking this time." Sato warned him, "Stay out of my way."

Neji was having an uncommon moment of patience. He stood there without an ounce of hostility trickling in his blood, and regarded Sato who was plainly enraged and unaware of the plan for Leaf Genin to selectively proceed or abstain from future rounds.

Maybe it was because he was in a very pleasant mood thanks to Tenten, or maybe because he did harbor authentic empathy for Sato's pain. In either case, Neji was not ready to spring into a fight if it could be avoided. Had Naruto been watching, he may have fainted from the shock of Neji not itching to brutalize someone.

"No one is in your way, Sato." Neji pointed out innocuously, "Did Hinata-sama speak to you before this match?"

"Yeah, and I apologized to her in advance for kicking your ass."

"I see. So you have not been informed of all Leaf Finalists agreeing to advance and withdraw based on logical progression." Neji noticed the start of a whirlwind of downy feathers, both real and illusory, floating around the arena.

"Logical progression-? You mean me having the chance to avenge Tama, because she's the person I love most and anyone here could understand that?" Sato snipped, "If so, sure, I accept your surrender."

"You've misunderstood," Neji assured him, "Leaf Finalists agreed that my team should be those who advance to defeat Huo."

Sato hated the sound of that so he drew his second chakra sabre.

Neji kindly reminded him, "What you are feeling is completely justified. If you think on it, you'll understand that wasting energy confronting each other is not the best way to go about this."

"Right. So you can give up now or accept that we are about to waste energy trying to beat each other." Sato retorted, "Your choice."

Being nice never was his forte, Neji thought. His peers would have to hand it to him for trying and being considerate of his opponent's distress. But his comments were falling on emotionally deaf ears, and perhaps the kindest way to go about it was to knock Sato out of contention physically. Neji pulled the sash of his jian free of his back and drew Mo-Ye from its scabbard. By then, Sato was already rushing straight for him.

His Byakugan was entirely necessary as Neji quickly realized Sato was far faster and more dexterous than Tenten, with a more unorthodox swordsmanship style to boot. The Feather Caper Illusion had disguised (in the absence of Neji's Kekkei Genkai) several of Sato's Fire Clones, which Neji had
taken the time to hack apart and not disturb with Wind Release. Meanwhile, the real Sato had whipped Neji in the chin with the hilt of a White Chakra Sabre, and came careening in with a second swing aimed for Neji's neck. He barely parried with Mo-Ye, whirling, his free hand using the sturdy scabbard he still had to jab Sato in the stomach and push him away.

A Fire Clone ignited behind him in unison with a Tar Clone's leap, hoping to trap and burn Neji while his back was turned. He tossed Mo-Ye's scabbard aside and shot a nature-less Air Palm at the combined clone effort, knocking the fire and tar residuals to the ground in a heaping mess. In the same motion, Neji turned again to parry another flurry of Sato's swordstrikes. His jian was ground to a halt within one of Sato's swift combinations.

With Mo-Ye securely caught between his chakra sabres, Sato twisted himself into a leaping kick that caught Neji in the side of the head. As Neji keened sideways, he watched carefully as Sato acrobatically launched himself again, white chakra shimmering along his short swords as he swung and slashed at a retreating opponent. Once Mo-Ye was free, Neji dipped into an abrupt Wushu form below Sato's reach and propelled himself forward, *caroming* his jian against a chakra sabre and sliding it up the blade— nicking Sato's hand just enough for him to drop it. Before Sato could somersault to collect the discarded weapon, Neji deftly kicked it away.

Angrily, Sato spun again, feathers everywhere, *clanging* his sword against Neji's weapon— aiming for the head, face, neck, chest, and sides at a great rate of speed. The audience went bananas while watching the veritable sword duel, as optional techniques fell completely to the wayside for a long while.

When Sato's second Tar Clone came creeping in to snatch Neji from the rear, the Hyuga was caught in a blade-on-blade pushing match as Sato steered him in the direction of the oozing clone. With no other choice, Neji hurled himself into a *Rotation* that flung the Tar Clone aside, as well as the real Sato, and all weapons flew from their hands and fell, stuck hilt-up in the dirt a considerable distance away. Sato rolled backwards and sprang up just as Neji darted forward in textbook perfect *Gentle Fist* form to shut an abundance of tenketsu. His hands poised mere inches above Sato's chakra points, it occurred to Neji that his opponent had completed hand seals and was molding an insane, hair-raising amount of chakra right under his face.

Neji had charged into a counterattack.

Sato's Chidori had drastically transformed its shape, brimming with Yang chakra that had flattened and stretched into three-dimensional segments, into panels of a huge wing, "*Yōton: Light Wing Chidori!*"

And it shot through the right side of Neji's chest, shoulder, and neck with a force that blindsided the Hyuga heir, impaling him up on the chakra wing's climb, and tossed Neji like a ragdoll as Sato withdrew his hand and cut off the jutsu. Neji struck the ground once in a bounce, streaking blood across the dirt, and then landed flatly on his back without a sound. For a long moment, the stadium was hushed and then began to jabber again after the unexpected assassination technique.

Shikamaru descended within a heartbeat and held a hand up to Sato, cautioning him to stand back. He stood over Neji and held in a gasp as the white *Hanfu* the man wore was dyed in his own blood. Shikamaru shut his shirt microphone off in case he needed to curse. Kneeling down, he brought his face close to detect a very faint breath as Neji inhaled, to his relief, "Holy fuck-! Neji, you okay? Can you hear me-?

Neji was in fact hearing a garbled mixture of sounds, ranging from the audience's concerned *ooohs* and tittering, to Tenten's petrified shrieks above on the balcony. As politely as possible, Neji reached to push back against Shikamaru's vest and sit up. Shikamaru could hardly believe he was still
"It's a timeout, officially. That was—" Shikamaru glanced over his shoulder back at Sato, who had not moved since the attack, "I'm honestly in awe you aren't dead right now."

"That makes two of us." Neji had to take a moment to ponder how on earth he could still move and think after the assault. He struggled to stand despite Shikamaru's protesting.

The Yōton Chidori had been the hottest, fastest mortal experience he'd ever had in his life, and Neji had experienced Tenten's empowered Hiyumi Fire Release—child's play, by comparison. But Sato had not aimed for any vital organs with the assassination technique, which was perhaps out of camaraderie or pity, Neji guessed. The technique had cauterized the wounds it caused, which explained why the bleeding had quickly ceased. Had Sato pierced him just a few centimeters to the left, through rib, lung, or liver, Neji would not be relaying such information to Shikamaru right that moment.

His cheek and jaw were seared and a good portion of hair from the end of his ponytail had been vaporized, Neji assessed as he stood fully. Shikamaru was having a minor conniption, advising him against continuing the match. Though the injuries were survivable, Neji was astonished by how stingingly painful they remained, feeling as if he were being continually zapped.

"Kakashi didn't teach him that one." Shikamaru noted glumly, "I don't know about this. I really don't think I can let you go on in good conscience. What if he does it again?"

"He will." Neji surmised, "But not before his loss is assured."

"Neji—"

"I will continue."

"I'm not—"

"Disqualify me, if you must." Neji maintained.

Shikamaru relented, "I don't have you down for any technicalities. You're standing and speaking."

"Then end the timeout."

"If being insubordinate and churlish counted as a technicality, I'd Frisbee your ass out of here, Hyuga." Shikamaru muttered before turning the microphone back on, "The match will continue!" He retreated promptly.

Using his Byakugan once again, Neji quickly detected the Genjutsu that Sato has snuck in—tricking Neji's plain eyesight to follow an illusion while Sato ran at the single-degree blind spot at his opponent's back. He had retrieved his chakra sabres by that time. Showing off the bending evasion that Wong Leung had imparted on him, Neji did not turn to face Sato as he slipped and stepped, dodging sword swipes that he kept in his field of vision. Mo-Ye was still stuck up in the dirt several meters to his right.

When Sato managed an unexpected sliding tackle, momentum sending him skidding over the ground, he nearly cut Neji's legs out of from under him. The Hyuga made a timely leap and shot a nature-less Air Palm at the whelp. Sato rolled out of the way, tossing his sabres that he had twined with trick wire, and formed hand signs while his hands were free, "Yōton: Spark Flash!"

Neji had to assume some things— fill in the blanks while his brain and senses acknowledged
complete flash blindness. Even the Byakugan was utterly scrambled, overwhelmed by light particles. He assumed that Sato had used trick wire to pull his short swords back after using the jutsu. Neji also assumed that Sato would be sixteen degrees to the left, judging from the dirt crunching, running footsteps and heavy breathing. Neji further assumed Mo-Ye was where he had last seen it, off to his right approximately a seven to eight meter sprint away.

He was not going to speculate when or if his vision would return. As it stood, Neji had been accepting and internalizing Wong's lessons for months to not merely "see with his eyeballs" or so Lee had translated it. So Neji took a chance and dropped into a Wushu crouch that fully evaded Sato's swordstrike at the precise moment it came arcing for his head. Neji heard the blade whistle by as he pivoted, slipping up from a sequential Wushu form, and made a tightly estimated dash towards Mo-Ye. Hopefully.

Sato gave away his pursuit positioning by his angry cursing. Neji would think it'd be elementary to take advantage of an opponent's blindness by not producing sound, but whatever.

There! He felt the tassel of Mo-Ye at his fingertips and then firmly took the hilt in his hand. Neji turned again, barreled backwards by a strong blow from Sato's sabres that pinged sparks off of his jian. He landed on his back with a wuff, his Chidori wounds throbbing, and felt the pressure of Sato bearing down onto Mo-Ye with both of his short swords. Neji caught Sato's stomach with his feet and rolled back, tossing Sato ass-over-tea kettle to the dirt.

Vague shapes were returning; all sights illuminated in silhouettes of white and pale shadow. The slight bit of vision Neji had regained allowed him to choose between Sato and a paper-bomb swathed Fire Clone, and he swung and thrusted with Mo-Ye as the startled Hatake began to realize his Flash was wearing off. Not that it had mattered— even without sight Neji had been able to keep up, and it was steaming Sato to no end. When the Fire Clone detonated, Neji strafed sideways to avoid the blast, and Sato dove forward to draw Neji's attention again. From behind, Aroo the screech owl furled his claws into Neji's ponytail and pulled sharply.

Though it was a small gesture, Neji was surprised. His head tipped back and he swung once at the distracting bird, the same moment in which Sato used a second Spark Flash.

Neji was not surprised Sato took that moment to disarm him, and let his two minion owls Aree and Aroo make off with Mo-Ye (though it was a heavy item for them to steal away with.) A white chakra sabre mercilessly nicked Neji in the torso wound the Chidori had burned through him, and a yowl of pain escaped him as he bent away from the blade point, blind and weaponless.

He'd had about enough of the preposterous effort Sato was making to proceed to future rounds. Without a doubt, Sato would waste more energy in the hope of winning this match than he could possibly use against Huo. Why didn't he see that? Neji wondered.

Freshly bleeding and furious, Neji stood and braced himself in a low Jyukken stance, able to hear Sato's advancing footsteps a stone's throw away…and fired a vacuum wave swirling with Wind Release chakra.

That attack was probably not advisable, Neji thought a moment later. Wind Release Air Palm had cut down a forest on his first attempt, and killed a man on his second attempt. As Neji could not see the result and things had gone quiet after the whirlwind, he was uncertain if Sato evaded the technique or was currently disassembled on the arena floor. But he had a feeling that Sato was most likely alive, based on the clamoring of the stadium's spectators.

He got the impression that the air and space within the arena seemed more congested, as if something large had suddenly appeared and stuffed itself in the ringed building. Neji took an educated guess
that Sato had summoned an owl that had, somehow, defended against a deadly \textit{Wind Release} attack. And it was a towering behemoth of an animal. And he couldn't see it at the moment.

"You're not in good shape, Neji." Sato's voice sounded distant, as if it were coming from atop the giant bird's head, "Give up so I don't have to hurt you any worse!"

Defiantly, he held his Gentle Fist posture, keeping his eyes shut to rest them. With any luck, Neji would have his vision back in a minute or two— and he could dedicate more effort to stopping Sato's \textit{Spark Flash} jutsu.

Neji overheard Sato giving orders to his monstrous bird, which he called Haneheika, and heard Sato direct it to stomp Neji or otherwise do as it saw fit. In retaliation, Neji shot another \textit{Wind Release Air Palm} that made contact, but only seemed to ruffle the feathers of the gigantic beast. He took a running tumble to the right to avoid the crash of giant talons and scaly foot, gouging up the ground where Neji had once stood. When a cloak of the owl's feathers came sweeping by like curtain, Neji repelled them with a \textit{Rotation} to avoid getting swept by the broom-like motion.

Another stomp of a clawed foot smashed down to his immediate right and Neji tumbled, getting a sense of the speed of the animal and how it positioned itself. As Haneheika brought his face down to snap at Neji with a hooked beak, Neji was successful landing one \textit{Air Palm} on the owl's nares and a second, rapid follow up squarely between Haneheika's eyes. The owl reeled back with a reverberating \textit{hoo-reeeee} of pain.

Vision incrementally improving, Neji wagered that as the giant owl retreated and took flight with a storm-inducing flap of its wings, Sato was probably on the ground and poised to strike again. Right about then, a glowing sabre slashed near his face and a second attack grazed his shoulder. Neji spun and relied only on intuition and instinct, reaching out where he estimated Sato's wrist would be, but caught his upper arm instead. Rolling with that, Neji closed a chakra point there and then bent low, slamming Sato with a Wushu high kick to the ribs. The Hatake was flung backwards, and Neji could estimate where he'd fallen. Neji rushed at him.

Sato had mixed feelings about what was happening. He \textit{was} rather impressed that Neji could be blind and still thrash an opponent. It also grated terribly on his pride that Neji's blind Taijutsu, which was now some hybrid of Jyukken and Wushu, had utterly compromised him and his dancing evasive maneuvers. Sato \textit{had} to get away from it. Neji had the advantage in close-quarters without vision, and could still \textit{guess} where chakra points were on Sato while Neji kicked and felt his way around.

He stuck Neji in both shoulders with his sabres, and then Sato kicked him away with a roar. Finally parted, Sato stowed away his short swords and summoned his most faithful, oversized owl, Kutaiku. The truck sized bird took off with his summoner on board.

In the moments that followed, Neji had some peace and was not assaulted by any jutsu, clones, or other nonsense. His vision gradually cleared up, though a bit fuzzy, and the Byakugan was adequately functioning again as he looked up. Neji estimated that Haneheika was in a flapping hover between two and three kilometers above the stadium. Kutaiku graciously dropped Sato off on Haneheika's head and then soared away until he would be needed again.

Well. Sato probably felt confident that Neji couldn't reach him up there. And he'd be right about that. With that fact in mind, Neji wondered how Shikamaru would want to go about calling the match with one of the two combatants sky high.

Except that Shikamaru didn't drop in to call anything. Neji had a few seconds to marvel at the debris and scatterings throughout the arena dreamily drifting up and up, floating miraculously. His brain quickly worked out that \textit{no}, random objects were not flying away into the wild blue yonder.
were being attracted to a new center of gravity. He too, then, felt his feet slipping against the ground.

Neji anchored himself with chakra and reevaluated. How much did this match mean? Not a whole lot. Sato seemed to think so, but Sato also was too stubborn to acknowledge he was not a proper adversary to take on Huo. Neji wasn't so sure he wanted to fight anyone at this point, from an objective point of view…but Sato had pissed him off. And, admittedly, he was not entirely cured of his own bloated pride. Naruto, Tenten, and Wong Leung had not completely beat it out of him yet.

'He's used such a seal at the previous Chunin Exam, to manipulate gravity.' Neji noted, guessing the paper seal was strung from the rope Haneheika was dangling from his claws like a fishing line, seemingly unaffected by the technique. It was certainly a Forbidden Jutsu Sato had been permitted to hold onto, and that was just as likely totally legal in the Exam's Rulebook, at least according to the anything goes comment Kakashi had made earlier.

Then, the chunk of ground he was attached to by chakra ripped up and began floating away. It was surreal— Neji making a grab for any earthbound material to hold onto, crumbling at his fingertips as he too was whisked up with speed…and shot up weightlessly to where gravity prevailed skyward. The Sealing Corps barrier protecting the audience, apparently, did not have an actual top to deflect jutsu above the stadium.

Below, Shikamaru was fretting that this was going to be a brawl he could not realistically interrupt. He looked to Tsunade in the VIP booth who had leaned over to exchange words with the Hoshikage, probably the only other person in the stadium who could fly. 'Maybe she'd-?' Natsuhi shrugged at Tsunade and then Tsunade shrugged back at her. They remained in their seats. 'Great. Guess Hoshikage-sama isn't going to be rescuing any flyaway Finalists today…'

Many audience members were not cheering so much as freaking out, with rogue cries of fright piercing the excited buzz. Tenten and Lee were among the anxious, vocalizing spectators.

In the clear summer sky, Neji had rightly predicted that Sato wanted him defenseless and tumbling so that he could pierce him again with another Light Wing Chidori. It was a very "fool me once" type of gimmick. Neji shot a Wind Release Air Palm at the paper tag as he came within a dozen or so meters of it, shredded the seal, and had just enough reach to snatch the tip of Haneheika's flapping primary feather. Which— surprise!— feathers are not at all sturdy or easy to hold on to, and the bird's motion flipped him, whizzing through the air uncontrollably, until Neji landed on the broad, muscled wing on the gigantic creature's opposite side. It felt like his heart had plunged into his stomach, and Neji supposed maybe he was not a fan of heights quite like these.

Sato was a fan of heights. And Sato was also slashing at his head again.

Vision fully restored, Neji fought in earnest, a bit petrified of the new venue being a living animal thousands of meters in the air. About the only thing he could do to defend himself against Sato's relentless sabre maneuvers was to knock him a-tumbling with vacuum waves. Neji unwisely used a Rotation once, which snarled the giant owl's feathers and caused it to keen into a near barrel-roll. The young men held on, wind lashing their faces, and charged at each other again when Haneheika leveled off, circling above the stadium.

Neji managed to disarm Sato of a sabre, bowing his head to duck a swing of the second sword, and closed what few chakra points he could before he was kicked in his wound again. Reeling, Neji staggered back and fell through the flimsy overlap of wing feathers. Sato blinked in shock, and then crept over to watch as Neji plummeted down. He sheathed his remaining sabre and quickly followed in a dive.

'Ah.' Neji thought to himself, falling back-first so he could plainly see Sato taking a leap off of
Haneheika's back, 'Sato would be so generous as to save my life right now, and then he'd ask me to quit...I bet.' Neji did a double take. Sato had made hand signs for the Chidori again on his way down, narrowing himself like a spear to fall faster. Neji scowled up at him. 'I was mistaken...'

His Byakugan surveyed the area and determined that Kutaiku, though close by, was still beyond his reach. Not that another one of Sato's summoned owls would be any safer, but it beat striking the ground and dying in Neji's book. Rapidly, his brain made some deductions. Sato's Chidori had transformed again into the large, sharp planes of a Light Style wing. Neji estimated he was falling at maybe fifty-six meters per second...and the stadium's top was less than a kilometer below him by then. Sato was a bullet— plummeting at maybe eighty or ninety meters per second with a devastating technique in hand, sizzling the air around him with heat.

Of all the predicaments he could have gotten into today, this was not one that had popped into Neji's imagination. Since he only had a few seconds to decide how he was going to try to survive this, he went with his gut instinct.

He flushed chakra out of all his tenketsu, more than double he normally would for a traditional Rotation, and Neji whipped himself into a defensive spin that maybe, just maybe, would protect him from the Yōton Chidori. He forced more chakra into his neat, full spherical defense, and laced it with as much of his Wind Nature as he could consciously tap into. Wind wouldn't protect him from any type of Light based piercing jutsu, but it would drain away the drippings of Lightning style from Sato's attempted attack.

Then the strange variables lined up, and Neji noticed a subtle trade in winds around them as Sato was a mere breath away from his Rotation shield... Chidori heat had spun wind counterclockwise above the stadium, cool air below them was whirling clockwise, and the clashing forces slammed into each other to form a funnel, pulling down wisps of cloud that were drifting by. Dirt, miscellanea, and Sato's owls Haneheika and Kutaiku were thrown into a spin as soon as the accidental tornado formed.

Shikamaru wisely chose to stay sheltered as a, 'Huh, looks like a tornado.' Clash of chakra natures rattled the interior of the Sealing Corps barrier. Spectators felt a rushing breeze at most, and safely watched as the wind funnel hurled Haneheika across town, where the giant owl retreated in a puff of smoke. Likewise, Kutaiku unsummoned himself to avoid injury. Neji and Sato, on the other hand, had reduced their speeds but still fell, flung against the arena's walls and upended floor before crashing painfully to the ground. The Yōton Chidori had pittered out before ever contacting its intended target.

The two of them ended up face-first on the dusty floor, about ten meters apart. Since the tornado had dissipated, Shikamaru plopped into the arena to figure out if either of the stubborn idiots had survived. To his surprise, Sato stirred and clambered up after a severe coughing fit. He hacked and wheezed, dusting dirt from his face and person. He shook his head and flecks of rock and debris scattered from his hair. Within that same timeframe, Neji had slowly pushed himself up to his knees. He appeared to be significantly more exhausted. His wounds, Shikamaru also noticed, were bleeding anew.

Shikamaru rubbed the back of his head, considering it, 'Not that I expected this, but...Sato really got the best of him. I should call it before Neji keels over and bites it...'

Suddenly, Sato was barreled over and off of his feet, and he frantically sprang up again to discern how he’d been ambushed from the rear. His face fell in horror. A clone of Neji had closed in behind him and slapped him with a Gentle Fist assault that suggested it was a truly solid doppelganger, 'That's a Shadow Clone! Shit— he must have made one when we touched down-!' Sato dodged and
wheeled away from the Kage Bunshin, his last chakra sabre drawn, and supposed Tenten had taught Neji more than just swordsmanship, 'Just quit already, damnitt!'

A tendril of Wind Release chakra sliced his cheek open, and Sato was steered away from the real Neji as he ordered himself and stood. The highly inconvenient Shadow Clone lambasted him with Air Palms. Thankfully, Sato was able to capitalize on the clone's slicing ranged technique, rolled to the side and countered with a Fire Jutsu with the last scraps of his chakra, "Katon: Lighter Thread!" The wire thin ignition flame sparked off of the indiscriminate Wind Release, and it engulfed the Shadow Clone in a blaze before it could protect itself with a Rotation.

Sato charged through the fire, hoping to take advantage of his last few moments of strength, 'This is over! It's over! He has no chakra, no jutsu left at his disposal— Neji isn't meant to go on the way I am!' With a running leap, Sato passed over withering flames and tumbled stones in the arena, spotting Neji who had also scrounged up enough naked ambition to stand and lunge for chakra points. And he drilled them shut— thirty-two tenketsu in Sato's hands, arms, and chest before pain was vibrating the neurons in Neji's brain, pleading with his limbs to stop moving. After all, Sato had jammed his sabre back into the same wound on Neji's right flank, and there was no describing how terrible it felt.

Exhausted, jelly legs buckled, and Neji was unconscious before he landed on the ground on his back, dust softly flitting up and settling on him. Sato had half a coherent moment more as he stumbled and folded up, vision spinning from the attack and chakra exhaustion. He landed frontways again, his arms tucked around his trunk as fatigue and the sting of Jyukken knocked him out of the woken realm.

A lot of expectant rumbling was coming from the watching crowds as Shikamaru did a wellness check on both Sato and Neji, his microphone off— snapping his fingers, calling their names, belittling their foolishness. Shikamaru remained beside Neji, frowning at how a sword was still protruding out of him, and the rate he was bleeding out was worrisome. Shikamaru didn't even have to radio up to Tsunade about what the result was. He announced over loudspeakers, "Both participants are unable to continue. This match is officially a draw!"

Many people were unhappy with that result. Neji had been a popular bet for gamblers…and that money was the house's now.

While a chorus of boos sounded, Hinata was glancing around at the modicum of chaos that ensued. Tenten and Lee had descended into the arena, collecting Neji's scattered jian and scabbard for him, and then anxiously inspected him from over the shoulders of Tournament-assigned medic nin. Shino had gone ahead without her to evaluate Sato's well-being.

She felt rooted to the spot. A horrible, nauseating feeling had clawed its way up from her stomach, and she felt a sheen of sweat on the back of her neck. Her breathing uneven, Hinata fumbled around for a hair tie in her pocket and pulled her hair up. She leaned on the balcony's rail and watched.

'Why did they...do that?' She believed she may have been able to prevent it. Hinata had not found Sato before his match to explain the plan that their Leaf companions had agreed on. But he had purposefully avoided his teammates for the match, and bull-headedly challenged Neji until the two of them were completely out of commission, 'Neji-niisan knew better than that too...but now...without them...' The plan was Swiss cheese now. Neji and Sato had shot holes through it, leaving it up to their friends and teammates to figure out what to do about Huo in subsequent rounds.

"Hinata?"
She peeked over her shoulder at Sakura, who had come to stand next her.

"You don't want to go down there?"

"I..." Her voice fluttered with sadness, "I would rather not be out there for all to see...if I..." Hinata swiped a knuckle under her eye to dry a tear, "I just wish they hadn't done that to each other."

"You can say that again." Sakura agreed morosely, "What are we supposed to do now? We all thought Neji should..." She sighed and looked back to Ino, Kiba, and Chouji. How quickly their numbers had dwindled...

"Change of plans." Ino spoke up at length, folding her arms, "Let's all do our best in our matches and not fight that crazy bastard. How does that sound?"

"We can't just let him get away with what he did." Kiba growled.

"We won't be letting him get away with it." Chouji disagreed, "We'll be playing it safe."

"We still-!"

"Are you actually going to lay all of this on Tenten and Lee? Well here's some news for you, Lee hasn't won his match yet. Looks like we have no idea how to call matches, considering how this one went down in flames." Ino reminded them sharply, "With that said, what good is Matsuri going to do us later, hm? Sakura, Chouji, and Hinata— think you can soften Huo up for later matches? I mean really people! Are we being realistic now?"

Kiba and Chouji quieted down. Sakura locked gazes with Ino, "Maybe we could."

"Don't—" Ino grimaced at her.

"Ino, I've been—"

"Yeah, yeah, you have some secret jutsu the Hokage taught you that you didn't waste on me. Is that it?" Ino surmised, "Forget it! There's no point in us risking it, just like Lee's grandpa said! And you know what-?" She continued furiously, "This year is shit. Where is Naruto's team? Well? Do we know? He's off training somewhere with the Hermit Perv, Gaara's ineligible, and where the fuck is Haku? Has anyone actually seen him for the last seventeen months?" She stomped her foot and screeched, "We kind of need them!"

"That's a good point." Kiba yielded.

"Wondering that won't help us now." Chouji patted her arm until Ino inhaled again, lowering her voice as she went on.

"I know it won't help. Ino acknowledged, "But I know I can't be the only one who thinks it's sketchy as hell that at least Haku didn't show up. What, is he like working in a dungeon for Gaara in the Torture and Intel Corps? Is he some spineless daycare worker retired from ninja life, or did he run off and go rogue?"

"Ino, stop." Sakura rested her hands on her hips, annoyed, "Even Gaara hasn't told me exactly what kind of work he has Haku-kun doing. It must be confidential."

"Confidential. My wax appointments are confidential!" Ino ground her teeth, "This is stupid. No one seems to care about all the shady shit that's going on. Never mind we're shorthanded while Sato and Neji, those dumbfucks, thought a double-knockout would be cool! Why is Huo so hell bent on
hurting us in the first place? Care to question that asshole's M.O.? Ask the questions, people!"

Chouji was chuckling by then. Tenten and Lee had returned in time to hear Ino's outraged speculating.

"I guess you could call them dumbfucks." Tenten agreed with a shrug.

Lee did not feel that way, "That seems much too harsh a description..."

"I don't know." Tenten held her chin and took the spot on the wall she had occupied earlier, Mo-Ye sheathed and leaned beside her, "Right from the start, Neji was injured severely. I thought he'd probably just avoid the hassle and surrender. Sato could've continued to future rounds, no problem. I don't think Sato would be effective, but we could've let him have his way."

Shino had turned up promptly from the stairwell and evaluated her opinion, "Allowing him to have his way is the same as permitting his indifference to the thoughts and feelings of others. Sato did not consider what we thought at all. We will be affected by this in future rounds." He amended, "Though, Hinata and I did not have the opportunity to speak to him prior to the match."

"Ah, well, Neji explained our plan pretty concisely for him. Sato still didn't care." Tenten sighed, "Even so, I expected a bit more prudence from Neji..."

"And yet his obstinacy still seemed characteristic of him." Lee observed.

She grumbled in the affirmative.

Ino clapped her hands to gather attention again, "Alright...so how about we come up with a new idea?"

"I've got one." Sakura proposed, turning to Hinata and Chouji on her left, "You guys have at it and be fair to one another." She looked to Lee, "Lee-kun...I really do like Matsuri and want to look after her...but we need you to defeat her. Neji kind of fudged our hierarchy for facing Huo."

He nodded enthusiastically, "I am confident I can!"

"Because we have one less person advancing to Round Two, that means no one will be getting a bye. The seeds will be even, meaning..." Sakura glanced at Tenten and smiled worriedly, "You and I will be facing each other at the beginning of Round Two."

The older kunoichi shook her head in amusement, "Here we go again. You did a number on me at the last Exam."

"I still can." Sakura pointed out.

"Yeesh! Stop being scary, Sakura." Tenten yipped.

Sakura went on with her mental-bracketing, "After that, Huo will be seeded against Shino." All eyes fell on Shino and he stood motionless, as if he were still processing that fact. "Shino. Think on it for a while. I know we all want to do our part, but if we're going to take another shot at fighting him, we should at least be sure those that do can escape unharmed or surrender."

He nodded solemnly.

"And the third match of Round Two could be between either Chouji or Hinata against either Lee or Matsuri." Sakura concluded, tapping her lip with her thumb, "That match doesn't seem so bad. Since
we're all mature, we can agree that maybe that victory should be given to Lee if he's made it that far."

Many heads nodded in agreement.

"And then semi-final rounds will be terrifying so let's not think that far ahead right now." Ino suggested.

Sakura was going to protest and continue prognosticating, but Shikamaru made the announcement for the next match, asking Chouji and Hinata to report to the arena.

To avoid Sakura's persnickety remarks, Ino offered to walk Chouji down to the ground floor. Chouji thanked her but descended the stairs on his own, as Sakura yanked Ino back and told her to face the music and prepare for what was coming.

Shino snapped out of his thoughts and looked to Hinata beside him. Her shoulders were slouched, and she stared ahead as an onslaught of thoughts and worries distracted her from the moment.

"Don't let what we discussed just now cloud your judgement and abilities. Focus on your match and consider all the rest later." He advised in a soft voice.

Hinata pursed her lips and looked up at him, able to see through his glasses to warm, considerate eyes, "I…I don't want you to fight H—"

"We can debate that after your match."

"Shino-kun." She cleared her throat to speak more clearly, "I will. Sato-kun asked us to fight as hard as possible today, for Tama-chan. I think for now…I can. But later on we should both be very careful."

"I agree." He replied, "Sato will regret not being able to watch your match. It will be artful and won quickly."

"Shino-kun!" Hinata reverted from her fretful state straight back to bashful.

"Go, before you're tardy." Shino gently tugged on her sleeve and she was off. He then became aware of Ino and Sakura regarding him; they'd been watching the exchange.

"I feel like I never knew! How did I not know how nice and smart you are?"

"Maybe because you don't like giving decent people the time of day?" Sakura sniped, "I've known for well over a year now that we can trust Shino with anything."

Off to the side, Kiba agreed that belatedly he had also discovered Shino was cool.

"Hm, that's great Sakura." Ino knocked shoulders with her pinkette friend, "You are an excellent judge of character, aren't you?" Sakura took that jibe much too personally and continued smashing shoulders with Ino, "But really, it's fab that Shino's compassionate and a bonafide strategist…but amazing that he's more handsome than pretty much every guy here."

Kiba and Lee silently wilted at the proclamation, and Tenten barked a reprimand at Ino.

"Like seriously, Shino, watch out. You won't be able to leave this stadium without turning a few
girls down today." Ino predicted.

"We are getting off the subject." Shino advised.

"A-aaand…we're off it." Ino kindly acquiesced.

About three and a half minutes into her match, Hinata was feeling a fair amount of guilt. Not only did her highly tuned empathy radar detect that Chouji was not at all interested in hurting her, but he had not bothered with food pills or any sort of advanced jutsu for their match.

Pitting two gentle people against one another made for quite the lackluster fight. Granted, she did sweat a little dodging Chouji's Multi-Size swipes. When a huge fist or gigantic roundhouse kick came too close for comfort, Hinata whirled in a Rotation to shrug him off.

Though the audience's mood was tepid, Sakura and Ino were doing a whole lot of extremely loud cheering.

Hinata supposed that the Hokage was already pleased with how much they had grown as shinobi. If this match was going to be brief and border on non-violent frolicking, she may as well turn it into a spotlight performance on her newfound strength. Even though Naruto couldn't be there to watch her, Hinata imagined her father would delight in seeing her wield the techniques he had trained her in.

So she did. She struck Chouji while he was tumbling full-tilt with his Human Bullet Tank jutsu, firing a precise and chakra-dense vacuum wave she had been practicing for weeks. It blasted her kind-hearted adversary back, and Chouji skidded flatly across the ground before coming to a stop. It knocked the wind out of him.

Hinata apologized under her breath as she battered Chouji with another Air Palm as soon as he stood again. Dazed, Chouji tried righting himself and getting his bearings, easily dispatching a circling Shadow Clone with a super-powered jab to the chin. But as he had settled his eyes on her doppelganger for only a few heartbeats, Hinata had launched herself at Chouji's right side just beyond his peripheral, and shut what chakra points she could. To halt her, a mammoth Multi-Size hand closed around her. Hinata reacted in a panic, and flushed herself with chakra again for a Rotation.

Chouji soared with a cry, not expecting such a retort, and he hit the arena wall— putting a sizeable dent in it. Hinata brought her hands to her mouth, peeping in surprise. 'Chouji-kun! Oh why did I do that? I was scared for a moment. I thought he would crush me…'

She could feel her father's eyes on her. This meant a lot to him. He had been waiting to see this for so long. Hinata put aside her anxious feelings about what lay ahead in the Tournament.

She rushed again, lithely ducking under Chouji's last-ditch swing, and spun cleanly into a Gentle Fist barrage that sealed thirty or so chakra points before Shikamaru's voice came from behind her.

"Eh-hem. Did you hear me? Time out, Hyuga Princess." He grumbled. Shikamaru motioned for her to step aside and he silenced his microphone to speak to Chouji.

"I think you can continue, but…" Shikamaru sighed at his best friend, "You weren't taking this match seriously."

"I don't want to hurt Hinata." Chouji sighed, "But, uh…she kinda blocked all of my chakra just now."
"Not a good idea to go easy on her, was it?" The proctor sniffed.

"Oh heck no. I'll never do that again."

"You out, Chouji?"

"I'm out."

He switched his microphone back on, "With Akimichi Chouji's forfeiture, the winner of this match is Hyuga Hinata!"

Cordially, Hinata helped Chouji up and exited the arena side-by-side with her fellow mild spirit. She offered to open all of the chakra points she had tampered with, and Chouji gladly took her up on the offer in the first floor treatment room. With no other injuries that needed tending, they were free to return to the Finalist Viewing Area.

On the way up the stairs Chouji mused, "Neji and Sato will probably be in the hospital for a while. Maybe a couple of days…"

Her head drooped at the thought, "Yes, they will."

"Guess we're going to have to catch them up on what happens today at the Tournament." Chouji went on, "That will be the first place I go when this is all over. Just to check on them. Tama-chan too…I want to know if she'll be okay."

"Yes, yes— me too!" Hinata agreed, hurrying up the stairs a bit faster at the thought, "Or if anyone else should get hurt…the hospital is a sensible first stop after this."

Back at the viewing area, the other Leaf finalists had clearly enjoyed Hinata and Chouji's super-courteous match.

"That was like watching the polar opposite of Neji and Sato's smackdown." Kiba described it.

"Thank goodness for that." Sakura breathed easier at the thought.

Chouji pointed out that since he had no expectation of advancing, he would be happy to pick up snacks from the concession stand for anyone who needed something. Lee's match, after all, was one they ought not to miss.

"Oh! Get me that thing that Tenten just finished drinking." Ino pointed out the emptied bubble tea cup in the older kunoichi's hand, "It's got to be good."

"It is. You know Finalists get snacks and drinks for free?" Tenten informed them, "But visitors pay full price, poor things."

At the mentioning of free concession treats, Chouji hurried up the orders from Kiba and Sakura, confirming no one else wanted anything. Then he set off excitedly.

After that the gaggle of kunoichi had reassembled, commending Hinata on a job well done. She blushingly waved off their congratulations.

"Tragic, though…that Naruto wasn't here to check you out in this ensemble." Ino fiddled with the bowed obijime of Hinata's outfit, "It's satisfying to see you win in the Finals, but even better to see you look hot doing it."

Hinata sucked her lips shut in embarrassment, her face tomato-red.
"Come to think of it, Naruto hasn't seen you with long hair yet." Sakura smiled at their shy friend.

"N-No...he hasn't..."

"You have to wear this for him at least once when he gets back." Ino asserted.

She was making small, tinkling I-can't-handle-this-topic-right-now sounds. Nearby, Tenten did nothing to stop it as she tried to suck the last remnants of tapioca out of her cup through a straw.

"Whew! Naruto has got to be taller." Sakura continued teasing Hinata, glancing over at Shino, Lee, and Kiba chatting amongst themselves at the balcony's rail, "Look at all of these knuckleheads, they're almost full grown I'd wager! It happened so fast."

Hinata peeped in agreement.

As a side-note, Ino added, "Yeah, and after watching Gaara hit the town with you he turned out pretty fine didn't he, Forehead?"

Sakura gave her a diabolical, naughty grin that telepathically confirmed to Ino that he was very fine. Tenten quirked an eyebrow at the obvious signal.

"So it's kind of like the law of averages that Naruto will be eye candy for you when he gets home." Ino continued to unnecessarily reassure Hinata, "You know, unless he's developed some serious toad warts or other unfortunate condition."

"He looked healthy—" Hinata immediately caught herself and fell silent.

Sakura and Ino still deciphered the huge, unbelievable blunder. Tenten was working on her cup disinterestedly.

"What did you just say?" Ino transformed into an interrogator. A gorgeous interrogator. Her vocal register dropped and took on a knife-edge.

Sakura also leaned in for the scoop, "We heard that right...didn't we? You've seen him, Hinata?"

"N-N-N-No, no, no, no, no, no-!"

"Yes, yes, yes you did say it!" Ino seized her by the shoulders, "Keeping secrets from the sisterhood, eh? Unacceptable."

"Hinata! But how-?" Sakura was smirking and intrigued.

"I-I-I-!" She was shaking her head defensively.

"Whatever you do, don't make her cry." Tenten warned the youngsters, "I'll shave your heads if you upset Hinata."

"She—" Ino said pointedly of the stuttering girl trapped in her arms, "Has had a secret rendezvous with a man, Tenten! I know you heard it too."

"So? Who here hasn't?" Tenten shrugged it off and tossed her cup in a trash bin across the room.

Ino smirked wickedly at her, "You haven't."

The girls went quiet.
"Say…" Tenten straightened and seemed much taller, looming over the insolent blonde girl, "Remember when I said I'd shave you? I didn't mean with a safety razor. I meant with the biggest, sharpest sword I've got, without suds to save your scalp."

"You don't scare me, frustrated virgin." Ino tittered at her. Sakura and Hinata were mouthing at Ino to cease and desist.

"I will be neither frustrated nor virtuous as soon as this Tournament's brouhaha is over and Neji can, you know, function." Tenten insisted, relenting sullenly and disposing with her threat.

Ino snickered at the word function.

"And I have had secret meetings with him…hmph!" Tenten was muttering indignantly.

"Yeah, and Neji probably didn't lay a finger on you." Ino pressed.

"Ino-chan!" Hinata squealed, "Stop talking about that! He's my big brother! He's very decent."

"Unfortunately." Tenten agreed. Sakura laughed at her.

"Ah that's right, I've digressed." Ino turned back to Hinata, "So did Naruto sneak back home while our backs were turned? Well, Hinata? Confess."

"N-No, of course he didn't." Hinata defended.

"I think I know what happened." Sakura spoke up slowly, as if to minimize the severity of the cross-examination.

Hinata gave the pink haired kunoichi a pleading look.

"Naruto is training on Mount Myoboku right now." Sakura explained, "So Hinata could have used her, uh, special ability to speak with him while he's in range. I'm going out on a limb here, but I guess that could happen."

"What ability?" Ino was flummoxed.

Hinata was not too keen on elaborating, "May we please talk about something else?"

"No."

Sakura interrupted, "Ino, let's give her a break. Her Byakugan can let her overlap her chakra and consciousness with someone else's. There's nothing vulgar or scandalous about it. She's even tried it on me."

Tenten shrugged, "I don't blame her for wanting to reach out to her boyfriend. Do you? It's normal."

"As someone who can also peek into the minds of others for a quick hello," Ino sniffed imperiously, "I am telling you it absolutely can be scandalous."

"Well that's none of your business and you can't make her talk about it here." Tenten seethed with a smile, "I'll take your shit, Miss Princess, but it's time to leave Hinata alone."

"Seems I've hit a couple sore spots on you, Old Lady." Ino smiled back, "Fine. Some other time."

"Hey! Have you noticed how nice your hair is?" Tenten reminded her, "My threats aren't idle, blondie."
Hinata sighed heavily as she listened to the bickering. While the verbal sparring continued, Shikamaru announced the final match of the first round. Tenten held a hand up to Ino's face to shut her down, and then strode across the way to Lee.

"You were having a very animated conversation." He pointed out, thankfully unaware of the subject matter, "You do not need to interrupt it on my behalf—"

"Lee, I am so done with that conversation. Talking to you is always better than girl-drama." Tenten informed him, and they shared a chuckle, "How are you feeling?"

"Capable."

"Don't pull a Neji, okay?"

"What does that mean?"

"It means don't lose to someone because you underestimated your opponent's will to fight."

"I do not often do that." Lee looked upward as he considered it, "Rest assured I shall be as judicious as possible!"

"Just like Grandpa said."

"Just as he said."

And also, Tenten switched to Hanwen, You are like family to me. Please don't get hurt. I really need you today.

I know. He was smiling.

Neji can be stupid sometimes.

He meant well! Things still surprise him now and then.

Tenten shook her head, exhaling roughly, I'm still scared. I don't want anyone to see me getting nervous or unsure. I don't want to fight Sakura...

It is alright to feel that way. Lee consoled her, Discuss it with Sakura. She seemed to indicate she may wish to advance to future rounds...and maybe it is safer if you do not?

I have no idea, anymore.

Lee hugged her tightly, I promise I will be back soon.

Kiba snarked at them, "Hey, what are you two talkin' about over there? No fair that you just up and switch languages."

Shino gave him a rebuttal, "The language of friendship should need no explanation."

"Yo! Stop being wise and crap, alright?" Kiba grumbled back at him.

Lee set out down the stairwell and Tenten turned in a small circle, unnerved by the absence of her team. She then shuffled back to the flock of kunoichi. The girls had settled down.

Hinata sidled in beside Tenten at the rail, and Ino and Sakura took the space between them and the remaining men. Chouji had the good timing to return with snacks prior to the match.
"Do not worry, Onee-san." Hinata spoke quietly to Tenten, "Lee-kun will be fine."

"I know he will be. It's me who's the problem." Tenten admitted.

"I can feel how worried you are." Hinata noted, "Is something the matter, Onee-san?"

"I..." She trailed off and lowered her voice, "It's a hunch, but...Huo could be here because I have a weapon passed down from our common ancestors. He wants it."

"C-Common ancestors-?" Hinata sputtered.

"Yeah. I don't really want to broadcast the relation. He's horrible. I don't think I can take Huo in a fight...but seeing my friends face him feels worse."

Discreetly, Hinata clutched at Tenten's sleeve as they said nothing more and peered down into the arena. Lee and Matsuri were squaring off as Shikamaru fuddled around with his two-way radio.

It was easy to tell by the look on Matsuri's face that she was fully prepared to use every last ounce of her strength to make her teacher proud. Lee had glanced up at Gaara in the VIP booth, wondering what his feelings about the match were. He turned a fraction to spot Huo on the Foreign Finalist balcony. Huo had cleaned up and preened himself in the time since his match. He was staring down at Lee smugly.

Many thoughts raced through Lee's head: that perhaps Huo suspected how his Leaf opposition was planning to deal with him. That Matsuri was bolder than before, calm, and maybe more eager to please her sensei than Lee himself was (and few surpassed his level of enthusiasm.) Lee also thought about Tenten, and how her tough exterior was beginning to crack as the Tournament wore on, even more so now that Neji was retired to a hospital room to recover.

A moment of tranquility washed over him.

'I am glad that Grandpa came to speak to us. I have never introduced him to Gai-sensei before...and though Grandpa did not have many encouraging things to say...I believe they understood one another.' Lee considered. It felt like the two halves of himself finally met. Culture and tradition had encountered his determination and Nindo, face to face, old and young. He felt lighter. He felt vastly more aware.

Shikamaru was speaking, "Are you both ready?"

Lee took his time-tested stance, nodding as he raised a hand and stared Matsuri right in the eyes. The girl unflinchingly looked back at him, her own hands hovering readily at her hips.

"Begin!"

As expected, Matsuri snapped a metal-chain jouhyou off of her belt, and lashed it out at Lee as she flipped sideways. Lee made certain to keep his eye on the weapon's tooth instead of the distracting, red fabric flag, as Tenten had advised him. He ducked and weaved away from the spinning offense.

Matsuri was stunningly quick, flexing and casting her rope-dart off of her elbow and neck, redirecting it with a kick and twist of her foot. The dart nearly bashed Lee's face four times in only a matter of seconds. He remembered his grandfather talking about the popularity of soft weapons in their homeland, and warriors in the Middle Kingdom who specialized in rope-darts and chain-whips. Matsuri's talent was not learned from a master. She had endeavored on her own to learn the weapon. 'She is like me in this respect! Our hard work is what got us this far!'
When he charged, Matsuri hooked her rope-dart around her thigh and rotated her hips, throwing her free hand forward. A fabric sash whirled out of her tunic's sleeve, and Matsuri snared Lee's wrist and pulled back, tightening a knot closed. She would have liked to tug him within range of the return arc of her plummeting jouhyou, but Lee was very, very strong. He somersaulted in the dust to avoid her attacks, pulling with all of his might, and Matsuri was hurled off of her feet. "Wuuh!" Her rope-dart pattered and flattened out on the ground while she was dragged.

Before Lee could start reeling her in by her own cloth whip, Matsuri tugged the knot free and drew it back, looping it around her arm for safekeeping. "Hah!" She spun with a flying kick that shot her jouhyou like a rocket, and clipped Lee as he bounced up. He winced as a line of blood ran down his from his ear. It was a superficial hit, but it proved her aim was impeccable.

Lee stood straight and exhaled. 'Gaara-kun's student is remarkable! She has not been in training for very long.' He reached into the utility pouch on his belt and retrieved his nunchaku. Wasting no time, he went through the minimal, swerving motions his grandfather had taught him, and batted the tooth of Matsuri's jouhyou away like pesky fly. She snapped and spun her rope-dart furiously, faster and faster, but Lee hardly needed to exert himself to anticipate the attacks.

He edged in closer, carefully, aware that Matsuri was winding up her chain to match him as the distance between them shrunk. Seeing an opening as she cast her rope-dart out to its full length, Lee dashed in, turned to get a full-momentum swing of his nunchaku to crash against her shoulder…but Matsuri had timed her leap perfectly. She vaulted over Lee like a gymnast and caught the tooth of her jouhyou in her free hand, pulling back on her weapon's chain as it snagged Lee's nunchaku on the way up and ripped it from his grasp. Matsuri tumbled to the ground and rolled backwards, hopping to her feet like a desert hare— she gripped her rope-dart in her left hand and Lee's weapon her right hand. She smiled and began spinning the nunchaku.

Lee's jaw dropped. 'She...she's going to use it against me!' Then he sobered up and grinned. She had made that opening for the sole purpose of luring him in closer to be disarmed. What a crafty amateur.

Willing himself to relax, Lee let himself melt like butter, like his grandfather always demanded. He sunk into a low Wushu stance, and when Matsuri's jouhyou lashed out at him Lee dipped backwards and spread himself completely flat on the ground. His noodling acrobatics allowed him to close the distance, avoiding her long-distance snaps with the rope-dart…then folding and flopping away from his own cracking, twirling nunchaku. When Lee kicked her ankle, she toppled with a shriek. There was a brief, crazy looking close-quarters struggle in the dirt before Lee was clocked in the chin by his own nunchaku, and Matsuri had taken an indirect Zui Chuan punch to the stomach that made her see stars. She leapt up only to fall over again, gasping.

Several times in the past, Lee had been whacked in the head by nunchaku while practicing with them. Because he was somewhat acclimated to the feeling, he was not dizzied by the bonk on his jaw as much as he could've been. While Matsuri was keening and trying to regain her balance, a zipping Leaf Hurricane kick knocked his nunchaku free of her hand, and he back-flipped to catch it.

"Woo hoo!" He cheered.

Lee charged again with his weapon in a full-tilt swing. Matsuri sacrificed her jouhyou by hurling it at him like a chain-bola, and the inertia of it pulled away his nunchaku again as both weapons entangled uselessly on the ground. Improvising mid-run, Lee skidded into an upward kick in preparation of Shadow of the Dancing Leaf, but her cloth whip was just as fast. He yelped as it wrapped round and round him, suspecting it was the work of some kind of Ninjutsu. 'Ah, yes... definitely Ninjutsu.' He had been gift-wrapped. Mummified. From his toes to his neck, Lee was straightjacketed in the fabric whip she had parted with.
"You are way too fast…and…” Matsuri lurched to hold her stomach again, "You didn't even wind up for that punch!"

"There was no need to.” Lee wobbled and then cried out as he fell backwards, landing supine on the arena floor, completely constricted, "We have both been disarmed. You fight incredibly well, Matsuri-san!"

"I have more weapons where that came from—" The smirk dropped off of her face as she watched Lee make a surprisingly fast inch-worm escape, "H-Hey! What're you-? Get back here!" Matsuri ran after him as the audience roared in laughter, watching as Lee scooted and rolled as fast as he could to escape his opponent.

Matsuri was irked, "You can't get out of those bindings! I applied a Sealing Jutsu to it! If you want me to let you go you'll have to surrender-!"

"—I have never given up…and I-!" Lee struggled and puffed to worm-hop away from her outstretched hands, "I will not surrender to-daaaaaaay…!" He accidentally fell down into an excavated trap hole from Shino and Kiba's match.

Stupefied, Matsuri peered down into the dark pit and then shook her head in exasperation. She backtracked to go disentangle her rope-dart from Lee's nunchaku. He would be a sitting duck by the time her weapon was free.

Meanwhile, underground…Lee was ass-up in the tilled soil beneath the stadium that smelled vaguely of dog and crisped insects. With a rocking start, he righted himself and took a deep breath.

"Troubling." He acknowledged his predicament.

So Matsuri claimed that the cloth-prison he was wrapped up in could not be escaped, but Lee was always about the good old college try. Flat on his stomach, he bent as far as he could, grinding his legs together like a stridulating grasshopper. To his great shock, the concealed blade in the heel of his shoe (Thank you Tenten!) rather easily cut through the fabric near his feet. With strength, he tore the ripped perforation up further, thrashing and squirming. Lee contorted himself, kicking his shoe off and cautiously lifting it in his mouth, directing the hidden blade carefully. He nicked himself trivially, but was freed with only a few minutes of cutting.

'Had I known that it was possible to break out of this cloth, I may have pulled it apart with strength from the Inner Gates.' That was neither here nor there now, he supposed. Lee pulled his shoe back on and glanced over the shredded fabric. He noticed that Matsuri had applied some type of Sealing technique to the cloth whip…but some characters were written incorrectly, 'Ooohhh…It is not easy to be new at something!' Lee snapped his head around when debris and stones tumbled down into the pit, foretelling of Matsuri's next potential attack. After glancing around and seeing no other exit, Lee opened Gates to borrow one of Tama's staple techniques.

Above ground, Matsuri felt a rumble and wisely decided to step away from the leftover insect hole.

"Blooming Lotus!" Lee crashed up through shattering of rock and earth nearly whomped the kunoichi before she scurried away.

"How did you-?" Matsuri was distressed to see Lee had escaped her snare.

He had become unbelievably fast— too fast for her to keep up. Lee had caught the flag of her jouhyou, and threw himself down on the chain in a whirling somersault. He pulled the weapon away
from her and flung it aside. He rolled up to his feet again and dashed at the unarmed kunoichi. All she could do as he kicked her was perform hand seals frantically.

In position for Shadow of the Dancing Leaf, Lee was truly surprised to see the arm-wrappings he meant to secure her with shred like tissue paper. A swirling gust of wind had passed through her lips, "Futon: Gale Breath!"

They crashed back down to the ground while the audience cheered rowdily. In desperation, Matsuri bit her thumb and rushed through hand seals again. Lee stood and brushed himself off, wide-eyed at the sight of her summoning of two cottage-sized scorpions.

"I'm not going to let you get the best of me!" Matsuri trumpeted, patting the armored body of the insect closest to her, "The desert has tested me! Gaara-sensei has tested me! He trusted me with the contract of our friends in the dunes."

Lee was impressed, "Amazing!"

Matsuri balked, still confounded by compliments coming from her opponent, "Er, uh, yeah! It is!" She pointed her big, dangerous friends at Lee, "Osba! Ireki! Sting 'em!"

Lee screeched in fright because he had not expected them to be upon him in an instant, jamming their hooked tails down with battering-ram force. In the background he could see Matsuri was summoning her meteor hammer from a tool scroll. Lee tangoed with the desert giants between their spindly legs and pincers, marveling at how his punches hardly swayed them at all. Yet he was most surprised when Osba, the scorpion with a reddish tint to his dark shell, used Sand Style Ninjutsu. Though not nearly as precise as Gaara, it was a frightening skill.

Ireki was exhaling Wind Style jutsu, trying to wedge Lee in between desert calamities and keep him away from Matsuri. Lee's hair was terrifically tousled by the attacks, stuck up in a faux-hawk shape. He sprang and flipped onto Osba's back, racing up the creature's tail, and pulled down just above the stinger's notch. Lee's Gate Strength hurled the scorpion onto his companion, Ireki, and the two had been tilted belly-side up with their legs scuttling.

Mostly out of curiosity, Lee whacked the joints of the insects with Wushu boxing as his grandfather might have suggested. And what a wonder—the attacks had frozen the bewildered insects in their vulnerable positions. Lee dusted his hands and stepped back. Then, the metal ball of Matsuri's meteor hammer caught him while he was turned away.

The crushing momentum of the attack flung Lee clean across the stadium's arena and into a wall with a crack. Eyes watering, Lee peeled himself out of the stone and plaster and collapsed to the ground. By all accounts, no weapon wielded by Matsuri's toothpick arms could have hurt so bad or hit so hard. As Lee was an educated, discerning soul, he gathered that she had propelled her meteor hammer with her Wind Ninjutsu. He wasn't sure, but the force felt like maybe a lower vertebrae in his back was, well—something didn't feel right back there.

It took a lot of willpower and even a manly tear rolling down his cheek for Lee to evade the next, bursting swing of the meteor hammer. The ball smashed into the ground and gouged up a trench. Matsuri pulled back on her weapon as Lee opened a third Inner Gate. He roughly caught the chain and ran around the girl, lightning quick, and before Matsuri could begin to wriggle and shrug her way out of confinement, Lee bounded up to give her a mighty toss, "Front Lotus!"

Things did not normally end this...softly, Lee noted. A hair's breadth above the ground, a bed of sand had halted the nosedive before its painful conclusion. Matsuri was safely cocooned and uninjured, and Lee sensibly tottered away to oxygenate and deal with the pain ringing in his back.
Shikamaru, who was then present in the arena, was giving an "all is well" kind of wave to Gaara in the VIP booth.

The Kazekage settled down in his seat and lowered his hand. His student was gently plopped to the ground. Matsuri sat cross legged in the dust with a rattled look on her face. She could not tell what was worse—that her neck may have been snapped by a super-fast Front Lotus, or that her sensei had to step in and save her, thus ending the match. As if taking a cue from Gaara, Osba and Ireki retreated in puffs of smoke.

"Sorry Matsuri, but the Kazekage's interference means that I can't acknowledge you as the winner." Shikamaru offered her an apology.

Wilted, she looked down at the ground and nodded woodenly.

"The winner of this match is Rock Lee!"

The crowd was pleased. Lee needed to be spotted by a medic-nin as he was escorted out of the arena towards the treatment room. Inner Gates recoil and his back injury were making it difficult to walk.

When Matsuri rose to her feet, Shikamaru gave her a consoling pat on the shoulder.

"You are savage, kid." He smiled lopsidedly at her, "Be proud. Lee is strong…and you beat the hell out of him."

"Thank you, proctor."

With his microphone switched off, Shikamaru added, "Oh…and stay away from Huo for a while. Maybe find a comfortable seat in the stands or on another balcony? I don't know if it's safe for you to be around him."

"Yes sir." She nodded and then set off.

Thankfully, her lip did not start quivering until she was indoors. Matsuri scurried into the ladies restroom and shut herself in a stall, waiting as the few women occupying the room finished washing their hands. The door creaked shut after they exited…then she bawled in frustration.

That tiny shred of hope she had allowed herself to hold onto—that foolish fantasy that she might defeat her opponent with the skills she had painstakingly perfected…She was still in last place. She always would be. When she had been a young child, Matsuri had barely scored high enough on the entrance Exam to earn a place at Suna's Ninja Academy. While in school, she was the shy underachiever with no special talent. And now, as she may have correctly predicted, she was still the runt of her Genin peers.

A few minutes passed and Matsuri managed to reduce her blubbing sniffles to quiet whimpers, reflecting on what had happened in her match. 'I think he escaped my cloth whip…because my Sealing Jutsu may not have been applied correctly.' Matsuri let out a shaky sigh, 'I knew that Lee could not use Ninjutsu or Genjutsu, so I thought for sure that would work…' She scoffed at her blunder. It might have worked if she had practiced more to achieve Sealing Competency, as Maki had offered to tutor her in Hidden Sand. Matsuri guessed her allotment of time to Meteor Hammer training two months ago detracted from Sealing lessons she could have paid more attention to.

She froze and went silent as the bathroom door swung open with a clatter. A person rushed into a toilet stall several doors down from her. Seated on the edge of a commode, Matsuri held her forehead in her hands and continued stewing in her thoughts.
I just wanted to catch up. I didn't want to be the best. I don't even need to be as cool or as pretty as the other kunoichi here today.' She leveled with herself, 'I just wanted one victory here. To prove to myself that I worked hard enough...that I won't slack off ever again. I won't chase after a boy again. I won't let anyone make me into a punchline again! Gaara-sensei...and Temari and Kankuro...I don't want them to see me cry anymore.'

Matsuri folded double and resumed weeping, as if on reflex. She could learn new tricks, new jutsu, new forms...but there was no quitting crying. It was as if her emotional thermostat would always get tripped while other people could tranquilly go about their business. Oh, how she envied them. If she could not eradicate the "mousy" part of herself that cried and felt things strongly, Matsuri reasoned she could always hide until she was dry-eyed again.

Except when she couldn’t…

The toilet down the row flushed and the other occupant went about washing her hands afterward. Before Matsuri could quiet down enough to go unnoticed, a voice called out, "Matsuri?"

She held back a gasp and lifted her feet up...as if that was going to conceal her in a locked stall.

The voice was familiar, "Matsuri! I saw your match! It was— wow! It was crazy! You did great. I came down here with Tenten when she said she was going to check on Lee. Are you okay?"

Matsuri jumped a little when knuckles rapped on the stall door.

"It's me, Sakura. Matsuri? Are you alright?"

"Sakura-chan..." Her voice was small, "I just need a few minutes."

"You've already been in there for a while..."

A lame excuse, "I had to...uh...my stomach is bothering me."

"Really?" Sakura's voice lilted with skepticism, "Probably not as much as my stomach is acting up. I've been running to the bathroom all morning."

"When does...your match start?"

"There's a twenty minute intermission before the next round. Come out and talk to me!"

Matsuri said nothing. If she refrained from talking and pretended to actually be using the toilet, instead of sulking...

"Matsuri—" Sakura was tapping her foot impatiently on the tile floor.

No. Why was confrontation the only answer for these Leaf shinobi? Matsuri considered that even Gaara-sensei would go off on his own to decompress whenever he was upset. He did not always need to communicate with others for therapeutic effects. 'Why must there always be discourse-?'

Sakura pulled the door off its hinges. She was frowning.

Wide-eyed, Matsuri braced herself on the walls of the stall before she fell off the toilet in surprise. Sakura pulled her up and out of the booth by her wrist, and Matsuri relaxed as the older kunoichi hugged her. Matsuri tucked her head down and squeezed back gratefully.

"You're not hurt." Sakura pointed out, "But you're shaking..."
"I'm just... I'm just frustrated!" Matsuri squeaked, crying into the older girl's shoulder, "I wanted to be as good as the rest of you."

Sakura laughed, "You are! Don't be silly. You think I could beat Lee one-on-one? It's not easy for anyone to do!"

"But he can't use—"

"Matsuri, Lee has been a ninja for a year and a half longer than my graduating class." She added wisely, "You have only been a ninja for thirteen months. And you are very good."

Matsuri sniffled, "Thank you."

Sakura patted her back comfortingly, "To have learned as much as you have in so little time... that is the achievement that Gaara is proud of. Not watching you win matches in this stupid Tournament. You know that, don't you?"

"I do..."

"Good! Hey, those scorpions are awesome. I've never seen Gaara summon them!"

"He only needs their help for construction work or deliveries around the village."

"Huh." Sakura took a step back and regarded the younger girl, "Feeling better?"

Matsuri nodded and followed Sakura to the row of sinks. She patted her face with cold water at a tap until she looked presentable again.

"Go have a snack!" Sakura recommended, "I'm going to try to keep a clear head until my match. If you need me, come find me or anyone else at the Leaf lookout, alright?"

"I will, Sakura-chan." Her smile was small, "Thank you."

After parting, Matsuri ventured out of the concourse and past the checkpoint to sniff around concession stands. It was difficult to make up her mind. Relax with a basket of fried treats or a container full of ice cream goodness? 'Maybe I should pick a small size of each...' She stepped into a line of people intending to order red bean ice cream. Matsuri glanced around in boredom until her eyes trolled across a familiar person. She sucked wind quietly when she spotted Menma navigating through the wide lobby of the cafeteria.

Her head snapped forward again. 'Maybe he won't see me. Don't look at him! What's he doing here? Did Tide Village ninja buy tickets to watch this Tournament too?'

Curiously, Matsuri slowly peeked over her shoulder again to see him poking around the area, sometimes stopping to read over snack menus. Eventually, he stopped at a yakitori stand. She let out a breath of relief as he faced the opposite direction. Matsuri permitted herself to give Menma the up-and-down while he was preoccupied. His flaxen hair was tied back into a short ponytail, and his dark clothing seemed new, contrasting the Tide Village-issued Jounin vest that was pale sea blue, its bottom fading into a darker gray hue. A clay flute and some other type of wind instrument were fastened to his belt. She pursed her lips. Ah.

'She kept glancing back at him, 'I wonder if he and Inari still spend a lot of time together? I'm sure Tazuna-san is very...'
proud of them.' Matsuri sighed wistfully, 'Maybe I shouldn't have...stopped talking to my friends?'
She missed them. They had been the only people she had ever met who had not tried to gauge her value based on who her sensei was.

"Are you ready to order, Miss?"

Matsuri snapped out of it. She asked for a small cup of ice cream and dismissed the fried dough idea. She could emotionally eat later while out of the public eye.

She thanked the counter worker for the free ice cream and started out on her return to the concourse. Then, like the true idiot she was, Matsuri looked back one final time.

Menma definitely made eye contact with her from the distant yakitori vendor. His whole face lit up. It was an expression that bordered on happy, but was mostly panicked. Panicked that she would flee like she did last time. He bumped shoulders with another customer in line who told him to watch it. Menma apologized and then left the queue.

Matsuri gulped and kept walking. 'Oh no. Oh no, no, no...I don't...I can't do it again!' Her walking turned into swift scurrying. She held onto her spoon and treat. 'Maybe he won't—'

"Matsuri!" Menma called out to her over the din of the concession lobby.

Strike two. She glanced back and saw him running.

"Eeeeh!" Spooked, Matsuri made a break for it. They dodged human bodies crossing their paths, racing towards the spacious, sunlit concourse near the arena's entrance.

"Matsuri! Please let me just-!" She could hear him pursuing, "Inari and I came to find you! Tazuna-san is sitting with your—" His shouting cut off when he crashed into someone, but he jumped up and continued the chase, "With your sensei!"

Matsuri vaulted over the turnstiles and was not questioned by the attending guards. As she darted down the vacant hallway, she heard the guards stop Menma, who was not yet dissuaded. She only stopped at the stairwell's archway for a moment to glimpse him again. Menma was trying to reason with the guards: he was a Jounin from the Tide Village, no, he admitted, he did not have Tournament credentials to pass, but please, please, he bargained. He only needed a minute to talk to Matsuri of the Sand Village.

The guards complained they already had the Copy Ninja dupe them today, and no other Jounin was going to pull a fast one on them.

Heart pounding, Matsuri ran up the stairs. She sprinted up past the second floor and the third floor before she slowed down and realized her ice cream was melting. She wolfed it down and fought brain freeze as she stepped out onto the fourth level of the stadium. Even if Menma played a song to get past the guards, which she feared he would, she would lay low until he gave up his search.

Matsuri marched down the corridor looking for access points to duck into, to find some wayward seat where she could eat her snack in peace...

'No more boys. No more distractions!' She puffed her cheeks and finally picked a doorway, dashing through it, and then trotted up a few steps to a long row of empty seating, 'He'll only make me cry again! I'm trying to change that part of myself! Menma would only mess up my progress...'

At the end of the row, Matsuri dropped into a seat and exhaled loudly. There. And good! A Leaf ANBU agent was seated in the row below her feet, less than a meter between them...and if a Tide
ninja came by to harass her she could ask the Black Ops nin for help! And beside the masked ninja was a plain-clothes Leaf ninja in black, doodling in a sketchbook. He noticed her curious staring and smiled strangely at her.

"Hello loser of the last match!" He greeted.

Matsuri's mouth dropped open.

The ANBU agent smacked his companion in the side of the head. "See? That is rude, Sai. We've been over this. Point out positive features first in the people you meet!" He turned around in a decorated cat mask to apologize, "Sorry, Matsuri-san. Sai is still learning how to interact with society after his tenure in Root. Your match really was impressive!"

"It was." Sai agreed, "Superbrows is my friend. His superlative nimbleness is always interesting to see."

The ANBU nudged Sai's ribs, "Sai…" He whispered, "Compliment her. She is the one sitting here with us."

"You wield rope hammers." Sai said to Matsuri.

She frowned and nodded. Great. She escaped Menma only to locate the lonely, unoccupied balcony with two weirdo ninja seated on it.

"You are a student of the Kazekage, is that right?" The ANBU nin asked, trying to salvage the first impression, "I can see why he chose you as his pupil! At the last exam I supervised, Gaara-sama was only a Genin. Now he is a village leader. You are both the types to grow and learn fast."

"Thank you, ANBU-san. But Gaara-sensei did not pick me because I was good at something." Matsuri smiled wearily, "He picked me because I was dead last."

Sai gave her a yeah-right look and then shrugged. He could not detect Matsuri's nuanced implication that Tenzo had.

"I see." The Black Ops ninja nodded, "He saw underneath the underneath, when he met you."

Matsuri nodded, feeling a bit better.

"You are timid and you don't like speaking to us." Sai observed shamelessly, "Did you not want to have company on this level? As a competitor, you can sit wherever you want to in the stadium."

"I…did want to be alone." Matsuri admitted, "But this is fine!"

Tenzo tried to engage in relevant conversation again but Sai interrupted him, "I will call you Mouse."

Matsuri stared at him and then began to giggle. Tenzo was absolutely astounded that Sai had achieved such a reaction.

The kunoichi explained, "My sensei calls me that! His whole family calls me their Mouse!"

"You look like one." Sai deadpanned. Tenzo wound him a second time.

"I know." She was chuckling and scooping the last of her ice cream from its container, "But I use that to my advantage a lot. No one expects me to bash their brains out when I look like this!"

"That is a perfect strategy." Sai agreed.
Tenzo sighed.

Sai then decided, "That makes you a Hammer Mouse."

"I am! I am the Hammer Mouse!"

Shortly after that, TenTen and Sakura walked slowly out into the arena side-by-side, muttering to one another as the crowd got revved up again.

"You quit."

"No, you quit."

"Why don't we both forfeit?" Sakura suggested sunnily.

"For the last time no."

"TenTen," Sakura hissed, "Hinata told me!"

"Told you what?" She was picking dirt out from beneath her nails.

"She told me that you and Huo are from the same clan."

"Oh. That." Tenten remembered.

"So it isn't a good idea for you to fight him, since he specifically has a score to settle with you." Sakura reasoned.

"That is exactly why I should fight him and no one else should." Tenten countered.

"You are a conflict of interest here!" Sakura got in Tenten's face, and the two stopped off-center in the arena to debate it, "I already told you I can handle it. I can finish what Tama started. Tsunade-shishou has made me pretty much indestructible."

"As much as I want to believe that, I'm too afraid to ask you to test that claim out." The older girl folded her arms, "Sakura, it's better if I face him myself. I don't want my friends to stand in the way of a maniac like him— that's exactly what he wants. He wants to rip my heart out by making me watch bad things happen to you."

"Oh, psh! How do you think we feel watching you go up against the maniac? Either way it sucks."

"Well...yeah."

"I can't condone you going ahead to fight him, Tenten. It'd be like pouring gasoline on a bonfire. Maybe even in the literal sense..." Sakura stated with finality, "So won't you please just listen to me, as your friend? And also as someone who can rip limbs off of people?"

"Hmm." Tenten considered, "I am completely undecided about it."

"Alright. Want to decide it with a round of Janken?"

"Might as well."

Shikamaru had walked over to them with his microphone off, and watched as the girls threw rock, paper, scissors hands at each other. His lip twitched as he waited for them to wrap it up. Shikamaru
guessed their match negotiations had failed. Abruptly, Tenten roared in frustration and flapped her arms in a rage after Sakura had beaten her at the game.

Sakura grinned, "Good! It's settled."

"No." Tenten changed her mind, "I won't let you do it. I don't want anyone else to get thrown around by Huo."

"Tenten, you lost fair and square!"

"I am not forfeiting. You're just going to have to beat me." The stubborn kunoichi announced, "And I will do what I have to so that you don't continue on."

"You really have no faith in me, do you?" Sakura growled, "We won't always be your juniors, you know. Ino and Hinata and I...we are just as strong as you now. You're going to have to accept that!"

"Well then," Shikamaru interrupted, "You two fighting or what? It looked like you—" They started barking at him to begin the match and save the fool who got her ass beat. From Shikamaru's point of view, that could mean either one of them...

With his voice live on loudspeakers, Shikamaru confirmed they were ready and then retreated, "Begin!"

Within a span of approximately twenty seconds, Tenten determined that Sakura was perhaps the most evasive opponent she had ever hurled weapons at, barring Neji. 'Although, Neji doesn't always dodge, sometimes he just deflects them with a Rotation...’ Indeed, Sakura could bend, dart, roll, and hop better than anyone thanks to Tsunade's soul-smashing volleyball pitches. Medic-nin had to be good at avoiding harm, and boy howdy did Sakura know how to avoid it. 'How did Ino hit her earlier? She could only have done it by predicting Sakura's movements!‘ And with that, Tenten gave a point of credit to Ino as she thought about it, somersaulting backwards with a hand seal.

Tenten sent a Shadow Clone to assist with directing Sakura into a trick-shot maneuver, but she felt the fuzzy-tongued sensation of Genjutsu settling on her. 'Aw great...’ She fought off the illusion with a pin-prick of chakra control and a release seal, and then suddenly stopped. Tenten looked down and noted her complete nudity. 'But-! If I broke out of-! How did she-? Oh my god-!'

Her Shadow Clone patted her shoulder and freed her from the multi-layered Genjutsu. Then, the clone tossed Tenten to the side before Sakura's mega-ton punch came down on top of her.

"Well that was a low blow…" Tenten muttered and dusted herself off. For a second there, she really thought Sakura had stripped her down for the whole stadium to see.

To conserve weaponry against the slippery, pink-haired wonder, Tenten changed gears and coordinated with her Shadow Clone as they drew their respective swords. Getting in close to Sakura was going to be a real bother, but it was the only way to inflict damage. A stab here, a cut there, the occasional parry from Sakura's kunai— Sakura was seemingly immune to jian wounds, or calculated that the half-hearted attacks were not worth putting more space between her and Tenten. It was very clear in that moment, when an opening appeared as Sakura reared back for another punch...Tenten hesitated to use Dance of the Crescent Moon.

Diving and rolling away from the punch's crater, Tenten supposed Sakura was aware of her reluctance. 'I don't want to hurt her even if she's driving me nuts!' Sakura was counting on that.

Tenten yelped when a concealed Earth Clone pulled down on her ankles, burying her up to her neck in dirt with the Headhunter Jutsu. It was a favorite of Kakashi’s team these days, Tenten gathered.
Sakura's punch came down on the crown of the girl's head, but only destroyed a captured Shadow Clone. Dust furling up in a cloud, Sakura dusted her hands and leaped out of the ditch. She glanced left and right, 'Where is she? I was so sure that was the real Tenten...but she had the chance to substitute herself...' The sound of the snapping, extending paper of tool summoning scrolls caught Sakura's attention. She tilted her chin up to look.

Above, Tenten and three Shadow Clones had leapt high in unison for a combination attack. Their spinner scrolls stretched and extended while airborne, sharing their sealed repertoires with each other for two-handed throwing, "Heaven's Dragon Drop!" With Sakura squarely in their sights, a hurricane of weaponry shot down at four times the normal speed, sticking the girl like a pin cushion.

The audience was divided by cheers and appalled gasps. When tool scroll smoke and dust dispersed, Tenten and her clones landed and got an eyeful of something that was not Sakura.

A slug about the height of a human adult sat placidly in the arena. Knives, sickles, razors, shuriken, and all manner of projectiles had stuck the poor creature on every bit of surface area its body possessed. Gradually, the weapons were pushed out of the slug's doughy flesh and pattered to the ground. A moment later, the slug expelled Sakura from its body gently. She and her slug summon were completely unharmed.

Tenten chewed the inside of her mouth, and gave a hand signal to her clones. 'Shit! Sakura can summon Tsunade-sama's slug!' Her Shadow Clones provided covering fire with the last bit of her scroll arsenal as Tenten charged with Hok raised, 'Whenever I use ranged attacks Sakura gains the advantage, so I have to get in close to win!'

Sakura handily ducked under the incoming projectiles. Leaping cleanly over Katsuyu, Tenten whirled like a demon and slashed downward to catch Sakura. They skidded as Sakura caught the sword in her hand, but Tenten pulled back on the jian and sliced the webbing between Sakura's thumb and index finger, 'You can't disarm me!' Beside them, Katsuyu had sprayed approaching Shadow Clones with an acid that immediately dissolved them.

"Sakura-chan!" The slug warned the girl to move aside, and Sakura rolled as Katsuyu squirted another stream of acid at the genuine Tenten, forcing her back.

With a chain of hand signs complete, Sakura exhaled a mighty orb of flames, "Katon: Grand Fireball Jutsu!"

Instead of running, Tenten rounded about and funneled chakra through her jian, running full-tilt as she cut through the fireball with her Fire Nature. Sakura balked as Tenten closed in, low to the ground in a Wushu lunge, and stabbed her dead-center in the stomach. Flecks of blood dotted their faces. Tenten pulled Hok back quick as wind, and retreated as Katsuyu chased her off with acid. Sakura toppled to the ground, her face contorted with shock and pain, 'I didn't think she'd make up her mind to finally...do that to me...'

"Sakura-chan, allow me." Katsuyu broke down into a mass of smaller slugs, a portion of which filed off to attack Tenten and the other group wiggled up Sakura's legs and amassed on her abdomen, rapidly healing up her wound. Sakura kept her eyes on Tenten and held still, watching for an opportunity to catch her off guard.

Meanwhile, Tenten reached into her utility pouch and tossed her last grenade, dropping it behind her to detonate on the chasing swarm of tiny Katsuyus. Unfortunately, the explosion only dissipated a few slugs while the survivors divided to avoid harm and continued pursuing their target. As they approached the area where Lee and Matsuri's match had gouged up several sections of ground, Tenten made a Shadow Clone and sacrificed it to the swarm of slugs to slow them down. 'Okay, I
Near the insect trap hole Lee had fallen into earlier, two of Sakura's Earth Clones popped up to ambush Tenten. With a guttural cry, Tenten twisted into a crouch and extended Hok, hacking a leg off of one of the Earth Clones. The other clone swung for her face but Tenten employed a complete Wushu form to weave around the strike, dipping and rising, and cut the clone's head off with her return momentum. With a flick of her eye to assess that the true Sakura was rising to her feet and in peak health again, Tenten dropped into the subterranean trap hole.

Sakura jogged over to the pit with a parrot-sized Katsuyu on her shoulder. The remaining portions of Katsuyu in the arena gathered, sliding up Sakura's body to reassemble on her shoulder into a larger, python-sized companion.

"Be careful, Sakura! She would not allow herself to be cornered unless she wants you to follow." The slug queen warned her.

"I am already a step ahead of her!" Sakura assured Katsuyu smugly, and formed hand seals to exhale another Fireball into the opening of the pit. Thanks to a keen sense of chakra control and a bit of intuition, Sakura predicted a counterattack.

She keened back just enough to avoid a direct hit from Tenten's Hiyumi bolt, empowered with Sakura's own Fire Jutsu. The furnace-hot burst partially broke on Sakura, scorching Katsuyu more than the girl's clothes. Katsuyu absorbed the damage and Sakura rolled to put herself out on the ground. Seconds later, Tenten leapt from the trap hole like a commando, her cheeks dirtied, and she barrel-rolled while firing another shot above ground.

Again, Katsuyu took the brunt of the fiery explosion, protecting Sakura who was only half-enveloped in the slug's body. Sakura rolled once more, breathing and concentrating, and then bounded up to her feet to run for it. She angled herself to get closer to Tenten. Standing fully, Tenten aimed her bow for a precise shot.

"You kind of are living up to that indestructible description!" She conceded. Honing her chakra into a dense point for an arrow, Tenten fired a burning, close range Scattershot. The smaller, hotter chakra arrows that divided in the air shot Katsuyu off of Sakura's shoulder and razed the ground, catching Sakura in the blaze. With no fanfare or warning, Katsuyu departed in a puff of smoke. But Sakura kept running.

She charged like a bull into Tenten, and crashed into her as they went skidding and rolling to the dirt. Tenten made sure to keep her bow firmly in her hands, not allowing Sakura wrestle it away, so instead Sakura targeted her body. Tenten took a knee to the gut and was ground into the soil as Sakura pressed down onto her, grappling her shoulder. She was trying to pull back on Tenten's draw arm, which already had a chakra arrow nocked and drawn. The powerful pull dislocated Tenten's arm, and tears welled up silently in the older kunoichi's eyes as she held her fire under Sakura's chin.

"I can punch your head off of your shoulders right now." Sakura notified her.

"And I can let this go." Tenten retorted.

"With your arm like it is?"

"Only my fingers need to do the work. Besides..." Tenten indicated with a small head gesture that they were not alone. Sakura peeked over her shoulder to see a Shadow Clone of Tenten's aiming its own Hiyumi shot at Sakura's back, "I hid that in the trap hole just in case I needed a hand."
"I bet I can shrug off another fire arrow." Sakura estimated, "They weren't so bad."

"How about two?"

"I don't think you can shoot yours."

"Do you really want to find out?" Tenten hissed.

Sakura was convinced that Tenten could not or maybe would not shoot her at close range like this. And if the Shadow Clone acted, Sakura was confident she could heal herself adequately before dislocating Tenten's other arm. By then, Shikamaru was hovering steps away from them and prepared to halt them with his Shadow Bind.

It probably looked as ridiculous as her fight with Ino. Sakura had to consider that even if she weathered a Hiyumi attack, it didn't guarantee Tenten would not stick her with a sword again while she recovered from the blast. *There are a couple of variables here that I don't like…* Frowning, Sakura looked from Tenten to Shikamaru. Then she let go of Tenten and leaned back.

"Fine," Sakura relented, "Since we're all so concerned about having good judgement today…there's no sense in me calling a bluff that could maim or kill me."

"You bet your skinny ass there's no sense in it." Tenten still kept her shot lined up with Sakura's face.

Sakura shook her head at Tenten and chuckled darkly, motioning for Shikamaru to call it.

"The winner of the match is Tenten!"

There was some moderately thrilled cheering from the audience. As it turned out, Tenten really did have a fully charged arrow aimed for Sakura's head…but her Shadow Clone dissolved a fraction of a second after Shikamaru's announcement. Tenten sheepishly admitted, as Sakura hauled her up, that she could not be equitable about where she allocated her chakra just then. The clone had just stood there to look good. Tenten could barely tap a seal on her spinner scroll to unsummon her scattered weapons.

The girls trudged back into the building's interior for the treatment room, groaning and complaining. Tenten stowed away the Hiyumi and collapsed onto a low bench. Sakura took the spot beside her and healed the last angry patches of burns on her arms and legs. Only then did she begin examining Tenten's injured arm. Sakura assured the medics in the room she had it under control.

"Sorry to put you through that, Sakura."

"Yeah? Well you should be! I won *Janken* so you should have surrendered! Also, you were being stubborn and unreasonable…"

Tenten stared at a wall and had a haunting realization, "It's like…Neji is rubbing off on me."

Sakura lost it. She rocked back and forth and laughed until she got it out of her system. Tenten gave her a *come-on-this-actually-bothers-me* face. In time, she too chuckled quietly.

Sakura carefully cupped her hands around Tenten's shoulder and felt around with her chakra. The diagnosis was that yes, it most certainly was dislocated. Tenten admitted the pain still made her want to cry, but she was not one for crying usually.

Sakura stood up to get in position to relocate her friend's shoulder. Trying to keep Tenten relaxed,
Sakura spoke to her, "You know it's okay if you pick up some of Neji's quirks. Thank goodness he's picked up some of yours. Like being polite and sociable."

"On a good day." Tenten agreed.

"I sometimes snap and insult people the way Gaara-kun does."

"Well you're both pretty good at it! And you have to get good at it since you put up with Ino so much."

"I know. Did you hear her going after you before?"

"She's relentless." Tenten complied when Sakura laid her flat on the bench.

"Okay. We're going to abduct your arm. On two take a deep breath, and on three I am going pull up slow and steady while you exhale. Got that?"

"Got it."

"One, two…" Both took deep breaths, "Three…" Sakura used what leverage she could to pull on Tenten's arm at a 90 degree angle, and thankfully the older girl did not squirm or fight as she wailed in pain. The head of the humerus bone slid beneath her shoulder blade and re-articulated. Sakura even heard the *bunck* sound it made after the successful relocation. Almost instantly, much of the pain subsided and Tenten shut her eyes and sighed.

"Sorry." Sakura apologized, "I've had it happen to me so I know what it feels like…"

"You don't need to be sorry, Sakura. I stabbed you and shot you." Tenten waved off the apology, "I am much sorrier than you are…"

Sakura crossed the treatment room and inquired with a medic staff member where she could find an arm sling. They procured one from a supply cabinet, along with an ice pack from a cooler, and Sakura crossed back to Tenten to help her sit up.

"All's forgiven now. Like I said, there aren't many things that I can't survive." Sakura smiled reassuringly and slung Tenten's arm gently, adjusting the strap, and wrapped the cold pack around her shoulder, "I hate to tell you this, but…your shoulder is going to be unstable for a day or more. You have to immobilize it."

"It's going to have to mobilize again for Round Three." Tenten remarked, pushing to her feet and picking up Hok in its scabbard.

"You need to be careful." Sakura reminded her. They waved to the medic staff before heading out. The pair approached the stairs and Tenten asked if Sakura could actively heal her shoulder and patch it up more.

"Even if I heal you and you don't feel any pain, you'll still be prone to re-injury." Sakura warned her, "And I worry that Huo will try to take advantage of that. He's a bit too keen for my liking."

"You have a point." Tenten conceded, "But can you do it for me anyway?"

"I will, but go up there and take it easy. I need the bathroom again…" Sakura muttered in annoyance, "God, I can't believe Ino…oh and hey! Don't let Ino tease you; if you get riled up I don't want that joint popping loose again!"
"Alright, alright…” Tenten trudged slowly up the stairwell.

For the millionth time that day, Sakura visited the restroom and tried to persuade her rebellious bowels to *cool it already*. She washed her hands, fixed her hair until she was somewhat cute again, and then trotted out of the restroom. The concourse and concession area beyond had emptied out significantly after the start of Round Two. Sakura estimated the next match would be announced soon.

Then she heard a soft sound coming from a perpendicular hallway, around the darkened corner that fed into the back entrances of the kitchens and food stands. Sakura inquisitively tip-toed over to it to investigate, poked her face past the cusp, and was pulled bodily into the offshoot corridor.

She nearly screamed in surprise, but luckily it was only Gaara.

"Gaara!" Her chest heaved as she caught her breath, and he appeared very amused by her reaction, "You're not supposed to be down here!"

"I'm not?" He was devil-may-care about it, as usual, "That's too bad. I wanted to see you."

"What about Tsunade-shishou? She wants you visible at the VIP guest seats."

"I am visible. I left a Shadow Clone there." He wrapped his arms around her and they leaned against the wall together, relishing the privacy, "Your match…worried me."

"Well I can understand why you feel that way." Sakura acknowledged, "I'm fine. Tenten's still a little banged up." She turned her face away from his warm, nice-smelling shirt to look up at him, feeling his lips brush over her nose and cheek, "What did you think of Matsuri? We spoke after her match and I tried to settle her down…she was a bit upset she didn't win."

"Matsuri honored my expectations and reminded me why I wanted to be a sensei in the first place." Gaara declared, letting Sakura fiddle with his hands, "I found her and spoke with her before I came looking for you. She is in good spirits."

"Ah, that's a relief." Sakura smiled and pressed her ear to his chest, hearing a steady beat, "Are we overprotective of her or what?"

"We are."

"Kind of like…” She trailed off and killed the idea. Gaara was still able to pick up on where she nearly took the subject.

"Did Tsunade-shishou say anything about me?" Sakura smoothly steered to a new topic.

"It was mostly bellowing…but the gist of it was that she was gratified by your performance.” Gaara added as he rested his cheek on her head, "Natsuhi-sama was also impressed by you. The Hoshikage is still grateful for your help in the Star Village."

"She's a really nice lady…I need to talk to her again sometime."

"And Tazuna-san rooted for Tenten the entire time. He liked her militant approach."

Sakura supposed that the old man who was a friend of Gaara's, described as the rugged, Spartan sort of bridge builder, likely preferred more aggressive, weapon-wielding contenders.

"So did any of you…discuss Huo?" Sakura wondered haltingly.
"Yes. Tsunade-sama and I tried to appeal his victory. Natsuhi-sama and Tazuna also agreed he used a technique that was an exception to Exam Rules. The administrative panel that is seated nearby… behind safety glass…disputed that with a majority vote." Gaara recalled, "I, of course, have no problem acting on my own if he jeopardizes anyone else in a match. Administrators can rail at me all they like for interfering. It's the right thing to do."

"Thank you…" She held his face in her hands and just stared at him. Gaara was so good at his job. He was also very good at being her boyfriend. He was just so…good.

He was trying to pick out what exactly Sakura was thinking or why she was holding his head and maintaining intense eye contact. Really, he was just acting on that selfish impulse to replace himself with a doppelganger at his seat…so that he could hold her, kiss her, and talk to her. Every waking moment Gaara wanted to drop whatever task he was working on to usurp time with Sakura. His brain was washed with oxytocin every time he saw her, his veins flooding with happiness.

But as Gaara had been molded into the responsible sort, the two hemispheres of his brain now balanced desire and responsibility. Eventually he would return to his seat. For now, he was kissing Sakura slowly and very aware of how her body pressed into him, coiling tension in his stomach and below.

Then, their ears finally noticed that Shikamaru's voice via loudspeakers was not announcing the next match…he was starting it.

Sakura snapped back from the Kazekage, exchanging shit-did-you-hear-that? facial expressions with him before they ran out of the kitchen hallway and into the main corridor. They stopped short at the entrance of the arena to see what the hell was going on after leaving "make-out land."

Gaara did not have to feel it to know what was happening by heart. He watched Shino freeze. It appeared as if Shino had fully accepted the necessity of his participation, and was prepared to fight Huo. No sooner had the match commenced; Huo had paralyzed him with unimaginably potent killing intent. They stood there, Huo stock still, and a subtle, almost unnoticeable tremor had begun to shake Shino from top to bottom.

"Huo is intimidating him." Gaara reported to Sakura, who was leaning into him and holding his hand, "He doesn't want to be met with resistance."

Sakura had only personally experienced killing intent on two occasions— once as a brand new Genin on a mission near Kusagakure, against a rogue ninja, and the other more distressing incident being Orochimaru's attack on her team in the Forest of Death years back. She understood why Shino could not lift a finger against it. It was extremely hard to fight through it when your courage and innards liquefied.

The features on Huo's face rearranged, as if he had suddenly decided he wanted to toy with the Aburame heir a little bit. He bent to spring for a Wushu high kick…but Shikamaru stilled Huo by binding his shadow.

"Attacking a defenseless opponent isn't very sportsmanlike." Shikamaru admonished him, and was not just referring to Shino, but to Tama as well, "I'm giving Shino ten seconds." He released Huo and held a hand up bidding him to remain motionless. Shikamaru examined a digital lanyard-watch for a countdown.

"You didn't stop me in my last match, proctor." Huo sneered.

"I couldn't catch you in the last match."
Huo's crooked smile flashed for only a moment, "Are you going to try this in every round, proctor? I don't see how that will work. No matter what you do, I will win."

"I don't give a damn about who wins." Shikamaru hissed at him, "You and I both don't care about winning at this Exam. Whatever it is that you do want; I will block it to the fullest extent of the rules."

Huo scoffed at him and turned his nose up when Shikamaru spoke into his mic and concluded the countdown, gesturing toward Huo as the official winner of the match. When the audience made low rumblings of disappointment, Shikamaru ignored it and walked off of the field with Shino, tugging him along by his arm. Sakura and Gaara pulled them into the safety of the building and convened on the matter.

"Shino?" Shikamaru gave him a light shake, "I felt it too. He was giving me a fuck-you dose of killing intent. That piece of shit. He's willing to challenge me. I'd like to see him give any guff to the Kages in the VIP booth…speaking of which…" He regarded Gaara from the corner of his eye, "I might need you later, Kazekage. That fucker is unhinged."

"We noticed." Gaara spoke simultaneously with Sakura.

Shino managed to speak up, "It was necessary that I…do something."

"No, it wasn't." Sakura corrected him, "We planned for this going only on assumptions of how he'd react. We planned to beat Huo down more in every round…but if we can't do it safely or can't even move, it just isn't worth it. It's alright, Shino."

Shino incrementally realized he had the hands of Shikamaru, Sakura, and Gaara steadying him by his arms and shoulders. He felt much calmer after that. The panic and terror constricting his muscles faded and loosened him.

"I have to go back out there." Shikamaru grumbled, "Look after him. I'm gonna radio up to the Hokage and share this with her before I announce the next match." He thanked Sakura and Gaara before exiting the archway.

Slowly, coming out of the fog of fear, Shino was able to walk with them towards the staircase. He was able to compliment Sakura's match, and she graciously thanked him. They heard a clamor of running footsteps descending the stairs, and so they waited for the occupant to come bursting through the doorway. Hinata had her hackles raised and stopped herself from running into Sakura.

"Sakura-chan! Gaara-kun!" She was breathing through her mouth and her flared nostrils. Hinata pulled Shino from their hands and hugged him fiercely, "Shino-kun! You're alright! I'm so glad…I'm so glad…"

He patted her back and accepted the embrace.

"I saw what he did! I saw he was going to attack you!" The mixture of rage and discomfort in Hinata's voice was utterly new, in Sakura's opinion.

"Shikamaru stopped him. Going forward, he won't allow that behavior from Huo." Gaara reassured her, "I should return to the other leaders to talk to them."

Hinata thanked him for standing by to help a friend, and Gaara pecked Sakura's mouth before setting out. Even then, Shino was not released from his teammate's bear hug. Hinata wished Sato was still there, "He'd know what to say!"
Sakura countered that Sato would probably just jump Huo and try to slash his major arteries. After a long pause, Hinata quietly yielded that did sound like something Sato would try. Hurting Tama had been Huo's first mistake, but threatening Shino would have been the last straw.

"I am well now." Shino assured her, waiting for Hinata to slip her arms down and come back to her senses, "I am discouraged by how I was entirely ineffective at furthering our strategy…but perhaps someone else will have better results."

They hoped that was the case. Sakura cautioned Hinata that her face was bright red from raging too much, and so Hinata rushed into the restroom to splash herself with cold water. Sakura and Shino returned upstairs, asking her to hurry along so they could speak to the rest of the Finalist group.

She leaned over the sink and cupped her hands beneath the faucet. Hinata was still brimming with fury over Huo's near sucker punch attack on her dear friend. While she fumed, she splashed, refilling her hands several times. Until she glanced down and noticed the still water she was holding was reflecting someone else. Someone she had seen before. 'Is that…?' Hinata scrunched her eyes and looked carefully, 'Is that the person from my dream?' It was the man with horns and white hair, his face looking just as bewildered as hers in the water's reflection. He was emoting and moving just as she was, blink for blink with his own pearly Byakugan eyes.

"Eeeh-ooooh!" Squealing, Hinata dropped the water and jumped back from the tap. She pointedly gazed into the glass mirror on the wall to confirm her face was still her face, thankfully. Water was still running at the faucet.

She inched forward to turn the water off and disregard this crazy nonsense. It couldn't be real. It was just stress manifesting, or something like that. Hinata frowned to herself. Or maybe it wasn't. Maybe, in the same way she had miraculously overlapped her consciousness with Naruto's in a distant valley…maybe this was some similar, albeit weird form of communication?

Hinata cupped her hands and filled them again, hoping she was not losing her marbles. And sure enough, yes, the horned man was there looking back from her reflection. Hinata marveled at the absolutely bizarre and unexpected phenomenon.

"Does this mean something? Do I know you?" She asked quietly, glancing over her shoulder to make sure no one would walk in and catch her acting nutty. She could not get a response. It merely seemed like a magic-mirror reflection trick and nothing more, with no otherworldly, wise spirit trying to guide her or make sense of it all.

Sighing, Hinata dropped the water into the sink and shut the tap off. She took a good, hard look in the wall mirror. Was it her imagination? The Misago Byakugan did not, or rather, had not revealed any supernatural forces to her as of that point in time. However…it was her plain vision that saw something unexplainable in the waking world. She had not dreamt it or used her Doujutsu to perceive it. *What does it mean?*

A speaker system in the bathroom announced in Shikamaru's voice that Hyuga Hinata and Rock Lee were expected to report to the arena for the next match. Distressed, Hinata clutched at the hair framing her face and lamented how she had dawdled over something so ridiculous.

She scampered out of the restroom as a group of concession workers and cashiers bustled in for a bathroom break. Hinata squeezed past and ran down the corridor, *What is the matter with me? I was feeling upset earlier but it…it didn't feel like a break with reality. I'm not crazy! Oh, Naruto, you'd tell me I'm not crazy if I told you about it, right?*
Lee was as pleasant as ever.

He was even cognizant of what Hinata was expecting to gain from the Exam. Primarily, she sought to demonstrate her skills publically and please her father as much as possible. It was no secret to her friends that she strived to do so.

Hinata nodded and confirmed it while Shikamaru stood several paces away from them, muttering into a two-way radio about something to someone.

"We can have an honest match, if you wish." Lee offered, "To show off your talents! I will not pressure you into forfeiting immediately."

"I think I would prefer that, Lee-kun." She agreed, "And I want to ask…did our group discuss the Semi-Final and Final Round while I was gone? I'd like to know if Onee-san can go on."

Lee's cheerful exterior flickered briefly. He was concerned about it too.

"I do not know if Tenten can…I do not know what any of us can do, beyond this point." Lee admitted, "Our friends asked me to continue and do what I could. If Tenten is not feeling well enough to fight in her next match, I hope she will be truthful and not struggle to fight such a difficult opponent."

"I hope so too."

Shikamaru returned to them, "Alright you two saints…will you make this a gentleman's match? Please? No bloodshed and misery? It's all I ask for." It was rhetorical. He knew he could trust them to be civilized.

"Begin!" He started the fight and dashed away.

Lee rushed at her and decided to treat this as if it were a match against Neji. Hinata was not someone to underestimate, if Chouji's duel with her was any indication. And also, Lee did not like to underestimate anyone. He had much better success making judgements five or ten minutes into a match. He got to know someone by fighting them.

Quick and springy, Hinata had no trouble avoiding Lee's Drunken Boxing jabs. Her small feet stomped on the ground with poise and surety as they besieged each other in a tight circle, redirecting strikes with wrists and the backs of their hands. Lee did not feel bad about borrowing a maneuver from this grandfather— he slipped his hand below Hinata's arm, folded her elbow up as she lunged at him…and completed his sideways turn to let her go tumbling with her own momentum. But her Byakugan could see the follow-up he had aimed for her back, and Hinata creatively bounced in a forward hand spring to avoid the next barrage of Zui Chuan jabs.

Lee furrowed his brows when he noticed it. This was not Jyukken that he was familiar with. This was not a style Neji had ever used against him.

Hinata was adapting with slippery footwork, whirling the sleeves of her tunic, by far more lithe and airy than her cousin. She was not striking back at Lee's Wushu with her hands…she was reciprocating with the cleverness of her feet! Trying to be mindful of Hinata's Gentle Step, Lee kept an eye on her dancing feints, but was punished more than once by a Jyukken slap on his arm and then neck. Only by the timeliness of his blocks could Lee protect vulnerable chakra points and organs she aimed for.

When he defended against another Jyukken blow, crossing his wrists to catch her striking hand, Hinata retaliated by tapping his shin and knee with the toe of her sandaled foot. Lee yelped in shock.
'She closed tenketsu there! With her feet!' He sucked wind and gasped at her, and Hinata's responding laugh at him was friendly, 'She learned to do such a thing…!'

Stepping backwards, Lee drew out nunchaku from his belt with a snap, and then spun with his arm fully extended to drive Hinata away for some distance. He whirled the weapon 'round his arm, frowning as he calculated, 'I do not wish to hurt Hinata-sama…but she can use tricks that Neji has never even thought of! I cannot—'

She lunged at him and he nearly clocked her in the head. Hinata ducked, and with a valiant cry, fired off a vacuum wave from her hands that sent Lee soaring. He landed hard on his back. His breathing sounded as if he were inhaling through a straw. The pain of the back injury he'd sustained in his previous match had returned with a vengeance. When Lee gained his feet, Hinata shot the nunchaku out of his hand with another Air Palm.

Abruptly, he charged. In a skidding, low Wushu form Lee caught Hinata by complete surprise. Though she blocked with both arms when he kicked her airborne, his blow had still sent her two meters skyward with force. Lee worked his arm wrappings around the girl's arms and trunk as if to prepare for a Lotus attack, but then flipped away and rocketed himself up for a different jutsu.

"Fledgling Peacock!" Lee roared. The scorching, not-so-immense barrage of unavoidable punches bashed Hinata terrifically…but the girl dispersed into a cloud of smoke. Lee landed and rubbed his chin, perplexed. He hadn't seen her replace herself with a Shadow Clone, but if she had managed it prior to the last exchange then touché.

And then…a blow struck him between his shoulder blades. Lee's eyes crossed as he careened forward and rolled on his arms, attempting to recover…but it had been a powerful, direct hit of Jyukken. He tumbled away before Hinata could strike his exposed back again. Lee worked his arm wrappings around the girl's arms and trunk as if to prepare for a Lotus attack, but then flipped away and rocketed himself up for a different jutsu.

"Fledgling Peacock!" Lee roared. The scorching, not-so-immense barrage of unavoidable punches bashed Hinata terrifically…but the girl dispersed into a cloud of smoke. Lee landed and rubbed his chin, perplexed. He hadn't seen her replace herself with a Shadow Clone, but if she had managed it prior to the last exchange then touché.

Surely he could work with Three Gates, maybe, but even those inner portals felt sluggish at the tinge and tug of his synapses. Lee ran like a madman before Hinata could catch him again, considering his options, 'I can ask her to stop now…I can ask for a polite and respectful cessation! And yet…she seems determined! I may need to defeat her in earnest.' He rolled and picked up his discarded nunchaku.

She caught up shortly thereafter, and they hollered at each other as Lee wielded nunchaku with wicked proficiency and Hinata tucked and evaded harm. A lucky shot from one of Lee's Wushu forms tripped her, and as Hinata squeaked and toppled sideways Lee caught her outstretched arms in the extended chain of his nunchaku. Then he wrapped and knotted the chain, restraining her as Hinata felt flat with a wumpf.

Lee followed through with a downward Drunken Boxing knuckle-punch, "Please surrender now!" She outstretched a leg and kicked his wrist away from her stomach, where he stuck dirt.

"Ack! Hinata-sama! You need to consider-!" Lee was hooting in pain again as her footwork kicked him around, knocked his chin, and shut a few chakra points before he staggered away.

Though restrained on the ground, she was not yet losing. Hinata was able to form a hand sign to create a Shadow Clone, and Lee rushed back before it could begin freeing the kunoichi's hands. Unfortunately, Hinata could bend chakra with her feet, lit pin-point blue and flexible, and the Divine
Protection chakra wall whacked Lee in the face when he tried to intervene. While he was splayed on the ground, Hinata's clone was able to free her and toss the nunchaku away.

Hinata hopped up and crossed over to Lee to apologize, "Lee-kun! I'm sorry! It seems to me you're struggling and I wonder if you-?

He wobbled to his feet again, grimacing and trying to ignore the injury to his lumbar. Lee insisted, "I am fine! I am well enough to continue."

She was concerned by the apparent evidence to the contrary, "Lee-kun, you may not be able to fight in future rounds if you are injured. I know that I also closed critical chakra points—"

Before Hinata could offer to open up access to his Inner Gates, Lee had snatched her loitering Shadow Clone and spun with it, hurling it into Hinata. The kunoichi fell over as her bunshin poofed away, and she realized Lee was not at all interested in pity. He seemed to be out to prove he could still fight in the Tournament. 'He doesn't want me to persuade him to give up, does he?'

Lee came in close again with accelerated Wushu, his conviction evident, and he employed his grandfather's trips and Breeze Boxing. He seized one of her hands in a vice-like grip and pinched, bending her arm uncomfortably so that she could not respond. Hinata cried out in pain, realizing he was intent on locking her joints to freeze her. It was only natural that he would twist her other hand next, and so Hinata swiftly struck Lee in the stomach with a Jyukken blow.

He had anticipated it. Lee exhaled and weathered the attack, reaching past her shoulder to clutch her neck in Wong Leung's Throat Hook grab. Time and time again, when the old man had used it against him or Neji, they submitted within a matter of seconds.

The audience did not take too well to the display and neither did Shikamaru, who had returned to arena. Before the intervention of a Shadow Bind connected, Hinata had helped herself. She forced Lee off with a Divine Protection sphere of chakra.

Slack-jawed and holding a hand sign, Shikamaru witnessed Lee dive back in. It was something else to see Lee use micro-managing techniques as opposed to the macro-level Taijutsu he often favored. Lee manipulated and twisted Hinata's hands away, locking and redirecting her arms when she lashed out. In the sole moment of opportunity she had to counter, Hinata flashed her dangling yukata sleeve in Lee's eyes to blind him, and struck with Gentle Fist again.

Lee kicked upward and the concealed blade in his shoe stuck into the fabric of her garment. With that leverage, he pulled her down to the ground by the sleeve to open her defense.

Simultaneously, Lee gave a shout as he punched down for a Wushu finisher…and Hinata poured her strength into a robust Air Palm. Lee was knocked back before making contact, and hit the ground again. He was spread-eagle for a few seconds longer than what he would have tolerated in prime health. Before Lee could struggle up, Hinata had darted over to him with a Shadow Clone. They pummeled him briefly with Jyukken before pulling his arms back to restrain him.

"Lee-kun!" She wanted to reason with him, "You are still hurt! This is making it worse! Please do not continue on… please be willing to look after yourself!"

"I must!" He wriggled side to side in the hope of freeing himself, "Tenten said that she needs me! I understand that I am needed!"

"Of course you are, but we have to know better. We can't all adhere to a plan when things change—just like Shino-kun couldn't. Please know that we do not have to fight Huo. Nothing is forcing any of
us to do such a thing." Hinata lowered her voice to remind him, "We need to look out for each other."

Lee fell still and stared her in the face. He breathed deeply and tried to relax. Shikamaru ended up beside them and gave them expectant looks.

"Is this over?" Shikamaru asked.

Frustrated, but aware of the sense in surrender, Lee nodded to him.

"The winner of this match is Hyuga Hinata!" Shikamaru declared.

The stadium rattled with excitement and surprise. The semi-final rounds would have the majority of its contenders be kunoichi. Also, the seeds were uneven. A small stampede for betting booths broke out on the third level.

Tournament medic-nin arrived to shepherd Lee to the treatment room, and Hinata accompanied them. She and Lee apologized profusely to one another for a full five minutes. Eventually, a medic demanded that they knock it off and that they were obviously still friends.

They sighed. Lee was laid stomach-down on a table top to be examined, and he answered questions and winced as a medic-nin prodded at his back to determine why his earlier healing was not as effective as it could have been. Hinata excused herself as she quickly massaged open chakra points through Lee's skin, and then retreated to a chair to catch her breath. She held up her arm to examine her torn tunic sleeve. Oh well.

"What has become of this Exam?" Lee wondered out loud, "None of it is at all like I imagined it would be…"

"It really isn't." Hinata agreed with that point, "I have no idea what to expect now."

Lee turned his head to regard her while the medic continued examining him, "You do not?"

"Well…no…everything has been so surprising…"

"The Final Round." Lee reminded her urgently, "Only three competitors remain, because of Neji and Sato-kun's absence." He waited for her to reply, but Hinata pursed her lips and said nothing. Lee continued, "Hinata-sama…you are going to compete in the Final Round. Unless the scoring panel elects to give a pass to Tenten…most assuredly it is yours. A bye will be provided for one Finalist during the Semi-Final, because of this."

Wide-eyed, Hinata stared at him.

"It is possible." He insisted, "You must be prepared!"

Several minutes passed and then Lee was made to sit up. He had been healed and told that his only option was to take it very, very easy. The attending medic wrapped a pack of ice with cling-wrap secure to Lee's back, and then ushered the two youngsters along. Lee tried to use pleasant conversation and the distraction of a curry-bread concession stand to help Hinata calm down about the situation. It only half-worked. She was pressing her fingers together and shuffling from foot to foot. She was over-thinking it.

"Oh! Here, switch!" Lee traded treats with her, "Yours is mild and mine is spicy. Let us eat!"

They dug into their snacks and Hinata raised her eyebrows, impressed with the delicious fried food.
Munching, they listened as an announcement was made over loudspeakers.

The Semi-Final round would begin after a thirty minute intermission. It would consist of a single match between Tenten and Sasagainu Huo. An official bye was awarded to Hyuga Hinata due to the absence of another competitor. There would be a thirty minute intermission prior to the start of the Final Round as well.

Staring off into the bustle and clamor of the cafeteria, Hinata's senses dulled and the curry-bread slipped from its wrapping in her hand and dropped to the floor.

Oh. If Naruto could see her now…

Chapter End Notes

Hey reader! I hope you enjoyed! Chapter 37 will be titled "Go!"

Match Tracks:

Sato Vs. Neji- "Gunmetal Black" by Varien

Chouji Vs. Hinata- "Kill V. Maim" by Grimes

Lee Vs. Matsuri- "Nanjing Road East Instrumental" by The Shanghai Restoration Project

Sakura Vs. Tenten- "Trophy" by Charli XCX

Hinata Vs. Lee- "The Gods Duel" by Derek Zhao
Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter Soundtrack: "On Right Now" by YOOKIE feat. Samuel Thomas
& "Go" by Grimes feat. Blood Diamonds

Wow, was the temperature perfect today! No breeze. No heat. The faint aroma of peonies blooming around the feet of the Toad Statues was sublime. It was an ideal day for meditation.

Naruto would tell anyone who asked him about it that meditating to gather Natural Energy was a boring and stiff task…but he would also admit he was starting to like it. It was the serenity of the mountain, the bright scents and sounds, the bliss that filtered down to the tiniest components of his cells…

It was a feeble description, but Naruto might claim it made him feel happy. He felt connected. He felt connected to Jiraiya, who, like him, was treated as a beloved child and student by resident toads. Naruto felt connected to his father, Minato, who was long dead and gone…but still felt like he was lingering on the sunny mountain as a pupil.

The stretching, vast feeling was reaching like open arms inside of him. Naruto felt the tingle—the many small heartbeats blinking and lighting the valley in all directions. Slowly, gently, he let their energy mingle with his own.

Shoot. He was fidgeting.

What a way to ruin great progress, his brain lamented. Naruto took a moment to snap back to awareness in his own body, and noticed that his cupped hands in his lap were twitching. He cracked an eye to look down at them. His index fingers were pressing together…as if he was worried about something.

'What…the heck?' He pooched his lips and wondered what this odd rebellion was. Just a moment ago he had been at total peace, harmonizing with all life in the valley…

Naruto opened his eyes and uncrossed his legs to stretch. He called out to Fukasaku, "Hey Pa! I came really close this time! Everything felt right."

The toad was working on a nonogram booklet to pass the time, relaxing in the grass nearby the Toad Oil Pool, "Oh? If that's so then why are you talking, Naruto-boy? I don't see Sage markings on your face."

"I dunno. My hands felt weird."

Fukasaku looked up from his booklet at him, "Weird?"

"Yeah."

"Were you turning to stone?"

"No, no. Nothing like that." Naruto assured him, "It felt like…my hands were full of water."

The toad rubbed at his fluffed, old-man eyebrows, "Weird. That is the word for it."
"What? That doesn't usually happen during training?" Naruto asked. He yawned and stretched again.

"No. During Sage Training I have never heard of or experienced the sensation of...holding water." Fukasaku confirmed, "Do you feel like you can continue?"

"Yup. I feel great." Naruto nodded and returned to his cross-legged position, relaxing, "I don't think I'll slip up and turn into a statue, but keep an eye on me, okay?"

"Of course, child! Give it another hour or so, and then we'll break for lunch."

With a deep breath, Naruto shut his eyes and pushed all thought out of his head.

In Konoha, the intermission prior to the Semi-Final match was dwindling down to its last few minutes. On the viewing balcony, the Leaf finalist genin were discussing the pros and cons of surrendering to Huo.

"No offense," Ino gave her friends a preamble, pointing to Lee and Tenten, "But the both of you have been beaten silly. You have body parts falling off."

"Okay. We know. Leave Lee alone— he can only spectate anyway." Tenten could not gesture to the saran-wrapped ice pack on Lee's back...her arm was in a sling.

"Pff." Ino brushed hair from her face and shook her head at Tenten, "You aren't any better off, Old Lady. Can you even move that arm?"

"Let's find out." Tenten slipped her arm free and tested her range of motion, "Hmm...it feels fine for now..."

Sakura reached to carefully lower Tenten's arm and inspect her shoulder, "Good. I'm glad to hear it. But the first thing Huo is going to do is punch your shoulder out of its socket again if you fight him."

Lee grimaced at the floor, appalled by the thought.

"True." Tenten conceded, "And I can't use Susumajin against him."

This statement seemed to come as a surprise to her peers. Though they were aware of the black jian's chakra-sucking consequence, they were about ready to endorse the risky method against their enemy.

"You could probably win if you used it." Kiba touched on the subject, seated beside Akamaru on the floor, "If it starts to hurt bystanders, Shikamaru will just disqualify you."

"That alone is reason enough to not use it." Shino disagreed.

"No. You don't understand." Tenten took a deep breath and informed them, "It won't touch his chakra. His is the same as mine."

A hush fell among her peers and they stared at her. Lee, Hinata, and Sakura, who were already aware of Tenten's ancestry, just gave each other mournful looks.

"You're related to that guy?" Chouji was aghast.

"Distantly. My clan doesn't exist anymore...so he's a leftover much in the way that I am." She clarified, "The point is...I can't use a weapon he wants to get his hands on. If he took it away from me...I don't know if he has a way to bind a contract with it. If he does, then we'd have an international security crisis with Iwagakure on our hands. The Hokage would lose it..."
"Then forget that idea." Kiba concurred.

"Want to borrow some poison?" Ino suggested jokingly, "I have no idea if it would do anything to him, but maybe it's worth a try!"

"Oh!" Sakura liked that idea and added to it, "I can hide Katsuyu on you so she can heal you! She can slip down your shirt where no one will see."

"Guys." Tenten smiled wanly at them, "I'm not going to cheat. It isn't worth it."

"You have not had enough time to fully recover your chakra…and Huo has." Lee warned her, "Perhaps some help from our friends would benefit you."

"Lee, I can't." She shook her head, "And yeah…I am seriously lacking chakra. He won't be."

"Want to borrow a dog?" Kiba snickered at her.

Shino had let a Kikaichu insect land on Tenten's cheek, as if to suggest the same thing. She sighed at them and slid the sash of Hok from her shoulder. She handed the jian to Lee, and he looked superbly confused.

"I am going to forfeit." Tenten stated with finality, "But I am also going to talk to him and see what he wants. Maybe I can negotiate something."

Her friends clamored loudly in disagreement and alarm.

"He will not cooperate, Tenten." Lee's voice pressed as he hovered beside her, "No matter what you say to him, Huo is not going to relent…or he will make a demand that you cannot in good conscience fulfill!"

"He's obviously trash. Just remember what he did to Tama!" Sakura added, "He can't be reasoned with. You can't trust him even if you think you've worked something out!"

"Maybe not. And maybe he'll tell me something that the proctor of the Exam isn't supposed to know." Tenten glanced up at a wall clock, noting a few minutes remained, "I'm not exactly an expert at steering a conversation, but maybe I can get him to incriminate himself. Shikamaru can disqualify him if he admits to cheating or blurts out some other egotistical remark."

"Go with that." Sakura condoned the level-headed idea, "If he tries to attack you anyway…we'll be close by to intervene. We should wait downstairs by the arena entryway just in case."

"Yeah. Can't take any chances…" Kiba stood and brushed his pants off.

It was about time to go. Descending the stairs with her entire group of friends was a strange but bracing experience. Every last one of them filed into the corridor on the first floor, lining the walls as they wished Tenten well. She thanked them and passed through the archway into the arena. Lee stood at the doorway after she had gone, clutching Hok in his hands worriedly.

Shikamaru waited at the arena's center and spoke into his radio, asking for the loudspeaker system to be rebooted again. An earlier announcement had failed to be broadcasted about the closure of betting windows. He wanted his comments at the Semi-Final to come in crystal clear. When Tenten arrived and stopped a few paces away from him, he quirked an eyebrow at her.

"You don't exactly look like a grand champion." He muttered teasingly.
"That's because I'm not." She assured him, "Is something wrong with the speakers again?"

"They'll be up in two minutes. What's up? Do you want to say something off the record? Now is the time to do it." Shikamaru confirmed.

"Sort of." She watched as Huo crossed the tattered ground with a swagger in his gait.

When he finally came to a stop across from Tenten and Shikamaru, Huo's gaze trolled up and down Tenten's form. He then snickered in Hanwen, *Where is that shabby old jian you keep on your back? With a friend.* She replied, signaling to Shikamaru from the corner of her eye that she might need more than two minutes. He got it.

*I see. You obviously don't need a piece of rubbish like that...when you can summon something much better.* He tilted his head at her, *Do you intend to use Susumajin in this match?*

*I was chastised for using something that can hurt innocent people in this stadium,* Tenten answered, *So I do not plan to use it again.*

*You're a liar.* Huo accused her, *That isn't the reason. You didn't give any thought to those people in your first match, and you would disregard them again if you were desperate... The corners of his mouth curled up, It is because you know who I am. And I know who you are. That is why you won't call it.*

*No. I don't know who you are. I don't know why you are doing this.* Tenten clicked her teeth angrily and spat, *I've done nothing to provoke you! You can take your threats and posturing back to Hidden Rock!*

*Is that what you want? He shut his eyes and exhaled, Of course I will leave, if you wish it, Tian-Tian. My lady. "Our leader." Our shining jewel. And I will tell you who I am. Huo's sharp, narrow eyes snapped open, I am your replacement.*

Tenten's face twisted as she tried to convert the words in her head, wondering if she understood him.

*You no longer hold any stake in our clan. The Main line has been deposed. The Branch is the Main, now. My Lord Bihokokuni has transcended his low birth and proven himself worthy, and exterminated you wretched elitists. You are not the only ones who can wield our people's treasures. I will become the new head and rebuild. I will take Susumajin and Hiyumi as you offer them to me with your head bowed in respect.*

*I don't kowtow for anyone who is complicit in murdering his own flesh and blood.* She stood straighter and looked him in the eye when she said it.

Huo smiled at her, *They did.*

Her face dropped a little, and an uncertain swirling feeling settled in her gut, *Who did?*

*The prince. And your mother. They dropped to their knees and pleaded with Lord Bihokokuni. How do you think he so cleanly severed their heads? They weren't standing! So too shall you bow in apology and acknowledge me.*

Tenten was losing her composure. She kept her jaw squared as her eyes moistened at the memory. How could he have known that? If he was aware that Leaf had recovered her parents' bodies decapitated, there must have been truth to his claims.
We have been instructed to rewrite...to overwrite our history...that we come from a heathen woman who disrespected the great shinobi of old and adopted the Tao before Ninshu. I will write you out of our story, Tian-Tian. Whether or not you give me what I ask for...whether or not you bow today, or on a cold night after years of hiding and fleeing from me. Your head will also be my Lord's keepsake.

You aren't a Genin. Tenten spoke to make a bid for information, and also to avoid Huo's hideous words, Is your Sensei in on this? Is she also a filthy, usurping murderer?

Huo referred to the Jounin Sensei of his team, the kunoichi named Sekieima, She is only Qin and Ga-Fen's Sensei. To me, she is a prisoner.

That detail was unsettling, but probably valuable. Tenten attempted negotiation, We have nothing to settle here, today. You are standing in the heart of my village. Nothing that you do will go unpunished. If you really want to challenge me, let's settle it in the future. Then you can have what you want.

My Lord said you would say that. Daughters always want to bargain. They always want to plot their escape and make a mockery of their adversaries. You are no disciple of our school, and your ignorance will be everlasting. Your past life disparaged Lord Indra and cursed our clan ever since. We will right your wrong.

Tenten had a prompt comeback for him, You are out of your mind! None of that is real! Don't you realize you've just been brainwashed by some cultist, rogue ninja? He made it up! Tenten insisted, shouting, Bi is using you to get the things he wants. That man killed my parents, and he will spill your blood without thinking twice about it.

My Lord Bihokokuni is a true disciple. He told me that your family knew the truth. The prince was always aware. The dirty Sa Gou people called our patron Tasaisha, but he is Lord Indra, the custodian of Ninjutsu and true strength, and we seek penance for betraying him.

Shikamaru motioned to Tenten, getting her attention, "You done? Loudspeakers are on. I can start the match."

"No, don't." Tenten was gulping air and trying to breathe, "I forfeit. I refuse to fight."

Shikamaru nodded to her and seemed heartened by her decision. Huo, however, was not done pontificating and threatening Tenten.

Don't try to delay this, you witch! I will make it so you are never born again. He was bristling, his hands fisted at his sides.

You are crazy. Tenten informed him, And you are being used. I don't have to fight you. It would be an insult to my honorable parents.

Shikamaru announced Tenten's forfeiture and made Huo the winner. Huo gnashed his teeth at her furiously. She turned her back and walked towards the exit of the arena, listening as the zealot called after her, I will kill them all! No matter where you go or who defends you, their grief and agony is my utmost priority.

Tenten covered her ears and jogged forward, relieved that Lee met her half-way and guided her inside the building.

"It's done! It's over." Sakura soothed as she crowded in with the rest of the group, encircling Tenten as she hyperventilated, "He was talking to you a lot! Did he tell you something we can use against
him?"

She could not form words. Shock had settled in and silenced her. For a while, Tenten tuned out the speculation and concerned rumbling of her friends as they group-hugged. She felt Lee right behind her, protective, and wondered if he'd overheard any of it. Hinata was pressed into her side and patting her back to pacify her. Gradually, the huddle dissolved and Tenten cleared her throat several times. Ino passed her a water bottle and she chugged it.

"Okay. He is crazy." Tenten took a deep breath and elaborated, "He has some bizarre vendetta against me because of...storybook...characters? I don't know. He is clearly not based in reality. And what's worse is that he admitted he is holding his Jounin Sensei hostage...meaning she isn't actually his sensei."

"How can he be allowed to compete if he isn't a certified Genin?" Sakura was astounded, "There can't be that many bureaucratic loopholes in Konoha!"

"Well, I think he is a Genin, but he never bothered to apply for promotions even when he could. It seems purposeful now." Tenten capped the empty water bottle and crushed it in her hand, "Not that I want to go into detail about it, but he knows how my parents were killed. That has to count against him somehow."

"Yeah, I'm thinking it should." Kiba growled in disbelief, "How could someone like him know about that?"

"Because he works for the man that did it." Tenten replied evenly, "And I don't think Iwagakure is dealing with a disgraced, on-the-run war criminal like Dintei Bi anymore. The Tsuchikage would probably agree after hearing all this that there is a prison cell somewhere with Huo's name on it."

"Great. That's just what we needed, right?" Ino brightened, "He is out of this Tournament. Thank God."

Shortly after that, Shikamaru located them in the concourse hallway and conversed with them. Judging by reactions he got from administrators on his two-way radio, Huo's advancement to the Final Round was getting mixed reviews. Tsunade and her VIP seating companions agreed that it was wise of Tenten to avoid confrontation. The on-staff security team also radioed down to Shikamaru confirming that they would be watching Huo's movements in the building. One of their officers did "not like" Huo's verbal altercation and indignant reaction to his forfeiture-win. They wanted to ensure he was not in violation of Exam policies or intending to harm anyone.

Administrators and old-fogey misanthropes on the voting panel, however, seemed to think Huo entering the Final Round heralded doomsday. It was unthinkable. How could a ninja from Iwagakure, the grimy pebble under Konoha's boot, have submitted a contender to shame the Chunin Exam so? A Leaf Genin had to prevail. The Daimyo of the Land of Fire, and other political leaders in nearby nations would certainly take note if Leaf was beaten on its own turf by a former enemy.

Conversely, a few on the panel believed it was a wonderful revenue-booster, at least for now. Let the silly, half-bald Iwa Genin fight, they said. Let him win uncontested. Whatever. Money was money. Reputation could be rebuilt after the fact. Besides, what did anyone expect from kunoichi being the only contenders in the Semi-Final and Final matches? A loss was guaranteed. Kunoichi were not dependable. Huo had a clear advantage, and many gamblers were heaping Ryo onto his odds.

Shikamaru sighed, "We are almost done with this day. I need a bath when I go home." He looked around at his haggard, frazzled peers and thought, "We all need a bath."
With encouragement from Lee, Tenten relayed the disturbing information she had gleaned from Huo. Shikamaru listened to her with a stone face and nodded occasionally.

"Do you think that's enough to get him in trouble?" She asked.

"Should be. The bit about his 'Jounin Sensei' is very concerning. Also, the fact that he knows about how your parents died could suggest a Privacy Violation for the Exam. Contenders can use information like that to intimidate one another. It isn't permitted." Shikamaru rubbed his chin, "And, once again, he was threatening your life and everyone associated with you. I'm not going to overlook what he admitted just because he said it in another fucking language. That dumbass."

"Thank you." Tenten breathed softly. Shikamaru clapped her bad shoulder and she howled in pain. Extremely contrite, Shikamaru apologized for his forgetfulness and then spared an urgent glance to Ino and Chouji before going to speak with the Hokage face-to-face.

"Let's get your sling back on." Sakura suggested, and headed for the stairs with Tenten beside her, "We have another thirty minutes to wait before they make announcements. Maybe it won't take the panel that long to penalize Huo."

"Hopefully not." Tenten began to smile, "And then you know what that means?"

Sakura laughed and they both turned back to regard Hinata as she climbed the steps behind them. She blinked in puzzled innocence at them.

"That makes Hinata the champion!" Sakura squealed, "Ha! Are you having a great day or what, Hinata-chan?"

"Hey that's right!" Kiba started cracking up. Shino quietly appreciated the happy turn of events, and Ino, Chouji, and Lee were also jovial that their friend had triumphed in spite of a difficult Tournament. The group celebrated at their viewing balcony. Sakura immobilized Tenten's arm once more and wondered aloud what Tama, Neji, and Sato would think of Hinata's dog day in the sun.

They settled down and relaxed, Chouji returned to the concession lobby for snack orders, and Tenten took Hok back from Lee with a small smile.

"Would you mind escorting me to the hospital?" She asked him sheepishly, "I'm tired. I just want to sit around and talk to Neji. Staying in this stadium is making me sick."

"Yes. You must want to get your mind off of it." Lee understood, "Of course! I will deliver you safely and then return for celebratory festivities!"

"But don't overdo it, Lee. You officially have a bad back."

She bid her friends farewell for the time being and set out with Lee. On the way down the stairwell, they heard the echoes of their friends cheering and making up a chant for Hinata.

Gai found them at the exit of the concession lobby, where the stadium's atrium fed into stone steps, and then on to one of the busy main streets of Konoha. He still seemed somber about Tama's injury, but joy was inching into his features as he commended Tenten and Lee for making him so very proud. Neji had too, of course. They could tell him that when they got to the hospital. Their team would celebrate over dinner as soon as Neji was well again— sensei's treat.

Gai added, "It is best, Tenten, that you do not approach Huo again. You were correct in avoiding him." He rubbed his chin and peered down the corridor, "Kakashi told me that he and other Jounin
were going to stand before the panel and listen to Shikamaru's comments. I also wish to hear council members deliberate Huo's falsifications."

Lee said he would hurry back so he could get the full scoop. They carried on out of the building and uptown a few blocks. After making a right turn into the automatic doors of the hospital lobby, a receptionist took one look at them and sighed dramatically.

"Chunin Exam?" The receptionist looked down his nose at Tenten and Lee.

"Yes." Lee confirmed, "We are here to see Hyuga Neji."

The receptionist was surprised, "Huh? Aren't you both going to be admitted? You're injured."

"We're fine." Tenten sniffed impatiently.

"I'm going to have to ask you to fill out intake sheets—"

"No. We want to see our teammate." Tenten pushed the clipboard back over the desk counter, "Which room is he in?"

"I am not allowing visitors into a recovering patient's room. Most especially not some rude Genin who just hobbled away from the Exam..." The receptionist was dishing back attitude. He and Tenten had a staredown until Tenten backed up and grumbled.

Lee courteously filled out the intake sheet for her, as he was still able-handed. Tenten sighed and told him he could return to the stadium.

"You do not want me to wait here with you?" Lee wondered.

"Nah. You said you wanted to participate in the merriment. I just need a break from it all." Tenten assured him, "It's alright, Lee. Go ahead. You can come find me later."

He gave her a careful side-hug before departing. Tenten handed the clipboard back to the snooty receptionist and was admitted by a much friendlier nurse. Her vitals were taken, she answered the questions, and Tenten finally relented as she was brought to a patient recovery room upstairs. The only other occupant in the multi-patient room was a middle-aged man asleep in a bed. The nurse filled out a white board on the wall with Tenten's details. The kunoichi sat on a bed and scowled at the board as the nurse moved on for her rounds.

'I'm not just going to sit here like an invalid.' She held a hand sign and produced a Shadow Clone. Tenten smiled to herself. The clone Transformed into the likeness of the nurse who had cooed at her and settled her down. Tenten sent it downstairs to steal a glance at the patient intake sheets and find Neji's room number. There. Maybe I should look for Sato and Tama's rooms later too...

She sat there in boredom and listened to her gurgling stomach. 'Hm. I'm getting kind of hungry now...?' Tenten padded silently over to the sleeping patient's food tray, pilfering a pear and an unopened cup of yogurt. She ate in silence for a while, disliking the sterile smell of the ward and how curtains were drawn to block sunlight. She zoned out and stared at long shadows on the floor.

Then, a thought popped into her head courtesy of her disguised Shadow Clone. It dissolved and transmitted its knowledge to her. Neji was in room 240. Good. Tenten hopped up with her half-eaten pear and navigated down the hospital hallway, finding her way up a stairwell to the next floor. It was very helpful that no on-shift nurses or doctors paid her any mind, too busy to acknowledge the errant kunoichi.
She poked her nose into the open doorway of Neji's room and looked in. Tenten sighed in relief. He was napping, propped up on pillows in bed—stitched, bandaged, hospital clothes, thin cotton blanket, monitor hookup—the works. She toed over to the uncomfortable, reedy armchair beside the bed and sat down. Tenten continued eating and did nothing to announce her presence. After a few minutes, Neji cracked an eye open and rolled it to look at who his visitor was.

There was a wonderful, sincere moment in which no words were spoken but the booping sounds of the heart monitor ticked up in frequency. Tenten watched Neji's face slowly pinken as he also realized how obvious his reaction to her was. Annoyed, he ripped the stupid thing off of his finger and tossed it. The monitor went quiet. Tenten grinned at him.

"Are you the winner?" His voice was scratchy.

"Nope! I gave up in the Semi-Final. Huo wanted to kill me so I decided to forfeit." Tenten was honest, still watching Neji's face as he processed the news.

She added, "Gai-sensei said he's proud of all of us. He's looking forward to a team celebration."

"Dinner? Like usual, I suppose."

"And no alcohol." Tenten thoughtfully amended, "For Lee, at least."

Neji nodded tiredly. She bit into her pear again and chewed.

"The Semi-Final." He sounded impressed by how far she had gotten, "Who did you defeat in Round Two?"

"Sakura."

"Ah." He shut his eyes and thought a bit more, "How far did Lee get?"

"He got to Round Two. Hinata beat him. Lee has a back injury from his first match that messed with him." Tenten smiled and set aside her sheathed sword on a bedside table, "Hinata is the champion today. Huo will be disqualified for what he told me before our match."

"Hinata-? What he told you-? He…" Neji was flummoxed, "Hinata will be the uncontested champion?"

"Yes."

"What did Huo say?" Neji pressed.

"He…" Tenten's chin drooped and she stopped eating, "He said a lot of things. We spoke in Hanwen, so when it got personal…Shikamaru didn't really understand it. I told him afterward."

Neji was looking at her with an expression that demanded the details.

She gulped and tried to recount what had happened, "Huo admitted he wanted both Sasagainu clan weapons I have. He wanted to cut my head off and give it to his…his Shifu. He said. The same rogue ninja who beheaded my parents, Dintei Bi. Huo knew all about that…and it really bothered me."

Staring in shock with flecks of anger hardening his features, Neji was all ears as Tenten spoke. He never knew how her parents had been killed, but now he understood why she never wanted to talk about it.
"Huo told me about…how he and Bi were replacing the Main line of the clan. They wanted to rewrite our history. They are repenting for something that my ancestors did…that was offensive to the Branch line's idol. Some kind of…splintering of beliefs. Two ideologies. But…but it all sounded so fake…like some kind of cult." Tenten shook her head and pressed her good hand into her eye, halting a tear, "He said some…pretty horrible stuff. Huo is definitely crazy…but I believe him when he says he wants to kill everyone I care about."

The room was quiet while Neji stared and digested what she'd said. Tenten sniffled until she dried up again, not too keen on revealing her puffy eyes. She never liked to display her weak side to Neji, even now when he was much better at accepting it. She hid it on reflex.

"Also," She cleared her throat, "Huo said that his Jounin Sensei is his prisoner. So she isn't exactly an accomplice in the crazy stuff he's doing. Shikamaru said he would take it up with the panel. The violation of privacy too…those were big offenses."

"I really want to…" Neji trailed off and stopped himself from replying. He turned his head away from her and looked at the wall, visibly angry.

"What?" Tenten peeped.

Neji broke his silence, "I want to kill him. For making you upset, for hurting you deeply even without fighting you…someone like him drives me to such thoughts. I hate him. More than anything." He let out a breath to ease up a bit, "I would give anything to have a chance to make Huo feel small. To prove how wrong he is."

Neji turned back to look at her and saw Tenten hiding her face again with her arm.

"Show me." His voice was softer.

She shook her head tiredly and rubbed at her eyes with her sleeve. Her subconscious had a weird mechanism in place, at least where Neji was concerned. She did not show grief or worry or any of those wimpy emotions. When she first got to know him, he only valued the people who commanded his respect. As a result, Tenten made a point to only reveal parts of herself that were respectable in his eyes. She did not quite grasp yet how different things were from those days.

He kind of got the gist of why she couldn't do it. Her feelings were no longer a mystery to him.

"The things that hurt you do not cheapen you. They aren't something you need to hide from me." Neji took a shot at appealing to that soft side she pretended not to have, "I want to feel your pain with you."

Tenten sucked in a breath that got stuck on a hiccup. Whoa. Had she heard that right? Yup. Pretty sure she did. Neji said that. The hiccups intensified. Tenten lowered her arm and set the pear down on the empty food tray of a rolling cart. She shuffled over to Neji and climbed up into the space beside him, not sorry about getting dirt from her clothes all over the linens. It did not seem to hurt his bandaged side at all when she curled into him, resting her forehead against his neck. Neji felt her chest and shoulders tremble, but she remained silent. He had enough range of motion to snake an arm around her, closing his eyes again and willing his exhaustion away so he could focus on this. It was important.

"You know, I…" Her voice was thick and wobbly, "I never liked sharing my pain. Not since they died. It became an inconvenience. If you…" Tenten wetted her lips and went on, "If you had learned about it then…back when you had so much pain of your own… I had no idea how you would take it. The last thing I ever wanted to do was make you feel worse than you already did."
"You never made me feel worse." Neji chided.

"Right. Because I made a point of including you in everything and socially rehabilitating you…when you didn't throw a fit or reject it. I never shared anything personal." Tenten's arm slipped out of its sling and her fingers fiddled with his hospital shirt, "I just kind of assumed…that was the best way to help you. I felt what you felt, because it was easier than feeling my own loss. I wanted you to believe I was on your side."

That was a surprisingly bitter pill to swallow. Here he was channeling his new powers of empathy and asking to feel her pain with her…and Neji had to acknowledge what Tenten was saying. That when she was 12 years old and freshly orphaned, then promoted to a Genin team…she had been feeling for him since that time.

Oh, how stupid he had been then— so inextricably caught up in clan politics and advancement…he couldn't even see that a person had been listening to him so intently. To reach past the grimacing, arguing, fighting, and his posturing for the Main House; past his reputation as a prodigy, past his pushiness and selfishness…Tenten had identified the feelings he had suppressed and misunderstood.

Perhaps on a very subtle wavelength, he had detected what Tenten was doing for him when he was younger. He had felt a very strong but unclassified bond with her. He had enjoyed devoting huge blocks of time to training with her. He had been mortified and furious when Tenten told him he was wrong, and that Hinata deserved the accolades and prestige of the Main House, when Neji had once thought they were in competition for it. She was on his side. He didn't want her to support anyone else.

But he had never actually returned that favor. He just made things harder for her, overlooking and squandering that benevolence… She had always seemed fine. Carefree. Burden-less. Neji had since learned that some people made themselves seem that way in order to accommodate others first.

In hindsight, boy oh boy was he bad at this. How had he existed without recognizing the needs and feelings of other human beings? Neji was absolutely perplexed. How had anyone been able to put up with him?

He felt wetness on his neck where he supposed Tenten had been crying, but she was too afraid to show it. Neji reached for the opposite side table with his free arm and pulled back a box of tissues. Before he could get one for her, Tenten had plucked several out herself and muttered apologies to him. He made a point of not getting impatient with her flighty evasion. He had a feeling she just needed to be reassured.

"You could have told me." Neji imagined out loud, and then he waited for her to finish blowing her nose. When she was tucked into him again he went on, "If you had told me about what happened to you—to your family…when I had first met you…I may not have said much. But I would have let it dwell on my thoughts every day. I would have thought about it every night before I slept. I would have thought less about my own exaggerated hardships." Neji concluded, "I may not have known how to help you, when we were younger. But I hope…that if you had confided in me…I would have contemplated about finding the way to do it. I hope I would have found the way to show you that I am on your side too."

She made a small sound in response to his thoughts and remained bunched up. It was the sound of a sob. Then her snuffling petered off and she inhaled again, her chest rumbling with phlegm, and Tenten stuffed tissues under her eyes. She calmed down completely after a few minutes.

"Are you feeling alright?" He asked.
"Yeah." Tenten rolled up the spent tissues and crammed them in her arm sling for the time being, "Sorry about that."

"Don't be."

"I shouldn't—"

"If I had been the one crying, you wouldn't have minded it. Why should I?"

"You. Cry?" Tenten was flabbergasted.

"Not at this age, but…" He sighed and admitted, "When I lost my father…I had tantrums for weeks. Hinata-sama can tell you. It took an incredible amount of cajoling from my relatives to get me out of my room to eat and function those days."

"You were sad." She understood, "And he was the only person you had. It must have been awful to say goodbye."

"Father was the only parent I had, but I was never alone. I was fortunate." Neji acknowledged, "I've been well looked after."

Tenten raised her face up to look at him and listen. Her complexion had evened out again. Her eyes were slightly less red.

"I do have…a reasonable amount of luck." Neji supposed, tipping his head back to relax, "Considering that someone could see past my flaws and pretenses…and tell me that I've got it together." He was looking up at the ceiling, but Tenten noticed his mouth curve into a smile.

"Well…you do. It took a while, but you do." She granted him that, "I mean…is that luck?"

"Is it? It feels like it is." He noted loftily, "And that same someone told me that I have turned out better than what she ever dared to hope for."

"No one told you that." Tenten protested quietly in embarrassment.

"I can assure you someone did. This person also told me I am the greatest." Neji stopped and thought, "Though that is debatable."

In a better mood, she rested her head gently on his shoulder and started to smirk impishly, "No, that one isn't debatable. You can have that one."

"I found it highly subjective."

"Just take the damn compliment." Tenten sniffed.

"I will, if you take care not interrupt me like you did before my match," Neji advised. He adjusted his sitting position to be face-to-face with her, watching her pupils dilate as she looked at him, "You have done something to me that you can't undo, that I won't let you undo."

The gypsum hue of his eyes had traces of lavender and grey in them. Maybe she was staring too hard. She couldn't help it. Her brain was a willing captive.

"I had no talent for seeing the good in others. I had little practical experience with feeling joy. Now I can see it everywhere. Now I feel happy in any moment I stop to reflect. Because you devoted the time to educate, criticize, and cherish me, these things now come easily to me."
She was too parched to swallow properly.

"I suggest that you...get accustomed to me staying by your side. Every day." He slowed down to kiss her mouth and had no idea that Tenten feared her chest might explode into fiery pieces. He spoke again, "You should get comfortable sharing both the pleasant and unpleasant things you feel with me. I am too curious now. I want to know those things." She was sputtering softly when they kissed again, and then Neji said, "I want you."

Unintentionally, Tenten flailed a hand and knocked the tissue box to the tile floor with a clatter. This was a bit too much for her to handle. Earlier she had thought she could absorb whatever mushy sentiments Neji beset her with, but oh ho ho her blood pressure and live-wire erogenous zones said otherwise.

And the other issue was that there was a polite knock on the door frame to announce a visitor's presence. They snapped apart from another kiss with what? we-were-not-doing-anything facial expressions. At the door they saw the same cat-masked ANBU agent that Tsunade had once ordered to keep them separated.

"Tenzo." Neji greeted, surprised.

"The name's Yamato, today." The man chuckled and removed his mask, giving a soft "Phew!" They stared in shock at the gesture.

"I'm off duty for now. Yugao-san took over." Tenzo, or Yamato, gave an amused look to Tenten who was still perched on the bed beside Neji, "She couldn't stop talking about you, Tenten."

"Oh!" Tenten's voice was high-pitched and working through the fact that even members of ANBU were invested in them.

"You both had some very interesting matches today!" Yamato remarked as he took a seat on a physician's rolling stool, resting his elbows on the countertop behind him, "It is good to see you two together for a change. I didn't like keeping you apart."

"Thanks." Tenten was warming up to him, "We didn't like being apart."

"I can see that." Yamato said, indicating their close proximity. With that, Tenten slipped down and back into the uncomfortable guest chair. Yamato shared a recollection with the kunoichi, "Yeah. This brings back memories! Neji was very hostile when I first met him. We had a confrontation in your apartment building."

This was the first she had heard of a confrontation in her building. Tenten pursed her mouth and looked at Neji, who seemed annoyed but also resigned to Yamato's storytelling. Inquisitive, she asked, "Neji came to my building?"

"He sure did. I read him his rights and everything outside...and then he jumped into someone's open flat window. So did I, unfortunately." The off-duty ANBU veteran muttered and rubbed the back of his head, "Neji ran upstairs to get to you and I barely headed him off at the pass."

"You don't say?" She was side-eye smirking at Neji, thrilled.

"Yes. There was even a brief skirmish! With an old woman. Then I pulled Neji out of the third floor window with a Wood Clone. Had you answered your door for him, I would have arrested him in front of you." Yamato nodded to himself sagely, "He caused me so much trouble."

"You were at my door?" Tenten looked at her boyfriend, mildly smug.
"No."

"My report says you were." Yamato corrected him.

"I stopped by." Was all that Neji would admit to.

"It was tricky keeping up with two yearning youths. Like something out of those novels Kakashi reads." Yamato rubbed his mask on his pant leg to clean a spot of concession food gunk off of it.

"Hey, don't patronize!" Tenten didn't like *that* assessment, "It's nothing like that!"

"Well, maybe you aren't as obnoxious as fiction, I'll give you that. Truly, I do respect you. I respected your father too." Yamato assured her.

She blinked and considered it, "You were in Black Ops with him?"

"Oh yes, when I was a new inductee and Kakashi was first whipping me into shape, Takaharu was a Captain I got to know and I liked him very much. He brought delicious food to the break room." Yamato remembered fondly, "You can follow in his footsteps, Tenten. You made that plain to me today."

"Pffft. I'm sorry. Were you *actually* watching my matches?" Skeptically, she pointed out her arm in a sling, "Dad was tough. I'm falling to pieces." Tenten stood from her seat and excused herself, "Uh, whoa, I waited too long. I watched too many matches… Excuse me!" She left the recovery room and went to the restroom across the hall.

"I wonder why she didn't accept my endorsement?" Yamato was stumped.

"She's like that." Neji informed him, "She is highly suspicious of endorsements."

"Hmm." Yamato smiled at him, "It seems she is. And Neji, I must say, I have never seen anyone fall into the sky the way you did in your match. Isn't Kakashi's nephew something?"

"He *is* something. Foolish." Yamato cracked up.

"Perhaps I should have used jutsu I had been withholding." Neji reflected on how he had held back and been pummeled, "I was not investing my full strength in that match. I thought it was best to conserve techniques to face Huo."

"A wise decision, really. Even if it didn't work out." Yamato agreed with him, "I can only imagine what the Torture and Intel Corps will ask Huo at his post-Exam interview. I know Ibiki is itching to get at him."

"May he languish and rot in their cells." Neji's comment was serrated.

"Had Huo not been a factor in this Exam, this Tournament would have been yours for the taking. That I am sure of. Your team was dominant and well-equipped. I enjoyed watching your matches! Sai was quite excited by them as well. He intends to spend more time with you soon, while off duty…" Yamato leaned back again, chipper, "My, my…you all grew so much in so little time."

"Soon, the Hokage will come to depend on us more. We do not want to disappoint her." Neji extended an olive branch, remembering how Tenzo/Yamato had asked him to put faith in Tsunade when it had been difficult to do so.
"Yes. That's the attitude Leaf ninja need. The Hokage's strength does not come from just *her* abilities…it is the will and service of the ninja who support her that empower her." Yamato mused contently.

Finally, Neji agreed with that statement.

"So…" Yamato transitioned carefully, "How long has *that* been going on?"

"How long has *what* been going on?" Neji didn't get it.

"The kissing and embracing. You put on quite the show for me before you realized I had stopped by."

The Hyuga heir's face flat-lined in humiliation. He did not offer a comment.

"Now, now, I won't tease you. Those feelings are important. You may need her support more than anyone else's in the world. I wish I had the good fortune to meet someone like that, but so far my search has turned up empty. Give thanks each day for your irreplaceable someone!" Yamato recommended.

Neji nodded. Yes. Gratitude. He couldn't forget that it would have been a very simple matter for Tenten to not acknowledge or desire him at* all. Many shinobi lived busy, career-fueled lives without so much of a hint of romance or true companionship.

"I am just surprised that your relationship is as advanced as it is. I could be mistaken, but I was under the impression that the noblest clans of Konoha don't allow informal courtships." Yamato explained, "Did the Hyuga sanction it for you? For them to consider her a serious future prospect of yours has heavy political implications."

"It's not." Neji enlightened him, "It isn't approved at all. My clan is not aware."

"Oooh." Yamato gave him a wary look, "Be cautious."

Pouting, Neji took a moment to think about what he had given no thought to previously. At some point, if he sincerely wished to keep Tenten as a lifelong companion, he was going to have to make a case for it with the Elders of the Main House. Since that was an immense headache waiting to happen, Neji had automatically pushed the idea to the farthest corners of his mind.

"...I did not think that far ahead." Neji admitted, "But I do know that I won't let her get away, and I won't allow anyone else to have her."

"Maybe that conviction is all you need…" Yamato pondered, "And a decent bribe to grease the hands of the old patriarchs of the Hyuga."

"If you know what would suffice in appeasing them, tell my uncle and I immediately. We still have no idea what satisfies them."

Yamato gave him a wry, knowing smile. He may have said something uncouth in reply, but he stopped himself. A few moments of quiet passed before Yamato turned his head left and right.

"Tenten's been gone for a while. Did she fall in?" He jested.

"Her arm is injured. It may be challenging for her to use the restroom on her own." Neji guessed.

"Ah. That could be it."
Shortly after that, Tenten returned. She appeared a bit disgruntled, "Ugh. What did I miss?"

"Nothing." Neji and Yamato said it in unison, and so she instantly realized it meant something.

"O-kaaay." Tenten dropped into the reedy seat and picked up her pear again to eat, "Well I had a scare in the bathroom. I looked in the mirror. What a nightmare…"

Leaf Genin Finalists had organized in a small gathering on the floor of their viewing area. They were seated in a circle and stuffing themselves with fried dough, icy treats, meat on sticks, and other concession delights. They took turns commending each other and toasting to Hinata's ascension to Tournament Champion.

"If your dad throws a party for you at the Hyuga estate, can we go to celebrate too?" Sakura wondered of her friend.

Hinata was giggling, "I would want you there! I wouldn't let anyone stop you at the gate!"

"Oh, Gaara has to come! Oh my gosh it'll be so much fun."

"Shika too!" Ino was cackling, "He's going to need to let loose after the day he's had."

"We'll have to tuck him into bed later." Chouji predicted.

"Be careful with that invite or the Hokage will show up." Kiba warned jokingly, "And she will drink all of your clan's liquor before you can lock it up safe!"

They were all roaring and guffawing, with the exception of Shino. His mirth was much quieter.

Abruptly, a large, swirling cloud of smoke erupted on the balcony just behind the ring of Genin. Akamaru startled and fell over into Kiba's lap. Lee also reared back and knocked over Mo-Ye from where the jian was leaned against the wall. The youngsters beheld a gaggle of arguing Jounin that had showed up.

A hush fell over the Genin as the shouting of the Jounin allayed. Kakashi was concluding strong words with a veteran kunoichi the Genin had never seen before. She was middle-aged and had wild, graying hair, and a sharp but comely face. Her Jounin vest was unzipped over layered tanks and fishnets. She held a finger up to Kakashi and turned to address the Genin.

"Hello children," She greeted, "I am Sarutobi Kakima. Today I was appointed as a moderator for Exam decisions and I was just now unfairly booted from the panel for calling another panel member a two-faced, sissy swinefucker."

"You should have held your tongue, Kakima." Asuma gruffed at his sister-in-law.

Kakashi was cupping his forehead in disappointment.

"You heard what they were saying. You heard the bias and treason as loudly as I did." Kakima insisted, "Forgive me for negating all of our reasonable and well-thought out recommendations to the council. They weren't going to listen to us anyway."

"We could have played our hand more carefully." Kurenai reminded her, "Your husband was doing well with his persuasion."

"Buh! Netsuke was sitting and nodding too much. Even Asuma wanted him to raise hell."
"I did not." Asuma denied it.

Gai and Genma insisted that Shikamaru's testimony of Semi-Final violations were misconstrued by panel members and thrown out before consideration. The Hokage should intervene. No. Forget it. The Hokage should cancel everything. Except that millions upon millions of Ryo were now flowing freely into Hidden Leaf and how? How were they supposed to cut the cord with so much hanging in the balance?

"Who does that old Shimura turd think he is?" Hayate sniffed, standing shoulder to shoulder with his wife, "He told Yugao she was exaggerating the danger that her Security team reported. I don't see his fucking Root security force watching matches, do you?"

"Screaming about it here won't change any minds." Kakashi stated evenly, "It's over. They ruled disqualification out."

"WHAT? Ruled it out?" Sakura hollered at the top of her lungs, snapping the Jounin out of their closed circuit of bickering.

The Genin were devastated.

"Wait!" Lee stood up, frantic, "Shikamaru submitted his opinions to the panel! Tenten told him what happened!"

"He did, Lee." Gai confirmed it gravely, "A panel member argued that Tenten made all of it up."

"No." Ino's face was aflame with fury, "No. No. No. How do they get to say that? How can they make a snap judgement? They weren't standing down there!"

"Shikamaru did not have a recording of the verbal exchange Huo and Tenten had. Furthermore, it was in a language that Shikamaru and other administrators do not understand." Asuma sighed heavily, "'Course, it's not that hard to find someone who can translate Hanwen on short notice. But the lack of a recorded conversation means that they can think whatever the hell they want. Ignorance is bliss."

"Ignorance will get Genin killed today." Yugao was also bristling.

"Elder Tatesono is incorrigible!" Kakima howled, "How can he advocate for a shameless, immoral delinquent to advance purely for monetary gain? I will refer him to the Corruption Committee and daimyo so fast his head will spin!"

"He was rubbing shoulders with Danzo too much. They allowed this." Hayate observed.

"The point is," Kakashi interrupted again, "Huo will be permitted to fight in the Final Round. We can't celebrate yet. We need to be smart and coast to the finish." He turned to Kurenai, "The floor is yours now."

Wilted, Kurenai stepped forward and extended a hand to Hinata, pulling her to her feet.

"I feel that you have been robbed of a limelight that would have displayed your beauty and kindness in the way it deserved to be seen by everyone in this stadium. It was yours. Forgive us for failing in our appeal." She wrapped her arms around her student and leaned back, giving her a stern look, "I will hold this day in contempt for the rest of my life."

"You mustn't, Sensei." Hinata shook her head modestly, "It isn't your fault. I don't need publicity to feel accomplished."
"I know you don't, but I wanted it for you so badly." Kurenai furrowed her brow and smiled, "Now forgive me for asking you to surrender. I treasure your life and future. Please do not risk your well-being against an unscrupulous competitor, Hinata."

"I won't." Hinata agreed.

"Good. Shino..." Kurenai extended her arm and gestured for him to join them. He got in on the hug, "I am sorry. I could not be more proud of what you both did today. I understand Sato's pain and frustration, even if he was out of line with his actions. You all did marvelously."

They were heartened, "Thank you, Kurenai-sensei."

"Well, guess we should stand by and make sure that Iwa crook doesn't try to pull anything." Genma proposed, "Come on, you old fucks. Let's go stare menacingly." By old fucks he meant his Jounin peers. Kakima, the most senior, took offense and smacked the back of Genma's head. They departed and left Asuma, Gai, Kurenai, and Kakashi with their student brood.

Chouji handed Asuma a wrapped curry-bread treat and his Sensei accepted it, biting anxiously into the snack. Ino sighed and moped beside them.

"When the Tournament's over, can we gang up on Huo and rip him to pieces?" Kiba asked optimistically.

Kakashi snickered, 'I'm afraid you'll have to get in line. Torture and Intel Corps requested an 'interview' with Huo, which the Hokage granted, and they always get first pick. Kakima was brandishing her connections to the Corruption Committee, and they may be number two on the list... so...give it a few weeks."

"Nah, I can't. I need my rage to be fresh if I'm going to hurt him." Kiba vigorously patted Akamaru to try and relax.

"It's not fair." Sakura protested, "It should be clear to the decision panel that Huo doesn't deserve any kind of recognition. He isn't representative of the qualities the Exam wants to promote!"

"I know, kiddo." Kakashi rubbed his neck, wound tight, "But many councils and decision-making bodies in this village, and pretty much everywhere else, are always stacked with self-serving, rhetoric-spewing demagogues who make it their business to get the final say."

"Tsunade-shishou should just punch them."

"She's done it before...long ago." Kakashi chuckled, "But that was the one and only time she could — she punched Jiraiya out of the auditorium of the Sealing Corps council meeting. He said something to her she disagreed with."

"Ah, well...I guess they won't condone that kind of behavior from a Hokage."

"No. The daimyo could replace her with a new candidate if she did." Kakashi imagined, "And that's the last thing we need— another rat race for leadership while we have enemies hoping to prey on weakness."

They stopped talking and looked to Gai at the top of the stairs, where he was speaking with someone unseen a few steps down in the stairwell. He turned back to the group and announced, "Hinata-chan, Ko-san asked for you to go to the first floor assembly room in the concourse. Your father wishes to speak with you."
"O-Oh…” Hinata handed a cinnamon roll back to Lee when he offered her one. It would not be appropriate to eat nervously while having an audience with her father. She excused herself from her friends and team, then hurried down the stairs.

She had forgotten that her father had been watching, and that he too may have been excited to see her get so close to the end. How unfortunate that he had to get used to being disappointed by her constant stumbling before the finish line…

'I just hope that I did enough today…to please him. I hope that he can see that I have grown and tried to become strong.' Hinata thought to herself. On the first floor, she got confused because she had no idea where the assembly room was. She stopped to ask on duty concourse guards for directions. She then set out down the leftward hall that wrapped around the circumference of the building, connecting to most upper level stairwells.

She glanced at a portable bi-fold sign and saw she had reached her destination. She ducked into the room and found her father there waiting all by himself. His hands were tucked into the sleeves of his overcoat and he was frowning. Hinata shriveled sadly after noting his expression.

"Hinata," He paused before going on to ask, "What do you think I want you to do?"

"I…” Her eyes nearly crossed because both continuing and forfeiting seemed like impossible options when she thought of her father.

Hiashi gazed at her for a long while before the lines near his mouth became more pronounced, and his face was shadowed with worry.

"You don't have to do anything to prove yourself to me." He informed her, "You did that long ago."

"But Father I know that you want—"

"There is nothing that I want…more than your safety." Hiashi confirmed, "I cannot ask you to do anything simply because it would reassure me or gratify me. All I can do is tell you what I feel. In the end, what you think is the sole foundation of your decisions and actions."

"I will always consider what you have to say." She was shuffling and fidgeting in front of him.

"I know you will, but I have been wrong about many things in the past. I would prefer it if you don't weigh my opinions against your own too heavily." Hiashi advised her, "If I had...let my thoughts and feelings affect all of your life choices at the last Exam…I would have left you bereft of opportunities and dignity. I would have forsaken you in an unacceptable way…because of the pompous opinions of our elders." He rested a hand on her arm and closed his eyes, "You are not a bit player for our clan. You are my child. Your life was a gift to me. I regret that there was ever a time…I dared to forget that."

"…u-um…" Her lip trembled. He did not fuss when she leaned her head into his chest, remembering that she hadn't done such a thing since she was a toddler. He held the back of her head, as if nostalgic for the short time she had been small and still needed him.

"Risking yourself for vanity seems like something that a Hyuga would do, and many people in this building may expect such a thing." Hiashi speculated, "But we do not lower ourselves to fight unprincipled adversaries. And our clan should prize its wisdom more than its repute. Let this foe stand alone and friendless in front of crowds, and then leave him to the damp chill of Leaf’s dungeons. That is where he belongs."

"Yes, Father." She nodded and took a step back, smiling slightly.
He held her cheek in his hand and wore a pained expression, "There are some days when I think… that if your mother were still alive and you stood beside her…I wouldn't be able to tell you apart."
He chuckled to himself, "It feels like she never left me."

Hinata patted his hand understandingly, "She didn't."

"Azumi promised me she never would. She also extracted many promises from me, before the end… and I should do better to keep those vows." Hiashi decided, "Hm. Despite all that's happened, there is still reason to celebrate. I will arrange an event with the clan later. But for now…" He rested his forehead against hers briefly, "Go."

Braced by her father's support, Hinata ventured out into the hall again to return to the building's concourse. There was still time. She did not quite know what to do with herself.

Naturally, Hinata found her way back to a vendor of cinnamon rolls and ordered one. She continued on through the lobby while eating. 'If Naruto-kun were here he would want to stop at that noodle vendor at the end. It looked and smelled wonderful!' She let herself dally and daydream to relax. It would be a little intimidating to stand out in the arena again and hand victory away to Huo, but at least then it would be over. 'Oh, Hanabi would love those fruits on sticks, the shapes are so cute!'

At the central corridor past the off-limits turnstiles, Hinata noticed Sai speaking to a Tide Village ninja. Sai was nodding and telling the young man something, and then pointed him to a stairwell. His Tide acquaintance thanked him and took off running.

That sight…maybe it wasn't so unusual. She finished her roll and licked the sugar from her fingertips. Hinata stopped in the restroom to wash the stickiness from her hands. She soaped up thoroughly and rinsed. She paused at the sink and frowned, then recalling her earlier episode in the bathroom. 'Could it…?' She almost didn't do it. Then she gulped, looked down, and cupped her hands under the tap.

What a wonder! The strange reflection was still there. 'Should I have brought this up to Father? No…I wouldn't want to alarm him by saying strange things. Not today, at least…' Hinata was acutely intrigued. She made faces at the horned man's reflection, tossed her head side to side to shake her hair, and watched as "his" white locks flipped and furled like her own. Nervous, she laughed at what she was seeing. Did anyone else in the world have this problem? A disjointed reflection?

'If I am not crazy…maybe other people could see it too? If I showed them?' Hinata dropped water in the sink and turned the tap off, looking into the wall mirror, 'I know I have seen him before… whoever he is. Would I be able to see him if I…?' She pursed her lips and decided what the heck, try everything! After several moments of concentration with her Byakugan, and many deep breaths, she searched with a wider, stronger field of vision. A-aaaaand…Nothing.

She pushed further, heightened to the level of the Misago Byakugan and then she did perceive something surprising. Hinata saw no strange reflection in the mirror and paid no mind to the vast, internal workings and minutiae of the stadium…but her blood limit detected her own chakra. There was a peculiarity she had not noticed before. An inner, glowing energy…. But it was his. It was hers. It was as if he was standing inside of her. 'Whoever you are…um…well…have you always been around?' She wondered, 'What is your name?' She was snapped out of it.

Hinata rested her eyes when announcements broadcasted over loudspeakers, requesting the presence of Final Round competitors. She prodded her forehead and frowned, hoping she wasn't going to sprout horns. For now, she had no explanation of what or who her "reflection buddy" was. It would have to wait until later.
Her mind wandered again on the way out of the restroom and through the corridor. She remembered the mission to the Star Village, enjoying her time with that team, the thrill of flying, and the terror of struggling against S-Class nukenin. Hinata passed beneath the archway and into the arena. She recalled having fun at the hot springs with her kunoichi companions. She nearly bubbled over with laughter while remembering the Pre-Tournament festival and all the fun she and her friends had. Hinata crossed the dirt floor of the stadium to where Shikamaru stood alone, waiting for Huo to appear.

She thought of what Sato and Shino had told her earlier that day, in the wake of Tama's match. The injustice of it maddened her. There had been no chance to redeem their friend who had fought so bravely. Had Naruto witnessed what befell Tama, he would not have thought twice about breaking the rules to retaliate against Huo. Rather, Hinata was fairly convinced he would do such a thing. *Naruto cares more about all of our friends than promotions and pageantry. I know that I do too! I became like him. I can champion others. I can face danger. I can be myself.*

Shikamaru cleared his throat beside her. Hinata looked up and furrowed her brow, seeing Huo in profile as if he had no interest in facing her fully upon his arrival. He was picking at his teeth with his pinky finger. That kind of behavior was obviously ticking off Shikamaru. It got under her skin too.

'*And I don't think that I can forgive...this person. That I can fear this person. I don't. All that I really feel is...*' Hinata widened her eyes and inhaled, taken aback that she was feeling true, unfettered anger for the first time. She better understood Sato's ambush on Huo. She understood why the Jounin had been shouting and railing after the panel's decision. It turned out that she too, like many of her Hyuga kin, had hot blood that demanded redress for such a wrongdoing.

Shikamaru was trying to get her attention as she stared straight ahead. "Hinata." He cleared his throat again, as if trying to give a prompt.

Hinata kept staring. Huo had noticed and turned to face her, inspecting her.

Concerned, Shikamaru tried to nudge her along to forfeiture, "Before I begin the Final Match..."

"I changed my mind." Hinata told him simply, "I want to fight him."

The proctor's blood ran ice-cold, upset that his shirt microphone had been on (to shut up panel complaints) and it broadcasted that the Hyuga kunoichi was going to try her luck against the foreign finalist. Shikamaru grabbed Hinata roughly by the arm, as if to pull her away. He shut the stupid fucking microphone off, because *screw* the panel, and he had a muttering conversation with Hinata to get to the bottom of her insane choice.

"I was told by four Jounin that you were not going to compete."

"Well they were mistaken." Hinata told him shortly. She had adopted one of Hanabi's disrespectful tones.

"You have to quit. I'm not gonna let you fight." Shikamaru hissed.

"Shikamaru-kun...I don't wish to upset you. But if you continue to stall the Hokage will be very cross."

*The Hokage doesn't want you to fight either.* He kept his voice down, but knew Huo could probably hear them.
"I don't care. If I need to surrender, I will." Hinata decided.

"This is fucking crazy. You took a crazy pill." He accused her, at wit's end.

"Please don't worry—"

"Hinata, I have to worry about you. Even if I call a time out and you are ready to forfeit, that piece of shit," Shikamaru referred to Huo testily, "Will more than likely attack you because he can, and because I may not be able to stop him."

A crackle of impatient what's the hold up? questions sounded over Shikamaru's two-way radio.

"You will not have to step in. He won't be able to surprise me." Hinata determined confidently, "I am not fighting alone today."

"The heck does that mean-?" Shikamaru lifted his radio testily to tell the blabbing elder or councilman or whoever to hold on to their horses. He gave a long, severe look to Hinata before giving up, "Alright. I have heard from the Hokage you can do some extraordinary things now."

Hinata nodded to confirm she was all about extraordinary these days.

"Pull out all the stops. If you need me, do the Lee-thumbs-up." Shikamaru advised her. He stepped away to turn to Huo, asking if he was ready.

Incredulously, Huo confirmed, yeah, sure, he was ready. He was unsure if it was a joke or not.

"Begin!" Hating himself, Shikamaru began the match and darted away.

Huo stood there and Hinata evaluated him with her Byakugan, composing herself into a neat and tidy Gentle Fist stance.

"You can't be serious." Huo's voice was flat with disbelief.

In the distance, Hinata heard the frightened, pleading cries of her friends from their lookout.

She took a single step to the right and adjusted the position of her arms, aligning them perfectly for an Air Palm if he charged. The sound of spectators was drowned out in her ears. She only heard a soft, whining laugh of amazement escape Huo.

He canted his head to observe her like she was some lost school child, his sinuous smile widening, "You want to fight me? Are you upset that your precious ones crumpled up like cowards? Little girl who helps old men on the street…who follows her big brother and big sister around…!" Huo started laughing wildly and held the stitch in his side, "Think I didn't see how you all dote on each other…? Heh heh…think that you standing there…means I won't find them?" He was teary-eyed and laboring to catch his breath, he had laughed so hard.

"That I won't find them asleep when the moon is high…? That I saw each and every last one of you…I watched today to be sure it was no contest." Huo straightened up, overwhelmingly cavalier, "I thrive in shadow. The dark is my sword. Do you plan to stay awake each night forever?"

"You won't threaten us anymore-!" She was not precisely sure when he had kicked her in the side of the head. Hinata tumbled sideways and sprang up, trying to calculate how he had closed the distance.

Her Byakugan was an indispensable resource, as Huo weaved and dashed around her without any of the restraint he had used against Tama in their match. Hinata's blocks and defensive combinations
were quick and precise, but he was marching her around in retreat, directing her where he wanted her to go. Much in the way Lee had, Huo had no difficulty folding Hinata's arm up like an accordion during a traditional Jyukken strike. He turned to wallop her with a round kick, but Hinata employed her invented Gentle Step to use a rabbity jump off of his thigh, returning her own kick to his chin. Huo hacked as his head snapped back. They fell away from each other before closing in again.

Her brain was an orchestral conductor in fast-forward, directing her hands and feet simultaneously, white matter kindling, rapidly firing off commands through nerves and synapses. She could not afford a single millisecond of distraction. Huo ducked and whirled at her with untamed Wushu, trying to bat her fingers and hands aside when she became too predictable. Every few seconds she had to reinvent her strikes. It helped when she had been able to sneak a Shadow Clone behind him and it swept his legs out from under him. He looked startled when he fell. With a war cry, Hinata bashed him in the stomach with merciless Jyukken, contacting the transparent Chakra Barrier that had once impeded Tama.

Huo somersaulted backwards and mule-kicked up into the face of the Shadow Clone, destroying it. She rushed at him, forcing her steps and stomps to direct his movements for a change. He bent his neck away from her pinpoint Jyukken jabs, swaying side to side, trading nasty elbow blows and knuckle punches for her elegant slaps and pokes.

To Shikamaru's great consternation, the audience was going just as crazy as Hinata had become. He was going to need ear plugs.

Psychology played a part in the unlikely moment in which Huo made a mistake— his Wushu punch for her neck was caught and pinched in her hand, something Hinata had learned from Lee, and she pulled down and twisted his arm painfully to lock him. He sucked wind in fright. Huo had automatically assumed that this kunoichi was not a competent or creative opponent. She looked dainty and gentle. As his barrier halted a powerful Jyukken stab that followed, Huo reconsidered his lax attitude that reflected in his fighting performance. He assessed and then freed himself from that derisory mind set.

Hinata was following up with a kick that he blocked with his own, and Huo snaked his free arm around her locking arm, winding around it like a vine. With her weight shifted, he easily tripped her and threw her to the ground, kicking sand in her face. Hinata screeched and rolled away like a log, pained, still able to detect him with her blood limit as Huo made hand signs.

"Doton: Shattering Canyon!" He sprang airily to the side as the ground cracked apart and violently submerged, Hinata narrowly avoiding a plunge into the new earth feature. The ground raised up and was hurled at her in fragments with follow-up jutsu, and Hinata did not dare employ her Water Release for fear of strengthening Huo's Earth Techniques.

Eyes tearing, she made leaps and dashes to close the distance, avoiding the obstacles he had conjured. Combining her chase with a Shadow Clone allowed Hinata to steer Huo into a clearer, less rocky area, but Huo took that opportunity to smash a boulder with his heel while simultaneously performing a jutsu. It modified the stone chips into hyper-dense carbon shards, and fired them en masse at his opponent. The attack shredded her clone, and Hinata plunged herself into a Rotation at the last possible moment to protect herself.

When Huo rushed forward with a snarl to attempt close-quarters combat again, Hinata was not shy about signaling for five Shadow Clones to bolt from their hiding spots in debris and ambush him. Her heart pounded in anticipation as several simultaneous 64-point attacks struck Huo's barrier, and she did notice two or three of his tenketsu close in spite of his protection. 'It may not last long! His shield! I know that I can get through it!' She was emboldened. Hinata rushed in to assist her assault
team, overwhelming Huo as he maintained a Wushu defense.

He shouted something in Hanwen, greatly irked, and then back-hand sprung away from the encirclement of Hinatas and drew a small utility scroll off of his belt, out of sight beneath his long shirt.

"You seek to make things difficult for me." Huo snapped the parchment open and applied a dot of blood to summon a tool, "But I can make it much more difficult for you."

In the split second Hinata witnessed Huo summon a dao sword, he rushed with an unprecedented amount of speed and Wushu flexibility before she had finished blinking. The first Shadow Clone that was too close succumbed to a high-powered kick in the chin, and in a leaping turn Huo knocked a second clone away, dropping into a low crouch as he turned the dao and his wrist gracefully, bisecting a third clone with shocking ease. He was a marvel. The torque and force of limbs harmoniously jabbing with his sword, a single cutting edge cleaved through clones as if they were softened butter. Hinata backed away before Huo's final, circular low sweep-kick along the ground that paralleled the arc of his sword, dispelling all clones in a putter of smoke.

Then he bore down on her with the weapon, dipping low, twisting his joints and limbs for maximum thrust as he swung at her. Hinata frantically used another Rotation to defend herself.

Huo reeled back as the force of her chakra trang'd off of his blade. He sank low again, resting the dao along his arm as he gathered energy and tapped into the Fènghuáng Tao Art, glowing with its aura. Hinata paused only for a moment before recognizing renewed danger, and with a heaving gasp for air she initiated another Rotation just before he exploded forward with speed. Huo circled around her, a blur of luminous green, blue, and orange energy, and then horizontally swung his dao with as much force as he could muster. The blow vibrated the dome of chakra around Hinata before bashing through, terminating the Rotation and hurling the kunoichi far across the span of the arena. A chorus of disbelieving banter reverberated among the audience.

From her place in the dirt, Hinata was gladdened that Huo took a long moment to gloat at his successful breach of her defense. She laid face-down and discreetly pressed a healing hand to the gash on her shoulder, 'Much like how I plan to break his defense, Huo wants to break mine first. If I can get rid of his sword he shouldn't be able to do that again!' Moderately recuperated, Hinata hopped to her feet and spun with Gentle Step, watching with her Byakugan as Huo charged again. A perfectly formed, full-power Air Palm sailed across the clearing and crashed into him. Huo fell back, striking the ground, and she astutely marked the flickering of his Phoenix Art as it was dismissed to not needlessly drain his reserves.

And then Hinata saw it— Huo sank into the ground in the stretch of shadow cast by the pile of overturned stones. He melted into it as if he were sinking into a pool of water, disappearing into the surface completely. He was gone, entirely gone for a whole moment, and her Byakugan was on high alert when Huo reappeared, exiting from a shadow several paces to her left. 'He moves through shadows! So that is how he closes the gap between himself and an opponent!' She forced pin-point, sharp chakra into the tips of her cupped hands, bending chakra that was strong enough to block Huo's sword strikes as he savagely struck at her, as if trying to chop a tree down.

"This trend of Leaf bimboes fighting battles they can't win— it's tacky and demeaning." Huo brought his face close to Hinata's, spittle flying, pressing his dao into the lit, blue chakra wall of her Divine Protection. "While more pathetic than the men, at least the kunoichi have a touch more courage!" He kicked her knee to bend her leg, but Hinata reacted capably and angled her hands to cut with precise chakra, severing the steel of Huo's dao. The top portion of the blade whistled through air and dropped to the ground, leaving him with a sword hilt and a few centimeters of
Enraged, he hurled his broken weapon aside and gave chase, closer to the arena's wall, and had his Wushu neutralized by her spinning, complete sphere of *Divine Protection*. Hinata felt reassured that he lacked the strength to break through it with just his bare hands. He would have to expend more energy to injure her. As surely as the sun rose, Huo did tap into his *Phoenix Tao Art* again, bolstering his strength with its aura…and with great momentum and force he tripped over Hinata as she purposefully fell flat to the ground and scissor-kicked Huo's legs to knock him akimbo.

He lined up ideally with the wall, stutter-stepping to catch himself, and while his back was turned Hinata smashed him with a second formidable vacuum wave as she rose up. Huo was crushed into the stone and plaster face-first, his aura flickering, and Hinata charged at him with a hot-blooded shout.

By then his Tao chakra barrier had been spent, and it only lingered to defend his vulnerable chakra points for a heartbeat before vanishing. Hinata felt the seizing and withering of tenketsu under her fingertips. Then, before she could close 64 points as she had envisioned, Huo had slipped away into an underfoot shadow to escape. Her pointed fingers gouged fearsome holes in the wall when she missed. Hinata spun around and searched with her Kekkei Genkai, desperate to locate him. The balance between Huo's offense and defense seemed to swing too far in the favor of one or the other. As he was more concerned with dealing damage, his own defenses had diminished. *He will keep trying to get away from me if he is leaving his body vulnerable…'*

Hinata pursued the retreating Iwa nin across the arena, not minding Shikamaru as he anxiously hovered off to the side. She fired another *Air Palm* at Huo, watching as he ducked beneath it into a shadow, and exited beside her—his ring of Tao Arts illuminated for a major technique. Crazy-eyed and teeth bared, Huo wrapped a hand around her wrist and held his free hand flat in a symbol of *Confrontation*.

She distinctly felt a shift, a shudder of unusual energy, but could not describe the disparity of Yin particles being ejected away from Huo, leaving only Yin energy behind. And the pull of it expanded their shadows on the ground at their feet, stretching wide, rising up with three-dimensionality, and enveloped them in a large dome of pitch black.

The Shadow Trap terrified Shikamaru as it had swallowed both competitors and hidden them from sight, and there was only a dark dome for spectators to contemplate.

Shikamaru ran up to the strange spectacle of a technique and rested his hand on it, feeling the unbalanced composition, surprised that something overloaded with *Yin Energy* took a physical form. "This can't…how…? I thought Yang is what builds physical properties…" He pounded on it with a fist. Sturdy. Oh that was *not* good. He could not see through it and was unable to budge it. Shikamaru backed up and held a hand sign for his *Shadow Bind*, prodding at the dome with his own Yin manipulation. *Is this even chakra doing this?* 'It didn't feel like it.

Beads of sweat streaked down the sides of his face as he gradually realized that he was *feeding* the dome with his tendril of shadow. Quickly, Shikamaru withdrew his technique and pulled the two-way radio from his pocket.

"Hokage-sama, this is officially a timeout, but I reserve the right to call this whole thing off. This goddamn dome is impenetrable. Over." He waited worriedly as the radio crackled before Tsunade's response.

"I'll be right down." She assured him.
He also received communications from Gaara, Yugao, and an auxiliary radio that Kakima was likely sharing with Kakashi's group. Frustrated, Shikamaru switched the channel to call the decision panel, expecting Elder Tatesono to answer him when he asked for assistance. Shimura Danzo's voice fizzled back to him instead.

"Nara-san, what is the nature of the issue? That jutsu is opaque and will obstruct your judgements."

"No kidding." Shikamaru bit his tongue so he wouldn't get too sassy at the unconcerned Foundation director, "Do you have anyone who is familiar with Yin or Yang Release? That's the nature of the problem. I need someone to look at it. Over."

Danzo also volunteered to inspect it.

Within minutes, most radio holders had gathered in the arena to evaluate the anomaly and tried to dispel it. What a rare intermission it was to have a congregation of high-ranking ninja examining an impervious Shadow Dome. Shikamaru was disconcerted to see Tsunade and Gaara's combined efforts to crush or puncture the dome yielded no change. For good measure, Tsunade punched it a second time. She stepped away and stopped beside Gaara, sighing and rubbing her fist.

"This defies what typifies Yin Release jutsu: they are intangible, visionary, complex techniques…not a physical manifestation…" Tsunade cocked her hip and folded her arms, staring straight ahead at the dome, "And whatever Huo is doing in there…he doesn't want Hinata to have any help whatsoever."

"He was tiring." Gaara pointed out, "He opened his defense carelessly more than once."

"Maybe so, but now he has this." Tsunade pointed her thumb at the black vault.

Tsunade turned to Danzo, who was a few meters away from Kakashi and his posse of panicked Jounin. The old man pressed the pad of his thumb to the dome, frowning and feeling around. He whacked at it with his cane and a spiral of Wind Nature chakra gusted off of the obstacle ineffectively. Danzo muttered to himself before crossing over to the Hokage.

"I applied a Yin-Counter-Seal." He informed her, "On the opposite side, Kakima-san and Kakashi-san also applied their own. All three were utterly inadequate and it seems…this dome is not responding to Sealing Counters." He rubbed his chin in bafflement, "Has there ever been a technique that did not recalibrate its light and dark properties immediately after such an intervention?"

"I am not the one to ask." Tsunade was tense, pushing past the gathering that was starting to flock to her, distressed and helpless. She lightly patted Kakashi's arm as he struggled to tamper with the dome. "Kakashi."

"Hokage-sama."

"Counter Sealing seems to be…" She growled furiously and trailed off, "It is never not effective. What is the meaning of this?"

"It's a Tao Art." Kakashi explained quietly, "This isn't something we can deconstruct with Ninjutsu."

"Then what do you suggest?"

"I have no suggestions. Only another Tao Art could break it down."

"Then where do I find a Tao Art Counter?" The Hokage sniffed.

"You don't." Kakashi's shoulders sagged as he admitted it, "No one in this village alive today can
use them."

"That…is not the answer I was looking for." She walked on, heels crunching on gravel, and motioned for him to follow her. They reunited with the small forum of concerned veterans and on-hand experts.

Many were sparing sympathetic looks to several Hyuga clan members who had descended and were agitatedly striking the dome, peering with their Blood Limits to discover that not even the Byakugan could see past the dense dark. Hyuga Hanabi had also arrived at the scene and was shrilly screaming her sister's name as she lashed out at the dome, over and over until Hyuga Hideyasu picked her up. She protested and thrashed as he escorted her away to reduce the histrionics.

As other Hyuga clansmen dejectedly joined conferencing veterans and responders, Hiashi stood alone, patting his hands along the dome.

"Someone should tell him." Kakashi recommended, looking from Tsunade and Gaara to Kurenai, who was wringing her hands apprehensively, "This match wasn't supposed to take place. He's going to want to blame someone if anything happens."

"She will be fine." Kurenai asserted severely.

"I know we want to believe that—" Kakashi stopped speaking when she bumped shoulders with him, hurrying over to a gaggle of Sarutobi clan ninja. Kakima and Asuma crossed the area towards Hiashi, following behind Sarutobi Netsuke, the de facto leader of their clan and conspicuously clean-shaven veteran. Shikamaru also joined the group who seemed to have some kind of idea of how to respond. Netsuke waved a hand at Konohamaru dismissively as his son showed up for a piece of the action, and Ebisu-sensei graciously led the boy away before he was entangled in the drama.

Netsuke looked from his brother and Kurenai, who were boring holes into his head with their gazes…and then to his mumbling, right-hand-woman wife, Kakima. She was snickering and speaking quietly in patchwork Nihongo-Hanwen to Wong Leung, who Netsuke had delivered out from the audience.

"Can you ask him if he can bring it down?" Netsuke asked her, "It got around the radio-com grapevine that he understands Tao Arts."

"Don't get your hopes up." Kakima sighed and spoke to the old man, "Wong, can you or your grandkid…? "Uh…can you disengage…" She had to improvise words she did not know, This technique? The bubble?

_I doubt it._ He replied honestly, _Let me have a look, Lady Monkey._

Wong Leung tottered up to the black structure, and Hiashi stepped aside to give him space for an examination. He analyzed it with finger pokes and a good sniff of the nose. The old man clapped his hands, bent at the knees, and then palm-slapped the dome with a cry. He grumbled to himself when nothing happened. Kakima stopped beside him, expecting an update.

_I never was any good at these spells._ Wong Leung confessed, _That is why I was not taken as a disciple of a Tao Master when I was young…though I had desperately wanted to be trained. I lack enough cultivation qi..._

_So you can't break it?_ Kakima confirmed.

_I am sorry, Lady Monkey. I am just…not strong enough to trifle with so much Dark Qi._ Wong watched forlornly as she crossed back to Netsuke to confirm their fears. He then looked to Hiashi,
who had his curled fist and forehead pressed to the dome, his eyes closed, as if his thoughts alone could bring it down.

"Your daughter." Wong Leung pointed out the obvious in Nihongo, getting Hiashi's attention, "Can hear."

"What?" Hiashi raised his eyebrows at him, "Yes, of course she can. I regret that we are meeting under these dreadful circumstances, good elder. I know that you have done a great deal for my nephew, Neji."

Wong nodded, "Neji…done much for me…and grandson too."

Hiashi chuckled faintly, surprised that even in this, one of the lowest moments of his life, there was a touch of grace in it.

"Your daughter…can't see. Can't see out." Wong Leung went on to explain his point as best he could, "But…she will hear." He tapped his finger against the dome, "She needs to hear…not alone."

"Ah." Hiashi understood Wong's meaning, "Thank you."

Wong then had an epiphany, deciding that he should pass the suggestion along to Kakima, who could confirm to other good souls in the Leaf Village to shout and communicate their feelings to the trapped she-ninja. He hurried back to his Lady Monkey friend.

From her position, Tsunade wondered if maybe the Head of the Hyuga clan was losing his mind when he started shouting and telling his daughter to blow a hole through Huo's chest.

As soon as Hinata had been absorbed into the dark Tao Art, things calmed.

Huo walked away from her casually and shook out his arms and legs, rolling his neck to relax. She stared in shock, wondering if she was imagining the sudden ceasefire. He stood below the center of the dark canopy, the dimness obscuring his facial features. Huo adjusted his rumpled clothes and then tended to his messy braid. Guardedly, Hinata stood near the wall of the dome, discouraged that she could not see beyond it with her Byakugan.

"Don't bother." Huo told her, presuming that she was searching for an exit.

"W-What is this?" She demanded.

"Welcome to Limbo. It is the small rift in our reality that allows Tao-Gifted or Sighted to Shadow Step. Think of it as the underbelly of our dimension. All of the things you can't touch…the intangible. The vast." He explained in boredom, "In here, I do not need to use Shadow Step against you. I have the most strength here, in shadow. Anything you do will be useless."

"I can do more than you realize." Hinata warned him in a chirp.

"Perhaps." Huo settled down in seated squat. He folded his hands and shut his eyes. Hinata realized he was trying to replenish his strength. He was resting.

She very clearly heard the hollering of Hanabi, who may have been just beyond the wall of the dome. Hinata swallowed, considering that she could try to delay any further fighting and wait for outside assistance. Belatedly, she remembered that there may not be a way for her comrades to intervene against a Tao Art. She narrowed her eyes and examined Huo.
"What is it that you want?" Hinata asked.

He opened a monolid eye and replied, "To kill you."

"Why?"

"Because she cares for you. When all of you are gone, she will give in more easily." He shut his eyes and smiled to himself. "You know nothing about hunting games, you silly pearl. Sheltered jewels like you have no need to kill and prevail over your competitors."

"I have killed before." It was a feeble threat, even with her hands poised, drawing nearer to him to spring for an attack, "It was not a game. I didn't enjoy it. It was terrible and frightening."

"Everyone enjoys the act...or if not the act, the result. If it isn't the euphoria or excitement that satisfies you...then the relief of safety will." Huo dismissed her lily-livered objection, "Apparently it isn't your sport. Soon, that isn't going to matter."

There was a rustle of her footsteps over the ground, and the cry of Hiashi's voice, urging her to strike. Hinata pounced in the gloom, prepared to jab Huo's heart with merciless Jyukken...and he reached up a hand to halt her arm. She caught his free hand before he could retaliate and stand. And then...he felt a bit foolish for underestimating her bloodthirst or desperation, as he felt the Shadow Clone she had snuck behind him cutting into his neck with a glowing, pin-point needle of chakra. Huo howled angrily and twisted himself, snapping out his leg, knocking the clone over, and Hinata was tossed and she rolled in the dirt, in the dark. Huo jumped up and swiped the blood away from his throat.

He formed hand seals, and Hinata coordinated a timely Air Palm with her Shadow Clone, hoping to catch him from two angles. Huo leapt and corkscrewed in the air to avoid the vacuum waves, snarling, and completed preparations for his superlative Ninjutsu, "Inton: Limbo Fire!" He took a deep breath and exhaled thin line of flame that was attracted to the black awning above them, igniting the interior of the dome with wisped, pale green fire. The savage heat prickled her skin and forced her closer to the center of the space. Hinata's Shadow Clone had a brief struggle against Huo, putting up with his Wushu until he pulled down an orb of fire at will from the burning shade above them.

He burned the clone's face until it was destroyed, departing in smoke. Hinata's only sensible option was to work in the safe space she had, keeping the crazed Iwa nin at a distance with ranged vacuum waves. Delighted, Huo leapt with a spinning kick to launch spheres of jade flame at her. Hinata reacted automatically, using a Rotation to protect herself...and quickly realized it could not keep harm at bay. She felt her hair, skin, and clothes burning as if she were standing prone. Panic had a brief war with sensibility inside her mind, fearing a painful death...and up from the deep stillness of her consciousness she finally felt a droplet. A tear rolling down her cheek. The thought relieved her.

Hinata plunged her Water Nature into her Rotation, effectively absorbing the volatile Fire Nature. Not to be cowed, Huo roared and spent tremendous chakra trying to incinerate her, getting in close to direct the flames with Wushu.

She could hear encouragements from her father outside; hear him citing their lessons— how Hanabi and he were both Water Natures just as she was. A proud family inheritance. Use it. Fight. 'Use what he taught me!' She clashed with all of her strength, battering Huo with slaps that crashed over him, wet and thundering like a waterfall. Though his jutsu leached off of the energy of his Tao Art, is was tapering off in the presence of her prevailing Nature. Her clothes were burning. Her skin was raw and pink from burns. It was a duel in an oven...and no longer dark. Before exhaustion crept up inescapably on her, Hinata poured the last of her concentration into the Misago Byakugan, hoping to
see the way out.

The swirling pattern of the dome…the interchange of energy was questionable and unstable. She could see it plainly then—the absence of Yang when all chakra preferred a balance of light and dark…'*His Tao Art will expire!'* A final push could do it, could destabilize the terrible, hellish prison tied to his stamina. With a sound that travelled up from her toes, screeching ferociously, Hinata channeled more than a drop; she channeled a river that she pictured in her mind and felt in her veins, funneling it through her chakra and into a single vacuum wave that Huo could not hide or duck away from.

He blinked as his fire was devoured, almost as if a lion's head crested an ocean wave…and he was swept away, half-aware of the crumbling of the dark dome. Huo was flung out of it by the force of Hinata's last ditch technique. Out in the day-lit world again, it appeared as if the ocean had surged up in the stadium. Huo scrambled to safety and gulped down air.

Hiashi heard a piercing, warlike shriek. A tingle of intuition warned him to retreat, and he did so as he motioned for other baffled Leaf ninja to do the same. Some did not react as quickly as they could have—a calamitous, crashing flood broke out of the dome as it cascaded into nothingness, expired, and the waves swept the Hokage, Kazekage, and several others away, flattening them against the stadium's walls in a violent rush of water.

The Sarutobi bunch and their elderly friend were safe in the stands, watching from a distance. Kakashi and other Jounin checked in with Tsunade as the water technique abated at the arena's edge, "Are you alright, Hokage-sama?"

She batted them away, aggravated, "Do I not look alright?" She brushed a sopping wet strand of hair from her face and tried to neaten herself, her vanity Genjutsu still in effect, "That was unexpected and rude."

"Thank goodness it happened!" Kurenai was thrilled.

Shikamaru was forced away from Hinata and Huo's game of tag as another wave artificially created a churning sea in the arena. He flagged the stragglers down and shouted for them to move up to the observation deck. All did as he directed, flabbergasted that Hinata had wrestled away control from her opponent. The water receded and spilled into open passageways in the stadium, drying out the arena again.

For a time, Hinata had chased Huo with *Twin Lion Fists*, hoping to use the last ounce of her strength to flatten him into the dirt. There was no telling if cowardice or the hope of outlasting her prompted Huo to flee in and out of shadows with his Shadow Step. He had less gusto for fighting, with his chakra dwindling so. As it stood, Hinata also was scrounging around the dredges of her reserves to attack him.

Huo found a hiding place in a crevasse, although there was no hiding from her Blood Limit. Hinata stood still, oxygenating and shaking, the truth dawning on her. She had no chakra left that she could spend. She was badly burned. Hinata might call it a *glass half full* for her to survive Huo's fiendish technique…and then be too winded to knock him unconscious at the finale.

She stared ahead, her mouth quivering sadly as she observed lovely celestial shapes transcending the threads of the world's reality…transparent pictograms and symbols, distant and near all at once. There would be no use in employing the Misago Byakugan when she could barely stand. She felt that her legs would give out soon.
Maybe she was punch drunk? Hinata was seeing less of the stadium's arena and more of a sprawling green lawn. Also, it felt like she had just taken a big slurp of miso soup. She was rather hungry.

'What am I—?' Her thoughts crashed into a traffic jam of sensory input. Her consciousness was staying put, but it was also trying to jump ship again.

And Naruto was not so surprised this time.

Whoa! Hinata? He laughed out loud, elated by her arrival. She felt him setting aside his lunch bowl. Naruto was seated on the porch of a house. Back again already! How'd it go? What're ya up to-?

NARUTO.

He nearly fell backwards she thought at him so hard.

Please! I need you here! I need to borrow some chakra... or at least one very good punch. She requested, May I—?

Not that her asking permission to borrow his consciousness and chakra reserves mattered. Instantly, the young man found he was no longer seated outside of Fukasaku and Shima's house enjoying a lunch break. She had commandeered his intangible faculties, placing Naruto smack in the middle of a bedraggled-looking Konoha Sports Stadium.

Holy shit! I was going to tell you to take what you need... but uh... I guess I'm here now. Naruto found it quite convenient that he communicated directly to her head, no speech required. The body he was in—her body, he noted—was about to topple over and take a long nap. But a second wind had come to Hinata as the unfathomable reservoir of his chakra bolstered her, letting her perk up and stand straighter. Ow! What hurts so much?

"I was burned." She muttered to herself, rubbing her arms down with a healing light, "This will help me feel a little better... thank you!"

Sure, no problem. Wait. Burned? What's going on?

"Look there." Hinata waited for Naruto to realize he too was seeing through her Byakugan, spying the gutless Iwa nin hiding in a ditch, trying to gather some energy.

Huh. Is he like missing some hair or something?

"Naruto... that is my Final Match opponent, Huo. He's hurt so many people today; threatened to kill us... mocked and tormented us..." She explained on the way, navigating towards Huo's shelter, "He can move through shadows with Shadow Step! He will be difficult to catch."

That so...? No. He won't be difficult to catch. Naruto corrected her, I can catch anything now.

"Naruto—"

Yeesh, he looks exhausted. You and I aren't! It might take me a second to get used to... seeing everything with the Byakugan. And understand whatever jutsu that jerk uses—

"Wushu! Tao Arts-!"

Yup. Got it. He had no idea what those terms meant, Gonna have to see for myself... Let's smoke him out of his fox hole!
Wide-eyed, Hinata drew her lips into a thin line as she allowed Naruto to take over for a moment, forming the hand seal for a Shadow Clone with her hands. A bevy of smoke clouds formed and dispersed, stuffing the arena full of Hinata-doppelgangers.

From his place on the lookout, Shikamaru swore loudly at the miracle he was witnessing. He would estimate that Hinata was about to collapse from chakra exhaustion…and then she pulled out a Mass Shadow Clone Jutsu from her hat of tricks. Now he'd seen it all.

A lone Shadow Clone dove down into the ditch like a paratrooper, confronting Huo. Meanwhile, Naruto was steering Hinata and accidentally thwarting her brain-mandated motor functions. She was chastising him gently for the hassle. Mostly, he was enamored of the dozens of beautiful, albeit singed clones of his girlfriend standing by in the stadium.

…Hinata.

She felt her mouth hanging open— his doing. She clapped her hands over her face and tried to get the grip that Naruto just couldn't seem to get.

Hinata! You grew your hair out! It's way longer than I thought!- Whoa. What's this-? What are you wearing? He lifted her arms, turning her head to gander at the lavender ensemble, I could just…

"Naruto, please! I need your help with finishing this match!" She squealed bashfully. She was flattered that he was reeling over her appearance.

I could just drop dead you are so gorgeous. How about—?

Her brain shoved him away from the controls, leaping as Huo burst from his hiding place, scattering stones and earth, and lunged through the dense throng of clones. The look on the Iwa nin's face was skeptical. This massive crowd of kunoichi was certainly fake. It was only after he had Wushu punched, locked, and smashed a dozen Shadow Clones before Huo realized he was not trapped in a Genjutsu. Every single last bunshin was real, and they were attacking more carefully, calculating his reactions and tailoring their combinations to him.

He ducked under two Air Palms before a third struck him, hurling him sideways, and Huo bellowed in frustration. He thrashed a hand at Hinata while kicking a clone in the mouth, "How are you doing this, wench? You depleted everything you had to escape me!"

"Obviously not, baldbrow!" Hinata retorted and then blanched at her words. Naruto was talking. She wrestled that feature back for a moment.

Ah, well, that made Huo even angrier. He slipped from place to place with Shadow Step, methodically avoiding Shadow Clones and picking them off individually as he flitted to safety.

He's a slippery sucker, isn't he? Naruto was thrilled, sky-high, brimming with her adrenaline. I'm gonna try something that's more my style. Whatever you're doing—that attacking with Air-Hands-thingy— try getting a clone or two do that and move him closer to us!

"What are we-?" She decided not to question it. Hinata motioned for nearby Shadow Clones to approach in a pincer movement where Huo was exiting from a shadow on the arena floor.

She charged with another pack of clones on her left and right, watching in amusement as it panned out like clockwork. Huo avoided the Air Palms and Shadow Stepped toward the offending clones, picking the both of them off.

He never, ever expected the head-butt.
Huo's eyes crossed, air crushed out of him as he was flung back into the fist of another kunoichi clone…and the clone punched him like a truck, upward, and its comrade clones kicked the grandstander simultaneously into the air. Huo's head was terribly rattled as he soared through open air, hearing an unusual cry with each hit, "Hy-uu-ga-!" Then, a clone's somersaulting heel drop came from above, "Hinata Barrage!"

Huo cracked a front tooth when he hit the ground mouth-first. Distressed and bloodied, Huo sunk down into the safety of a shadow to steal away.

"That worked!" Hinata was riveted, "We can coordinate something like that again!"

"Heck yeah, he ain't so tough! Doesn't look like anyone is on his side today!

"No one was." Hinata confirmed, "I believed I wasn't fighting alone today. I believed it!"

"You better believe it girl! Whoa— what's he doing now?" Naruto inquired as Huo's Phoenix Tao Art aura flared to life on the far side of the arena, He's all glowy.

"Naruto, that's the Tao Art that empowers him! He won't be able to hold it for very long…” She passed along the facts, "His Wushu, um, Taijutsu is much stronger when he uses that technique."

For emphasis, Huo was laying waste to Hinata's army of Shadow Clones. Naruto frowned in disapproval with Hinata's face.

A team of Shadow Clones wizened up and spread out, hurling themselves into Rotations to preserve themselves. This instance, however, clued Huo into who the originator was. Closing the gap between them, he plowed into Hinata with a Phoenix Aura wing, flinging her across the arena with a guttural snarl.

On the cross-stadium flight, Naruto reached out with one of Hinata's hands and planted a Jutsu Formula, brushing it from her finger and onto the dirt floor. They tucked and rolled to come to a safe stop.

"What was that, Naruto? On my hand?"

"My formula. We might need it, if he's going to be all tough-nut and crazy at us. He brushed Hinata's clothes of dirt and stammered when he accidentally touched her chest. That faux pas was overlooked when Huo came charging again, weaving away from the last infantry of seven Shadow Clones.

"What does the formula do?" Hinata asked, breathing heavily, joining her clones in distracting Huo, hoping to open his now very-strict defense.

"We can jump to it with Flying Thunder God. That'll get him. We'll plant a big one right on his ugly mug!"

Covertly, while being terrorized by Huo's fire-breathing and rampant Wushu, Hinata let Naruto apply his small formula seals throughout the arena. Her head was nearly kicked off her shoulders by a flying Phoenix Kick, but Naruto retreated to let Hinata's instincts take over, and she defended against the attack with a Divine Protection wall. Two Shadow Clones dashed to her aid and blasted Huo away with vacuum waves, skid marks scoring the diameter of the stadium as he ingrained his feet.

"Shoot that's cool! You've worked on some rad jutsu, Hinata!"

Her clones were throttled, finally outdone by Huo's aura and quick Shadow Step. Naruto borrowed
control again, apologizing, and asked Hinata to take a few deep breaths and act as a sentinel while he sensed around her chakra paths and got a feel for shape manipulation.

_We're both right-handed, yeah? Well it doesn't matter; I'll get this going…_ Naruto was responsible for Hinata sticking her tongue out of her mouth in concentration, and also spinning the start of the Rasengan in the palm of her hand. She kept track of Huo with her Byakugan, watching him stalk and dash through shadows like a beast, making his approach toward her again—a single target.

_'Naruto, how can I use the Rasengan without missing him? He might-!’"

_Hey beautiful, we're not letting him come to us, we're gonna jump to him! See him hopping? Always through shadows right? If we stand over here in this sunny patch…he's gonna pop out of that big 'ol shadow from that rock pile in front of us. Predictable schmuck._

_'We put a seal there?'

_Yeah, I feel it. I mean, we rolled around and marked a lot of spots, but that's one of them. We can always try another position if this one doesn't work out. He weighed her hand down with a condensed, metric ton of chakra, But if that guy can keep walking after this…well damn. Even Ero-sensei needs a while to get over a hit from Big Ball Rasengan. That old fart._

In a blink, Huo disappeared. Hinata felt her heart fluttering in her ribcage, frightful.

_Don't worry! Pound that asshole's freaking face in with this! You do the honors. I'll just flash for ya!"

"Naruto…” Her voice was warbling.

_You already won, look at that chump! He doesn't want to accept it. He's too proud to give up, so he'd prefer to learn the hard way. Hey! There he goes…_)

Huo indeed flung himself out of the quarry's shadow, airborne in a leap, aglow with his Tao Art. Guided by an intuitive motion, Naruto indicated she should turn, and Hinata spun and built momentum as if she were attacking someone behind her. Instantly, she was repositioned, following through with the motion. Courtesy of Naruto's remarkable flash of speed, Hinata realized she was abruptly teleported behind Huo. And to vent some pent up aggression, Hinata rightly let out a howl as she slammed the swirling ball of energy into the brute, "Rasengan!"

_'Oh…’ It did far more damage than she expected it to.

Huo's inertia was an enigma of physics, velocity changing hazardously, crushing him down into the earthen floor in a crater that most meteorites could not boast after striking the planet. His _Phoenix Tao Art_ flickered out like the final wheeze of a basement lightbulb. Debris scattered everywhere in a dusty plume, and Hinata shut her eyes and mouth to avoid eating dirt, still able to track Huo with the Byakugan. By the look of it, he had several broken bones…and a few of his fingers were not at their correct angles. In that moment, he had not been attempting to defend himself at all. Now, Huo was clinging to consciousness by a thin thread, groaning in pain.

Still skipping with momentum, Hinata back-flipped to correct herself and stuck the landing. In that instant of peace, Naruto was tickled by errant hair displaced on her nose, and he blew it aside playfully.

_Wow, I cannot wait to run my hands through this hair! Oh. Duh. He carded her fingers through it._

_'Naruto!’ Hinata could hear his internal chortling. She looked back at Huo, shocked that he had some semblance of willpower to sneak off through a shadow again, _'He's trying to get away!’_
Hinata bounded after Huo, ignoring the deafening ovation in the stadium, and with a Gentle Step flourish she whirled, knocking Huo's injured leg with her foot. He yelped and buckled, in too sunny a spot to flee, and Hinata bore down on him with a 64-point strike. Naruto noted the tiny, pinhead-sized tenketsu along Huo's chakra pathways, the internal injuries that the Rasengan had inflicted on Huo, and the pounding, terrified heartbeat in Huo's chest as his Wushu hand locks were molasses-slow compared to Hinata's tried and true *Hyuga conclusion*.

His front row seat of the motions, the breathing, the strikes, the footwork, the light and lithe body that bombarded the cowering Iwa nin, knocking him back and back again until he was spread-eagle on the ground…Naruto was educated by the experience. Was she ever amazing, 'I am so happy I got to be here with you...I've missed you so much! We kicked ass! Though you did most of the legwork before I got here...' His girlfriend. His darling…

*Hinata*— Naruto startled, his vision compromised as he began to see a stretch of green lawn ahead of him once more, surrounded by sights and scents of the Toad Valley. He called out to her with his mind as the connection wore out, trying to hold on to that fiber from her Kekkei Genkai. But the technique was spent, and her concentration had wavered, and so it dropped Naruto off to leave him safely on the lush mountain in his own body.

Hinata stood shivering and did not lower her arm as she stared down at Huo. He was crumpled up, unconscious.

When she felt a hand touch her shoulder, Hinata spooked with a squeak. Shikamaru gave her a dubious look and asked if she was all in one piece, definitely alive, and what in the blazes had he just seen?

She stuttered in an attempt to explain, but trailed off tiredly. Shikamaru kneeled down beside Huo to determine the extent of his ass-beating. With his shirt mic off, he lifted his radio to give a cheerful report to several anxious parties.

Every single ache and sting came flooding back, making Hinata wince and shrug her shoulders, bracing her legs in the hope she would not tip over. Curiously, most of her burns had healed, but a few other nicks and sprains remained. She shut her eyes and tried to breathe, noting Naruto's absence. *Naruto-kun...I'm sorry that I couldn't keep you here longer. If only for a few more moments of talking...that would've been nice.* She sighed heavily, *I always feel as if you are there for me in every way...in everything I do! And you were! You helped me achieve something important for our village and our friends!*

Hinata batted her lips, thirsty, and then gave Shikamaru a strange look as he ceremoniously took her hand and raised her arm high. She balked at him as he made a new announcement, "Per the review of the Leaf Village's decision panel and my calling, the winner of the Final Round Match and champion of the annual Chunin Selection Exam Tournament is Hyuga Hinata!"

She was grateful that Shikamaru braced her back when she nearly stumbled, jarred by the cheering and fanfare of the stadium's spectators. She shyly peeked around the circumference of the arena, unaccustomed to the public eye and pure mayhem of tournament attendees fussing over or lauding the last match of the Exam. She felt a fidget coming on. Not long after Shikamaru's calling, medic-nin assembled under the watch of the Security force to extricate Huo from the arena. At about the same time, Hinata turned about and was frontally mashed into Sakura, smothered by the hugs of friends as Shino, Lee, Ino, Chouji, and Kiba arrived to blare congratulations.

"You fibber!" Sakura was holding her head, teary-eyed and grinning, "You said you weren't going
to fight! Don't you realize how dangerous that was?"

"Of course!" Hinata could not speak over the din of her friends, Shikamaru included.

"What was that? At the end! Holy—!"

"Truly an incredible match, Hinata-sama!"

"You should have seen how distraught the Jounin were when that Shadow Dome went up!"

"—that coward…"

"How the heck did you learn how to do that?"

"Angel-face exterior, badass interior." That one was Ino.

"N-No, I just did what any of us would have tried to do!" Hinata tried to downplay it.

The huddle loosened up and gave the champion some space, quieting down when the Village Leaders came forward to acknowledge Hinata. Tsunade looked as if she were still drying off after being splashed. She rested her hands on Hinata, going over a few noticeable injuries with a healing light. "Young lady, your actions during the match were much too reckless for me to label that good judgement. I hope you know that you didn't have to go so far to be recognized." The Hokage admonished her, "While you were trapped, half of your clan was down here and about ready to howl at the sky in a panic."

"I did not mean to worry or upset anyone. I…um, it was that I…" Hinata folded her hands and said, "I knew I could do it."

"Hmm." Tsunade tilted her head towards Gaara, "What do you think, Kazekage-sama?"

"I think you should welcome her into your service as your newest Chunin." Gaara recommended warmly.

Teasingly, Tsunade smiled and determined, "Well, if the Kazekage is convinced…allow me to confer Chunin Rank upon you here, Hinata. In view of all those who watched you today, no one can dispute your aptitude."

"T-Thank you, Tsunade-sama." She peeped.

"Also." The Hokage lowered her voice and leaned in near Hinata's ear, "You're going to need to explain a few things for me tomorrow."

"I understand-!"

Tsunade was patting her shoulder again, barking grievances at the group of Jounin who were crossing over to join the rabble. Hinata gladly accepted a hug from Gaara afterward as he told her, "Some of your talents…seemed very familiar to me."

"On my own I wouldn't be able to use—"

"You don't have to validate what happened. We both know that Naruto did not want to miss out on this Exam." Gaara assured her, "He can't help himself, obviously."

She giggled at the notion and then graciously accepted compliments from Natsuhi the Hoshikage and Tazuna the Bridge Builder. The frenzy of people and felicitations dragged for a while before Hinata
notified Sakura of her intention to slip away for air. Handily, she slinked off and through a concourse passageway before members of the decision panel arrived to offer their stiff sentiments. That segment of interior corridor was not yet bustling, and Hanabi easily found her sister there. She seized Hinata in a running hug.

"Oh! Careful! I'm feeling weak now." Hinata informed her, "Hanabi, I—"

"You scared me." Hanabi squished her sister's cheeks, adding, "You scared Dad! Everyone! And then you were cracking out of the black thing and— Water Release! And those jutsu! How did you use them?"

"I can tell you all about it later. At home…just the two of us, if that's what you would like." Hinata pried Hanabi's hands from her face and squeezed them, "I could hear you calling to me."

"…yeah." Her sister's eyebrows sloped, still a touch unnerved.

"Thank you."

Hanabi sniffed and waved off the sentiment, "Ah, what good did it do anyway? We just made ourselves look like screaming lunatics in public. Our clan Elders are going to be thrilled."

"Aren't they always?" They reveled in their hug for a bit longer before Hinata notified her, "I want to go ahead to tell Neji-niisan! Can you find Father and everyone else who would like to stop by the hospital?"

"Sure. Dad's been looking around for that old Master Neji-niisan trains with. He said he wants to thank him. Pft." Hanabi shrugged, "I'll tell him."

They parted and set out in opposite directions. Hinata scooted off, ahead of the crowds that were beginning to trickle out of the building to exits. She followed the Main Avenue uptown, jogging only part of the way before she slowed to save her strength. Hinata smiled to herself as she trotted through automatic doors, imagining what her big brother and big sister would have to say. Then she was stopped at the front desk by a gruff secretary.

"Chunin Exam?" The clerk drawled.

"Yes. I want to visit a patient." She nodded politely.

"Sorry, but it looks like you need to be admitted. You're pretty banged up."

Hinata's default smile wavered, "I'm only here to visit right now. I would rather rest at home."

The secretary leaned forward to get a whiff of her clothes, "Were you lit on fire or something? Come on now, you'll need medical—" He trailed off, intimidated by the stare of her Byakugan as Hinata leaned over the counter herself, veins bristling at the corners of her eyes.

"I am here for a visit." She repeated.

"R-Right. Which patient?" He squawked.

"Hyuga Neji."

"Ah. Just a second…" The secretary skimmed down the list, "He is on the second floor in room 240. Please note that visiting hours wrap up at 10:00PM—" Hinata walked away before he completed his routine chattering.
She carried on down the hallway, hoping she didn't look too worse for the wear. A few nurses did double-takes at her as she walked by. On the second floor, Hinata stopped in a restroom to examine herself and was taken aback by the smudges on her face, her knotted hair…and the tatters and tears on her outfit, somewhat charred and not at all as presentable as she had looked that morning. Hinata splashed her face at a sink and rubbed the dirt off; a rudimentary fix.

Out in the hallway within the east wing of the hospital, it was tranquil and had fewer roaming nurses. Hinata felt she could get away with racing down the final stretch, counting off room numbers. Then, she excitedly burst into room 240 with an announcement, "I did it!"

Sleepy, surprised yelps sounded as Hinata stood in the doorway and saw that she had loudly awoken Neji, and curled up beside him, Tenten sat up in alarm and blinked her eyes rapidly. They calmed down and regarded Hinata, noting the time on the wall clock.

"Oh! Were you resting? I'm sorry!" Hinata held up her hands apologetically.

"No, it can wait, get over here." Tenten demanded, stretching out her questionable arm to the girl. Hinata walked up to the side of the bed and moved into the hug gladly, "It looks to me like you didn't surrender…and that is just so…"

"I know, Onee-san, it was impulsive to fight Huo."

Neji also sat up. He did it carelessly and banged the top of his head on the extended arm of the vitals monitor beside the bed. He groaned and pressed a hand to the new lump.

"Impulsive is not the term I would use when discussing Huo. We planned all day about how to deal with him!" Tenten reprimanded Hinata before doing a 180, and softly asked, "But you're okay?"

"I'm fine! I won!"

Her bed-tousled elders made sounds of jubilant triumph and worried astonishment. They were a bit grabby too. They sandwiched her in a hug, sighing. Neji muttered a scolding at his cousin, shocked and relieved, "We did most everything we could to make it so you wouldn't have to face him…don't be so rash, in the future."

"I won't, Onii-san." She moved to sit on the edge of the bed.

Tenten lifted a strand of Hinata's hair and passed it under her nostrils, "Whoa. Were you burned? You're definitely going to have to trim these ends…"

"Yes, Huo did his very best to light me on fire while I was cornered by a Tao Art." Hinata nodded as she recalled it, "But it empowered my Water Release."

"Thank goodness." Tenten patted her and grinned, "I guess if you were able to waterlog me, it couldn't be any more difficult to drown his sorry ass."

"It wasn't that hard at all!"

Neji asked at length, "Is that how you defeated him?"

"I…well…not exactly."

They gave her long, wordless, expectant looks.

"Um…" Hinata poked her fingers together shyly, "Recently, I've learned that when I use the Misago
Byakugan…it allows me to overlap my consciousness with someone else's. Sometimes.

"We have heard about that." Neji granted.

"Today I…borrowed someone else's consciousness. And chakra…and jutsu."

"Aaah..." Tenten smiled and waggled her eyebrows at Hinata knowingly, "We girls were talking about that earlier!"

"Well I don't want to discuss it here—at home would be better-!" Hinata chirped.

Neji did not quite get it. Borrowed chakra and jutsu? Whose? How he lamented not being there to watch Hinata's match.

Then, a loud crash outside caught their attention. Hinata lightly hopped up from the bed, wondering what the source of the rabble was coming from the hallway. As she curiously, cautiously poked her face out of room 240, she saw that Sakura, Shino, and the rest of their friends were approaching Neji's room. They looked just as confused by the echoing racket as Hinata did.

"Hey Hinata, do you hear that?" Sakura walked up to her, frowning in thought, "Hospitals don't allow excessive noise. A floor manager will come up here and rip them a new one…"

"I don't know. I just heard it now." Hinata toddled a bit further down the white tile corridor, and then turned right onto the perpendicular hallway. Tenten had also joined the group to investigate. She nagged at Neji when he tiredly loped after them, recommending he rest before indulging his wish to move around.

Hinata halted and witnessed a disturbing altercation about six rooms ahead of them. She did not have to use her Byakugan to know that one of the intensive care unit rooms down the way was assigned to Tama. That was because Maito Ken had bodily dragged Sato out of the room and tossed him. Repeatedly, Sato had gotten up and tried to return to Tama's side. Hinata covered her mouth anxiously as she watched Tama's father rough up her already injured teammate. Her friends stood rooted in shock beside her.

Ken was seething, speaking in low tones to Sato, "Go back to your room, I said."

"—I feel fine, please just let me stay-!"

Ken's hand fistd in Sato's pale, checkered hospital shirt, "Boy: I don't care if your wounds hurt you or not. I don't care about anything you want right now. You are not welcome to stand with my family as we grieve my daughter's pain, which I hold you accountable for. She was never meant to be a ninja."

"I just wanted her to follow the dreams you wouldn't let her—" Sato's teeth sunk into his lip as Ken cufffed him in the face.

"Do you see her chasing dreams now?" Ken was simmering at the idea, "Do you think you'll see Tama pursue anything now that she'll never walk again? Are you going to enjoy being married to my daughter when she will now require more care and assistance than ever? Pity. Obligation. Those aren't the things that should bind you to her. My dream for my daughter was to see her live well."

Weak and distraught, Sato held onto the man's arm with two hands, sinking to the floor, "I know. I know that's what you wanted."

Ken looked down on him, his thick brows furrowed, "I had my reasons for stopping her. My
daughter and my brother share that foolish ambition…share their adoration for my father. And do you know what became of Maito Dai? Well, do you?"

Sato whimpered in affirmation, but Ken spoke over him with a scornful narrative, "My father wasted his whole life never getting ahead. He embarrassed me and my brother over and over. He was the eternal Genin. Endlessly naïve and optimistic; he poured all of his free time into training with our family's Inner Gates specialty…"

Ken grabbed Sato’s wrists and forced him to let go, "My father wasted time on those things…instead of caring for us and my mother. He clucked his tongue at me when I said I didn't want to be a ninja. While Gai flunked his Academy entrance exams and strained himself to become a shinobi, I educated myself, ran a business, put food on the table, and provided for my family so that a roof stayed over our heads. My father didn't care that we lost our first home— he said that there is a bright side to everything."

Ken roared in Sato's face, "There isn't a bright side to being a ninja. To being gormless and unprepared. To being STUPID. It only guarantees you one thing. Hardship. My father died by overexerting himself with Gates, the same way my brother Gai wants to die—the same way my daughter wants to die!"

Tears sluiced down Sato's cheeks. He stared at Ken's face, listening intently, unaware of the onlookers behind him at the end of the hall.

"How am I supposed to believe you can take care of Tama, if you let her run full speed ahead towards her own demise?" Ken sneered, "In how many ways will you forsake her, now that she is no longer able-bodied? Do you realize how much you owe her?"

"I do. It's all I think about now." Sato confirmed in a gravelly voice, "But I will take care of her no matter what. Anything and everything she needs, I'll provide. I know it's hard for you to do, since you've watched me grow up directionless and ignorant, without much family of my own…but please entrust Tama to me. I want her to live well too."

Sato prostrated himself on the floor, folding and bowing his head in respect, "Ken, please accept my apology for everything. Please try to trust me. From this day forward, know that I dedicate everything I do to giving Tama a happy life."

"If you had told me such a thing before her injury," Ken lowered his voice to admit, "I just might've thought you could do that."

Maito Ken brusquely stepped over Sato and strode down the hallway, past the accumulation of Sato's shinobi peers, and scoffed softly to himself as he proceeded towards the men's restroom.

Shell-shocked, Sato looked at the closed door of room 271, where Tama was unconscious in bed and hooked up to various machines. He imagined that if he went back into the room, Tama's mother Miako and her brother would have no qualms with letting him stay. But Sato was trembling as he slowly heaved himself to his feet, crushed by Ken's edict and ridicule of the ninja-trained portion of his family. Of his concrete, never-ending mistrust of Sato, and that his daughter would forever be saddled with burdens and misfortune.

Moreover, it did not feel good to hear the patter of footfalls come up from behind him, nor did listening to the coos of sympathy from his teammates and friends...who had witnessed most of the quarrel. Sato wiped his eyes on his sleeve, not answering as Hinata and Shino asked him questions and touched him gently. It was hard to breathe through his congested nose, and he was still sore all over from his Exam match. At least his physical troubles did not hurt nearly as much as the emotional
wreckage did. Sato was too ashamed to even look at his friends.

"Sato-kun, do you want to tell us-?" Hinata's hand slipped off of his shoulder as Sato fled.

She fretted and did not follow as Sato ambled dizzily down the hall, having lost track of where his recovery room was. He seemingly did not care anymore. He wandered off to rue the events of the last few days, and how he had caused almost all of those hardships.

Shino nudged Hinata's fidgeting hand, getting her attention.

"I will look after him and tell him about the Tournament." Shino advised her, "There is no doubt that your clan will wish to celebrate your accomplishment. You should recover at home and spend time with our friends."

"But I don't want to exclude Sato-kun." She murmured.

"Give me until this evening. Though he won't be in high-spirits, I will bring him by later." Shino decided he could negotiate such a thing, "No matter how he feels, he won't be able to resist honoring your victory."

After the Final Match of the Tournament and giving a tongue-lashing to the obtuse decision panel of the Exam, Tsunade shepherded Tazuna, Natsuhi, and Gaara along. Tazuna was annoyed that he would have to locate his grandson Inari and his retainer, Menma, who was also MIA. He vaguely remembered, "They said they'd meet with me on the steps outside on the ground level…"

Morino Ibiki caught Tsunade on the first floor, asking her to sign a hastily-whipped-up magistrate affidavit that would be sent to the Tsuchikage, providing details on Sasagainu Huo's arrest, investigation, and soon to be extradition back to Iwagakure. The man stalked off after that, ready to direct Intelligence Officers on how to get Huo to squeal.

"He looks like a barrel of fun, that guy." Tazuna estimated. Tough and scarred ninja were always alright in his book.

"Not the kind of fun you'd want to have," Tsunade warned him, "But if you break any laws in my village today, Tazuna, I can send you down to Ibiki's office so you can get better acquainted."

Tazuna passed on the offer.

On the ground floor, Natsuhi longingly walked past vendors that were still selling food. She had forgotten to eat while watching the matches. Tsunade grinned at her and took the woman's arm, assuring her they were going to the best izakaya in Leaf. She had a perpetual tab open at that establishment. She'd pay for the meals and booze.

As the village leader gaggle passed beneath the grand entrance of the stadium, exiting out onto steps, Gaara noticed Matsuri below on the promenade. He raised a hand to get her attention and then quickly dropped it, his voice catching in his throat. Gaara's companions noticed this and followed his gaze curiously.

"Isn't that your retainer?" Natsuhi asked Tazuna.

"Yep. That's Menma. Didn't do much of his job at all today, considering how he went off on a stroll to find yakitori and never came back!" The old man groused, "So much for paying for protection. I'm garnishing that wage."
"You need a court order before you can garnish someone's wage. Believe me, I've looked into it." Tsunade simpered, "Besides, you've had three Kage beside you all day long. You were never at any point unsafe."

"Righto, I kind of did have the safest seat in the house." Tazuna supposed, "Guess I just miss having my kids around. Menma and Inari go everywhere with me these days."

Speaking of the devil, Inari bounded up the steps toward his grandfather, raising his hands in a warding gesture. It stopped the leaders in their tracks. Visitors pouring out of the stadium parted in a crowd to move around the group.

"Grandpa! Uh, just wait here for a second…before we get Menma." Inari was trying to run defense. "Why?"

"Uh—"

"Kid, I'm hungry, and the generous, buxom Hokage offered to buy us a meal and liquor. I want to get a move on." The grandfather sniped.

While the two prattled on, Gaara tried not to notice his student making conversation with her Tide Village crush. It was by far more amicable than past encounters, and, in Gaara's opinion, Menma was unschooled in terms of personal space boundaries. He needed to put at least another ten centimeters between himself and Matsuri.

"Oh so that's what it is-!" Tazuna lifted his hand, gesturing at the sight of Menma bending and Matsuri rising on tip-toe to meet in a kiss, "My guard has been out fraternizing with competitors." He turned to Gaara, "Ain't that kid of yours too young to date?"

"Yes." He confirmed.

"It's quite cute, actually." Natsuhi offered her two-cents, crossing her arms behind her back girlishly. "Eh." Tsunade shrugged.

"That's not a date. Or whatever. That's just how people greet each other these days." Inari tried to write it off.

"You sure as hell don't see me greeting anyone like that." Tsunade disagreed.

"Er…the Tide Village is just trying to strengthen inter-village bonds with the Sand Village." Inari suggested feebly.

"Yeah, we've been making decent progress with that." Tazuna noted, "So, Gaara, do ya want a Tide Village ambassador to report to your office monthly?"

"No."

"Too bad. You just got a new ambassador." Tazuna declared, gesturing again, "I'll send Menma to you with my invoices, project reports, matters requiring attention, and dirty gossip on the first of each month."

"No, you will not." Gaara had to unclench his teeth to speak, "Send a messenger hawk— seagull." He amended, "Send whatever. But don't send him."

"Aw, come on." Inari protested.
"Menma can come to the Star Village, when you're ready to discuss trade agreements in the future, Tazuna-san." Natsuhi offered sweetly, "I'm looking forward to that business!"

"Yeah, pretty lady, and we look forward to those deals too. I've got a project team interested in developing aviation vehicles."

"Can we not talk business until after we are seated at the pub?" Tsunade suggested, carrying on down the stairs. The group followed after her.

Gaara nearly blew a gasket when Matsuri and Menma united with the group on the promenade, and Menma bowed respectfully to him as if he didn't just see the former ragamuffin plant one on his student's lips. Oh. And even better! Now Matsuri was spouting nonsense about how much she looked forward to visiting the Tide Village again.

On the way to the izakaya, Gaara thought he had a good counterpoint in that the Sand Village Training program was in its final stages. Once all of the administrative clutter was settled, mission routines established, and the local lords and daimyo were presented with the option to hire Tide ninja, Sand would withdraw completely from the village.

"But Temari-sama told me that she bought a bungalow down there." Matsuri notified him, "She said I could stay in it with her on our time off and visit the beach."

Gaara's eyes nearly rolled back into his head.

Tazuna scratched his mustache, "Oh, you didn't hear about that? She got a good price. I talked to the seller for her."

"That would be something I'd like to buy, someday." Natsuhi sighed.

"That makes two of us." Tsunade echoed.

"No." Gaara countered again, back at Matsuri, "You'll be too busy to go to the Tide Village now that you're a Chunin—"

"I'm a Chunin?" Matsuri screamed.

Menma winced. She had gotten him directly in the ear drums.

"Yes." Gaara grumbled, "And I will be assigning you many missions. You will be very…very busy."

"Oh sensei, thank you!" She squeezed his arm happily, walking alongside him, "I promise I'll do my best."

"I know you will."

Tsunade blew a raspberry as she watched the giddiness. Hopefully Sakura would not hang on like that when she got the news.

"Congrats, Matsuri!" Inari laughed and high-fived her.

Natsuhi was giggling.

Once they arrived at the izakaya, Tsunade was given her preferred table and their orders were quickly taken. Because Tsunade was an altruistic soul, she ordered Gaara a pour from a rare bottle of Chichibu whisky.
"Just so you know," She muttered to him, "That glass costs one thousand Ryo per. You're welcome."

He dropped his head back and sighed heavily. He didn't even drink.

Then, Menma did something unexpected and addressed the Kazekage, "Gaara-sama."

Surprised, Gaara sat properly again and looked at the Tide nin seated across from him. Matsuri was sitting stock-still with her hands pressed into her lap.

"I think that maybe you got the wrong impression about me." Menma was direct, "When we met, it was during a stressful time, and reparations to the village required a lot of funding, time, and energy from you. Also, I had just freed myself of the clan that had abused me and stopped them from taking those children." His eyes flickered over to the other adults, who were listening in, "And the time after that, you saw that Matsuri was upset with me."

Matsuri shook her head timidly, "Menma, you don't need to bring that up—"

"Someone I worked with had a bad habit about lying to store management and customers, and made up something about me." Menma explained, "But Matsuri believed it was true, when she was told. It caused a misunderstanding."

Gaara only blinked once while listening to him.

"I hope that you don't think that I…would ever lead Matsuri on…or that I would take advantage of my new home or any of the friends that I've made. They are the most precious things that I have." Menma prodded at the condensation on the glass of water in front of him, "For most of my life, I've been alone. The times during which I was not alone, I was often in bad company. This is the first time in my life I've ever been allowed to care about something…and been strong enough to fight for it."

A waitress came by and set down beverages on the table. Gaara eyed the whisky in front of him before resting his gaze on Menma again.

"So you care about Matsuri?" He asked rigidly, "And you would be willing to fight for her sake?"

Tsunade discreetly mouthed at Gaara to remain calm.

"Yes, I do and I always would." Menma said with a straight face.

Natsuhi, Tazuna, and Inari formed a chorus of swooning and teasing banter. Matsuri tucked her head down a little, hoping she would magically camouflage herself and go unseen.

"Hm." The corner of Gaara's mouth tugged down. He was considering what Menma said.

"The truth is…I also have you to thank for my new life." Menma added, "If you had not taken on Matsuri as a student…and then assigned her to help train ninja in the Tide Village…I would probably still be a captive of the Shin clan." He turned and smiled at the girl sitting beside him, "Matsuri saved me. She saved many people that day. I've never met anyone like her before."

"He really is a total sap for her." Inari confirmed in a hiss from his end seat. Tazuna shushed him.

Tsunade rested an elbow on the table and held her chin in her palm, watching for Gaara's reaction. She was often curious about how he responded to intricate social stimuli. Though she knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that he was a dependable partner for Sakura, sometimes Tsunade wondered
how Gaara's student and family members fared in his interactions.

Gaara shut his eyes for a moment, breathing deep, and seemed to make up his mind. He lifted the whisky glass and held it out towards Menma, indicating with subtle face signals that Menma do the same. Uncertainly, Menma held up his water glass.

"To Hidden Sand's new ambassador from Shiohakure." Gaara tapped his glass to Menma's in a toast, noticing the boy's eyes light up with delighted surprise, "May our villages forge many bonds and enjoy mutual prosperity."

"Now you're talkin'." Tazuna also tapped his glass to theirs. Natsuhi, Matsuri, and Inari gladly toasted with their beverages.

Tsunade lazily clinked her sake cup in with the group's, "Kanpai, you turkeys."

The afternoon was characterized by brief interactions between Chunin Exam Finalists and their families, who also received well-wishes from their Jounin Sensei.

The Akimichi and Yamanaka clans were inclined to celebrate Chouji and Ino's performances (going on the assumption they'd been promoted) but did not organize anything on account of most everyone planning to party at the Hyuga estate. They advised their children to attend that function because the Hyuga clan rarely permitted outside party goers to their lavish events. Their families would have their own congratulatory festivities in the coming days.

And by sunset, with lanterns hung in the yards of the stately Hyuga house, a mish-mash of Hyuga clansmen and other Leaf inhabitants assembled to pay respect to Hinata and her peers.

Hinata was being harried by a jovial mob, with many Branch members fawning over her. She had overheard a few wary accusations that she had used jutsu suspiciously reminiscent of those the Fourth Hokage had employed during the last war, but no one pushed the matter. Her father shooed those conspiracies away. As it was, the Main House elders were going to be looking for an explanation in the morning about whether or not their eyes had deceived them.

While Lee was not tending to Neji, he took time to walk his grandfather around and introduce him to curious party goers. Wong Leung, though not fluent in Nihongo, was happier than usual being engaged by Leaf Villagers he did not normally get recognition from. He was also quite popular with the Sarutobi attendees, including Konohamaru and his parents, who had taken quite a shine to him. Lee was thrilled. After a while, Hanabi and Konohamaru began badgering each other; their usual pastime.

Shikamaru and his teammates sat beside Neji on the porch to eat and occasionally tease the bandage-swathe prodigy. He took the jests in good humor. Kiba and Sakura had wrestled in between Hinata and her admirers, finally getting the chance to converse with her and maybe get some buzz on where the hell that Rasaengan had come from.

Tsunade and Gaara showed up after a while. Gaara had brought his own guests: his student and some Tide Village dilettantes. Hyuga clansmen were curious about the Hoshikage, and were asking
for a demonstration of Star Village jutsu. Natsuhi assured them she would show off a technique or
two only after a glass of wine and some dessert.

Most Leaf Jounin present were well-behaved, but Asuma and his brother Netsuke had been goaded
by Hyuga Hideyasu into accepting a challenge to a drinking game. Apparently, Hideyasu and a few
Branch members were legendary at "flip cup." Netsuke claimed it was a bold faced lie. Grudgingly,
Kurenai and Kakima were pulled into the drinking game, as it was team-based.

Gai and Kakashi were embroiled in some strange contest of Janken combined with a push-ups race
and downing shots. Fascinated, Tsunade and Gaara sat down to watch. When Sakura passed by, she
shook her head in embarrassment at the sight.

Shino had showed up with Sato as he had promised, though his friend was dressed down in a t-shirt
and joggers. Hinata navigated her way over to her teammates at the edge of the yard and then
hugged Sato, careful not to irritate his injuries. He sighed and squeezed her, muttering an apology,
"I'm sorry I've been so dumb. I didn't want you to see what Tama's dad…had to say…"

"It was an accident. We just wanted to know if you were okay." Hinata leaned back to look at Sato,
"I wish you hadn't fought Neji-niisan."

"Looking back, I wish I hadn't either. I should have just stayed with Tama." Sato agreed.

Concerned, Hinata pressed a finger to the cut on Sato's lip and sealed it shut with the Palm Healing
Jutsu. He laughed softly and thanked her.

"Congratulations, Sunshine. No one deserves to be a star more than you." Sato told her, exchanging
an agreeing glance with Shino, "Naruto would have gone nuts watching your match today."

With a small smile, she cupped her hand and whispered, "He did see it!"

"Yo, what?" Sato leaned in and lowered his voice, "Is he here? Oh crap that's great, we could like
pants Gaara in front of everyone—"

"No, no, I mean that I overlaid his consciousness with mine during my match. I ran out of chakra and
I needed some help." She explained quickly, "And you mustn't do something like that to Gaara-
kun!"

"You're right. It'd be funnier if Gaara helped me pants Naruto." Sato decided.

While Hinata tittered at the idea, Shino advised Sato to stop thinking about removing people's
trousers for comedic effect. They asked if it was alright to help themselves to some of the food and
Hinata tagged along with them, also peckish.

Later, Wong Leung set out for home because he had a long bedtime routine and wanted to read the
newspaper. After seeing him off, Lee and Tenten took their spots beside Neji as Shikamaru, Ino, and
Chouji shifted over, while conversing with Fujita light-heartedly.

"I didn't know the Hyuga clan played drinking games." Tenten remarked to her boyfriend, amused,
"Ino told me that the Yamanaka clan does stuff like that every weekend."

"My clan does not play often." Neji noted, "But they play hard."

"The Sarutobi clan appears to be losing." Lee rested his chin on his fist, watching interestedly.

"Fujita's dad is really good at it." Tenten pointed out, "That must be his fifth or sixth turn and he flips
cups perfectly on the first try."

"He's going to need a new liver." Neji muttered.

Later that evening the Sarutobi clan guests were sent home, plastered, with Konohamaru tugging his elders along in a chain of hand-holding and burping. Several sober Branch members proceeded to clean up tables and leftovers, and Hideyasu's team retreated into the house to retch over toilets in various bathrooms.

While playing Koi-Koi with Hanabi on the porch, Fujita held his hand of Hanafuda cards and bid his father goodnight as Kayato lugged Hideyasu into a sliding door. She nearly dropped him, vacillating between laughing at her loaded husband and griping at him for overdoing it. Eventually, she got him inside and shut the door behind her.

The Leaf Finalists bid their friends goodnight and set out, congratulating Hinata one last time before leaving. Sato travelled to the hospital rather than returning home, intending to wait by Tama's side all night.

Lee and Tenten sent Neji to bed and promised to find him first thing in the morning. No guarantee that Gai-sensei would show up, though. He and Kakashi had wandered off in a drunken embrace, and Tenten did not think it was wise to find out where they'd ended up. They too went home after respectfully bidding the Hokage good evening, even though Tsunade was passed out on the porch of the house, her face pressed into a support pillar. Thankfully, Shizune found her and had assistance transporting the Hokage and Hoshikage to their residences.

The Tide Village group and Matsuri had long since vacated to turn in for the night. Sakura was the last to depart after hugging Hinata goodbye, and she caught up with Gaara at the gate of the compound before falling into step with him.

"Mom and Dad are waiting up for me. I said I would go home after the party and let them praise me and feed me sweets." Sakura folded and rubbed her arms, surprised by the night's chill.

Gaara circled an arm around Sakura to warm her as they hiked down a fence-lined street, "Good. I imagine they were very proud while watching your matches. I will walk you home."

"Thank you." She touched her head to his shoulder happily, "I see that you had lots of fun today."

"Most of it was fun."

"Tsunade-shishou overindulged."

"She overindulged before we went to the party." Gaara sniffed.

"Yeah…and you know…" Sakura pulled him to a stop to sniff her boyfriend's neck, "You smell like you've been drinking too."

"I am sound of mind and respect my limits." Gaara protested, "Your master bought me whisky at our early dinner."

"Oh! It kind of…makes you smell good." Rosy-cheeked, Sakura shook her head and continued ahead, darting under a street lamp.

When she asked him what he was doing later, Gaara matter-of-factly told her that if he had the patience, he would wash his face and shut the lights off in his flat before falling asleep. Even if he looked "with it," he was desperately trying not to curl up on a park bench and pass out like a hobo.
"Should I come over later?" She asked in a lilting voice. They turned onto her street. Gaara gave her a lofty, considerate look.

"No." He smiled slowly at her, "You should stay home and rest."

"Aw, but I'm still pretty energetic—"

"I would be useless to you tonight." He asserted, "But I am here for one more day."

"Ah, and you won't be preoccupied with anything?" Out in front of her house, Sakura climbed the steps as slowly as she could.

"Matsuri will be distracted with friends tomorrow, and the other village leaders will be recuperating. I know that Tsunade will not want to address any of her appointments in the morning, even though she'll have to."

Sakura nodded, "Yeah, she's bound to get a late start. Tomorrow is going to be a by-the-skin-of-her-teeth kind of day for Shishou."

"Then she may not need you for many tasks."

"No. I haven't even been added back onto the hospital's work schedule yet. We Chunin can take it easy until we are officially assigned missions." She smiled at Gaara as he waited on the step below her, "So...I'll come find you tomorrow."

He shut his eyes and relished a soft kiss from her. He listened when Sakura added, "And I'll make up a convincing excuse as to where I'll be tomorrow night for Mom and Dad."

"Please do." Gaara held her face and kissed her again.

They nearly jumped in the air in startlement when Kizashi threw the door open behind Sakura, and he and Mebuki were animatedly cheering. Gaara just barely managed to compose himself and politely turn down their offerings of tea, sake, ice pops or umeboshi and just generally staying up all night singing Sakura's praises.

Back at his flat, Gaara, like most everyone else that night, had a deep and dreamless sleep.

When Naruto had come back to his senses earlier that day, he was surprised to find that he was standing in the middle of Fukasaku and Shima's lawn. His feet were spread and arms were arranged in a Gentle Fist pose that evoked the end of an attack.

Jiraiya had only witnessed part of Naruto's remote-controlled motions, glancing out the window of the toad's home. "Hey! Stretching your legs or something?" He called out to his student, but Naruto did not seem to hear him.

Shima recommended that Jiraiya leave Naruto in peace to finish his lunch, "He and Pa are going to get right back to meditation once he finishes."

"I dunno..." Jiraiya scratched his chin and watched the boy from the window, "He's acting bizarre."

"Jiraiya-boy, you act much stranger on a daily basis."

"Nah, I mean he's jumping around and thrashing. Looks like some kind of fit..." The man pushed up from the tatami mats to exit the house, "Be right back, Ma."
"By the time he tapped Naruto's shoulder, he had snapped out of it. He turned to give Jiraiya a mystified, googly-eyed look, then lowered his arms to stand normally.

"They need to stop feeding us poisonous insects, I'm telling you—" Jiraiya groused, making an assumption, "I don't want you hallucinating the day away, kid."

"Whoa. Ero-sensei, I wasn't hallucinating or anything like that." Naruto waved his hands and crossed back to the porch, "Hinata needed help at the Chunin Exam final! She kind of just…confiscated my brain and chakra for a bit."

"Confiscated." Jiraiya spun around to look at Naruto as he chugged his cooled-off soup, "As in, you were in her body?"

"Yeah!"

"Fighting?"

"Yeah it was crazy! I could feel her wounds and stuff like that." Naruto patted his shoulder, where he remembered a gash Hinata had hastily healed, "And I was like-! Using Jyuken and I could see chakra points— I saw things the way she did, it was totally—!"

Jiraiya gave him a light shake, "Kid. That kind of oversharing can expose you, you know. She didn't feel the Nine-Tailed Fox, did she?"

"I'm pretty sure Hinata was way too distracted to take a tour of my chakra." Naruto shrugged off his concerns, "Oh man, we knocked teeth outta that guy's head! Hah!"

"So I gather that she won that match?" Jiraiya settled down on the porch, somewhat pleased.

Naruto clacked his empty bowl down on the porch, "I think so! That jerk didn't go down easily. He tried to crawl away after we hit him with Rasengan."

"Oh jeez." Jiraiya dropped his face into his palm, "You used that in someone else's body?"

"Er…" Naruto stopped to consider the implications of using an array of jutsu that might get Hinata questioned after the fact, "Well…you know, we had to improvise a few things here and there."

"You didn't use the Hiraishin, did you?" He was frowning.

"Just once." Naruto nearly spilled his tea cup when Jiraiya wapped the back of his head, "Hey! I know. I didn't consider what it would look like at the time."

"People are going to think she's the second coming of the Fourth!" Jiraiya rumbled, frustrated, "Naruto, you can't recklessly use those jutsu in public situations. It can stir up negative sentiments from the Third Shinobi War. And you want to drag Hinata into it, of all people-?"

"No one's going to bother her, come on! They'll call it a fluke or a mirage or something." He sipped his tea again.

"Don't participate in that kind of gimmick again, you hear me? Discretion is key." Jiraiya held up his pinched fingers to emphasize his point, "If you're going to assist her in a fight, try to be subtle about it!"

"I get it already. Can't go back and change what we did…and…" Naruto suddenly had a far-off look on his face, "Hinata was so beautiful."
"I bet—"

Pulling at Jiraiya's tunic sleeve, Naruto lightly shoved his teacher and had a conniption, "You don't understand! When I was there, she felt light as a feather—not at all like how my body feels when I run around and move. She was bouncy." He and Jiraiya made uncomfortable eye contact at the mentioning of the word, "And Hinata was kind of banged up and hurt, but she was wearing this awesome—I don't know what it was. It was a purple, yukata-looking thing. Oh! And her hair was so long and shiny I just had to touch it—"

"That so-?"

"I can't believe I kind of forgot what her face looked like. Well, I didn't forget. But she looks different! Like a lady in those fine art portraits; and her eyes were huge with fluffy lashes-!"

"Kid—"

"And I was freaking out! I didn't want to make it weird." Naruto made a yipping sound, shutting his eyes as he remembered, "I really don't think I can handle it. That she's beautiful spiritually and physically. It's like if I can't touch her I'm going to self-destruct. I'm going to die here, just-! You'll walk by the Toad Oil Pool later and I'll be dead because I want to be with her so bad-!"

Jiraiya was snapping his fingers in front of Naruto's face, "You are blowing a fuse, Naruto—"

"I didn't mean to! I just accidentally touched her there when she was covered in dirt and—"

The man clapped a hand over Naruto's mouth, announcing, "Normally I can handle the extolling of a gorgeous babe and her effect on a man…but you need to cancel the rocket-launch. You hear me? Take the ten you're at and bring it down to a two, alright?"

Removing his hand, Jiraiya regarded Naruto as he took a few calming breaths.

"Phew." The young man exhaled, "How'd she do that to me?"

"Get used to it." Jiraiya gruffed, "Now…if you're done eating and ululating, I'd like to ask you to take it slow and steady when you meditate for the rest of the day. Can you do that?"

"Yeah." Naruto stood and dusted his pants off, "Sorry about that."

"It's alright, kiddo. Just relax and concentrate on Natural Energy. The mail came in a little while ago, so tonight you can read your correspondence." Jiraiya picked up the dishes to bring them inside, "Work hard."

As he was told, Naruto returned to the Toad Oil Pool and found Fukasaku working on the same book of nonograms. The toad patted him down with oil before returning to his puzzles. For the rest of the afternoon, Fukasaku was alarmed by how Naruto fluctuated between fidgeting and rapidly transforming into a toad statue, drawing on far too much natural energy. He was very out of sorts.

An hour before sunset, Fukasaku rapped his cane on the stone steps to get Naruto's attention, "My word, this day's training took a nosedive this afternoon! Let's turn in for the evening, Naruto-boy."

Slightly miffed by his performance, Naruto returned to the house with the Toad Sage.

Over dinner, Jiraiya clarified for Fukasaku and Shima what had distracted Naruto. It grated on Naruto's nerves as they so clinically discussed Hinata's technique, and Naruto's evident inability to cope with the physicality of having his consciousness sojourn in a woman's body.
After the meal, Naruto retired to his room and tried not to be irritated. ‘I don't need them to poke fun at me. Nothing like that has ever happened to me before!’ He flopped over onto floor cushions and unwound a scroll that had been delivered to the Toad Valley. It was a reply from Haku.

‘Ah, good, it's about time he got back to me...’ Naruto spread it flat on the floor and propped his head up to read.

Naruto, maybe I should tell you that I was shocked when I read your letter discussing the identity of your parents. I was for a moment! But, it does make sense to me that you are the child of the Fourth Hokage. In some ways it may seem terribly obvious who you are. With respect to Jiraiya-sensei's guardianship of you, the techniques you've learned, and simple family resemblance, some people could likely guess! It only makes me wonder why friends of the Fourth and your mother did not take responsibility to look after you when you were a baby. You mentioned that Jiraiya-sensei had Leaf's state care look after you, when he was battling alcoholism. Surely there were friends of the Hokage who would have preferred looking after you themselves?

I don't say that to condescend or hurt you. I am genuinely surprised that no one came forward. Perhaps a political element was in play, or such people were discouraged or marginalized for volunteering to raise you? It's all speculation, at this point. Over all, it must feel very good to know who you are and where you come from. Sometimes that feeling can be as daunting as it is comforting. During my travels, I have come across evidence that suggests I am a descendent of the Yuki Clan. Unfortunately, that is the only lead I have so far, aside from a nukenin of the Water Country being a former member of that clan...it may not be wise to approach a criminal simply to ask about my heritage. Although, I've already done that by contacting Zabuza.

"Hmm." Naruto drummed his fingers on the tatami mats, engrossed by the idea of Haku closing in on his clan.

So far, no one I have spoken to knows where to find the Yuki clan, as they are highly elusive. With that goal being inaccessible due to a lack of information, I've also gone about collecting information about potential Akatsuki activity in the Water Country.

I fear that they may have control over the Mist Village, based on what Zabuza and rebel ninja have to say. Rumors purport that the Akatsuki are using the current Mizukage as a figurehead, and could also be targeting him because he is a jinchuriki. Such an operation would also explain the stratocracy that's pervading Kirigakure, tasking Black Ops and Hunter commanders with eliminating Mist's "rebels," or those who may be aware of the Akatsuki using the Mizukage as a puppet. I wanted to warn you, Gaara, and Jiraiya-sensei about this. It may be in Gaara's best interest to send Black Ops and Recon forces close to Mist, to see what they can glean from the area. I know Tsunade-sama may not have the resources at the moment to do a sweep with Leaf's forces.

The only other news I have is something that I ask you not to share with Gaara.

Naruto blinked down at the parchment, awed that Haku would tell him a secret that was meant to be kept from Gaara. He would be a good sport about it and humor the request, but Naruto was itching for a scandal as he read on.

Temari has been communicating with me again. She does not write to me often, but I am glad that she is no longer completely closed off from me.

"Oh boy..." Naruto groaned out loud.

The only topics she discusses are the Sand Village and Tide Village, or Gaara, Kankuro, and her acquaintances. She never tells me anything about herself, or how she's feeling. I know that I've
specifically asked her such things, but Temari has made a point to not talk about her life or ambitions. It's frustrating. I think I may have gotten my hopes up too much, when I started to receive responses from her. Things will never be the same. I know that I've broken her trust. Maybe there is nothing I can ever do to rebuild it. Anything that I put in writing will sound cheap and disingenuous. I have thought about visiting her in person in the Tide Village, to make my feelings clear.

"Aw jeez! Do you hear yourself?" Naruto muttered as he read, "And Ero-sensei was telling me to take it from a 10 down to a 2…it's going to go so wrong if you see her face to face, I just know it."

I find that it isn't so hard missing the Chunin Exam, which I know will be concluded in the next few days. Missing you and Gaara, and all of our friends weighs much heavier on me. I've kept busy, work part time, study Medical Jutsu, and train with Zabuza when I can…but I've come to realize that none of these things are what I want to do with the rest of my life. It took some time for me to discover what means the most to me. And after spending time with and looking after the children of a friend, I've realized that I enjoy that the most. I would prefer a simple home life to anything else. I want children of my own.

Quietly, Naruto re-read the line and was highly aware that he too had some to such a realization not too long ago. Though Naruto had never distinctly pictured such a thing for his friend, now that he related to the feeling on such a personal level, it made sense.

It seems to me that children ask the most important questions. Some of the things that Katsu, Hotaru, and Nagisa say are so profound that it startles me. When in the presence of jaded adults and roughened nukenin, whose words and feelings seem so shallow in comparison. The children argue less, since I've taught them to listen to each other. They emulate me when I do chores or assist Hiroshi-san. When they learn something new, they are eager to share their knowledge with everyone in town. Small things like those make me happiest.

I think you'll understand how I feel about it better than anyone, Naruto. That is the future I see for myself, someday. I look forward to hearing more about your time on Mount Myoboku, and if you learn anything more about your parents and their history, if you're willing to share it. Please give Jiraiya-sensei my best, and pass along those details about the Akatsuki. May Sage Training give you as little grief as possible, and success be within your reach.

Wishing you well,

Haku

Sighing, Naruto set the letter aside and rested his chin on a floor cushion, wrapping his arms around the pillow. 'I can see it now.' Naruto thought to himself. Haku had always been the "mother hen" type for most of his life. He was domestic, organized, mild-mannered, and great with children. Though he may not have grown up realizing what he truly wanted, Haku had eventually found his calling. All while hobnobbing around with a dangerous nukenin…

Naruto laid there for a while as the night's dark stretched into the room. He went to the cupboard and pulled out the futon, set it up, and tossed his blanket and pillow onto it. Naruto snapped the light off and then rolled onto the cloud-like mat.

'Come to think of it, Gaara wrote me that weird letter while he was staying in Leaf for a month.' Naruto remembered, 'He was complaining about paint color in the apartment and saying the new furniture all has to have…light tones…' The concept seemed so frivolous, 'Then when he was done venting about home decorating, Gaara wrote about using Mirin to deglaze pans. I'm assuming that has something to do with cooking, but I had no idea what the heck any of that meant!'
He flattened out on his back and pulled up his blanket, chuckling wildly, 'Holy shit. Gaara's a total homebody too! All he and Haku really want to do is get cozy and stuff! And if I'm honest…' Naruto shut his eyes and smiled to himself, 'I want that too. Nothing will ever be better…than going back home each day to see my family. A family that I make.'

Chapter End Notes

Hey there reader, I hope you enjoyed the conclusion of Chunin Exam 2.0!

Next chapter- 38: Bends in the Road

Bonus Soundtrack: "Pink + White" by Frank Ocean
Bends in the Road

Chapter Notes

Mature Scene Advisory: There will be a sex scene later in this chapter and you know the drill. Skip it if you do not need to see the sin, or read it you darn filthy sinner. Will be marked by ### for your convenience.

*Chapter Soundtrack: "Doubtful" by Gregory and the Hawk*

The long, yawning night hushed activities in Konoha Hospital.

A surprisingly fresh-faced, nocturnal secretary looked up and greeted Sato when he stopped at the front desk, "Hi. Weren't you discharged earlier today?"

"Yeah…but I'm actually here to stay with a patient overnight." He clarified.

The lady at the desk nodded, "Name?"

"Maito Tama."

"Hmm." The secretary skimmed down the roster, "She already has guests staying overnight. Hospital policy requires that no more than two family members visit overnight after hours…" She trailed off at the sight of Sato's worn, heartbroken face, "But…never mind that. Go ahead. Maito-san is in room 271."

"Thank you."

On the way upstairs, Sato fretted about who he would find in Tama's room. He was still smarting from Maito Ken smacking him around and venting his frustrations. He relaxed when he entered, seeing only Tama's mother Miako curled up on a contemporary sofa at the far side of the quiet room. She was arranged in an uncomfortable position, one slip-on skimmer dangling off of her dainty foot, snoring softly. Ken, thankfully, was absent.

Sato silently crossed over to the woman and crouched down. For the most part, he and Miako got along very well. She resembled Tama in most every way, save for being brunette and several centimeters shorter than her statuesque daughter. Respectfully, Sato slipped the mother's shoe back on. He smiled a little when Miako stirred and stretched her arms over her head, gradually remembering where she was.

"Sato-kun," She smiled back at him, "I knew you'd be back here when things calmed down."

"Definitely. Where's Ken?"

"He went home." Miako sat up straight, fighting a yawn, "Waiting was making him anxious. He also told me he has a loan closing to oversee in the morning. He wanted to rest."

"Huh." Sato let his hand fuddle around his pants pocket, annoyed that Ken could bellow about attentiveness and caring for Tama...then go home to sleep and resume business as usual.
As if Miako could read his thoughts, she shut her eyes to simper and stand up, "It's just the line of work he's in, Sato-kun. I can't be mad at him for not staying here."

He grunted noncommittally at the justification. Miako crossed the floor and pulled a second blanket up over her daughter to fight the room's chill. She pushed back Tama's bangs and kissed her forehead.

"She just doesn't want to wake up." Miako sighed, "I really did admire...how strong she was today. I've never seen anything like it." She moved tiredly to take a seat in a bedside chair, missed, and nearly fell to the floor. Sato caught her by the backs of her elbows.

"Oh! Thank you. I am all kinds of clumsy at night..."

He gave her a concerned look, "You really should go home and sleep, Miako—"

"I don't want to leave her." The mother protested, "If she wakes up in pain or is confused...I should be here."

"You've been going all day. Tomorrow will probably be even harder..." Sato let his eyes drift between Miako and Tama. "Rest now while I can be here with Tama. Ken won't want me around tomorrow...so she'll need you here." She gave him a long look of deliberation when he asked, "Is that alright?"

"It is." Miako rubbed at her eyes sleepily.

Sato moved to the room's window and flipped latches before pushing it open. Miako watched him stick his head out and make a tooting call out in the night air. Shortly after that, a screech owl zoomed in and landed on his outstretched arm, "This is Aroo. Let him, uh, walk you home. Well, he'll fly. But he'll also come back and let me know you made it safely. If not, I'll be looking for you."

"There's no need to worry about me!" Miako smiled and patted his cheek, "But thank you, Sato, an escort home will be nice." She motioned with her hand, prompting Aroo to flit over and perch on her shoulder, "I'll be off now. You try to sleep too. I'll be back bright and early!"

He acknowledged her with a wave and a nod, listening as Miako's footsteps retreated down the hallway. Sato then pulled the guest chair up to the side of the elevated bed and took a seat, exhaling roughly. Tama laid there, eerily still. He looked at her for a while and let reality sink in.

The only time he ever saw Tama so still and peaceful was when she was stretched out on the couch for a nap after training. Sato's heart ached for those times to return. That she could be mobile, feel well; smile and stay safe. It was hard to see her so damaged—wrapped and mended, immobilized in lower-body braces, her left forearm and hand in a hard cast. Her hair still looked as luscious and shiny as ever, though.

'Miako must have brushed it for her...'

"It must hurt. All of it must hurt so bad...that she doesn't want to be awake..." Teary-eyed, Sato glanced up at a drip of strong pain medication, 'I won't even wish for you to wake up, Tama. Not until it starts to get better. I don't want you to...'

He slipped his hand up her right arm, ghosting over a cotton pad adhered to her jaw. Huo had kicked her face and split skin there. 'I don't ever want you to suffer.' Sato shut his eyes, his breaths rumbling. Maybe he should have thought about this nearly two years ago. When he had teased her and...
encouraged her to become a Genin against her parents' wishes. When he had called in a favor with Iruka-sensei, so that Tama could take the exam and graduate…

"I'm just…really bad at looking out for you." His voice was soft and quivering, "You've always been so good at it. Looking after me. When Mom was gone…and Kakashi was too freaked out to go near me…you protected me from things. You knew what to do. You had your eyes on me."

The sounds of the monitor Tama was hooked up to reminded him of bird chirps.

"But I can do it now." Sato cleared his throat, sniffling, "I've screwed up so many times. That's just how I had to learn. I wish it hadn't been at your expense…I wish you hadn't been hurt. I promise I can do it now. I can protect you. I can look after you." He leaned in to brush his lips across her cheek, "Don't go out of your way for me anymore. It's my turn to care for you. It doesn't matter what I have to do. You have my word."

He let silence settle in again, and Sato shifted to prop himself up on the edge of the bed's mattress, elevated enough to fold his arms and rest his head there. His eyes were trained on Tama's sleeping face.

Sato's thoughts swirled around like marbles in a bowl.

His throat felt tight again when he thought about how he'd been unfaithful and slept with a stranger, merely to sate a craving. For her. Oh, how he wanted to tear his own brain out and throw it to the floor, stomping it and cursing it for failing him. For not safeguarding something so sacred; for saving his body for Tama who, he was sure, deserved that milestone with him. He had sold himself so cheaply. He had once been valuable. Now, looking in reflective surfaces repulsed Sato and reminded him of the mistake.

The alcohol had not justified him. Not even her excuse for leaving that night had justified him. Not when their formidable bond, mutual attraction, and love towered over him as a behemoth reminder. Sato wondered how he could have ever done wrong to someone who cared for him and honored him so. He had never felt quite good enough for Tama. Never felt that he deserved her, if the sarcastic comments of others had been anything to go by. But why? Why tumble into the pitfall? Why be what they said he was? No good.

Sato gulped again. Taking Tama for granted had been a horrible thing to do. When he'd been younger, imagining a future with her used to feel like a heavy, unavoidable requirement. Today, the fear of being unable to build a life with Tama suffocated him with fear.

If he had never advocated for her to become a ninja in the first place, perhaps they would be lounging on the couch right now. She'd be fine. Maybe he wouldn't have cheated, if Tama had not been occupied with Exam preparations, and he could have persuaded her.

Sato pressed his hands to his eyes and rubbed, sickened by the selfish thoughts. Why was he thinking something like that now? Just how much of a degenerate was he, to lament that kind of an outcome? Her life was more important. Whether he was satisfied or not, whether she was a ninja or not… 'If Tama could hear what I've been thinking she would smash my head into garden mulch…' No. Sato acknowledged that now was about a good a time as any to not expect anything physical from Tama. Her welfare came first.

His thoughts evened out. Responsibility clicked back into place. Caring for her meant caring for her selflessly. Anything personal or Sato-related…he deleted those items from his brain. Then he lay there, staring at her face for a length of time he could not measure. Sometimes tears would slip free, and his eyes would dry up again periodically. Things felt very different.
Aroo came back after a time and hooted. Miako was safe at home. Sato thanked the owl and told him to go hunt.

The night wore on and a nurse stopped in, checking Tama's charts and medication drip. She glanced at Sato, bunched up at the bedside and freshly done weeping. She winced in sympathy. "Thanks for staying the night." She told him, smiling gently. Sato blinked up at the nurse, surprised by the remark. She concluded her tasks and carried on down the corridor to her next patient.

With the endless nighttime minutes, his mind ceased speculating and stopped forming ideas of how to improve Tama's circumstance. There was no way to know what was ahead of them. All that he could do was be there. Exhausted, Sato drifted off to sleep. The hands of the room's wall clock completed several revolutions.

The pre-dawn hours of morning were dark and without birdsong. Sato unfurled himself like a dozing cat, pushing up from the bed's edge as he stirred. It was then he noticed Tama's eyes were open just a sliver, almost too narrow to be noticed. She was statue-still.

"Tama?" Sato spoke softly and sat up. When she did not respond he edged in closer, beside her ear, "Are you awake right now?"

She did not move or make a sound. Sato wondered if she had opened her eyes and continued sleeping. Then she slowly turned her head to the right, towards him. Her lashes fluttered as if nerves were firing incorrectly. He felt scared and relieved all at once.

Sato stroked the side of her face and hair as if she were breakable, staying close enough for her to hear as he kept his voice down, "It's me."

"W-W…" She made small sounds, struggling with the effort.

He waited with baited breath for her to complete the phrase.

"Watched…" Tama opened her eyes a bit wider, but seemed disoriented, "I watched…"

"Watched-?" Sato wanted to help her along.

"Watched you sleep." She coughed softly, "Right here." She tapped a single, working finger on the mattress space where his head had rested.

He was startled, "You did? For how long?"

Tama's eyes fluttered shut again tiredly, "A long time."

"I'm sorry, you could've woke me—"

She gave him a weak shhh.

"How are you feeling?" Sato asked a treacherous question, but he genuinely wanted an assessment.

"Not much." Tama batted her lips, "Fuzzy…hard to…speak."

"The medication is super heavy duty. You might feel woozy." He informed her.

"Yeah."

"So you were awake for a while?"
"Watching you." Traces of emotion were returning to her face, bits of discomfort, warmth, and frustration, "Moving…what still moves. My hand. My head and neck are okay." Tama demonstrated by showing off the slight range of motion.

Sato palmed her cheek, "Don't move too much for now."

"Legs." She said simply. She did not mean Sai's nickname for her. She meant that she could not move them. Sato understood and lowered his eyes, despondent.

Tama fidgeted uncomfortably, more awake. Her eyes were scrunched, and she was pursing her mouth, trying to dislodge the nasal cannula fitted in her nostrils, and the small, hollow tubes draped over her ears. "Please." She said tiredly.

He looked at her with shiny eyes and tried to interpret her request.

Tama clarified, "Take it off."

"I can't. I can't tamper with anything." Sato apologized, "I'm sorry, Tama. If you don't move so much it won't bother you. You need the oxygen."

"-can breathe fine." She retorted softly, "Can still do things myself."

"I know." He acknowledged, leaning in toward her neck for comfort, "For now, don't get ahead of yourself. You've been badly hurt. We'll talk to the doctor in the morning."

Tama smiled weakly at him. She stopped fussing.

"I want you to know that we defeated Huo. Hinata beat him." Sato announced with a mix of pride and seriousness, "He got what he deserved. He's under investigation now by Leaf's Security forces."

"…he…didn't hurt anyone else?" Tama hoped not.

Sato kept his head tucked against her as he spoke, "No, no. Sunshine is still scratched up, but otherwise everyone is okay. The group planned out how to deal with Huo."

A long silence answered him. Sato watched the rise and fall of her chest for a time before sitting back, looking her in the face. They held each other's gazes without a word for a while, and Tama understood unsaid things. Sad things. She could see it all in his expression.

She spoke again, "My chest hurts."

"Even with the medication?" He was mildly alarmed.

"Yeah." Tama confirmed.

"Well," Sato swallowed and recalled some info he had gotten when he had checked on her earlier that day, "Your mom told me you have some broken ribs, and you came in with a collapsed lung. The medics had to correct it…with a needle to draw out excess air from your chest." He was grimacing, "I know it's got to hurt. I wanted you to sleep as much as possible…so you don't have to feel as much of it."

"What else?" She asked. Tama was aware there would be a laundry list of problems with her body.

"Let's wait for the doctor tomorrow before we discuss the rest." He recommended again, "Whoever comes in to look at you will have to do some follow-up evaluations. Tsunade-sama will too, when she can."
Tama presumed, "…it's bad."

"You're going to be okay." Sato insisted nervously.

A far-off look came over her face. Tama stared across the room while deep in thought. She was processing the level of physical impairment she would have to deal with. She was weighing it against how she lived her life, her career, her wishes. Sato watched her think with a pattering heart. His worry stretched over them like a rain cloud.

"Sato." Her voice sounded a little stronger, "You can leave."

Sato was surprised but then dismissed the statement, assuming he misunderstood, "I'm staying all night and day, until your family shoos me out. Your mom already went home for some rest."

"No." Tama shut her eyes and shook her head tiredly, "You can leave me."

Sato was hushed in shock and then supposed he was not misunderstanding.

Tama explained to him, "It isn't good. Me like this. I can't live the life…I want. Can't give you the life you want."

He shook his head rapidly in disagreement. She went on to clarify, "There are…no strings. Like this, I'm a burden. If you want to, forget everything. I won't be…offended. Really…I understand."

"Can't give me the kind of life I want?" Sato was appalled by the suggestion, "What kind of life is that, Tama? An active one? A meaningless one? I don't want to spend every day with you purely for the convenience." He protested, eyes tearing up again, "I am not intimidated by doing whatever it takes…to care for you. Whatever that entails, I'll do it. If I have to reduce mission activity, or quit being a ninja, I will. I am going to look after you and be with you."

"I may not…be the same." Tama warned him, "Could become…very sad. Un…unfulfilled. I like my pastimes. Dancing. Biking. Running. Working. If I…can't do the things I enjoy…I might change."

She took a break from speaking to catch her breath, then added, "That change may let you down."

Sato regarded her for a long moment and then let out a clipped, half-deranged laugh at the thought.

"Let me down?" He calmed himself, "You…are worried…about letting me down?" Sato sighed at the assertion, "Tama. That is impossible. No matter what you're going through, you will never, ever disappoint me in any way."

Tama stared at him and listened.

"That's one of the craziest things I've ever heard. I'm not in love with you just because of the physical things you can do, although…yeah, I do find you extremely impressive and attractive. But your way of thinking…your spirit…that's what moves me." Sato looked down for a moment and noticed where his hand had settled on the bed's edge, Tama had subconsciously grabbed it while he spoke, "Your devotion and love are the things I want most. There's nothing in the world better than that."

For the first time in days, Tama saw Sato smile the way he used to: genuinely happy, with a hint of the debonair, carefree charm that played a tune on her heartstrings.

Tama's awareness of pain alleviated a bit. Her mouth was tugging up at the corners, pleased that he had disagreed with her.

"Yup." He seemed much more relaxed, "Oh, I am so committed. It's gonna get annoying. Watch out.
Until we are cremated piles of dust, Tama…and whatever happens after that. I don't want to go anywhere or do anything without you."

They smiled goofy smiles at each other.

"Is it okay if I kiss you?" Sato asked her, "Will it hurt you? I'll be careful."

Tama blinked at him, "Even if it does hurt…I want you to."

Acting on that permission he leaned in, half-lidded eyes matching her own when he was only a whisper away from her mouth… Sato stopped short. He paused to look at her as if another urgent declaration had come to mind, "Hey…" Tama peeked an eye open wider when he said, "I love you."

Flustered, she shimmied a bit and only allotted him a bashful peck on the mouth. That did not satisfy and Sato moved in again, his eyes shut, head tilted, kissing her in earnest. Tama had been holding her breath in surprise. She was pretty sure that was the first time she had distinctly heard Sato say those words to her. After a moment he pulled back a bit to look at her and gauge her reaction. She looked astonished.

"Sorry if I taste like onions." He was sheepish, thinking of the ways he could have messed that up, "I didn't brush before I came over here."

Her face was more expressive. Tama was cracking up. She began to giggle, unable to control the rumble that jostled her chest painfully. Sato raised his eyebrows and automatically reciprocated the laughter. With what strength she had, Tama raised her hand and tugged on his t-shirt. He understood. Leaning in, they quieted down and kissed again. It was calming and binding. Without saying so, they both felt much closer and more confident.

"Hmm." Tama dropped her head back on a fluffed pillow. She was smirking and looked very pleased.

Sato shifted in his seat, stifling a yawn as he angled himself downward, and mashed himself onto the corner of her pillow to get comfortable. He pressed his lips to the bare skin of Tama's arm and kept kissing her there. She started chuckling again.

"Thank you, Sato…" She watched his hand caress up from her fingertips to the curve of her shoulder, down and up again, "I love you too."

"I am gonna do more to deserve hearing you say that." He declared, "Now you need to stop giggling adorably and being so damn soft."

"Can't." Another chuckle spilled from her lips.

Grumbling, Sato glanced up at her, "It's turning me on too much."

That, uh, was the point, Tama's expression revealed. She was taunting him cutely on purpose. So what if she couldn't move? She still had it.

"Let's sleep." Tama suggested.

At first, Sato was not much for the idea, even though he accepted the extra blanket layered on top of her—which she wanted off. Covered up and folded onto the bed, they muttered and yawned at each other until they did indeed sleep.
Later that morning, at about 8:10AM, Tsunade took a silent headcount of the former Leaf Rookies who had piled into her office. Maito Tama was not among them. That absence stood out like a sore thumb to the Hokage, and she leaned back in her seat, shutting her eyes for a moment to compose herself. The youngsters chattered quietly while Tsunade collected her thoughts.

At the side of the room, Shizune cleared her throat. Beside her on a display table were ten Chunin vests, each with a small note safety-pinned to a front pocket; the names of who they belonged to.

Right. Tsunade took Shizune's cue. There was no use in dragging the announcement out.

She angled her swiveling chair to get a side-on view of her newly promoted ninja, "I congratulate all of you on a job well done. Each of you has been promoted to the rank of Chunin, with the conclusion of the Exam." Tsunade added airily, "And the shenanigans that ensued generated a staggering amount of revenue…which will provide a much needed facelift for our village. I thank you all for that as well."

They replied in an affirmative chorus and Tsunade raised a hand to settle the group down again. She flicked her eyes toward Shizune, "Shizune is going to call each of you to receive your flak vests and certificates. Frame the paper if you want. The copies that really matter are on file here…and if your vest does not fit as anticipated, be honest. I've seen Chunin walk around this building who are clearly in denial."

Ino cackled softly at the jibe. Sakura nudged her to hush up. Hinata was called first and timorously accepted her accolades from Shizune. Ino and Chouji followed after her, followed by Sakura and Kiba, then Neji's team, and then Shino and Sato last. Aghast, Sato stared at the table, his eyes ringed by dark circles. He turned to Shizune as she gave him a questioning look, trying to hand over his vest.

"What about Tama?" He asked severely.

Shizune tried to explain, "I was told—"

Sato kicked the leg of the table with his foot, turning to Tsunade in outrage, "You didn't promote her?"

"Mind your mouth." Tsunade smiled at him patiently, resting her chin on her folded hands. "You didn't."

"You didn't." He spoke through clenched teeth, "You saw what she can do…how can you exclude her?"

"If I see it fit, I will exclude her however I deem it necessary." Tsunade daringly made eye contact with Sato, "She was promoted to Chunin just as all of you were. I have her flak vest locked in a cabinet on the next floor, if you must know. I won't be giving it to her. I suspended her mission activity."

"How can you?"

"How would it look if I gave her the false impression that she is among you and your peers now?" Tsunade spoke over him, "To give her soft tasks. Desk work. Paperwork or drudgery that requires little movement. That isn't what she worked for. So I won't do that. I will not assign her anything beyond focusing on her recovery."

"Then, in a symbolic sense, at least give her what she earned." Sato tried to bargain, "That would make her happy."
"It won't make her truly happy." Tsunade replied knowingly.

"Do it anyway." Sato spat, and then he looked to Shizune again, "I refuse to participate if you don't recognize her."

Shizune was shaking her head at Sato, still extending his Chunin novelties. Tsunade watched him impassively with her mind made up. Sato stared at the Hokage and tried to compel her to bend on this one trifling matter. She did not.

As good as his threat, Sato stormed off without accepting his vest or promotional document. He brushed past Shino and Hinata who tried to slow him, hoping he would reconsider. Sato squeezed through the group and darted out of the doorway. After that, Shizune wilted and set the items down on the table again.

The whole collection of new Chunin stared at the floor in silence. It was hard to accept. Sakura, for one, had been particularly moved by Sato's solidarity with Tama. She stepped forward in a gesture to return her promotional items.

Tsunade leapt from her seat and barked at her, "No. No dissent among the ranks. Especially not you, Sakura. He's being childish."

Sakura did not give much pushback, "But Tama should still—"

"It was my decision to make. If you all feel bad about this, fine: visit Tama in the hospital and tell her what I told you. I guarantee that she will understand. That is simply how that girl thinks—that's why I can depend on her." Tsunade circled around the desk and approached them, "I am depending on all of you more than I ever have. Don't cut and run just because you don't agree with me."

She stopped in front of Neji and pointedly locked gazes with him. To her surprise, he was fully paying attention to her. The former back-sass and friction she used to get from him were gone. 'Ah, good. He's recovered from that no-contact order, it seems. Just when I'll need him most.'

"For now," Tsunade went on as she paced slowly in front of the Chunin gaggle, "I want you to rest. I will begin mission assignments within a week. Things are still hectic internally with the closure of the stadium, so I may have you oversee things of that nature…"

The youngsters acknowledged her and thanked her. Tsunade dismissed them after that. When they had filed out of the office, the Hokage reminded Shizune she was a seasoned Jounin and advisor, and never had to take anyone's shit. Why had she stood there and not smacked Sato for his impudence? Shizune mumbled lowly, unsure. She felt bad, she guessed.

"Throw it in his face, next time." Tsunade recommended, picking up Sato's unwanted vest and certificate, "Let's go get breakfast, Shizune. Ton-Ton. I'll hand this off first so I don't have to look at it all day…"

Kakashi knocked on the door for ten seconds before he tried the door knob. Locked.

"What a pain." He scratched his head tiredly and then traipsed down the apartment building's interior hallway.

Had anyone been watching, Kakashi would have made it look easy flitting out of a window to the top of a nearby building, circumventing around the complex's exterior until he arrived at the window of his nephew's flat. Sato often left it ajar for Aree and Aroo to come and go as they pleased. Kakashi dropped in via that entrance.
"Yo." He half-shouted into the home. He got no response. Kakashi could tell that someone was around, though.

He tottered down the corridor and popped into the open doorway of the restroom. Sato was vigorously splashing his face at the sink.

"Tsunade-sama called you a dissenter today." Kakashi greeted and watched his nephew sputter and startle, fumbling with faucet handles before he stood upright, surprised by a visitor, "Looks like this is the first time all night and morning you left Tama's side."

"It is." Sato patted his face with a towel, "And I'm going back to her right now. I'm gonna say slanderous shit about the Hokage and talk about how I won't serve as a Chunin. Not unless Tama can."

"That's stupid."

"So is your face."

"That's why I don't show it much."

"That mole is stupid."

"It's a beauty mark." Kakashi corrected him.

Annoyed, Sato stuffed the towel on a drying bar and motioned for Kakashi to move aside. His uncle obliged, but followed him into the bedroom.

"I'm changing clothes, you know." Sato warned him, pulling his t-shirt off.

Kakashi shrugged. He stood there and watched, utterly unaffected, and held Sato's Chunin vest in his hands like a butler. The boy changed back into his white and red tunic, the clothing that he debuted at the Tournament. Kakashi was not surprised that his nephew was embracing the Hatake-style apparel. It suited him.

Sato stopped in front of his uncle, who blocked his exit. He frowned when Kakashi handed his vest to him.

"You're going to put this on, and you're going to serve." Kakashi told him, "Life isn't fair. It doesn't always go as planned. Didn't you think about how Tama would feel if you waltzed up to her and told her you forsook a duty she wants to fulfill? That she'd feel angry and frustrated? It's better if you take responsibility. That's what will cheer her up."

A minute elapsed with a no-blinking staredown, and finally Sato sighed and accepted the flak vest. When he pulled it on and zipped it up over his tunic, Kakashi snickered at him, amused.

"What?" Sato was still not happy about it.

Kakashi ruffled his hair, "You look a lot like my dad."

They left the certificate on the kitchen table. Sato followed Kakashi out of the flat, exiting from the window. Kakashi accompanied his nephew on the trek across town to the hospital. There was a traffic-jam of wheelchairs and other hardware being moved across the lobby, and so they waited for it to pass.

"The Hokage would have felt terrible assigning Tama menial tasks. I'm sure you agree with her that
Tama would not want to do those sorts of things." Kakashi ventured, sticking his hands in his pockets.

"I know she wouldn't want to do stuff like that." Sato acknowledged woodenly.

"Tsunade-sama is sympathizing with Tama. I know that she is very fond of you both."

"Because we're like you and Gai." Sato figured.

"Not that." Kakashi disagreed, "You remind her of another time…of a more hopeful time in her life."

Sato quirked an eyebrow at Kakashi, not getting it. When the floor was clear they carried on to the stairwell.

"Off the record, the Torture and Interrogation Corps has detained both Huo and Sekieima, and from what I hear…” The Jounin kept his voice low, "It really was a hostage situation. The network that Huo was a part of runs deep, and has undermined Iwagakure. Like a mob, if you will. Many people are threatened and hushed into keeping it secret."

Sato noted perceptively, "That's not gonna last."

"Not if Huo has valuable information about that operation, it won't. He can't conceal anything from our specialists." Kakashi confirmed, "His restraints sap and lock chakra. He won't be able to use Ninjutsu or Tao Arts."

"Good. I heard Sunshine knocked some of his teeth out."

"Yeah. He's not getting those back."

They wound up and up the steps.

"So do I really look like Grandpa?"

"You do. You've seen the photos." Kakashi confirmed.

"Why don't you ever talk about him?" Sato asked. He'd been meaning to ask that for years.

"Because," Kakashi said as they turned into the hallway, "Some days…I still can't believe he's dead."

Sato processed the sentiment. He felt that way about his mother.

"I don't want people to know how addled my head is. About losing him. Losing everyone." Kakashi chuckled, "It'd be pretty obvious if I talked about my dad, and Semi, and Sensei, and Rin and Obito all of the time. I'd never shut up."

"You can talk to me about it." Sato offered gently, "I won't judge."

"Maybe I will." Kakashi sounded surprised with himself, "Some time. I might."

They arrived at Tama's room and the door was closed over slightly. Kakashi pushed it open and ambled in, followed by Sato. The room was stuffed.

"Who are all of these people?" Sato whispered from the corner of his mouth.

"Hmm." Kakashi was surveying the many visitors crowded around Tama's bed, chatting amiably.
He knew most of them. At least he thought he did.

Eventually, heads turned and noticed Kakashi and Sato had arrived. They received a lively greeting. Tama had strength enough in her right hand to wave a little.

"Hey!" A young man in a Chunin vest laughed at the sight of them, "The Hatake clan is here, move over people!" Sato squinted his eyes. Everyone gathered was a Chunin or Jounin, but they looked young.

'They look...Tama's age.' Sato estimated.

Kakashi was given the space to Tama's immediate right and Sato sidled in beside him, reaching out for Tama's hand and feeling better when she laced her fingers with his.

"Good morning, Kakashi-sensei." Tama greeted politely, "Sato-kun that looks good on you!"

"You'd say that about any old rags I put on." He winked at her.

"You were promoted too." Kakashi informed her, "But the Hokage terminated your mission activity, for the time being."

"Well that's nice." Tama yielded, "It makes sense."

"I had a problem with it." Sato protested mildly.

"Please don't. Please take missions." She soothed him, "I know you'll visit me a lot. We'll find a new balance soon. Work on your schedule and assignments."

"Alright, I will…"

"So..." Kakashi regarded all of the wrinkle-free faces around, "This is your graduating class, Tama-chan. Or, it would have been if you graduated in your year."

"Yes!" Tama confirmed, "Thank you for visiting, everyone!"

Sato's mouth hung open a little. Tama's peers from her Academy days must have seen her match in the Chunin Exam Tournament. Maybe they didn't know she had become a ninja after withdrawing from the Academy years ago, as a late bloomer.

"Looks like you need an introduction," The man who spoke earlier from the left side of the room chimed in again, "I'm Runruna Mion. I know Tenten from your age group, actually. This here is my teammate, Hagino Shoda. Medic-nin and part-time journalist." The dark-haired, bespectacled man beside him waved with a small blush.

Mion pointed to other ninja in the room, "That's Aburame Michiko, isn't she cute? And her teammates: that there's Sarutobi Banri, I hear he's a clerk for the Sealing Corps now. Aren't you, man?"

Banri smiled at him, "Yep. But I am going to apply to be an assistant commissioner next year."

"Good for you, curlicues!" Mion congratulated the wild-haired Sarutobi, "And Mizutani Nogo rounds off their team. Yo, Nogo, we need to go out again sometime. See something in the cinema."

Nogo agreed.

"Here's our Ino-Shika-Chou trio." Mion gestured to the three at the foot of Tama's bed, "Akimichi
Choukoki, Yamanaka Inohei, and Nara Kojika. Kojika, girl, you spilled your mega-slushie all over yourself at the Tournament, I heard."

"Yeah." She confessed, "During Tama-chan's match. It was exciting."

Tama thanked her.

"And here's Nabeya Yurie," Mion pointed to a man to his left, "One of Tama's rivals from our Academy days." Yurie waved the suggestion off and insisted all of that was behind them, "Huh? Well cool. And here's Shimura Mashu. Whoa, Mashu, you smell good. New cologne!"

Mashu cupped his face in his palm.

"It is new, right?"

"Yes. Please stop talking about it." Mashu muttered.

"Their teammate Aiko quit recently because she had twins!" Mion tittered, "Can't wait to see those cuties later."

All of Tama's age group clamored about how excited they were to see the babies. Mion prattled about how he was also a father to a baby girl now and wow, did time fly by so fast!

Sato was glaring at Yurie's head, as he had realized that was the boy who had injured Tama in the past during an Academy quarrel…and caused her to drop out. Kakashi patted his shoulder, signaling to his nephew to cool it.

Inohei flipped his chic haircut out of his face, "Tama-chan, we're very sorry we fell out of touch with you. Most of us didn't know you continued your shinobi career."

"Not that you being a ninja is the only reason to socialize with you." Shoda clarified.

"Right, I know." Tama assured them.

"When we were kids, you punched me once so hard that I cried." Choukoki remembered fondly, "You've always been strong."

"We wish you a speedy recovery." Kojika was very pretty when she smiled.

"Thank you."

"Also," Mashu spoke up again, "Tama-chan's match was an unparalleled earth shaker…but Hatake Sato-san..." All heads rotated to look back at Sato, "You used jutsu in your match that you invented on your own."

"Technically, I just improved shape and nature manipulation based on what Kakashi showed me." Sato dumbed it down, "Then I poked someone with it."

Laughter answered him. This time he actually wasn't being funny but he accepted it anyway.

"I don't know anyone else who can do that. Even Danzo-sama of my clan, can't do anything like that." Mashu impressed upon him, "No one who saw that Chidori on the ground or in the sky will ever forget it." His peers agreed.

"I probably won't use it so rashly next time." Sato admitted.
"Mashu says stuff like that because he wants to label you." Kojika informed him dryly, turning back to Mashu, "Go on and do it, then. Dub him something. You did it to every single one of us."

"I will, since I have a speck of creativity to my name." He snarked back at her, "Sato-san, like the rest of the Hatake clan, possesses white chakra and incredible talent. Based on what we've seen…he could be the White Wing of Konoha."

Mion blew a raspberry.

"That's not as cool as Kakashi-san's moniker. Or the White Fang's." Yurie pointed out.

"Sounds kinda flappy." Kojika seconded the pan.

"Then come up with something better." Mashu turned his nose up at them. He bid Tama farewell and filed out with Yurie in tow.

Idle chatter continued for a few minutes while Sato pondered the nickname. He didn't dislike it.

Mion and his teammate, along with the Ino-Shika-Chou team excused themselves and promised to visit again before leaving. Michiko did not say much, but she extended her hand and left a ladybug on Tama's casted arm. Her smile was slight and sweet, adjusting her glasses before giving Tama a pat. She and her teammate Nogo carried on out of the room. Sarutobi Banri lingered, however. Sato, still wrapped up in his own head, did not notice the loiterer.

Kakashi did. He was not sure why Banri did not move on with his team. His conversation with Tama seemed trivial, as if scraping for a reason to stay. He called the kid out, "Banri-san, doesn't the Sealing Corps have management meetings in the morning? You'll run late."

"Oh, I…" He glanced up at the clock, "You're right, Kakashi-senpai. Please excuse me."

Banri said goodbye and wished all of them well.

"Friend of yours?" Kakashi asked his student.

Tama smiled lopsidedly at him, "From when I was six. It's so strange not seeing people since I was a kid…I mean, we live in the same village. We should've run into each other before now."

"You all keep very busy." Kakashi observed.

"That could be why."

"Well…" Kakashi steered Sato forward and plopped him into a bedside seat, "I don't think we've eaten. I'll find some edible hospital food for now. Catch up with each other, kids. Before Ken gets here." He plodded out of the room.

"Even Kakashi knows what's up." Sato noted after his uncle had gone, "Did your dad tear into Kakashi too?"

"Not yet. He's still at work." Tama guessed, "Mom came over thirty minutes ago and asked me what I wanted. I begged her to bring me something from the bakery and tell my coworkers that I won't be in…for a while. Hm! I might get sympathy scones."

Sato poached his lips, "What's a scone?"

"Delicious."
"That's all I need to know."

"Uncle Gai will probably come by with his team." Tama imagined, tipping her head back, "That'll be nice."

"Yeah, they'll all be in a pleasant mood. I feel bad though. Neji was still limping a little when I saw him this morning." Sato recalled.

Tama clucked her tongue at him. She knew he was responsible for Neji's injuries.

"Come on, everyone's a little roughed up. Lee and Tenten too. I saw them hobbling around at Hinata's party..." Sato started chuckling as he thought about it. "I've got these scary bruises all over me, and I think my butt bone chipped from the falling-out-of-the-tornado incident."

"Tornado?" Tama raised her eyebrows, "You need to tell me more about your match. And it's called your tailbone. Or Coccyx, if you want to be more scientific."

"Whatever you call it, it hurts." Sato whined. He folded forward and mushed his face into the edge of Tama's pillow.

Tama turned her head slightly toward him, "Now you just want attention."

He peeked an eye up at her, "Can you tell?"

"I'll trade your tailbone pain for my full body tingling and numbness." Tama offered, "They adjusted my IV and I'm getting less medication now. I feel way more lucid. Still have the fluffy feeling though! You should try this stuff sometime."

"I think maybe I did get it after the Star Village mission." Sato narrowed his eyes and tried to remember, "My body was majorly screwed up even after Sakura-chan and Tsunade-sama worked on me."

"Oh gosh." Tama then remembered Sato's close shave with death, which she had nearly forgotten, "We need to be more careful."

"I think that kind of goes without saying at this point." He scooched closer and brought his face close to Tama's, "I'm glad we're still here."

Tama possessed more energy than she had overnight, and delightedly kissed him until they were short of breath. Sato settled on his pillow-edge spot again and looked at her, contented.

"Did that make your tailbone feel better?" She asked.

"Totally."

They were interrupted by vigorous knocking on the open door, and looked over to see Sakura grinning at them. She had a stethoscope around her neck and a clipboard in hand.

"Whoa. I came at a good time!" She laughed, gambolining in, "I am so glad you're awake, Tama!" Sakura scurried over to give her teammate a gentle hug, "Kiba-kun said he'll be by soon! I heard Kakashi-sensei is already here."

"He is. He went to find food, but I already asked my mom to bring me baked goods." Tama confirmed.

"Hmm. I kind of want treats too." Sakura noted to herself, "I might stop there later. Do you mind if I
do a couple of tests on you? I was going to take some notes for Tsunade-sama and see where we need to start treatment."

"Please do."

The day before, Sakura had expected not to lift a finger around the hospital for a while. It turned out to be a harder habit to kick than she had thought.

Sakura went through the practiced motions of checking blood pressure, heart rhythm, breathing, pupil dilation, head and neck mobility, and so forth. She glanced over at Sato and was relieved to see him wearing his Chunin vest. He had mostly been watching Tama with a protective look on his face, but Sato eventually made eye contact with Sakura. She seemed thoughtful and optimistic, despite the fact that she confirmed Tama's disablement from the waist-down.

"I don't think I noticed it as much before…" Sakura said as she carefully reclined Tama again to rest, "That you guys are like two halves. Inseparable, in some ways." She moved on to examine Tama's working hand, "It kind of gives me second-hand happiness being around you. I don't know why that is, exactly…"

She scribbled a few things on the clipboard and set it on a physician's table, "Try not to worry or jump to conclusions, Tama. You too, Sato. Tsunade-sama's follow up should get Tama on the right track. I know it."

Her comments bolstered them. Kakashi returned shortly after that and tried to encourage Sakura to stay, "Look, I brought applesauce and onigiri." Hospital food was not very enticing, and she did have a few more patients on the floor to check in on.

Sakura told them to keep their chins up before waving goodbye, carrying on with other duties in the hospital.

By early afternoon, Sakura wrapped up her round in the hospital and returned to the Administrative Building. Tsunade was just about dead on her feet. She had put on her game face for the morning announcement to her new Chunin…but as the day wore on she tarried, shoved papers aside, and snapped at a few visitors to her office.

Shizune had brought the Hokage a pot of green tea and an energy bar. Sakura snickered at the sight as she three-hole punched documents for binder filing.

"What is this?" Tsunade held up the plastic-sealed protein bar.

Shizune frowned at her, "Your lunch."

"I'm going to find something substantial in the break room, not this sad excuse—"

"Not until you look at the preliminary report from Morino-san. It has to be approved and sent out with the affidavit to Iwa. As soon as possible."

"Since when do preliminary findings take up five pages? Ibiki is trying to kill me." The Hokage began peeling the plastic open to get at the snack, resigned.

"You have to get that done, if nothing else. You should not have been so decadent at the party last night." Shizune grumbled over her shoulder, helping Sakura with sliding hole-punched papers into place, "Tsunade-sama, you even said you wouldn't indulge after the exam. We anticipated the workload we'd have today."
"The Hyuga kept pouring the wine. It'd have been rude to refuse their hospitality. And I'll have you know that I had no qualms with getting work done today."

"Pft." Turned away from her mentor, Shizune crossed her eyes at the bookshelf. Sakura laughed out loud.

"Sakura." Tsunade sniffed in annoyance.

"...yes...Tsunade-shishou?"

"Was something funny?"

"Uh..." She gave a cornered look to Shizune.

Tsunade pressed, "Did you complete your check-ins at the hospital?"

"I did—"

"Hmph." Tsunade tossed an interoffice envelope at her apprentice, "You're too ambitious today. Drop that off at the Media and Print building. Then actually rest like I asked you to. At least one of us can."

Without needing to be told twice, Sakura scurried out of the Hokage's office, down the tower's stair, and out onto side streets north toward the small, brick printing offices of the village. She presented the envelope to a clerk who wordlessly took it from her, probably unenthusiastic about his job. This is good! I finished early. I'll go home and clean myself up...fib to Mom about staying over at Ino's... then buy a ton of sweets.' Sakura remembered that she still wanted to drop in at the bakery and treat herself. She hustled across town back to her house.

And then, in true parental fashion, Haruno Kizashi delayed Sakura from her plans for forty-five minutes. He was still so very proud of her and just kept talking and talking...

Laughing at one of her father's corny puns was the appropriate release latch, and Kizashi was so tickled that he barely noticed Sakura sprint to her bedroom in order to gather things for the remainder of the day. Quickly, she changed into less practical, much cuter clothing. She could still hear her father talking to himself out in the hallway.

Sakura could not make a clean escape. On her way back out, her mother exited from the kitchen doorway and set a vase of flowers on a side table. Mebuki gave her daughter a discerning look, "Going somewhere, Sakura?" The overnight bag on her child's shoulder was a dead giveaway.

She stopped and turned slowly on her heel, "Yeah, I finished up my duties today. Tsunade-shishou wants me to take it easy."

"Hm." Mebuki handed Kizashi an empty bowl and a bag of refill potpourri, "A girl's night, then?"

"Ino invited Hinata-chan and I over. You know her sleepover routine: silly board games, staying up late, sugary snacks..."

"You're getting a little old for all of that." Mebuki pointed out astutely, "I suppose that's fine..."

"Oh! We should play a board game tonight, dear." Kizashi was inspired by the idea. He'd filled the potpourri bowl.

Sakura moved in to kiss her father's scratchy cheek, and then her mother's. Mebuki accepted it, but
had an attentive glint in her eye.

"Sakura, it's a shame that you didn't bring Gaara-kun over to celebrate with us. Won't he be leaving soon?" She was probing the subject.

"He can drop by tomorrow morning before he leaves. I think." Sakura slid her thumb up and down her bag's strap. 'Play it cool. Mom can smell blood in the water already…'

"Is he busy tonight? Maybe that's why you made plans with Ino." Mebuki and Kizashi moved in opposite directions in the living room, tidying it up.

"Exactly."

Mebuki gave Sakura a long, sharp look. Then she relented.

"Bring him over when he's available. We want to say goodbye, if we don't meet again for a while." The mother smiled knowingly, "I'm sure he'd like to do the same."

Sakura seized the opportunity to diffuse parental suspicion, "I know he does. Gaara likes you both very much." She gave a crinkle-eyed smile to her mother and father, "And that's important to me."

That calmed Mebuki right down, even if she did sense a hint of deception coming from her daughter. Kizashi was flattered by the statement. They told Sakura to have a good time before she tapped her shoes on in the genkan and hurried on her way.

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At 4:30 that afternoon, Gaara answered his apartment door. He found Sakura there holding up a large confectionary box like an offering. He blinked at it.

"Once you try what's inside this box," She warned him, "You may love me more."

"I will feel more strongly about you in the future irrespective of food." Gaara replied. He let Sakura inside and closed the door.

She set the box down on the low dining table and was curious as to why it was already set for one. Sakura looked over her shoulder, seeing Gaara fetch another bowl and chopsticks from a kitchen cabinet for his guest, "Oh, were you going to eat?"

"I ordered takeout. It should be here soon."

"So you're having a lazy day?" She nodded in understanding, "I don't mean to—"

"It will be enough for two." Gaara assured her, setting another bowl down on the table. Inquisitive, he pulled the lid of the box up and beheld an assortment of beautiful, unhealthy desserts. Sakura noticed his eyes widen just a touch with _I-have-not-eaten-all-day_ anticipation.

Sakura confirmed, "We're going to be fatties tonight. What kind of takeout did you order?"

"Han food from the Ethnic Quarter."

Awesome. Thank goodness she'd only had a protein bar earlier in the Administrative Building. It was time to pound back saturated fats.

"You don't want to wear your Chunin vest, Sakura?" Gaara asked her. He was walking around the kitchen island, gathering a glass pitcher, ice, and a pot of tea that had been left on the counter to cool. She watched him. He was unusually dressed down.
"No, I brought it home. Call me vain, but I just want to wear pretty things since we got into that habit for the Tournament." Sakura explained, "Gaara-kun…a t-shirt and shorts? Don't you usually wear sashes and drapery?"

"I'm out of clothing." He admitted, filling the pitcher, "Doing laundry now, as a matter of fact."

"Ah." That made sense. No one was laundering clothes for him. He did all of that on his own.

Gaara crossed back to the table and set down the pitcher of cold tea, then took a seat on the zabuton beside Sakura. Before she could utter another word of small talk to him, he moved in and cupped her face, slanting his mouth over hers. Ah, she thought to herself: there it was. He'd been rather casual about her arrival; even though they were both aware she intended to stay over again. Sakura angled into him and shut her eyes to enjoy the greeting. Gaara kissed her for a long while.

A knock at the door sounded.

Gaara leaned back and looked at Sakura. She appeared dazed, her eyes slitted and lips parted.

"Dinner is knocking." She pointed out.

"I'll get it."

"Why don't you sit and I'll get it?" Sakura started rising, smirking at him.

Gaara pushed her back onto the cushion, "No."

"What? I'm not gonna embarrass you and tell the delivery guy that the Kazekage ordered."

"When you put it that way…I think you will." He laid his hand flat on the top of her head, bidding her to stay put, "As my guest, you will wait here and let me serve you. And don't tease me."

She was grinning, "I came here to tease you."

"Sakura, sit." Gaara ordered. He went to the door, glancing over his shoulder to make sure she wasn't going to rush after him or shout something.

Gaara greeted the delivery-teenager, thanking him as he accepted a brown paper bag. The boy clearly had no idea who he was asking 400 Ryo from. But drats, Gaara realized…he forgot the money on the kitchen counter.

And Sakura had found the paper notes and scurried over, standing beside him to pay the delivery-teenager. Then she let it spill that he had just delivered dinner to the Kazekage, and Gaara gruffed in annoyance as the freckled kid in a cap began to sputter and struggled to come up with the appropriate salutation. Gaara gave him an extra note to keep and shut the door in his face.

"Aw! He had no idea what to do!"

"Sakura——"

"Let's eat!" She pranced back to the table.

Exhaling, he calmed down as he crossed the space and took a seat beside Sakura. She was being playful. He could handle it. Gaara knew he was not in the right head space to dish it back to Sakura or clown around, pajama-bumpkin that he was now. She was pulling food containers out of the bag, evaluating each one while making ooh and ahh sounds. He leaned over discreetly to reach for pork and soybean noodles, getting a whiff of Sakura's hair. She always smelled good. He was starting to
do these things automatically while in her presence.

"So…Matsuri isn't joining us?" Sakura wondered, "I kind of wanted to have at least one evening
with her."

A grumpy answer, "Well, that won't happen for a while."

She picked up on his inflection and gave Gaara a curious look, "Did something happen?"

"She…" He trailed off and started shoveling golden-fried lamb and spring onion pies onto her
serving plate.

"Slow down, that's too much." Sakura smiled with concern, "You didn't have a disagreement-?"

"No. I'm surprised the Hokage didn't tell you." Gaara decided to clarify, "Matsuri is seeing
someone."

"Oh-!

"A Tide Village ninja."

"Oh-!" Sakura was reacting to the news in the exact opposite way he had.

"And now he will act as an ambassador to Suna. I have no idea why I allowed that. I wasn't even
drunk." He recalled, "I don't want her to be unhappy… but I don't want him to make her unhappy."

"He won't! What's his name, by the way?"

"Menma."

She nodded before a bite of rice and vegetables, "Ah, that's right."

Gaara chewed on a dumpling lethargically.

"Gaara… such is life. Let her make mistakes and get hurt. Let her date and succeed. She'll come to
you if she needs you. You'll always be her teacher." Sakura reminded him, "But I get the feeling
Matsuri can handle this and make something good out of it."

"Optimist."

"I know you think that too."

"I do." He admitted with a half-full mouth, "But now I worry more about others being hurt, and not
doing enough to stop it. Our villages. You. Everyone."

She paused before another bite, "…what a thing to worry about. So mature."

Gaara grunted at her but smiled a little. The pan-fried pies were the first to go. It only took a few
minutes to clear the container.

"These barbecue skewers are kind of burnt…" Sakura noted, passing off the container of chicken.
Gaara didn't care. He ate one.

"Did you visit your teammate in the hospital?" Gaara asked, "And how is Sato?"

"Oh! I did. Tama was alert and cheerful. Sato was too, thank goodness." She wilted a bit when she
added, "I don't even know where to start with Tama's lower body injuries. We'll need more tests to examine the fractures and nerve damage."

"Can't Tsunade heal her?" He wondered.

"I know she can try. But…it'll be dangerous. Whatever procedure she attempts will be high-risk." Sakura supposed, "I…"

She stopped talking and poured herself some chilled tea. She looked Gaara in the face, shiny-eyed.

"I can't take it anymore." Her voice thickened, "I don't want to lose another teammate. I don't want to take missions without her. Tama's helped me so much." Sakura blinked her eyes and turned away, "I want to do more. To help her. I want her to live and serve as a Chunin like the rest of us."

She sipped her tea and tried to relax. Gaara turned a bit and braced her as she leaned into him.

"Tama-san is fortunate to have someone like you, even if she doesn't recover." He informed her, "She is a true friend to you and is dedicated to your team. She's grown much stronger than when I saw her last."

"All that training so she can waste away in a hospital bed…" Sakura lamented.

Gaara halted her train of thought, "Stop that."

They finished eating and boxed up the leftovers. After tidying up and putting the food away, Sakura followed her boyfriend to the laundry closet after a buzzer sounded. She helped him fold dried clothing.

"Today in Tsunade-shishou's office I was filing employee reports…and I read some of their long-term goals…" Sakura recalled, assisting Gaara with quartering a long sash, "It made me think about what I want to do."

"And what do you want to do?"

"A lot of things. I would like to set up an inter-village conference of Medic-nin and experts annually, to share research and address crises; kind of like a Kage Summit…but that's ambitious at this point."

"It's still an excellent idea." Gaara commended the objective.

"I think that goal is much further out. But maybe in a few years or so…I can get funding and start a bigger, better-staffed mental health clinic. Divisions for children, civilians, shinobi…the clinic we do have in Leaf is kind of falling apart because of its board and administration." Sakura explained, folding pants as she spoke, "I want to run one myself. Correctly. I need to figure out the financial piece, though. Without inviting greedy interests and layabouts into management…"

He agreed, "The quality of the establishment can only be as good as its foundation."

"Did you know that up to 52 percent of active duty shinobi don't seek mental health counseling even when they know they need it?" She quizzed him, "Even when it's affordable or free?"

"Very concerning."

"That's what I said. No one has bothered to do anything about it. I asked Tsunade-sama about using some revenue from the Exam…but she said it's already been mostly spent by the village council on other projects."
Gaara sighed. He knew what it was like when village administrators spent money before anyone had even physically seen it.

"How does Sunagakure compare, on the mental health front?"

"It is less organized and not as available as it is here…though I don't have formal reports on it. I lack the experts to brief with me," Gaara confessed, "I do care. I want to know. I want to hear what you think about it, and have you give me guidance if you can."

Sakura smiled at him and then tottered off with a pile of towels. She went to put them away in a linen closet. Gaara took a pile of folded clothing and carried it by hamper to his bedroom. When he passed the dining room window, he stopped and observed a torrential downpour that had started outside, darkening the evening sky.

"Gaara, should I put towels in the bathroom?" He heard her ask from the linen closet.

"Just two."

"Will do!" Sakura's voice carried down the hall.

While he dawdled at the closet and dresser putting apparel away, Sakura returned to him and waited in the doorway, watching him. She smiled and leaned on the doorframe, "You know what I want to do now…so how about you tell me what you want to do in the future?"

He gave her a wary, side-eye look around the corner of the dresser, "What I want to do?"

"Yes."

"That I'm not already doing or working towards?"

"Yes. Details like that."

"I don't know." Gaara was a bit evasive about it.

"Bullshit— you don't know! Everyone has something they're working towards." She protested.

He did not reply to that. Gaara finished organizing things into drawers and made himself scarce at his bedroom closet, placing tops on hangers. Sakura frowned, annoyed. It was not an especially hard topic to talk about, was it? She was curious. Surely he understood?

She left the doorway without a word. It was suspiciously quiet for six minutes and Gaara concluded his laundry routine, wondering what his girlfriend had gotten up to. He sort of, a tiny bit, did want to tell her what he was looking forward to…but he feared she would not approve of the goal he had in mind. It wasn't typical. He left his bedroom to go looking for her.

"Sakura?"

No answer.

He grumbled to himself and poked into the bathroom, squeaking the door open as he heard water being run. The tub was filled, and beside it Sakura was seated on a bathing stool, completely nude, rinsing herself down with a shower head. She had her back turned to him.

He cleared his throat, miffed, "Sakura."

"Hm?" She glanced back at him, rinsing suds from her shoulders.
"I didn't give you permission to bathe here."

"I didn't know I needed to ask for permission. I'm sorry." She smiled, "Can I take a bath?"

"If you don't, you'll have wasted water."

"Thanks." She took that as a yes.

Even more annoyed, Gaara shut the door and stood in the hallway. Then, he pressed his forehead against it and listened to Sakura bumble around in the washroom. The showerhead had switched off by the sound of it. He took a moment to collect himself. Maybe this was more normal than he thought? Sharing a living space. Maybe he should tell her about the unconventional goal he had in mind?

He took a deep breath and opened the door, finding that Sakura had settled herself in the tub, up to her neck in warm water. She winked at him and said that she really was sorry, "I shouldn't be testing boundaries in your home. It's rude! I wanted to clean up, but I should have asked first."

Gaara shook his head and shut the door behind him. He slid down the wood panel until he sat on the floor where it was dry, ready to stay and talk, "You're not rude. I like that you're comfortable around me."

"I'm rude. But thank you, I am comfortable around you, Gaara."

"I don't mind." His tone of voice evoked a sense of appreciation for the fact she was naked in the tub he used.

Sakura sighed and leaned back, shutting her eyes as she relaxed.

"I do have quite a few expectations for the future." Gaara told her, shattering the silence. She cracked an eye open and listened to him as he went on, "I want Temari and Kankuro to train Genin teams while they still have the energy. They have the skills and mentorship for it. But I've made them both so busy lately…they can't scout for students or read Academy profiles."

"Things will calm down again." Sakura assured him.

"Temari doesn't seem that interested. Not as much as Kankuro is." Gaara recalled discussions with his siblings, and rested his arms over his bent knees, "And down the line I want them installed on the Village Council when they have off from missions. They're already very highly qualified for those seats…and the assembly needs a younger, fresher perspective."

Sakura was chuckling in the tub.

"I don't want Matsuri to get too wrapped up with a sweetheart now. I was going to assign her an apprenticeship to Sand's best Sealing Corps Commissioner, Maki. She already likes Matsuri and sees potential in her. I don't know if I can get her to agree to train that way now if she wants to spend more time and energy on the Tide Village…" He sighed in frustration, "She could be a Jounin if she kept working hard for a few years."

Sakura was optimistic again, "Maybe she can balance it out? Work with Tide and her boyfriend…and still train with the Sealing Corps?"

"I hope so. The only way to know is to ask her to do it." Gaara acknowledged.

"But what about you?" Sakura pressed, "What do you want to do, Gaara?"
"I…” He tilted his head up and looked at the ceiling, pondering, "I want to formalize an agreement with Sand about freeing Shukaku. Once I have it in writing, I can submit it to the council and see how enthusiastic they are about ratifying something like that."

"If they don't like the proposal coming from you alone, maybe you could have portions of it supported by testimony from other jinchuriki?" Sakura suggested.

"Oh." That was a good idea.

"Yeah, if other jinchuriki endorse it and ask their villages to honor similar agreements, you can set a precedent."

"Hmm. Cloud and Tide might immediately get on board with that…"

"The Tide village has a jinchuriki?" Sakura squealed, "When did that happen?"

"He's a transplant from Mist. Very talented. Our first meeting went well." Gaara explained, "I should introduce you to him, sometime."

"Wow, that'd be great."

"And along that same line, I want to strengthen deals and build new import incentives for the Tide Village. It could be the greatest opportunity that Hidden Sand has had…since its founding." Gaara estimated, "Which is pathetic from a financial standpoint. That over a hundred years of stagnation and slippage has endured."

"Well, you know…the desert." Sakura said, sticking her toes up from the tub water, "It's not exactly a business utopia."

"But soon it could be. We're nearly there."

"Have you thought about agricultural and greenhouse initiatives-?"

"We have already started a few." Gaara was proud to say.

"Whoa! Where will you build them?" She was impressed.

"There are several locations that daring architects said they can work into semi-subterranean gardens, with the right controls and management."

"How much did that cost?" Sakura snickered.

"The figure keeps going up. It should be worth it." Gaara added finally, "But what I think about most is…retiring in ten years or less."

A soft splash sounded as Sakura pulled her feet beneath the water's surface again, turning to stare at Gaara. He looked back at her and was definitely being sincere, judging by his facial expression.

"You mean…retire from being Kazekage?" She asked, and watched him nod in the affirmative, "You want to be done in ten years or less? Why? You practically just started!"

"It's been two years already. I accomplished quite a few things." He observed calmly.

"But why?" Sakura demanded, astounded, "Can you not…handle it anymore? Is it not what you thought?"
"It's a privilege. It's been very rewarding." Gaara assured her, his expression softening, "I just want there to be an end to it. To the work. To...the distance between us." He confirmed, "I can't stand being far away from you anymore, Sakura. I've thought about what your parents said. I won't make things harder for you if I don't have to."

She was a stuttering mess, slick strands of pastel hair clung to her temple and cheek, "...u-uh...you m-mean—?"

"I know I can live happily in Leaf and be proud of the legacy I leave in Sand." Gaara stated plainly. He was watching her reaction from across the bathroom, amused by her surprise and timidity.

"You mean..." Sakura adjusted her warbling voice, "You want to live...with me?"

"Yes. I would retire tomorrow if I could, but I need to round off my responsibilities."

She held up her hands, overwhelmed, "Wait! You don't need to do anything like that, Gaara! I can move. Really. I have no problem with going to Suna when I get the clearance to-!"

"I dislike how that would remove you from your family and friends. Your parents were concerned about you sacrificing so much for me." Gaara assured her, "I feel the same way they do."

"They're your family and friends too, you know." Sakura insisted.

They went quiet for a while and thought about it.

Sakura scooched down in the tub and ruminated on the possibility. It came with many implications. She blew a few bubbles and tried to muster the courage to ask the question that was really weighing on her mind, at that point.

Almost inaudibly, Sakura asked a question half-gurgled from the water. She was abruptly shy and soft-spoken.

Gaara was turned toward her and seated on the floor, scrunching his face to try to understand, "I didn't hear you, Sakura."

"Um..."

"What did you say?" Gaara needed her to repeat it.

"...I asked..." She could form the words a bit clearer this time, "Do you...want a...family?"

He regarded her with rounder, wider eyes, processing the inquiry. Then he bounced the question back at Sakura, "Do you?"

"What? No, you can't deflect it, I asked you first!" Sakura griped. She was trying to shrink into the tub as if to hide, embarrassed.

Gaara took another twenty seconds to look at her and think.

"I do want a family." It was a basic answer. Sakura watched him noodle on it for a few more seconds.

A tidal wave of honesty suddenly came out of his mouth, "I want to have children. I don't know why I've thought about it so much, but I have. When you came to Suna for the training workshop, I kept thinking." Gaara continued the stream of consciousness tangent, "Many children. I like children; actually...they've grown on me..."
Sakura had adopted the reflexes of nervous poultry from her spot in the tub. Shocked, she needed to stop his narrative and held up a finger, interrupting Gaara, "Okay. To clarify...you want children with me?"

"Did I leave that part out?" He couldn't remember.

"I don't know. Maybe it was implied? But I really need you to tell me what qualifies as many children in your opinion." Sakura notified him, "Can you...?"

"Four." Gaara said.

"Ah, no." She panned it, "I want to continue my career."

"Three." He countered.

"Again, by what persuasion do you expect me to manage that even if I'm in Sand? Because Temari and Kankuro may have their own families and maybe they don't want to babysit?" Sakura wrapped a tidy rejoinder around it, "Ugh. And my mother would ruin them in Leaf..."

"I see how this is going to work." Gaara was getting it, "Two...because that is the standard nuclear family and I will persuade you. I can be relied upon while caring for them and raising them. It wouldn't be your responsibility alone. I'll have the time."

Sakura continued to shrink the number, "1.5, because that's a modern average and I like it better."

"That isn't even a whole number." Gaara complained.

"The 0.5 is a pet and the 1 is the kid."

Gaara replied, "I don't like pets unless they are autonomous and hygienic."

"...I think you misunderstand what a pet is." She snarked at him.

"Sakura," He got serious about the subject, "You can do and achieve whatever you want to. I won't make it so you are burdened or impeded in any way. You have a sharp mind for policy and improvement. You'd make a better Kage than I. You are a more charismatic, personable mover and shaker than I can ever hope to be. So work, imagine, and create things if that's what you want to do."

Gaara quelled her fears by admitting, "I can be at home with children. I would like that."

She swallowed hard. He had batted her heart out of the park—a home run.

"Now I'm more inclined towards two kids because you said that." She told him, "But you know...all of this requires the act of making, carrying, and then pushing the watermelon through the orange... which has always scared me in a vain sort of way..."

Gaara pointed out, "We don't have to decide now."

"Right, right..."

"Whatever compromises need to be made, we can make them when we're ready. You have greatness and genius that you need to share." Gaara told her, "I need you to take higher-level missions and advise councils, to advocate for your ideas— which are an incredible asset...sow the seeds for your goals now. I will help you."

She felt jittery. Sakura nodded to him, smiling like an idiot, and then lowered her forehead to her raised knees. Not only did he call her a genius, but he was emphasizing the importance of her using
that talent to bring about change. Gaara pushed himself up from the floor to stand. She watched him from the corner of her eye.

Goodness, she was besotted with him. Sakura did a mental, backwards search for the stupid reasons why she had once thought Sasuke had been worth her time. He had asked for so much and given so little. Now it finally felt like she had found love that was rooted in equality and respect. It was powerful. Gaara made her feel strong.

On his way out of the bathroom Gaara said he would bring clean night clothes for her. She thanked him before the door clicked shut.

Sakura stared at the wall and was hyper-conscious of her elevated heartbeat. The excitement had gone from a shade of surreal to tangible ecstasy. *Lucky does not even describe it anymore…* She composed herself, took a breath, and then stood from the tub to towel off. She drained the water and neatened the room.

'Well,' Sakura thought to herself, *I brought condoms this time. And I know I am going to be using them…because, boy, did we come up with a great plan after that talk.*

Wrapped in her towel, Sakura accepted the clothes that Gaara handed off to her at the door. She raised her eyebrows, realizing he had given her a shirt and shorts of his own. She responded to Gaara's wary look and explained, "This is fine, but-! I brought clothes with me in my bag."

"Oh, I'll—"

Sakura shut the door and laughed, "Sorry, I think I want to wear these more!" She heard him give up and walk down the hallway. She shed her towel and dressed, thrilled that she had a chance to wear something of her boyfriend's. *Maybe I can sneak off with these and borrow them? I wanted something of Gaara's while he's gone again.* Then she remembered she had the key to his flat. She could come by anytime she wanted and run amok in the place. Nap on the couch; try on clothes in his room…

She decided that would be intrusive. She would probably still do it, though. Sakura regarded herself in the mirror, intrigued by the deep, draped 'v' at the front and back of the black shirt. *This is very desert-dweller…* The shorts were burgundy and soft and she wanted to steal them.

Sakura ventured out and found Gaara at the dining table again, frisking the box of desserts. She plopped down beside him on a cushion, "You pick first, Gaara."

"I don't know what most of this is."

"Well you must've had daifuku before. You know what that is." Sakura presumed.

"Sometimes Haku would get it." Gaara acknowledged. He picked up the glutinous rice cake and bit into it, then turned to her in surprise.

"There are whole strawberries inside the red bean paste," She informed him, "Good, isn't it?"

He nodded and then pointed to a square tart. He wanted to know what it was.

"Carrot cake." She laughed lightly.

Gaara finished chewing, "Not real carrots…"

"They're dissolved in the batter. It's not very noticeable. Delicious, if you ask me."
"Why is there a design of a rabbit on it?"

Sakura split a piece with him, "Because the baker thought it was cute? Carrots. Rabbits. You know…"

Gaara said nothing and wolfed it down. He continued scrutinizing the treats.

It took a moment before he appraised, "The daifuku is better."

"It's the strawberry inside that makes it a winner." She agreed.

"What is that golden cube?"

"Honey toast. They put chocolate on it for me." Sakura tittered and pulled a corner of the treat off, letting him try it.

He was sitting closer, she noticed. They stared each other in the face while eating and ripping the honey-chocolate toast to pieces. It was the clear favorite.

"Nothing sugary is made in Suna." Gaara was a tad mournful about it.

"Maybe that's to your benefit." Sakura theorized, "I think I can feel my arteries being blocked as I eat this." She licked a syrupy spot off of her thumb after carelessly handling her treat.

"It's an enjoyable way to die." Gaara was eyeing the daifuku again, but canted his head to watch Sakura try to manage her sticky hands. Gently, he plucked her wrist up and did not break eye contact with her when he brought her hand to his mouth.

She inhaled harshly from her nostrils and pursed her lips, wondering what stupid face she was making as Gaara lapped the honey's sheen from her fingertips. Daring, he watched her face emote a variety of feelings in a rainbow of expressions, sucking her pointer finger clean. Sakura sat on her heels, stunned, dropping her hand to her lap after Gaara let it go. In her mind, where a clear, coherent inner voice usually sounded to direct her thought processes, she found only a static buzz.

It looked like he was about to say something, but Sakura quickly poked her hand into the box and drew it out, sticky again. Gaara gazed at her incredulously.

"…look at that…w-would you mind…?" She was a mix of amused and skittish when Gaara made no comment and raised her hand again to lick it clean.

"…look at that…w-would you mind…?" She was a mix of amused and skittish when Gaara made no comment and raised her hand again to lick it clean.

Focus shifted away from dessert altogether. The heated, aching, whirring sensation between her primly folded thighs, her sense of smell sharpening, and taste along with it…Sakura was heavily fuddled by her awareness of him. She leaned forward and narrowed her eyes, watching him hold her hand as if it were a delicate, small thing that needed protecting…

Gaara leaned back to avoid her attempted kiss. He was still watching her. She blinked in confusion, scooching in again, only to be evaded as he slipped back a little on a floor cushion. Bewildered, Sakura then began to detect that he was teasing—a subtle, impish look on his face.

"Kiss me, jerk." She furrowed her brow at him.

"I did that already." He recalled that she had been thoroughly kissed when she first stopped over.

Sakura briefly debated holding him down and getting what she asked for, but she feigned hurt instead and turned her face to the side, drooping, her hand slipping out of Gaara's. Like many a
girlish actress, her on-the- verge-of-tears face was a reliable standby. He moved in again and
murmured softly against her slender neck. His hands had roamed, sliding down her arms, and Gaara
spun her nearly a full-turn while she sat on her zabuton. He faced her back. Sakura trembled and felt
him push aside the curtain of her hair, pressing an open-mouthed kiss to the nape of her neck.

It occurred to Sakura that she didn't need to demand anything from him or continue teasing him.
Gaara definitely knew what she wanted. 'So I'll just...let him...' Her brainwaves were scrambled. The
game was afoot. He wanted to seduce her. He didn't need any guidance. Gaara's kisses traveled
down her back, free to descend and graze her skin where the shirt dipped. He tugged a little on the
fabric, nearly reaching her lower back. The kissing and pressure from his hands folded Sakura
forward, bent almost in a formal floor bow.

His hands moved along her flanks over the draped top. Gaara was kissing his way up, but he kept
Sakura in that tucked, vulnerable position. She wasn't resisting. She was calm and alert to every
touch, sighing sometimes. Gaara edged in closer, pressing against her to reach her neck again,
carding his fingers through short, pink locks; kissing her skin. A soft nip at the round of her right
shoulder elicited a shudder. Sakura had her head turned sideways, only able to see Gaara's hand
pressed flat to the wood floor beside her face. He was working diligently.

The attention to her shoulders, neck, and the backs of her ears felt good and was quite romantic,
Sakura thought to herself. Romantic was nice, but she was hoping for more progressive action. With
a brief, nondescript motion, she raised her hips and ground her backside into his front. A frantically
thoughtful silence followed. From her viewpoint near the floor, angled in a rather provocative
position, Sakura watched Gaara's hand lift away from the hardwood. She felt him replace his hands
at her waist, anchoring her. Her ears did not lie: he had moaned softly.

That was a new reaction, 'What a great sound. I need to make him do that again...'

Fascinated by the effect this had on Gaara, she pushed back against him with her bottom and rubbed.
His feedback was louder—a strangled groan that quieted in a hiss. He was very, noticeably hard and
snug against the cleft of her ass. 'Hmm. What to do? Gaara seems to like this, even if we're not face-
to-face, so...'

For the sake of science and her own curiosity, Sakura ground against him again, without pausing to
see what he would do. The response from the ordinarily quiet man behind her was a piercing,
reactive wail, and Gaara's grip on her hips roughly sunk into her flesh. Abruptly, he let go and
shimmied away from her. Sakura peeked over her shoulder, slowly sitting upright again after he'd
retreated. Gaara was assessing her too, flustered.

"Now why did you stop? That was the perfect thing to do while we're not aspectant." She didn't turn
around completely, hoping he'd be willing to proceed with the newfound pastime.

"I was..." Gaara was a bit flushed, "I didn't want to hurt you."

"You weren't. It was great." Sakura assured him, and then boldly taunted, "Come on, Gaara. I'll take
something off if you do."

His brain was on two second delay, "Take something off of myself?"

"Yes. Remove your own clothing. We'll make it fun, and hopefully not awkward."

She was impish and snickering over her shoulder at him. Enticed, but lacking blood in the northern
portion of his body, Gaara agreed and sat behind Sakura, watching her back and wondering what to do.

'Good. Stripping will move us along.' Sakura was gloating to herself, pulling her top off over her head, That suggestion helped, I think. Gaara takes direction well.'

To be coy, Sakura swiped a spot of chocolate from what remained of the honey toast on the table. She turned to look at her boyfriend, as alluring and topless as possible, and sucked the sweetness off of her fingertip. Certainly he would react to such temptation! Then she got an eyeful of Gaara, who she expected to match her state of undress…and squawked in startlement.

He was not a modest, shy kind of naked— Gaara was up on his knees, staring at her, lanky muscle, pale skin, with a raging erection type of naked.

So. He had missed the point of the playful exercise. His clothes were strewn about on the floor.

"Gaara…” Sakura cleared her throat and averted her eyes, her face scarlet, "One article at a time…is what I meant. I-I…wanted you to copy what I did."

He had moved closer. Sakura could feel the warmth of his body as he kneeled behind her and spoke, "But this was the end result you were thinking of."

"Yeah, but not quite so quick." She admitted.

"I know." He acknowledged loftily, "That's why I did it." Gaara traced a hand in dreamy patterns over her bare back, "And I think you should copy me."

"I…eh-hem…I definitely am going to…” Sakura kept her eyes on Gaara's face when she turned toward him again. Sometimes, no matter how sly she thought she was, Gaara was a pinch more cunning when it counted. Or it only looked that way, and he was really just winging it— not in the least embarrassed.

The kisses were much tastier mid-dessert, and since Sakura's hands were busy with his bare shoulders and chest she let him slide her shorts off. Maybe he shouldn't have dressed her after her bath, Gaara wondered while flicking said shorts across the room. Maybe Sakura would have let him sweep her up and toss her into bed while she was fabulously naked and pruny? Though the idea crossed his mind, he had prioritized good manners and boxed confections first. Not the worst way to go about it, they could agree.

Then there was nothing cute or modest about it. She had nearly climbed into his lap, voraciously claiming his mouth, and Gaara traced his hands over the softest, most sacred parts of her body. Outside, a rumble of thunder accompanied the rainstorm. Sakura flicked an eye to the darkened window, her brain still considering things in the background of pleasure and exploration.

"I wonder how often people…in Konoha…” She tried to speak around his kiss, "Disrobe in their dining rooms?"

"Probably not very often." Gaara estimated. He relished the soft sound Sakura made when her breasts were meticulously rubbed in circles, a silken touch. He pulled her closer and tipped her head back for a kiss.

Sakura's reasoning capability was rapidly shrinking. Undeniably, it was going to happen. Dessert had been a good call on her part. Or maybe the bath had been? And yet, she just couldn't abide the wide space of the dining area and the window that gave the dark evening a glimpse of their activity. With a quiet, smack sound, she interrupted another kiss, "Local voyeurs are in for a show…and they
may ask you later who did your nice, new floors." She jested, "Gaara, you have a perfectly good bed…"

He agreed with a weird growling sound and scooped her up. For the road, Sakura snatched a daifuku and bit half of it away. She crammed the rest of the mochi ball into Gaara's mouth as he relocated her. Down the hallway he finished chewing and requested, "Buy more of those."

Once in the bedroom, Sakura made nonsensical, delighted sounds and did not care that she was just about hurled onto the top of a fluffy comforter. She briefly took stock of her surroundings— fresh sheets, lights out, occasional illumination by lightning in the room, and her bag sat neatly on the bedside table like a good little overnight bag should.

Gaara wrapped his hand around her ankle and pulled Sakura toward the bed's edge, firm yet gentle with the motion. She blinked and watched him, wanting to ask what was on the agenda…but she didn't say anything. She sucked in a breath when he kneeled down and slid his hand up her leg, lifting it, pressing kisses past her calf and inner thigh. He roamed up again, over her hips, kissing her stomach and took time to dote on raised nipples, listening to her mumble. Gaara gravitated back towards the porcelain of her stomach after a time, reverent. Sakura watched in wonder; feverish, excited, and curious about what he intended to do.

"Are you alright?" His voice sounded lower, sultry to her ears. Gaara's eyes turned up to look at her face from where he hovered over her navel.

She trilled her answer, "Yes! Uh-herm! Sorry. Yes, why don't you come up here?"

"I will. But not yet." His face looked positively sharp and irresistible in the dim light.

Sakura liked trolling her fingertips over his smooth skin, the knolls and sinew of muscle, then tracing lightly across his scalp. He was using his mouth to get better acquainted with her features, and for now she would do the same with her clever hands. Whenever he decided to join her on the bed, she figured, he wouldn't object to an onslaught of kisses. Then Gaara moved down again. She hadn't expected his sudden relocation between her legs, or how he unabashedly pressed his mouth to her folds. Sakura shrieked in surprise.

He snapped back and ended the contact, acknowledging her with wide eyes, "Should I not-?"

"Don't- No, I mean…do it again. Don't mind the vocalization, please." Sakura struggled to communicate, frantic, aching and excited, "It was new. It's alright. Gaara, please do it again?"

Gaara evaluated her for a long moment, reading between the lines of consent to see if she actually meant it— actually wanted him to do it. That grimacing face of hers…it was impatience and desire on a pale canvas, framed by her damp, blush hair. He had to look down and away, cowed by her beauty. Sakura made another annoyed, encouraging sound at him. Then he bent and resumed, testing with a flick of his tongue.

Sakura was still rather noisy but he paid less attention, wondering at this strange, new human part that was so smooth and pliant under his mouth. Without thinking much, Gaara slid his hand to the space below her bellybutton and held there. He shut his eyes and brushed his lips aimlessly, dipping his tongue when he felt bolder, aware of Sakura's approving sounds and wriggling. Testing, tasting.

His mind went to a way-station at the precipice of consciousness. 'Oh. We won't be friends anymore.' Gaara thought, 'Not like how I used to know you and wish for you as a friend. Then, at the Academy. On summer days when we were younger, and you never stood too close to me, Sakura.' He lapped at a sensitive spot, thinking, 'I will always want you more. Not in simple ways. I want you to give me
Her touches were busy skimming any part of him she could reach, furling in his hair at times. Gaara listened as Sakura gave him directions, breathy and vague though they were. A few instructions were nearly too scientific in nature, and Sakura bit her tongue, trying to muffle her logical talk and keep it sexy. Before long, her boyfriend struck the ideal balance of pressures and attention with his tongue and lips. Her wailing was a very good indicator, so Gaara took the cue and continued what he was doing, hearing the pitch rise; Sakura's groaning was a lightning strike to his brainstem.

She nearly ripped hair out of his head, suddenly caterwauling. Gaara took care not to overreact or cease contact. He did watch in fascination as Sakura thrashed and made disbelieving sounds. Her head lolled on her neck and her pink lips parted— he did not look away, his mouth still canny at work. Gaara did take liberties as she peaked, enticed by the experience of it, and slid down her folds over the flesh bridge below. Though he was stimulated by the texture and taboo, Sakura made a definitively shocked grunt of objection and surprise.

She patted his cheek and pushed his face away. Sakura was panting and chattering nonsensically, "Was the— huh, did you-? Ah…whew… down there… was that—? Intentional." She breathed deeply, her chest heaving beautifully. Gaara stared. It took a bit for him to compose an answer.

"Should I have not done that?" He wondered, genuinely ignorant.

Sakura was moderately oxygenated, "I…it's weird. It's never been…the most I've ever done for myself…uh." She shook off her embarrassment, "That made it feel way better, but I can't condone you… going that far down, right now. Hygiene! I hate to give a health rant, but that sort of venture goes best with some preparation. You understand, right? The need for prep."

"I understand." Gaara confirmed, clambering up onto the bed beside her.

"But damn it felt good." Sakura added as an afterthought. She had only ever manually pleasured herself all by her lonesome. It was extraordinary to rocket to new levels and feel unfamiliar, insurmountable things because of him.

They rolled on their sides to face each other, pawing lazily and curiously. Sakura grinned at him, "Thank you, Gaara. That was a nice maiden voyage."

"That's what it was, wasn't it?" He was pleased and speaking against her mouth, in-between oddly flavored kisses, "I want to do that to you every day."

"-now think about—"

"Before work. Every day." Gaara decided to himself. He had palmed her ass cheeks in each hand, kneading them while his lips traveled down her neck.

"Do I have to set the bar that high?" Sakura wondered if it had to be reciprocal treatment. She had a hand wrapped around the urgent erection between their stomachs. He stopped moving and sucked wind sharply when the pad of her thumb grazed over the underside bundle of nerves. Sakura made a note of the reaction.

He assured her, "You just have to show up."

"Ah. I got it. Oh gosh, I should know now not to accept missions you request me for. It'll be a trap." She teased.

"A trap." Gaara's voice was changing octaves as her fingertips skimmed sensitive flesh. It was too
much. She did so little to make him feel so much.

His verbal communication had tragically declined. All power had been diverted to the groin, away from extremities. He was poised to snap like an elastic band—so close…

Gaara rolled away from her and escaped Sakura's fast-learner hand. She pouted at him.

"Just a brief stop." Wow, he managed to speak. Gaara was aware of how it sounded like he was being strangled. Without a break in the action it'd have been over with half a second ago.

Sakura, of course, understood. She regarded him as he laid belly-down on the bed, running her hands from the crown of his head and southbound over his back, surfing down to the backs of his legs. "Oh." She discovered his ass, and with it, rediscovered the dimples of his lower back, "This is perfection I don't see often."

He snorted at her.

"Are you relaxing? We're not done yet. And shush. I like your butt." Sakura informed him.

Within twenty or so seconds Gaara had pushed himself up, seized her wrists, and toppled Sakura over onto crinkling down and pillows. Their staring match was organic and amenable, but Gaara slowly began to choose alluring locales on her body: clavicle, the curves of her breasts, pert nipples, ribcage—nipping and growling. Sakura writhed under those attentions for a time.

Gaara raised his head to peer up at her. His eyes were begging long before he said, "I want to be inside of you." Sakura stared back at him, processing as he requested, "Please. Can I?"

She gave him a comically solemn look, "Yes. You can."

He nearly forgot himself and proceeded. With a touch of super-strength, Sakura batted him aside and reached for her obediently present overnight bag. Gaara watched her and slowly caught on that, oh right, she was trying to be practical and responsible. Like last time. And he still wasn't thinking much about those virtues, even though he'd pontificated about them earlier in the bathroom. His stunted thought processes, Gaara accepted, probably had to do with arousal and other biological impediments.

A finger snap got his attention while his mind and eyes wandered. He blinked at Sakura. She held up a square of plastic packaging in front of his face. With as much dignity as she could muster, Sakura asked him, "So…ever used one of these before?"

Mildly offended, he frowned at her.

"That's a no?"

"I have never had sex before you. Dispose of the searching questions and just ask me if you were concerned." Gaara sniffed at her.

She felt a little bad that she had bothered to be insecure about it. He wasn't exactly a ladies' man. Or anyone's man. Gaara was the bare minimum of social, most days.

"Right…then perhaps you've seen a condom and know what to do with it?"

"I suppose I know. I've seen them in my brother's drawer."

"That was…too much information." Sakura sighed.
"Teach me." Gaara invited. So she did, with a red face, demonstrate correct application and helpful tips that had been shared with her. After that, it was on and he looked down at himself as if he'd made some determination while Sakura sat anxiously beside him. If she wound herself up anymore she'd have a fit of nervous hiccups.

She cleared her throat and gave him options, "Front or back? You...kind of liked it from behind when we were—"

Gaara seemed even more annoyed by her implication, "No." He brushed against her and pushed her down onto her back, "It's impersonal that way. It might hurt you."

"I don't know about that...and either way..." Sakura gave a small shrug.

"I want to see you." He supplied her with the actual rationale and it was enough. Gaara aligned himself with her body and was still accepting kisses, though distractedly. He paid more attention to her slow, luscious explorations with her tongue, savoring his mouth. She was trembling. Sakura's jitters allayed when Gaara folded his hand over hers, holding her in a protective manner.

Mid-kiss she tensed at the pressure of entry, somewhat relieved by the fact that she was obscenely, messily lubricated. A deluge of worries crashed in her thoughts, and Sakura addressed it for a millisecond before noticing something remarkable. She distinctly felt him, cautiously easing in, his fingers laced with hers while Gaara grumbled in a variety of tones. 'Whoa. Wait.' The alien feeling was suddenly marvelous and not what she'd anticipated, 'I was told this hurts. I do not...agree with that.' To her happy surprise, it was a very agreeable sensation. Perhaps because of all of the other pleasure signals hailing her brain and body at the moment, but she'd take it. No complaints.

Gaara, for his part, was far beyond that mild acknowledgment. Fully seated inside of her, everything was amplified. Sakura's deep kisses and stray touches were insane. The caress of her ankle moving up his hip, when she was relaxed enough to cinch her legs around his waist...he understood what all of the fuss was about— why people wanted to do this. He was unashamed of the peculiar grunts and moans he uttered against her skin. Sakura seemed pleased by those noises. Though timidly, she matched the slow rhythm he'd established.

The way she looked when she squirmed, moving his free hand to a breast, glorious skin to skin, moving beneath him, tightening around him...he opened his mouth while inhaling her soapy smell, lost in sensitivity. Gaara groaned and stopped moving completely. He didn't want to finish. There had to be a way to prolong such a divine act.

Oh. But she was a trickster and brat; and Sakura ground herself into him—a minuscule in-and-out slide that made everything wild and dim and sensory. Gaara's rational thought and "present self" were hurled into mental wilderness. He didn't fight or protest what she was doing. He was meeting her in a fanatical epicenter of vulnerability. How could something feel so good that a mortal had a louder, abstract concept of death? Did she feel this way too?

Gaara tried asking her that, but the words came out sloppy.

"It is very good." She was smiling and had an arm draped around his shoulders. He motioned for her to stop moving and she did.

He exhaled roughly, "Try not to move. I don't want to..."

"I know..." Some of her playfulness had come back and replaced apprehension, "There's no rush. They say a man's first time is pretty short—" Gaara pressed a finger to her lips quiet her. She'd still made her point.
It was hard to look at her she was so beautiful. The dark of the room couldn't dim her radiance. Sakura's tea-leaf eyes were bright and seemed to pierce through him. It made him ache.

"You're not in pain?" Gaara asked a bit late.

"No. This is not what others told me it would be." Sakura confirmed, "Maybe it's because we were so occupied beforehand...or my pain threshold is way beyond this." She found a spot on his neck that needed to be nibbled and kissed.

"Sakura, I don't know how...to tell you..." He was sighing and rumbling, slowly thrusting again, "How good it feels to be inside of you."

"We're not poets. Besides, I can kind of tell just by looking at you...what it must be like." Her hands were all over the place and setting his skin a-tingle.

"Then look at me." Gaara's eyes were narrowed and his face a breath away from hers, bearing down on her and moving faster. She made a small sound of aroused accord, sinking her nails into his shoulder and back. She kept her eyes on him.

The proximity and tightness— the pleasure of Sakura's reactions, mewls, and touches; it made him moan and cry out in ways he had never dared. Every nerve ending that Gaara had was his new best friend. The emotions playing across Sakura's features, it was as if he instantly understood the dozens of feelings she was experiencing all at once. It was so strange. She thrashed more when he got bolder, deeper. She softly vocalized and watched him.

Then the far-off wilderness feeling in his mind condensed down to a tiny focal point. Gaara could only stare at her face in wonder and let himself come. It was visceral clarity. Short-lived and intense. Nothing remarkable or outrageous about it, the two entwined and making low sounds; Gaara pressing his face into the curve of her neck to ride out the waves. It was curiously simple as well as profound. Sakura relished his vulnerable countenance during and after orgasm.

For a long while they stayed in the embrace, brushing each other lightly with fingertips and lips. Intrigued, Sakura lifted his hand and noticed claw tips that had sprouted, "This again? That's two for two."

"I got the sheets rather than your skin, thankfully."

"It's fine. It'll just be our normal." She proclaimed cheerfully.

He groaned tiredly when he pulled out. Sakura was briefly fascinated by the drenched condom and then helpfully handed Gaara a tissue. He sat on his knees and removed the sheath, wrapped it up, and chucked it in a waste bin on the far side of the room. Simultaneously, the pair toppled over in a heap.

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"Sa-aakura." Gaara rolled onto his back and took her along, ignoring her disgruntled puff as he squeezed her.

"Gaara." She said, "Blanket." It was chilly. He got the hint and pulled back the comforter, settling beneath it with her. Sakura happily curled into him, tucking her hands against Gaara's chest, "When no one's around you get louder. Not by much...but I liked it."

Gaara traced his fingertip (now clawless) along the shell of her ear, "Good. You are the only one who is going to hear me like that."
"Well, that's the idea. But when Naruto and Haku are home it'd be polite to keep it down."

"Absolutely not." Because for the grief they gave him, Gaara believed they could put up with occasional bedroom snarling down the hall.

She poked him, "You're terrible."

"At least I am consistent about it."

"True. You never coddle them. Naruto once told me you like to tell him to eat shit and die when he needs your help."

"That's how I sign off my letters to him." Gaara confirmed.

Sakura snickered merrily at the thought. Then she asked, "Oh! That reminds me: what have you put Haku up to? Was he overseeing something that stopped him from entering the Exam?"

"Yes." Gaara lied flatly and efficiently.

"Oh. Ino made me wonder. What sort of work is it? Is he enlisted in the Medical Corps in Suna?" She was endlessly curious.

"Not exactly enlisted in the Medical Corps, though he is trained in Medical Jutsu." Gaara confirmed at least that much from Haku's most recent correspondence.

"Not exactly?" Sakura pried impishly, "Black Ops, then?"

"I can't get into detail about it due to confidentiality." He muttered against her hair.

She stated smugly, "I knew it. And Ino kept speculating. Well! Tell Haku-kun I wish him well and that he stay safe."

"Of course."

"Is he in good spirits? Do you two spend time-?"

"Sakura—"

"You know we miss him! We don't hear about him as much as Naruto-kun…"

"He's…not in the best of spirits. He and my sister…" Gaara trailed off and shook his head, wondering why the hell he was entertaining the subject, "To be honest, Sakura…I'm done talking about him."

"Hm." She reflected on the shutdown.

"Haku is alive and working. He irritates me." Gaara gave her that much, "Confidentiality, as I said."

"Right, I understand. It's policy." She nodded sleepily, "We can talk about something else."

"Such as how I want to take you back with me to Suna," He squeezed her gently in the confinement of his arms, "And wake up to you every day."

"Mmmm…that sounds nice. But remember we kind of agreed on a plan?" Amused, Sakura pulled the comforter higher to warm her neck and ears.
"We can amend the plan."

"How do you suggest we do that?"

"Come with me. Then we make a new plan."

"I think an amendment would have to happen before I go anywhere." Sakura double-poked his pectoral.

"I'll speak to the Hokage in the morning and order your reassignment." Judging by how Gaara said it, Sakura determined the statement was 90 percent a joke and 10 percent serious.

"Tsunade-shishou would love to hear you out now that she just promoted me and wants to add to my workload." She ventured further, "And an inter-village reassignment also needs approval from both corresponding administrative panels."

"Those panels almost always go along with what a Kage approves."

"True." Sakura traced her fingertips along his hip bone, "But why abuse your power like that and make yourself look like a douche?"

"I wasn't serious."

"You kind of were."

"I'm tired of being away from you, Sakura." He repeated his earlier frustration and snuggled closer. She sighed.

"I know…" Her eyes were feeling heavy, "I'll tell you what. Give me a hand scrounging up funding so I can establish that new clinic I mentioned. I'll make sure I find staff and administrators I trust to hand it off to, once it's running smoothly. Maybe we can set up a network with Sand and Tide?"

"That is substantial funding you're talking about." He noted.

"You've thrown that kind of money at Tide already." Sakura countered.

"Only after getting screamed at by committees, did I make that happen."

"Will you just talk to the right people for me?" Exasperated, Sakura gave him a light shake.

"I will."

"In exchange, maybe I'll…spend extended periods of time with you, while you're still working as Kazekage. Maybe we'll change our minds about where we want to live?"

"I like the idea. But Suna has no hot springs or sweet shops. Not like here." Gaara considered.

She teased, "That's a steep downside alright."

"If you think about it," Gaara yawned, "It really is."

Several days and nights passed with frequent rain showers. As a result, Neji's seventeenth birthday was a low-key affair at the Hyuga household and was hosted indoors. The next day the sun finally came out again.
That particular post-birthday morning, Neji got his way when it came to eking out more time with Tenten. It had not taken much convincing for Lee and Gai to agree to a special Wushu lesson with Wong Leung downtown. Tenten, of course, was invited to the Hyuga estate.

"Did you get your stitches out?" She was optimistic, trotting alongside him towards the Main House courtyard.

"I did."

"About time. Sakura also said my arm is in perfect working order again." She was smiling a lot.

Tenten had not been able to attend his formal birthday celebration, but the team dinner with Lee, Gai, and Wong Leung had been very festive. It had been evident that Wong was very happy that Neji had thought of him, even if he didn't give thanks for the invitation. Since the informal team party, being promoted to Chunin, and visiting Tama (who was doing quite well, all considered) Tenten was positively buoyant.

Her good mood was rubbing off on him. Neji suppressed a smile, and motioned for her to hand over his jian once they stopped in the square dirt yard. Tenten handed Mo-Ye over to him. Neji cocked his head and looked at the sword in her other hand.

"That isn't Hok." He pointed out.

"No. This is Mo-Ye's mated jian, Gan-Jiang." Tenten handily unsheathed it so he could see the work she put into spiffing the retired sword up, "It was just sitting there in the shop cabinet. I felt bad."

Neji was interested, "Were these used often in the past?"

"I think so. My dad always kept them around." She ambled off into Wushu steps to test out her swings and thrusts, speaking over her shoulder to Neji, "Dad said he named them for a folktale he enjoyed. Like everything else he named, really."

By that point, Neji was aware that though he had never met the man, Tenten's father had been an avid reader of literature.

They went about a Wushu sword routine that Wong Leung had demonstrated prior to the Exam Tournament. Tenten noticed when Neji's crouching step fell out of time with hers during the synchronized drill. She laughed at him, "What's the matter? Partied too hard yesterday?"

Tenten made him start over. The second attempt went much better. Moving in unison, the pair kept a safe distance and completed forms. Hanabi's former babysitter, Natsu, stopped on the veranda for a minute to watch. The green haired woman gasped in delight at the impressive, spinning leaps and slashes. She gave them a little wave before pressing on with household chores.

At a break, Tenten stopped at the porch and sipped from a thermos of tea. Without a word, she held it up and offered it to Neji, but he stood by and shook his head. No sooner had she turned her back and swallowed, she ducked under his swing for her head.

'This isn't the first time Neji launched an unprovoked sword attack on me. Must be how he flirts…'

With good humor, she accepted the challenge and sparred with him— even if he was a bit slow and stiff from his Chunin Exam injuries. Tenten kept it a mild contest because, 1) she hated dinging blades during practice and was a stickler about maintaining them, and 2) it'd be rude to thoroughly whoop him at his own residence.

At the end of a long exchange of parries and creative combinations, she had him woefully trapped.
Tenten leveled the tip of Gan-Jiang with Neji's nose and he paused respectfully. "That's a point for me." She declared. Slightly hot-blooded, he smirked and tapped her blade away with Mo-Ye, charging after her. She chirped in annoyance when his jian nearly caught her earring. If he'd ripped it out… ‘I would make him sorry for a week if he did that, accident or no…’ His footwork was a bit more polished, she noticed. Neji marched her across the courtyard during a long exchange, and backed her against a porch beam of the house.

Tenten scowled and crossed swords with him. He'd stopped her in a rain puddle on the ground, and her feet became unpleasantly wet. "Your point." She conceded, muttering, "But you didn't have to be rude about it…"

"I am not rude." He informed her as they parted their weapons, "You need to be mindful of your surroundings."

"That's why I have you, isn't it?" Tenten smiled, referring to his talents.

"That is not the only reason you have me." Neji's voice was fond and warm, "Please do not take me for granted."

Tenten liked that he was standing close, also soddened by the puddle. Sometimes he said things that made her wonder if he had ever actually been a true, detached misanthrope in his youth…or if Neji had still loved and cared as much as he was capable of now— but had built defensive walls that he never really needed. She tipped her face up at him because he was already leaning down, misty-eyed and smitten with her.

"That's…impossible." Tenten muttered against his mouth. It was a tender, good-morning kind of kiss. He tasted of iyokan and strong Han tea.

Four blissful seconds then gave way to Neji jerking back from her in startlement. She batted her lashes at the sudden retreat, trying to understand. His face was sheet white.

Tenten's contingency functions gathered that something significant had occurred to Neji and that he'd need a moment. She sheathed Gan-Jiang for good measure. She started to understand when he slowly turned his head to look over his shoulder, and the veins at the corners of his eyes faded, 'Oh. Neji must have gotten a look around. With the Byakugan.' Well then. The matter seemed quite obvious to her now. They'd forgotten themselves in a very formal, noble house. In a formal, noble house where people could see through solid objects.

And she glanced over at the end of the porch that encompassed the internal courtyard, catching a glimpse of Hyuga Hiashi's back. He was nonchalantly sliding a door open and carrying on into the house. If Tenten did not know any better, she'd wager he had not noticed a thing. One could dream.

Tenten chose optimism, "He probably didn't—"

Neji's loud, rattling sigh of anxiety silenced her.

"Okay. Your uncle may have seen that." She stepped out of the puddle and tugged him along to dryer ground, "I'll take my leave now and find a rock to hide under for the next forty years."

"No." Neji sighed again but there was a scintilla of humor in his tone, appreciative of her, "I…should talk to him."

Tenten's eyebrows assumed the position of maximum surprise her face was capable of.

Neji tapped her arm and gestured for her to take Mo-Ye back after he sheathed the sword. He
advised, "Wait here. I should not have procrastinated your introduction for so long."

"Wait. You mean this isn't some catastrophic, punishable offense?" She tottered after him as he moved for the porch, stepping up on to it. Tenten stopped in the dirt yard, wondering, "Should we not have—?"

With a bothered head snap, Neji returned his attention to her, "Yes, we should have. I am not an unthinking, unfeeling puppet preoccupied with my clan's customs or prejudices. It's why I never inquired with them in the first place." By force of habit, he took his shoes off to go into the house and left her with, "And you are the only reason I ever would." Then just like that, he was off after his uncle.

Tenten nodded to herself as if absorbing a philosophical truth. Love wasn't a crime. Hyuga clan policies just had a hard time defining what love was and what purpose it served. She sat down on the porch to drink her tea and wait.

Neji caught up with Hiashi at the long corridor's corner, before his uncle could settle down in the tea room to take breakfast and read the morning news. He gave a small, half-bow of respect to the clan head, "Hiashi-sama."

There was a benign look on the man's face. He considered his nephew, "You seem to be feeling better today, Neji. I didn't think your injuries would heal so quickly."

"I am much improved." Neji confirmed, "I apologize that my teammate and I took up the courtyard. I neglected to remember that you reserve it for this time."

Hiashi was unruffled, sliding open the tea room's door, "Do not apologize. I'm an older man now. Sometimes I like it better when I don't have a warm up each and every day..." Neji followed him in and shut the door. When his uncle took a seat at the table, Neji politely kneeled down as well on a cushion.

"Have you more to say?" His uncle imperceptibly quirked an eyebrow and poured himself tea.

"I do not want you to believe I am acting imprudently, or that I do not value my station in our clan... based on my behavior in the main yard." Neji clarified.

"That young woman— Tenten. I know who she is. I watched her performance at the Tournament." Hiashi assured him, "Don't fret, Neji. It's natural for you to lose a contest of weapons against a talent like her. I forgive your transgression, so long as you vow to improve that abysmal swordsmanship of yours."

He was smirking a bit. At first, Neji could not wrap his head around the fact his uncle was trying to make a joke.

Neji opened and shut his mouth, unsure of how to respond.

"Your bond with her does not offend me." Hiashi made it clear to his nephew "I have no objection."

"But you would consider it frivolous and temporary?" Neji asked.

"Yes. Are you telling me that your relationship isn't like that?" His uncle was fishing for the facts, "For anything serious you must seek approval from the Main House."

Neji made his intention plain, "Then I am seeking approval now."
Hiashi's forehead wrinkled as he took a sip of tea. He regarded Neji for a moment, somewhat surprised.

"I cannot grant permission for a formal courtship…without getting to know her more." Hiashi explained, "I am your custodian. With your best interests in mind, I need her to be introduced to me in order to be certain that she is as serious as you are. If she is spoken for, I should like to meet her guardians as well."

"Tenten has no living family." Neji informed him.

"None at all?" Hiashi wondered, "What is her relation to Wong Leung-san and his grandson?"

"A strong friendship. They share customs and are nearly family…however," He tried to explain it, "Lee and Shifu would not be able to tell you anything that Tenten could not tell you herself."

"Ah." Hiashi shut his eyes and nodded, "She can speak for herself, in that case."

"Is that enough?"

"It is." Hiashi assured him, "If I find her sincere of intention, and to be…compatible with you…I would gladly submit your request to our Elders. I will even advocate for it."

Neji was nodding and trying to downplay the fact that he had feared pushback or disapproval for his personal choice. Maybe choosing to bring this up now, after Tenten had advanced far at the Tournament, was a strategically sound move. She'd made a good impression on his uncle, at least superficially.

"An introduction over dinner will suffice. Of course, this should be treated like any formal consultation. I expect all courtesies that we afford our esteemed friends in the Taketori or other such clans…to be respected at this meeting." Hiashi elaborated, "Make sure that she is aware. She will join us and my daughters tomorrow. I have other commitments today."

"I understand." Neji expressed his gratitude, "Thank you, Uncle."

Hiashi waved it off, "See to it, then. Do not leave a respectable kunoichi waiting on our porch."
Hyuga Litmus Test

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Mini-Chapter Track: "Sleeping States" by Gregory and the Hawk

It took most of the next day to explain to Tenten, both in the company of Lee and out of Lee's company, what the heck all of this meant.

Essentially, the Hyuga clan did not date. They bargained. If a potential prospect was introduced to the Main or Branch houses, it was incentivized by the strengthening of blood lines, monetary compensation, gain of resources or influence. Or, if a marriage was not the conclusion of an approved courtship— elders would sometimes ask for a runner up to be sent and considered so that there were no hard feelings between families. It was transactional. Always.

"So how do your clansmen…get to know anyone?" Tenten was baffled, "Is there a lot of…intra-clan marriage and dating?"

"Not as much as there was in the past. Decades ago, that practice exacerbated a variety of hereditary diseases in the Hyuga…and prompted a shift to friendships with other clans and families to remedy that problem." Neji was recounting a bit of history and Lee stood to the side, listening in fascination.

"Hmm. You stand to gain with me…a disease free partner with a sense of humor. That's not much." Tenten shrugged, "Might as well hit up some aristocrat women to be sure that's what you're aiming for, Neji. Make some comparisons…"

He snorted contentiously at the suggestion.

Lee gave some input, "Neji could perhaps worsen relationships with allied clans, if he were to explore with that goal in mind. He is very temperamental!"

"Wow. I did not even consider that risk." She now understood why the socializing bar had not been set too high.

"Enough. This isn't about other possible candidates," Neji reminded her sternly, "It's about you. Whether or not you have a prestigious background…all that truly matters is your dignity and honesty. Even the most refined lords can get that wrong."

Tenten and Lee were impressed by the notion.

Neji went on, "We have a few hours, and much to go over."

Later, they broke the news to Hinata and gently begged for help. Tenten had never been to a dinner more formal than a kaiseki restaurant which, Hinata was alarmed to tell her, was nowhere close to the level of formality that she ought to expect.

"You will need to wear a furisode." Hinata added.

Smiling cluelessly, Tenten acted like she knew what a furisode was.

Neji gave Tenten a long, impatient look. It was obvious to him that she had no idea what they were talking about. The three of them were assembled near Hinata's garden while she watered plants and
simultaneously assisted with the courtship project.

"Furisode is the long-sleeved, ornate kimono traditionally worn by unmarried women." Hinata explained helpfully, "Sometimes they are passed down in families, because they are so valuable. They are used to express the eligibility of a woman."

Painstakingly, Tenten was forced to confess, "My family…never had anything like that. Mom always had super expensive qipao, though! Why can't I wear one of those?"

Hinata nearly tossed her watering can when she reacted, "You can't! It isn't formal enough."

"It's beautiful and formal." She protested weakly.

Neji was shaking his head at her.

"Fine. I'll let your traditions trump mine." Tenten gave in, "But I don't own one. So now where do I find furisode?"

"I own two. But they…would not complement your coloration." Hinata tilted her head to look at Tenten, "We need to find someone who is selling or is willing to rent to you."

Tenten was muttering under her breath about all of the hassle.

Neji warned her, "This is the least complicated aspect of this meeting. You still need to be taught prompts, greetings, appropriate eye contact, appropriate volume of voice, table manners—"

"Table manners!" Tenten nearly threw her hands above her head, exasperated, "What am I? Uncultured swine? I have good manners."

"The Hyuga have strict etiquette when it comes to these kinds of introductions. So do other clans." Hinata tried to pacify her, patting Tenten's arm, "We can show you what to do."

After that, they sought out Kayato at her studio in the house. The woman was leaned over a complicated piece of costume embroidery, and when she looked up at her visitors she had a glass eye piece scrunched in her orbital, used for magnification. She grinned at them.

"Ooh, my favorite customer is back." She tittered at Tenten and removed her eye piece, laying down her needlework, "To what do I owe this visit, children?"

Neji explained. Hinata co-explained. Kayato was breathless and excited.

"Oh! Furisode. I haven't worked on one in a while, and I'll be honest…” Kayato smiled wanly, "I haven't got a single one in stock. You're going to have to ask around. Once you do find something I'll have it fitted and tied correctly for Tenten, of course. Also…” She took a discerning up and down look at the girl in question, "What to do with your hair and face?"

"What about them?" Tenten asked defensively.

"Well you need to look your best!"

Tenten held a hand up to her dewy, just-good-enough-face as if she were a game show host revealing a prize. Kayato laughed at her. Not the reaction she was going for.

"Neji won't be a slouch either, just to be clear." Kayato pointed out merrily, "He owns hakama already. That will do. And maybe we'll tie his hair a bit nicer…”
The statement did not grate on his nerves. Neji just accepted it as a necessary evil. It was a one-time meeting and once it was completed and Tenten approved of, they could pretty much go back to how they were doing things before. With the exception of Tenten being more involved with his clan…and entertaining a few other minor theatrics.

The group split up: Neji set out to join Lee for training with Wong Leung, and Hinata scampered off with Tenten in the hope of finding a friend who owned furisode. That afternoon they would all regroup.

Naturally, the girls checked with Ino first. Sakura was visiting her at the Yamanaka flower shop as they gossiped in hushed voices. They ceased whispering and animatedly greeted Hinata and Tenten when they arrived, asking what was Tenten frowning about? Hinata's rendition of the situation was syrupy sweet and excited, while Tenten was not nearly as enthused.

"This is a huge deal, you know." Ino simpered at Tenten, "Try to get over the parts of this that are annoying and inconvenient. If you get your foot in the door with the Hyuga clan-! Damn. That's not easily done. Neji's really sticking his neck out for you."

"I know. It makes me feel worse that I have no idea what I'm doing, or that my parents aren't alive to give their approval, you know?" Tenten revealed her somber train of thought.

Sakura's cheerful face faltered, "Oh. Sorry about that. But you know you're going to get this right! Neji chose well and Hinata's dad can't overlook that."

"Thank you, Sakura."

Hinata's head was bobbling in agreement, "I know my father will like you!"

"Even if I mess up my table manners?"

"You won't." Hinata assured her.

They passed through Ino's home to a tatami-mat storage room, finding a wall of cedar chests. The blonde woman gleefully pulled open a mid-level drawer, lifting away preservation paper to retrieve rich, green silk. Ino proudly held up the kimono, "Feast your eyes on this, girls. My mom and dad found it for me specifically for Coming of Age Day, but if there's an occasion for it you bet I am wearing this sooner."

In another drawer, Ino directed Sakura to retrieve the corresponding violet and pink obi and accessories. Tenten's expression seemed to thaw, marveling at the work of art. Hinata was fiddling with the sleeves.

"Do you have a kimono in every drawer?" Sakura wondered, aghast.

"Nah; just less than half of the chests are filled. Mom and Dad cleaned out a lot of old threadbare pieces."

"My clan has two rooms full." Hinata noted, "And the owners' names are printed on each drawer to avoid mix-ups."

"I bet your clan does, Hinata." Ino sighed enviously and then held up the green furisode against Tenten's chest, "You're a chestnut beauty. Green will look good. You're welcome."

"I…" Tenten pursed her mouth. At the sight of her inexplicable dismay, Hinata's expression also wilted.
"What? What's the matter?" Sakura stood beside her, "It's beautiful! I know you're not into flower designs, but we're lucky someone had something for…you…" Sakura seemed to pick up on what was concerning Tenten.

Ino blew a strand of hair out of her face, "Problem?"

"Neji won't like it." Sakura determined.

Hinata quailed at the suggestion and reevaluated the garment, frowning as she realized that Sakura was right.

"He probably won't." Tenten reasoned, "He liked me in red…but at this point how can I be picky? I have hours to prepare for all of this. I can't go door to door soliciting for formalwear."

Hinata had to ask, "Maybe Onii-san would understand-?"

"This furisode is as green as Lee." Sakura declared, "Maybe that's only a subliminal message, but men can be touchier than they let on. Unfortunately."

"Pff. Great." Ino proceeded to fold up the garment in defeat, "I wasn't even thinking of that."

"I just appreciate that you were willing to let me wear something before you did." Tenten thanked her.

"I would have called in a favor with you someday, for a premium." Ino warned her smilingly.

"Right. Do we know anyone else that I can ask?" Tenten inquired of the group.

Hinata perked up again, "Maybe Tama-chan!"

Sakura shook her head, "Tama doesn't own furisode either, just hakama for formal occasions. She's sporty. And she's been engaged since she was four years old, so her family never invested in something that signaled: I am up for grabs, gentlemen."

The girls stewed on the dilemma.

Ino turned to Sakura curiously, "I've seen you in red many times, Forehead…"

"I rent from my Auntie. She would charge Tenten an arm and a leg for formalwear…" Sakura lamented, "There has to be somewhere to go…"

Considering the problem in silence, the women racked their brains for a solution and stared off into space. Judging by Sakura's scrunching and quivering facial features, her mind was rapidly combing through a list of Konoha's tailors, expensive boutiques, and eligible women to ask.

Suddenly, Tenten made for the door to exit the storage room, snapping her friends out of their community brainstorming.

"I have one other female friend in my life who could probably help." Tenten ushered them to follow, "As long as Hayate doesn't give me grief about it…Yugao can salvage this."

And by the grace of a higher power, Yugao answered the door, beamed at the sight of Tenten, and yes—she could definitely help. She was delighted to lend Tenten the furisode she had worn only once for her engagement pictures. Now it just sat in a box, like most kimono did. Yugao welcomed the gaggle of kunoichi inside her house, and ignored Hayate's incredulous sounds of protest from the
In passing, Tenten greeted her tutor as he put away groceries. He didn't get much of a hello otherwise, and no explanation of why there were so many visitors.

Yugao nearly floated into a guest bedroom and happily retrieved a lacquer box from the closet. She set it down and lifted the lid, "So things are going well, Tenten? Being introduced to his family! The last time you asked me for help it was for your first date."

Tenten tried to shush her, but her friends were already chattering about it.

The woman lifted up the garment and it silenced the group of girls. The silk was a richly dyed black, emblazoned with a scarlet cascade of flowers and ribbon designs down a sleeve's length and at the legs. It was simple and boisterous all at once. The gold obi also elicited a nod of endorsement from Tenten.

"Oh, so you like it?" Yugao brightened.

"Will Hayate let me walk out of here with this?" Tenten joked.

"No, he won't. But I'll go with you if you have a dresser. I won't be able to put this on you myself." Yugao explained.

"He—"

Yugao shook her head, "Hayate has no business parsing the details of my loan to you. This kimono belongs to me." She smiled, "And I want you to wear it."

"Seems a shame you only wore this once." Ino said, examining the obi in the box.

"I would have worn it for Coming of Age day when I was younger…but I was on a Black Ops assignment, then." The woman shrugged, "Such a thing may happen to you girls as well, while you take missions."

It was food for thought and gave them pause. Tenten took another moment to fawn over the exquisite piece, "I really appreciate this, Yugao…"

"Not at all!" The woman chirped, setting the kimono in place again and closing the box's lid. Yugao marched from the room with her entourage, and Hayate held up a hand to get her attention in the living area.

"I just want to know if you're coming back for dinner later." The man asked his wife, "And if…I'm feeding all of you?"

Yugao assured her husband that it would be just the two of them for an evening meal.

A short time later, the pack of kunoichi had arrived at Kayato's dressing studio at the Hyuga compound. Sakura had excused herself from the uproar to check on Tama in the hospital. After handing the lacquer box off to Kayato, Tenten was promptly seated on a floor cushion so Yugao could begin styling her hair. As Ino explained it for her, "Hair has to be done before you are cocooned in layers of fabric. I'll take some time to do your makeup."

"Ino, I don't need makeup. I need caffeine or some other stimulant." Tenten complained, relenting as Yugao shushed her in a motherly way and unwound her chignons to set to work.
Hinata offered to run and fetch tea. Ino tsked at her, "Don't indulge her, Hinata. She needs to get through this like a big girl."

"Indulge? Says the queen of indulgence—" Tenten's comeback was cut short when Yugao pulled back too hard on her head with a fistful of hair.

"Sorry!" Yugao chuckled, "I want to do something more intricate today. Bear with me, Tenten."

Tenten relinquished creative input, "Do what you think will make me seem classy."

Yugao and Kayato laughed in unison and Tenten tried not to shrink and disappear into the floor mats. Kayato hung up the kimono for inspection and spoke over her shoulder to Tenten, "Dear, it's so funny to hear you say that you think you don't seem a certain way. Elegance is mostly pretense no matter what."

"But I have to try. The Hyuga clan is..." She trailed off, feeling lost.

Yugao kept clucking her tongue at the girl. Ino had asked Hinata to seek and find a suitable makeup pallet nearby; otherwise she would be running across town to fetch her own.

"The Hyuga clan is distinguished and proud, but in the end..." Kayato simpered as she worked, "Even you saw our clansmen drinking themselves under tables a few nights ago."

"Oh yeah." Tenten relaxed.

"They had to win that game. They couldn't let Sarutobi clan visitors beat them on their own turf." Ino remembered in great amusement. She assisted Kayato in relocating the long obi and other fabric ties about the floor.

When Hinata returned with two sets of cosmetics, Ino inspected them and picked the better option of the pair. Tenten still objected to the one girly art that the stronghold of her tom-boyishness had disallowed.

Ino soothed her and handed over a hair tie to Yugao, still at work. "Tenten. I'm not going to do your face like some neon billboard. Alright? You already have unfairly good skin." Ino traced a fingertip along the older girl's cheekbone, "I'll leave that be. Let's play up your eyes and do a subtle lip. Have a little faith in an expert."

With little other choice, Tenten elected to accept the help. She needed the help. She needed to start feeling adequate so that she could have a stellar meet-the-uncle dinner, and convince Hiashi that she wasn't going to take advantage of Neji or utterly fuck things up.

Yugao was re-doing elaborate chignons that connected in a central, ponytail-like braid. Ino and Hinata kneeled in front of Tenten and continued grooming her. While Ino gently dabbed Tenten's eyelids with some kind of base, Hinata reviewed the shortlist of etiquette with Tenten.

"Anywhere you go in the Main House, you must be escorted. Because you are Neji-niisan's guest, he is the only one permitted to escort you." Hinata raised a finger and added, "To the restroom, for example. Father will not let me leave dinner to bring you myself."

"Will you be wearing kimono too?" Tenten had not considered it.

"Yes. I am required to at these types of functions."

"When I agreed to all of this I never thought I'd be inconveniencing you too, Hinata." Tenten shut
her eyes so Ino could work, trying to apologize for the bother.

Though she couldn't see it, Hinata was smiling, "It's alright. It makes me happy that you are the visitor, Onee-san! In Spring I had to do this sort of thing nearly every week for a different suitor. That was..."

"Awful. Nauseating. Pointless?" Ino offered, recalling that dark time as well, "Wow, and even I had to put up with all of that indirectly. I'm glad you survived, Hinata-chan."

Hinata concurred. She also filled Tenten in on: avoiding too much direct eye contact, avoiding too little eye contact, placement of hands in lap, correct seated posture and how to rise from a floor cushion to stand. Ino vehemently agreed with the last subject.

"She's right. You have to practice sitting and standing so you don't flash anyone." Ino recommended.

Hinata explained that food at the dinner table would be served to her by either herself or Neji, and that it would be inappropriate for Tenten as a guest to handle dishes. However, if she wanted anything she could ask at any time. Hinata mentioned that her father would do most of the talking, and that Tenten should do her best to answer his questions. Fibbing was to be avoided. Hiashi did not take well to dishonesty and had a knack for detecting it. Overall, Tenten would be prompted to speak and should avoid talking out of turn or ahead of Main House members. It was just a general rule of thumb. Hinata hoped the introduction would decrease in formality as the evening wore on, and that Tenten could engage in conversation freely.

Also, under no circumstances, no matter what Hanabi said at dinner, Hinata added— do not take the bait. Her sister excelled at cattle-prod questions and remarks. She liked to gauge the character of new acquaintances by mildly antagonizing them. Kayato seconded the warning.

"Duly noted." Tenten acknowledged.

After dinner, Hinata forecasted, there could be further talk and refreshments. After that, before it got too late, Tenten would be politely discharged and could visit Kayato to undress and box up the furisode. Neji would escort her home after that, and hopefully return to hear a positive endorsement from Hiashi. Tenten mentally took notes on the timeline.

By then, Kayato was waiting around since she had concluded laying out the different furisode components. She stood close by and watched Yugao enter the final stages of hair artistry, and then circled 'round to see Ino's handiwork, "Oh, that color! What is it?"

"Burgundy." Ino announced, "And just a bit further in it'll blend into scarlet— which is much brighter and I don't want to overdo it. Then a bit of gold..."

"It corresponds so well with the fabric's designs."

"That's the idea."

Kayato considered the girl, "Ino, was it? I may need to hire you for makeup on photo days before I submit portfolio work to my agent. My models will look so much better."

Ino was charmed by the suggestion.

Hinata had a few last pieces of advice for Tenten: Don't attempt to eat until after Hiashi began the meal, muffle bodily functions and sounds, don't ask very personal questions of anyone at the table (even though Hiashi could ask such things of her,) and in general try to be interesting and also be herself. Ino called the list "a doozy" and wished Tenten luck. She was finishing up and patting color
onto Tenten's lips with a small brush.

Yugao finished tying Tenten's hair, and tugging in a few spots to straighten the braids encircling the buns on top of her head, "Ah. There. I've gotten my hair fix for the week. It's always easier doing someone else's. Mine always comes out just a bit off when I tie it up."

Tenten thanked her and peered into a mirror that Ino handed to her. She was relieved to see she looked more aristocratic than costume-y. She breathed a sigh of relief. It was like a beautiful, rich woman was looking back at her. Tenten set the mirror down and puffed up a little, awestruck that it was possible to look so good.

"So, do you have any questions?" Hinata asked finally, "I have to leave soon to get changed. I'll have my sister help me, since Kayato-san will need some time to dress you."

"Well." Tenten considered it for a moment, "I think I want to avoid talking about Huo and Exam drama."

"Yes. Please do." Hinata nodded.

"And would you be so kind as to signal me if I start breaking a rule or forget myself?" Tenten asked.

"I will be as discreet as possible." The younger girl promised.

"Is there a chance that Neji could mess this up, and not me?" Tenten wondered.

"Oh yes, but he won't. Onii-san will use his best manners and patience. He's been to functions like these in the past."

Tenten ventured, "What if, despite my best efforts to adhere to etiquette…and I go home…your Dad decides that he doesn't like me?"

"I don't see how that could happen!" Hinata chirped, "My father will be glad to meet you."

"Maybe, but what if fundamentally he thinks I am a bad fit? He's still entitled to that opinion even if he likes me as a person." Tenten wisely pointed out, "Hinata, if that's the case, is it implied that I stop seeing or stay away from Neji?"

The room got uncomfortably quiet. Ino cleared her throat to fight the awkwardness, bouncing to her feet when she finished touching up Tenten's lips.

Hinata had to suspend her disbelief to reply, "I think that's what father would want, if he felt that way."

"That's fine." Tenten was calm about it, "I just need to know. I'm a realistic person. I refuse to assume things will go well just because I subscribe to positive imagery. What everyone else thinks and feels still weighs on something like this." She smiled warily, "But you know, positive attitudes have gotten my team pretty far."

Kayato chortled as she and Hinata pulled Tenten to her feet. Yugao affectionately patted Tenten's bottom when she stood. She did a fast swap of clothing for underclothing.

Then, after fitting Tenten with a practical, white nagajuban and undersash, Kayato slipped Tenten into the black furisode. Here and there, Hinata tugged and helped straighten the kimono while Kayato prodded and adjusted. The meticulous, measured preparations and tying took a while. Kayato had rolled up the floor-length sleeves and made Tenten hold them, keeping them out of the way.
way. Ino observed, "It's a spectacle every time. Putting one of those on…"

Hinata excused herself to get dressed and advised Tenten to stay positive. Tenten watched her go with a wistful expression.

"Relax, she'll be with you at dinner." Ino reminded her.

"I know…"

"If it's any kind of consolation, we all go through something like this." Kayato said while working on a koshi himo at Tenten's waist, "I did, in fact, go through exactly the same introduction you will. I was a nobody. Not even a ninja. But Hideyasu, that crazy man, had haunted my step for two years and was adamant about me meeting his family. They needed some extra convincing that I would be a good match for him, even after we met." The woman laughed, "They came to my place of work to see what I was good for since I was not a kunoichi."

"Did that satisfy?" Tenten wondered in terror.

"For some reason, it did. Then we were allowed to date. I'll admit, living among the Hyuga clan and its stringent rules and elders…it tired me out. I tried to leave Hide-chan several times. I couldn't imagine getting married and staying in a place where I felt so unfree." Kayato explained, "But things got easier, and with time their scrutiny of me relaxed, even when I was trying to run off again…they knew I'd be back."

"I'm surprised they tolerated that." Ino admitted.

"Well, it wasn't exactly tolerated. He and I were still dating, but suitors were called in for Hide-chan for the interim. His elders wanted to give him options." Kayato grunted as she tugged another under-belt tight around Tenten, "And I hear that he did not welcome any of those visits. He scared them away with his weird sense of humor and waited for me."

Yugao was curious, "How long after that did you get married?"

"About two or three months after my last I'm moving out tantrum. I'd made friends in the Branch family and they were helping me with my new business. It made me feel more secure…and appreciated. I just hated feeling alone when those old men—er, our elders…stared at me and said I wasn't enough." Kayato sighed, "Hide-chan was happier after that. I put him through a lot. He always used to feel scared that I would leave."

"You maneater." Yugao teased.

"I wasn't! I was just frightened." Kayato laughed nervously, "My point is that I know this isn't easy, Tenten. You don't have to go through with anything that you think is unfair or oppressive. Stay true to yourself."

"That seems to be the theme." Tenten recognized, "But I'm wondering how I do that and still impress the head of this house?"

"Make sure you don't apologize for anything." Yugao suggested, "Oh, and don't sugarcoat your opinions. A clan leader may respect you more for being critical about something."

"But don't outright insult anyone either." Ino added on to it. She had begun helping Kayato wind and fold the golden obi around the kimono.

"I may forget most of this." Tenten admitted.
"Just remember to make it clear to Hiashi-sama...how much you value Neji." Kayato recommended, "That's why you're here."

Tenten liked that piece of advice best. It took time to complete the flower-like knot of the obi, and Kayato looped a red obijime beneath it before fastening it at the front. Yugao admitted that she had no idea how Kayato had created the knot, other than employing wizardry.

"When you dress about 200 hundred people a year in kimono," Kayato told her, "You get good at it."

Yugao took another few moments to fawn over Tenten, reminiscing. "I can't believe I only wore it once. It makes me wish I were still young and single!"

"You can be, if you want. Just kick Hayate out. That house is in your name." Tenten jested.

"Oh, no, no. He's a good cook and I like his company." Yugao flipped a dangling, red tassel earring at Tenten's ear, "I wore this furisode when I met Hayate's parents for the first time. I don't know if they approved of me or not by the end of the night because we all got so drunk."

"Maybe that wasn't a bad outcome?"

Yugao thought on it, "Maybe. They like me well enough now."

Kayato forewarned, "Oh, Tenten, so you know— only tea will be served at this introduction. You will all be scrupulously sober."

"I didn't think alcohol would be served. I'm kind of grateful for that." Tenten recalled that she and Neji were not at all presentable after getting drunk the night of the festival, or the morning after.

With her desire to see her furisode worn again sated, Yugao bid everyone good luck and a prosperous evening. She set out for home shortly after Ino did, leaving Tenten in Kayato's company. As Hinata had advised earlier, Tenten slowly practiced sitting and standing from a floor cushion.

"Try not to be so rigid." Kayato demonstrated a good technique on the next zabuton, "It will be easier if you push up with your fingertips for balance, like this. No one will notice with your long sleeves."

After many attempts, she was starting to get it. Tenten even tried to compose her face as if it wasn't a big deal that she wasn't falling over and crushing Kayato's hard work on the obi.

When that was done, Tenten asked for a time check.

"Well, you have nearly an hour to go." Kayato confirmed with a glance at the work desk clock, "I know what we can do. My family won't be joining your introductory dinner...and I bet my son is still practicing out in the yard. Why don't we watch?"

Tenten liked the idea, "Sure. It'll give me time to practice walking without tripping over this."

Since there was no need for shoes indoors, hers were left in the studio and Tenten accompanied Kayato barefoot through the house. The walk down long hallways and around a few corners ended on an outdoor porch that overlooked a green lawn. Fujita and Hideyasu were scrapping with each other, using Taijutsu that was distinctly Gouken as opposed to Jyukken, according to Tenten's trained eye. Kayato sighed at the sight of her husband and child.

"I'm glad Fujita recovered from his injuries." Tenten spoke sidelong to her dresser. She wasn't sure
what to do with her arms in long sleeves, so Tenten crossed her hands at her front like a lady. Not her usual posture, for sure.

"It took quite a while. My husband was concerned that he was so out of shape! They've been sparring for the last few days to condition Fujita again." There was a far-off look on Kayato's face while she watched her loved ones. Her shoulders drooped.

Tenten watched her carefully, considering the woman who had not really wished to join the Hyuga clan but had integrated anyway. By Tenten's estimate, Kayato was a genuine best friend and spouse to Hideyasu. There was no question she loved him and their children. She had compromised to keep her professional career, and to fulfill her duties to the Main House. There were probably some days, Tenten gathered, that she still wanted to run away from the surveillance and demands of clan elders.

And of course, one of her children was dead. That probably stuck mercilessly like quills in her heart. Tenten regarded the woman in profile and began to empathize.

"Is it hard not seeing him out there with them?" Tenten wondered.

By him, Kayato understood she meant Hikune, "Very hard. Sometimes I want to burn this place down to the ground, I'm still so angry."

Tenten bowed her head a little and looked out over the lawn again.

"I felt lucky…watching my eldest boy grow up to be smart and kind. He was so much like Hide-chan." Her voice flattened, "But he was also selfish and didn't take rejection well. I disliked listening to Hikune bad-mouth girlfriends that had dumped him. I remember telling him one night that he was the one who needed to reflect, and not the women who had moved on. There was much he had yet to learn. That boy frustrated me on some days…argued with me…"

Amazed, Tenten's ears perked up at the honest admission.

"Children are challenging. I laid awake worrying many nights, wondering if the things I said or did permanently damaged them. It took a while to learn they are largely responsible for their own choices, no matter what I taught them…or didn't teach them." Kayato settled her hands in her trouser pockets, "I worried that they would never understand what the Hyuga clan really needs. That they would never know it the way Neji-sama so profoundly knows it. I feared that even more when Hikune fought with him…that he would prefer that ignorance as long as he could feel superior or secure in some way."

She turned to Tenten and saw the bewildered look on her face, "I'm not trying to panic you or tell you to avoid this kind of a future! Sweet girl…I'm sorry. I just keep talking while you're here—"

"It's okay. I'm glad you're sharing it. I don't have anyone to tell me about these sorts of things." Tenten informed her.

Kayato regarded her warmly, "I see. Well…this path wasn't at all bad. It's quite fun. My sons are neither the most generous nor the most enlightened people…but because they aren't perfect, I forgive myself a little more for not being perfect either." She smiled to herself, "This clan wants excellence so much that we become afraid of our softer, truer selves. You've helped Neji-sama in this respect, but don't be afraid to help yourself either. Don't wallow in doubt. Not for too long, anyway."

Tenten was still upbeat, "This is kind of heavy subject matter for someone who just wants to be allowed to date."

"It is! I know you're not my therapist…but I felt like opening up." The woman laughed, "You may
realize that you want more than just the chance to date Neji-sama, and it will be very hard for you. Forever. For every milestone and bit of progress you make, you'll have to keep fighting for him."

Tenten winced a little. She still had not fully considered what was ahead, because she had hardly anticipated coming so far.

"Not to worry." Kayato patted her immaculately dressed shoulder, "Your team prides itself on hard work. I'm sure you can handle it."

"Thank you for your confidence."

The sun had sunk closer to the horizon. Hideyasu and Fujita concluded training and were drying their faces and necks with towels. The two visited Kayato and Tenten at the engawa of the house with puppy-like enthusiasm.

"Wow! New project, Kayato? She looks great!" Hideyasu was thrilled with the kimono.

"Believe it or not I didn't make this. I simply fitted her." Kayato brushed errant hair from her husband's face while he stood a step below in the grass, "Gekko Yugao owns this furisode."

He turned to Tenten, "My goodness, you're a friend of Yugao-san's? How fortunate! She's well-to-do and a respected veteran of our village." Hideyasu noted, "It seems to me you've been formally invited to sit with the Hyuga, is that right?"

Fujita gasped over his water bottle, surprised by the news.

"That's right. Neji had a talk with his uncle and…I'm trying to be effortlessly impressive and vigorously myself for this dinner." Tenten summed up the total of all advice she had taken.

"Bwa-ha-ha!" Hideyasu laughed more easily than his wife did.

Fujita was grinning, "It won't be so bad!"

"I've heard things…" Tenten sighed, "And Fujita, we really need to work you out. We can start weapon drills again…as soon as I get out of expensive clothes."

He nodded happily, "Oh yeah, I'd like that. I don't want to take another mission until I feel strong again."

"Thank you for looking out for my nugget, Tenten." Hideyasu was jolly, "Also, we wish you an expedient and pleasant introduction this evening. May Hiashi-sama have mercy on you."

Kayato whacked Hideyasu in retaliation for the low blow comment, but then they erupted into inside-joke giggles. Fujita mused at his parents and internalized their silly camaraderie. He slipped off his shoes and stepped onto the porch, offering to show Tenten around for a bit while his parents canoodled.

At sunset, Neji showed up and interrupted Fujita's detailed explanation to Tenten about games played with Hanafuda cards. Tenten was intrigued that he was such an avid card game player.

From her seat on the porch near Hinata's garden, Tenten looked up at Neji to where he stood. She blinked and tried to recognize him. The montsuki hakama he was wearing were probably worth more than the apartment she currently lived in, plus the lease for her shop space.

"Hello." She managed to say without swallowing her tongue.
Neji was dressed in a haori of indigo as dark and deep as the ocean's bottom. The crests of the Hyuga clan were visible in bright contrast; with charcoal colored hakama that made him look unattainably important. His hair was pulled back in a regal ponytail, putting his chiseled face on display. Neji frowned at her staring.

"Good evening, Neji-sama." Fujita greeted respectfully, scooping up his cards and into a deck box, "Mother and Father said that Tenten is going to be formally introduced to the clan head tonight. I hope you have a good time."

"Thank you, Fujita." Neji extended his hand to Tenten to help her stand, "Good will be a relative term at this meeting."

"That's boosting my self-esteem." Tenten sniffed at him.

Neji turned his attention back to her and for two very long seconds…he seemed to become squirrel-ish. He averted his eyes from her slightly, "You were successful." He was pointing out the furisode that she was wearing— not as if she had a choice. 'I couldn't show up here without one, apparently.' Tenten logged Neji's strange reaction to her.

They bade Fujita farewell or in Tenten's case, gave parting remarks on fitness, "Hold a horse stance for a few hours and do high reps of push-ups. Ask Lee to help, he'll whip you into shape—" Neji tugged her through a sliding door into the house.

"He's gotten skinny and flabby." She noted to Neji.

"He had four broken ribs, a ruptured spleen, and a broken wrist. Fujita abided by a no-activity order."

"Spleen too? That can be a lot of bleeding..." Tenten observed as they slowly traversed the hallway. She was actually going at her top speed in kimono.

There was a step down from the wooden floor, leading towards the extra formal dining room of the Main House (where no one ever ate except for nights like this.) Again, Neji held a hand out to help Tenten negotiate the perilous drop. He finally worked up the nerve to say, "You look beautiful."

Safely on the next level, Tenten stopped to regard him and smiled with curling, cherry-hued lips. "You didn't think I had it in me, huh?" She teased.

"I knew you did."

"The layers are killer. Note to self: never wear one of these again in summertime." Tenten added, "I can't wait to get this off and return it."

"Who does it belong to?" He was curious.

"Yugao. She's a lifesaver."

Neji nodded in agreement. He still had not met Hayate or Yugao for a proper introduction or hello, but he felt a shred of gratitude towards them.

"I learned all of my etiquette." Tenten disclosed as they approached the formal room's closed door, "But...just in case this doesn't go well...please know that I really tried, Neji."

He said nothing and kept looking ahead, minding her step so she would not trip. He had to move aside the billowing silk of her sleeve, but Neji was able to locate her hand and stroke the back of it
with his fingertips. Tenten did not have to inquire about why he did it. He communicated several things through the gesture: he knew she was trying, he would try too, he didn't know what to expect, really, and thank you.

The door slid open and nearly elicited a startled yelp from Tenten, but she contained it. They stepped inside, and the servant in the room slipped out and shut the door behind her. Neji stopped an appropriate distance away from the table, addressing his uncle and two cousins already seated, "Hiashi-sama, Hinata-sama, Hanabi-sama…this is Tenten." He gave her the verbal cue to bow, which she did spectacularly, "Thank you for letting her join us this evening."

Hiashi inclined his head, his expression straddling the fine line between boredom and indigestion, "Welcome." And since that was their cue to join, the two sat down (Tenten carefully so) across from Hiashi and his daughters seated to the left. Tea had already been served. Hanabi brought her cup up to her lips and then reneged on the sip, looking at Tenten with a grimace.

It seemed to just occur to her why Neji would have invited his teammate out of the blue. The thoughts danced across her face, piquing her, "Tenten. Neji-niisan's teammate."

"Yes, it's nice to meet you." Tenten provided a default reply.

"What family are you from? Shouldn't they be here too? Why didn't Onii-san introduce you properly?" Hanabi set her tea cup down, "Who did that makeup and where can I find them?"

Tenten remembered Hinata warning her about not taking the bait, so she played it as cool as possible, "I'd be happy to tell you…as soon as we're properly acquainted."

Hiashi gave an annoyed look to his youngest and it reeled Hanabi in somewhat. He turned back to Tenten, "Thank you for joining us. There is no need for presentations, as I know that you are already quite familiar with all of the Main House." Ah, so he'd noticed, "I feel that I should commend you for your performance at the Chunin Exam, Tenten. Both you and Hinata were exemplary in your matches."

"Thank you, Hiashi-sama." Wow, she thought, that kind of felt good.

"Please oblige a few questions so that I can get a grasp of who you are, as Neji considers you a cardinal companion." The clan leader added.

Tenten's stomach did weird acrobatics. There was no platform for Neji, or Hinata, or anyone else to speak because, as they had rightly predicted—Hiashi would do most of the questioning and she would do the answering. Hiashi wasn't interested in what Neji had been up to or the pursuits of his children. Not now, anyway. Two servants stopped in and dressed the table with a handsome spread, efficiently and rapidly setting it. Hiashi paid them no mind.

"How long have you known Neji?" The man asked.

There were a few ways to answer that. Tenten went with, "I got to know him when we became a team about five years ago. But I have known him since we both attended the Academy."

Hiashi accepted the answer and pressed on, "What are your specialties in terms of jutsu?"

Ah. Easy. "Bukijutsu and Ninjutsu."

Neji plucked food from dishes with chopsticks and left a variety of items on Tenten's plate. His eyes subtly traveled between Tenten and his uncle. Hanabi was flat out staring at Tenten, and Hinata could not conceal a bubbly, silent smile.
"And your Taijutsu?" Hiashi wondered, because of course he wondered. It was the expertise of his clan and everyone at the table.

"I'm improving. I've started Wushu lessons with Neji and Lee to hone my skills." Tenten remembered to breathe through her nostrils. This wasn't so bad.

"What rank do you aspire to, if you continue your shinobi career?" Hiashi asked as he accepted a bowl that Hinata handed to him.

Tenten took four extra seconds to actually think about it, "I was told that I should consider enlisting in the ANBU Black Ops. I've seriously been thinking about that. I wouldn't want to retire until seniority."

Hiashi seemed surprised by the answer, "And who told you to enlist?"

"A member of the Black Ops." Tenten hoped her reply wasn't too snappy. It seemed to satisfy him. Though Hiashi wasn't saying anything about how he evaluated her answers, she got the gist that he was trying to gauge how hostile she would be if, for some reason, she had to retire at a younger age.

He went on, "Do you have any other relationships or connections with clans in or outside of the Fire Country?"

"No." No friendly relations, at least. Tenten chose to omit the Huo debacle.

"Do you have any illnesses?"

"None."

"Have you ever been apprehended for illegal activity?" It was a serious question.

Tenten noticed Hanabi's mouth curve up in amusement, and Tenten internally struggled not to also be amused by the thought. After a bite of some of the best fish she had ever tasted, Tenten assured him, "I have no criminal record."

They were eating in earnest. The mood seemed to lighten and become a tad more conversational.

"Do you have any outstanding debts?" Hiashi asked.

"Not anymore. I paid off one of my parents' last loans about a year ago. The other was forgiven." Tenten explained truthfully.

The information registered on Hinata and Neji's faces as they looked at each other from across the table. They were unaware Tenten dealt with that type of burden.

Her response led to Hiashi's segue into, "How long have you been living independently from your parents?"

She chewed for an extra moment because her throat felt tight. Tenten banished the emotion down with the masticated food, "Since they died nearly six years ago."

The admission hung in the air of the room for a while.

Hiashi seemed to be thinking very hard on the matter. His eyes fell away from her and settled on the wall behind her and Neji, eating with easy sophistication. Tenten wondered if he was already aware of that. Her parents had been the same age as Hiashi and shinobi peers of that generation.
He spoke again on a more considerate topic, "I had the pleasure of being introduced to Wong Leung-san at the Tournament. He is a distinguished master, though not from this land. I hope you and Neji both continue to learn from him."

Tenten dared to smile a bit, "I'm glad you met him. We really enjoy training with him. I think he'll be happier if he gets to socialize more in the village."

"I agree. Neji has said that you can communicate with Wong Leung-san in your native language. Tell me about your ancestry, and if it lies outside of Nihon."

She stewed for a moment. He was searching for some type of genetic information to judge her by. Nihon was the region of the world that was home to shinobi countries. Beyond that border were the Kingdom of Han, the Kingdom of Joseon, and Sindhu. Ninja hardly concerned themselves with those foreign territories, but sometimes grew curious about the rest of the world.

"My family is descended of Han settlers who arrived in the last few centuries. They intermingled with old shinobi clans from the north." Tenten did not want to get too specific and raise questions about loyalties or refugee status from the last war with Iwa.

"Do you possess Tao Arts?" Hiashi got to the point.

Tenten coached herself to breathe again. Was this going to be a selling point? Perhaps a deal breaker?

"I don't." She admitted, "My father may have taught me if he were still here. He could Shadow Step."

Hinata tipped her empty tea cup over, bumping it with a tea pot before refilling. The comment excavated memories of her recent struggle against Huo. Tenten gave her an apologetic look, sorry for the blunder.

Hiashi had the opposite reaction, his face lit with interest, "I see."

"I think my mom also used Tao Arts, but for so long I thought it was only Ninjutsu. They never talked about it when I was a child. Unfortunately, I can't confirm it now." Tenten went on, "I have no inherent skill for it."

"That likely is not the case." Hiashi disagreed, "There may be use for abilities such as those in the near future…more than this village realizes. Should you never develop them, it's no loss. You already have a high degree of skill with Ninjutsu."

The positive assessment was like a silent siege on Neji, completely upending his expectations. He tried to eat his meal with composure and not interject until he was invited to.

But Hanabi happily interrupted, "So you're below average compared to your parents? What was their surname? Do I know them? I don't get where you're from. Konoha, right?"

"People leave names behind for protection." Tenten assured her, "That's what my parents told me. And would a name really speak better for me than my own actions?"

Neji damned propriety and added, "She is a Leaf ninja, Hanabi-sama. She has even saved your life, if you recall."

Hanabi wore a blank look and searched her memory. Oh. After the first Chunin Exam when the Invasion hosted a splinter cell of Cloud ninja hunting the Byakugan. That incident. Hinata had been
too exhausted to keep fighting to defend her sister, but Tenten was quick to protect the cornered girls.

Hanabi didn't press the matter after that.

Hiashi slowly observed, "Perhaps it is worth mentioning…that she has saved each of your lives at least once."

It got quiet again. Tenten stuffed an un

i roll in her mouth and chewed to excuse herself from acknowledging that fact. Her involvement with the Hyuga clan was evident enough for the clan head to certify.

"Thank you." Hinata smiled at Tenten, acknowledging what had long gone unacknowledged.

Tenten chewed, swallowed, and tried to wave the matter off. They saved lives too. It was just part of the job, and not necessarily exclusive to Tenten's friendship with Hinata and Neji. Not that Hiashi would buy into that reasoning.

Hiashi moved the conversation along, inquiring about her interpersonal skills and how easily she formed meaningful relationships. Tenten estimated that she had a pretty good knack for it. She had many friends, but she didn't always want to be around them.

With that the man asked, "How do you think you would fare in a close-knit, dense family unit within a clan? Would it run contrary to your independence?"

Tenten sipped tea and thought, whoa, what a good question. She wasn't exactly claustrophobic, but neither was she accustomed to having 135 housemates.

"I like being alone." Tenten was honest, "I like having free time to metalwork, organize, seal, and train…but it can get lonely. I might benefit from having company again."

That answer also seemed to satisfy. Hiashi nodded and sipped his tea. He had a much better rounded idea of who Tenten was. The meal relaxed from then on, finishing most dishes as conversation became organic thanks to Hinata's small talk.

She brought up Tenten and Neji's experiment with Chakra Affinity and how they helped her practice with her Water Nature, "That was the first time I succeeded with Nature Application, when Tenten used her Fire Nature against me!"

Hiashi seemed to appreciate the anecdote. Such a lesson probably had direct correlation with Hinata's triumph at the Tournament.

While sipping miso soup to conclude dinner, conversation lulled and Hanabi took over again. "How old are you?" She was almost accusatory with the question.

"I'm seventeen." Tenten replied evenly.

Then, the bombshell, "We heard a lot, but really! What's the motivation for this? Why does Neji-niisan like you?"

Hiashi and Hinata turned their heads in unison to scold Hanabi, who still didn't much care about the delivery of the question, which bordered on insult. Neji exchanged a look with Tenten that a lawyer may have given to a client, wordlessly advising: you have the right to remain silent.

Hanabi broke away from bickering with her father and sister, adding to Tenten, "You can't answer that? Psh! You're here because you want to date—we all know it. Why do you even like Neji-
niisan? Don't you find his personality abrasive?"

"Hanabi." Hiashi's voice was heavy and pricking with irritation, "Stifle yourself. You owe courtesy and respect to our guest."

"Dad, I just wanted to—"

He pegged her with a *I will fling you out of this room if you don't reinstate the manners we have beaten into you* look.

Surprisingly, Tenten offered a conciliatory answer to Hanabi's grilling, "I can't speak for Neji on why he enjoys my company, so you should ask him that question. And I do…" She reached for the words, "Find that Neji can be— surly…some days…but I've learned to read beneath those feelings."

Hanabi, along with others at the table, turned their attention back to Tenten and listened.

"What I've gleaned most from Neji's, hmm…*concealed* thoughts and emotions…are very good things." Tenten provided a heartfelt explanation, "He cares deeply about his family and clan. He vigilantly looks out for his team and friends. Neji holds these people in high esteem and I can see it, and in turn that earns him respect. Neji is smart, but he is willing to learn more, and he is getting better at seeing things for what they really are."

Tenten paused to consider that none of that had clarified her feelings for him, so she amended, "I think Neji is a leader who has also learned how to be led and how to listen. I admire those things. Neji has many of the qualities that I want to see in myself, and I enjoy learning from him. He's the best."

Hinata kept her line of sight only on Neji, fascinated by the minuscule, colorful expressions threatening his face.

Hanabi was flabbergasted by the decorous reply. The girl suggested in a mutter, "If you think all of that…well…maybe we should train sometime." Her opinion of Tenten had transformed.

Nothing was perceptibly registering with Hiashi yet, but Hinata responded jubilantly, "Oh! Onee-san, it's wonderful to hear someone find so many positive attributes in Neji-nii-san; apart from our family!"

Tenten contended, "Well, Lee has learned a lot of things about Neji too. Lee truly understands him."

Neji gathered some composure to confirm, "I can attest to that."

And from there, Hanabi turned her questions loose on Neji, "Neji-nii-san, you too! Why do you like her? Tell us!" Hiashi didn't bother trying to get her to pipe down again. The answers could prove useful.

But it was silent for quite a while and Neji did not try to answer the inquiry. Tenten glanced down at the empty bowl and plate in front of her, feeling her hands get uncomfortably clammy. Her thoughts tottered towards a new possibility, *What if this is it? This is where we mess up. Neji could choke or not get this right…I can't be mad about it. I'm glad I did well, for my part.*

Luckily, Neji had only taken some time to refine his statement, "Everything she does teaches me and makes me better."

Hanabi protested, "That's still vague…"
Neji elaborated, "Tenten is the better leader. Her emotional intelligence creates direction on our team. I've known that since graduating from the Academy, and I long fought that reality…but I could never change it or compete with it. I had to grow to match her talent." He concluded, "I have the highest respect for her of anyone I know."

What was conveniently, and appropriately, left out was that both were undeniably attracted to one another and had romanced each other to no avail for years. That was not up for discussion.

Hanabi shut up entirely. Hiashi was visibly amused by the answers. What seemed to be a lot of beating around the brush indicated to him that Neji and Tenten did possess a deep, emotional relationship. From what he could see, Tenten had no ulterior motives. She genuinely cared for his nephew.

After dinner, the table was cleared and plates of namagashi were set out for dessert. The confections were delicately molded into flower and peach designs for summer. Things were less casual in terms of discussion at that point. Hinata was using her imagination, "I think my mother would have liked you a lot, Onee-san." She spoke merrily to Tenten, "I wish she was here. Kayato-san was quite fond of you, I noticed! It'd be nice for you to meet some of the Branch family too. While speaking with me a few mentioned your matches at the Tournament, and they'd be very excited to get to know you!"

Tenten relaxed and prattled on with Hinata: oh yes, sure, she'd meet anyone if it wasn't a bother; and yes, kimonos are a lot of hassle aren't they? It was still fun to have Hinata's help for most of the day. They did not pick up on the clear expression of hopefulness on Neji's face. He was even bold enough to eat a peach-shaped sweet. Neji caught his uncle's eye and tried to approximate what Hiashi was thinking about.

No one had eaten more than two namagashi before Hiashi asked, "Children; will you excuse yourselves from this table for a short while? To the adjacent tea room— take dessert in there." He announced, "I want a word alone with Tenten."

Heartbeats were nearly audible. Since there was no precedent for something like this, Neji and Hinata had no idea what it indicated. Almost passively, the two agreed and nudged the less-willing Hanabi along with her plate of treats. They shuffled out of the dining room and sealed the door behind them.

Tenten felt a spike of alarm in her gut and then let the feeling go. There was still no use in panicking. Honesty was her greatest asset, even if conditions had changed.

Hiashi leveled an analytical gaze at the young woman, finishing a bite of dessert. He assured her, "We can speak informally now, within good taste, of course."

"Ah, r-right." Tenten untensed her shoulders, "What about, Hiashi-sama?"

"That you are ideal." He said simply.

Her mouth was stuck in a half-smile, her jaw threatening to drop.

"I have watched you for some time. It's been years, in fact." Hiashi explained, "Our clan has many formalities and rules that must be respected, however…I hardly needed this introduction. Not to know how much you've benefitted Neji. It is self-evident."

It was difficult to form words of thanks, and she wondered if thanks were even in order. Tenten just took the compliment with a nod.
"It was not discussed in depth before, but the absence of your parents dampens the spirit of our village. I imagine if they were here, they would have quickly controlled discord at the Tournament… and they certainly would have made this meeting cordial." Hiashi gave her a kind thought, "I did not know them personally, but my brother did. Perhaps that's why this arrangement is a touch ironic. Some friendships endure in new lives."

Tenten cleared her throat with a small laugh, "That's something…my dad might've said."

"So that you are aware of what happens after this: I will take the time to discuss our meeting and Neji's request with our clan's elders. I can advocate for your breeding and abilities, and general compatibility with my nephew…but once you are approved, you will be subject to numerous other bothers and interviews." Hiashi exhaled tiredly at the thought, "Understand that courtship among the Hyuga is serious. If marriage is not the ultimate result, frivolity and wasted time is met with hostility by our elders. Be aware of the expectations."

"But there's no rush for that sort of thing?" Tenten verified.

"There is no rush. You're young yet." He confirmed.

She begged to differ on that. Young? Perhaps; that, or Hiashi was starting to feel old, Tenten guessed.

"Also, please know that I am grateful for your support and defense of Hinata." Hiashi added, "I intend to repay that debt to you."

She raised a hand nervously, "No, no, that isn't something that ever needs to be repaid. I'll always feel compelled to protect her."

The clan head looked at her for a long moment as if something had come to mind. Hiashi recited an old proverb she had reminded him of, "Ten men, ten colors."

A frilly way of saying to each his own, Tenten knew, but she also noticed a reference to her name. Though she had been poised and minimally effusive that evening, she allowed herself a small smile.

Hiashi went on, "When approval is granted there will be many rules you shall abide by, and you will also remain under the watch and care of the Hyuga clan from then on."

She felt slightly caught off-guard by the weight of the arrangement but nodded anyway.

"I imagine that the children are anxious next door…wondering what this is about." He asked of Tenten, "And perhaps you had thought I was a cold, aloof man before we spoke candidly?"

"I never thought that." Tenten certified, "I understand. Well…I've seen the stress that Neji has been under. I know you deal with your own share of quandaries and red tape."

Hiashi appeared briefly delighted by her observation. No one seemed to get it. How hard a day in his shoes could be… He raised his hand and gestured with a wave, as if motioning through the wall for his family to return. Tenten was amused that he knew at least one if not all of them had been watching with the Byakugan.

His children and nephew returned, muffling their own speculative conversation as they entered the room. They had only saved one last namagashi for Tenten, as Hanabi had eaten all the rest. Tenten helped herself to it and gave Neji a reassuring look as he sat stiffly beside her, clueless of how well it had gone.
"I find this to be…a sensible match." Hiashi updated his nephew, who straightened attentively after hearing the opinion, "Know that I approve, and will follow up by morning to have other minutiae of this matter sanctioned."

Hanabi and Hinata started talking at each other, turning their thrilled jabbering toward Neji and Tenten. It was hard to tell who the congratulations and fawning were actually aimed at. Hiashi took a moment to let the girls process. Neji and Tenten, on the other hand, sat beside each other and quietly marveled at the outcome. They spared a glance for each other, pleased.

"Before it gets too late, all of you change out of that formalwear." Hiashi mandated. Oddly, it was only then that Tenten noticed the clan leader was dressed as he always was: in white and black yukata. Quite informal for such a meeting, but he probably did not want to deal with heat or discomfort nearing the end of summer. It was his prerogative.

"Neji, bring Tenten home and then return to me so we may go over other details." He requested of his nephew, and then added to his guest, "How fortunate that we were able to learn more about you, Tenten. From here out we can share even more. Be a good companion to my nephew."

Calmer and cooler, Tenten responded in the affirmative, "I will, Hiashi-sama. Thank you."

After being bid good night, Hiashi and the youngsters went their separate ways, with most intending to find help removing their kimono. As directed, Neji led Tenten back in the direction of Kayato's work area, matching her slow-as-molasses pace.

"Were you watching from the other room?" She asked him.

"We all were." Neji confessed.

"Ah. That's what we thought. Your uncle didn't bother checking what you were up to."

"What did he talk to you about?" Neji needed to know.

"He…huh." Tenten tipped her head as she recalled, "He was nice to me."

Neji was not sure how his uncle had been inserted into the context of 'nice.' He could scarcely even envision it.

"Stop. He just recalled some things about my parents…and talked about a few subjects that were best not said in front of your cousins." Tenten filled him in, "They were already riled up."

"Good." Neji breathed easier. He found her hand again under the billowing sleeve.

"That went well." Tenten observed, amazed.

Neji halted and Tenten stopped short, leashed by his hold on her hand. She turned to see if anything was the matter. He stood close to her with his eyes shut, keeping his face level with her temple. He was winding down: much too high-strung for a rather simple meeting.

"Thank you for doing this. Most of it will be troublesome. There will be critics and naysayers, but I will do my best." Neji spoke the words softly beside her ear, planting a chaste kiss there, "For you."

Tenten badly wanted to kiss him the way she typically did, but it was not the proper time or place. She made a sound of accord in her throat and reveled, standing face to face with him. They just stood like that for a while, wordlessly appreciating each other and how it had turned out.
After a few seconds Tenten lightly jabbed Neji's arm, continuing her slow walk down the corridor, "Not half bad for a late birthday present, right?"

Chapter End Notes

Note: Look at that, they are almost adult-ing. Beware. To describe the form and premise of the next chapter—imagine a full carton of a dozen eggs that are cozy, beautifully smooth, and uncracked. Now imagine dropping them 5 meters onto concrete. Side note; Naruto will be involved in the mess. I will post that soon. Oh and hey, what did you like? Let me know in a review, good reader.
In this chapter—Neji and his uncle experience the unchained spite of the hawks in the Hyuga clan! Naruto's Sage Training takes an unexpected turn! A tense meeting with Kurama and a never-before-seen Toad Sage!

Chapter Soundtrack: "For the Best" by Gregory and the Hawk

Low rumbles traveled down the long corridors of the Hyuga house. It was the morning after a propitious introduction between Tenten and the head of the clan. Many clansmen had set out to attend to tasks and mission assignments, Neji being no exception.

He could hear distant discussion; voices in the far parts of the house as he prepared to depart for training with his team. Neji neared an exit to the Main House's engawa and then stopped, feeling a prickle of intuition.

A short silence in the home was broken by shouting that rattled the rice paper door beside him. Wide-eyed, Neji tried to imagine what on earth the source of commotion was. He peered uncertainly down an interior hallway, hesitant to confirm the feeling in his gut. Something was amiss.

Perhaps against better judgement, he followed the passages of the house toward the sounds of discord. Neji arrived at the portion of the home that Hyuga Main House elders inhabited, stopping uncertainly near the closed door of a tea room. He wondered if it was acceptable to use the Byakugan and determine who the arguing parties were. One of them, by the sound of it, was his uncle Hiashi.

Then, the door slid open after a minute of quieter discussion, and Neji blinked in surprise as the tall Elder Haburo exited the room. Neji glimpsed his uncle seated at a low table with other elders, ready to rise and leave as well. Hosuke commanded Hiashi to remain, as those gathered were not done conversing with him. Haburo shut the door and leveled his gaze on Neji.

The old man's face had lost nearly every trace of fat and elasticity it knew in its youth. Lines were deeply etched into his skin, and his sharp, white eyes drooped noticeably at the corners. His gray hair was tied in the traditional style, but today Haburo was dressed in dark, modern clothing as if to attend a village conference.

"Great grandson," Haburo let out a small sigh as he greeted Neji, "Walk with me. I am stopping at my office."

As far back as Neji remembered, Elder Haburo had never spoken to him one-on-one before or acknowledged the fact that Neji was his direct descendent on his grandfather's side. He felt wary of the old man who he had no threads of a relationship with. He followed half a step behind Haburo.

At the office near the back of the house, Haburo tottered inside on tired legs and moved to the far left window, pulling up blinds. He waved bony fingers at Neji, signaling that he shut the door. He reluctantly did so.
"Come here, Neji-kun, and get these shades." Haburo pointed out the long wall of windows, "Let some light in here. I need to see where I'm going..." As directed, Neji lifted shades and carefully watched the old man circle around a formidable desk. It was littered with correspondence. Haburo proceeded to organize it.

"I am sure you are wondering...why I have never stopped working? My peers are lazy in their retirements...and I am too motivated to sit idly." He licked a fingertip to flip through a multi-page report. He glanced up at Neji again, with the faintest, ghostly expression of affection on his face.

"You are 17 now, your uncle tells me. You are of age to fully assume responsibilities in the Hyuga clan." Haburo noted, "Ah. If I could remember that age...or what it felt like to be strong and young...17. Then, I was busy fighting wars, and providing for my late wife and first child. Days that were bloody and overcast...leaving us weary. Shortly after that I became head of this clan." He dropped documents in an outgoing tray, "Things happened so fast."

Weirdly, Neji could kind of relate. Haburo detected the empathy on the young man's face.

"Do you feel that things move fast, Neji-kun?" Haburo asked him.

"At times it does feel that way." He conceded.

"Ha! And imagine being my age while feeling the speed of life— I turned 90 this year." Haburo was dryly amused, "You have an adult perspective now, and you are interested in finding a spouse and assuming your duties as clan leader, I understand. It will be upon you quicker than you know."

Neji maintained a respectful distance from the desk, regarding the elder who was a conspicuous and persisting antiquity of his bloodline. Neji took a moment to think about how he had snorted and rebelled at the last meeting with clan elders, wondering if that behavior left a sour impression on them. Haburo had been willing to advocate for him, more so than Hinata, at any rate. Neji wondered how Haburo felt now. He seemed willing to talk and express himself. Maybe this was a resource he had overlooked? Hyuga clan elders and their viewpoints, so often vilified by Hiashi and Hideyasu...Neji was not so sure he could ignore them after all.

"Have a seat." Haburo motioned to him again, and they sat in chairs on opposite sides of the desk, "There, that's better. You look me in the eye, Neji-kun. Quite unlike little Hinata and Hanabi...who dislike me so..."

"They have different preferences in the company they keep." Neji spoke on their behalf, "I don't think they have any personal objection to you, Haburo-sama."

"Yes, perhaps. They are social in outside circles, I can see. Fujita-kun is skittish as well." The old man tapped his chin, "What a generation. Like sparrows that scatter..."

Neji tried to keep his face as inexpressive as possible while trying to figure out what this was about.

"Neji-kun," Haburo announced, "Frankly, you are one of the softest people I have ever met."

A bolt of alarm woke Neji up a bit more. He didn't understand.

"You have been pampered and well-cared for by your foster guardian, raised up from the Branch and treated as an equal..." Haburo's mouth slanted in irritation, "How do you expect to repay the kindness of elders who gave you that chance...to live such a life? Have you ever given that thought?"

No, he had never given it thought. Neji hardly knew how to form a sentence involving that
admission. He stayed mum.

Haburo sighed while rummaging around a drawer for something, "And your cousins are recalcitrant and ungrateful for their freedoms. So very spoiled…" He tipped a bottle of peppermint spheres into his palm, "None of you have ever spilled blood in a war. You have never subdued Branch members engaging in an uprising. Never traded your lives for a greater cause; never for more than the instant gratification that young people seek…"

Neji watched in astonishment as Haburo scooped a few peppermints into his mouth. He was very nonchalant about his disapproval.

"When your uncle called for a meeting this morning, while thinking on my way there, I realized that my grandson Hiashi facilitated this bloated privilege that my great grandchildren misuse. So I was compelled to silence Hiashi’s request before he could even make it— just as soon as I sat down."

Haburo elaborated serenely, "The last time I granted Hiashi a favor was when he and Hizashi discussed repayment to Kumogakure in the death of the idiot Raikage on our property."

He was aware of Neji’s shocked staring but continued shamelessly, "I sympathized with Hizashi's sacrifice and respected it. By elevating you to the Main House of our clan, I believed it was a gesture of gratitude to Hizashi that you would one day reciprocate to the Main House. Though you haven’t yet done so…now I know how I want you to return the favor, Neji-kun."

It was about then he tried to speak up, as if to mention some feeble example of a contribution, but Neji was cut off again.

"You will bring our clan back to its former condition and leadership. Back to strength. Neji-kun, you will complete Sealing lessons under my tutelage to understand our restraint seal, and how best to control Branch members. You will also honor the covenant I recommended."

Haburo reiterated, "We elders agreed this morning that you will select from and marry within the Main House of the Hyuga clan and carry out your duties. This shift in ethos will combine your talent with the clan's vision of the future."

"Whose vision of the future—?" Neji continued to speak even though Haburo raised his hand to silence him again, "Yours? I intend to repay the Hyuga with kindness, but such a choice leaves me no choice at all—"

He felt a slight poke near his ribcage from Haburo, which had traveled through air. The old man's Jyukken was subtle and mild, but it made his point clear. Shut up. Neji did.

"You do not have to abide by the vision if you do not believe you can serve as the leader this clan needs." Haburo assured him, "You can repay your debt by rejoining the Branch Family, Neji-kun. That is what you were born into and that is where you belong. Only by my intervention is that not the case." His voice hardened, far less amicable, "Choose wisely. Your decisions will affect your immediate family, one way or another. I have had it with Hiashi and Hideyasu's games— your games by extension. Such are frivolous rackets, and that is not in the Hyuga clan's best interest. It has been in your interest. You will no longer shame the Hyuga with your personal pursuits."

The silence in the dusty, sunny room was razor-sharp. Neji seethed in dread.

Haburo spoke again with a hint of smugness, "Did you really believe you are better than all the rest of the Hyuga clan? As a prodigy with talent that we, supposedly, have not seen before? I assure you it has been seen before." He went on, "Did you really think you have dreamed up a future for this clan that no one before you has envisioned, Neji-kun?"
The old man leaned forward over the desk, watching the youngster, "You are not the first to think that the Caged Bird Seal should be done away with. Not the first to be raised from the Branch to join the Main Family. Nor the first, reciprocally, of the Main who will have been relegated to the Branch." Haburo, for his age, was intimidatingly sound of body and mind; it was clear when he stood from his seat and loomed above the clan heir, "Decades and decades of leadership in the Hyuga clan have seen all kinds of wanton stupidity like yours. You dared threaten me and my peers, claiming death was a gentler option than what we suggested to you?" He scoffed at Neji, "That is something your father also thought, no?"

Neji bristled furiously, "Do not drag my father's memory through the mud of your rhetoric, great elder."

"Oh Neji…tens of others just like you, before you…more skilled than you, more popular than you. They are gone." Haburo pointed out, "I am still here."

"Does that honestly speak for their incompetence, or was it your sacrifice of those who came before me?" Neji wondered boldly.

"See for yourself." Haburo offered, "Our brothers in ancient blood, the Uchiha clan…who refused to fit their clansmen with failsafe seals to avoid violence and calamity…" He happily shamed the Uchiha for comparison, "And where did it get them? Where did their lack of control deliver them to? Self-discipline and caution are the hallmarks of longevity. That is what the Hyuga clan has known as we watched our brother clan burn itself from the inside out…destroyed by its own heir, no less."

He was grinding his teeth and considering a verbal onslaught to unleash on Haburo. Unfortunately, no good points were coming to mind. Neji felt a landslide of helplessness slip down his esophagus into his stomach, roiling his insides.

"Think on it." Haburo told him. With his bony hand, Haburo pointed to the door, marking Neji's cue to get out. Woodenly, Neji rose and left the office.

The only thing he could think to do was to return to where he last saw his uncle. Thankfully, or maybe not thankfully, all of the other elders had vacated the tea room. Hiashi and Hideyasu were still occupying it, Neji glimpsed with his blood limit. More than likely they were reeling from the same news.

Neji quickly entered the room and shut the door behind him, just in time to catch some of Hiashi's vocal fretting.

"He's leveraged my daughters." Hiashi lamented what had come to fruition, ignoring Hideyasu's 9:00AM pouring of wine into a rather large glass, "My grandfather, understanding soul that he is… he will send my children to the Branch if he does not see my nephew do his bidding."

"Here. Come on now." Hideyasu caught a flailing arm and fitted the wine glass in Hiashi's hand, "I need you to let this slow you a little, Hiashi-sama. Then we can get constructive."

Neji was bewildered by the sight. Was this a coping mechanism he had never witnessed before? Had they just been good at concealing it?

Hideyasu noticed Neji's arrival, "Oh, gosh, Neji—here." He poured more wine.

"It's morning." Neji reminded him. He moved around the low table to take a seat beside Hiashi, who was sadly sipping the alcohol.

"I know. This must be what mornings in Hell feel like." Hideyasu imagined. He helped himself to
"We are all…more disposable than I realized." Neji admitted, stilted.

Hideyasu and Hiashi turned to him at the same time, equally rattled.

"…was that the point?" Neji asked quietly, "That the Head of the Hyuga…is in fear of disobeying our elders? Enacts their will out of necessity and self-preservation?"

"I'm sorry." Hiashi shut his eyes, trying to calm down, "That is the way."

"Will Haburo-sama…do that to Hinata-sama and Hanabi-sama?" Neji ventured further.

"He can, and he would create the necessary justification for it to quell outrage." Hiashi confirmed, "My grandfather…sent Hideyasu's sister, Hizome, to the Branch for disobedience. It happened when you were a child, Neji. As recently as then."

"And he's threatened my other sister, Hikamei, and I with that promise as well." Hideyasu spoke mournfully above his glass, "Now you can see why we don't get much done in terms of forward progress."

"Were you going to…explain this to me?" Neji was a bit perturbed.

"Yes. I had no idea that today would be the day." Hiashi admitted, "I have no more leeway with my grandfather. I cannot call his bluff. He has no qualms moving us to the Branch so that he can puppeteer a new leader…someone more pliant, like Fujita or Hanabi, if he so chooses."

"Well, not Hanabi." Hideyasu laughed morbidly, "She's as good as Branch-sealed, with that mouth."

Neji tried to grasp this new reality, "How do I stop it?"

"He must have told you how to do that." Hiashi guessed, "Grandfather spoke with you, didn't he? Surely he gave you his terms. Those are the only terms that will ensure the safety of my children. If you choose an option other than what he provided…"

"I won't." Neji spoke protectively. The situation was godawful, but he at least had the power to keep his cousins out of the crossfire.

Hiashi's shoulders slackened a little. He set his glass down on the table and let his eyes stare off despondently.

"What did he ask you to do, Neji?" Hideyasu inquired.

The words flooded back to him. The putrid, degrading demands. The insults. He had never felt so small in his life. Neji did not say anything for a while, still digesting what Haburo expected of him.

When he had the willpower to speak again Neji asked, "Did you mention Tenten at all?"

"No. Not by name or explanation of eligibility. I was told to drop the subject in favor of hearing out my grandfather's message." Hiashi informed him, "I have no illusion that they would have reacted favorably, had I been allowed to address it. Please forgive my failure."

"There is nothing to forgive. It is no failure of yours." Neji wasn't sure how he was supposed to console anyone else. He was on the verge of a mental derailing himself.

"She would have been a refreshing opportunity…" Hideyasu sighed and polished off the wine glass,
"I was glad to see Tenten here last night. Fujita and Kayato couldn't stop talking about it…now what do I tell them?"

"The truth." Hiashi offered somberly, "Do not let anyone in our family misunderstand. This extortion is what our tradition is rooted in. Don't let our children live their lives ignorant of this practice." He glanced at his nephew again, "I never wanted for you…to enter an era of disappointment and disillusionment because of our clan, Neji. I regret not being able to prevent any of this. I hope you understand that I won't risk the futures of my daughters. I hope you can come to terms with what my grandfather asked."

"You won't like it." Neji warned.

Hiashi's face dropped. Hideyasu took the cue to pour another glass.

"I will see it done, but I…" His voice cracked slightly, "I am expected to serve the Main House and its interests only. I will be…trained in proper use of the Caged Bird Seal. I will choose a spouse from the Main House. If I decide not to meet those requirements, my alternative was to join the Branch Family." Neji bowed his head, "…I need some time to think. I don't know what's right."

"Dear God." Hideyasu spilled a spot of wine on his pants, horrified, "No matches with the Taketori? The Sarutobi? The Senju? Anyone else? Our own blood…"

"Yes."

"So he does intend to control Hinata and Hanabi, in some capacity." Hiashi observed, cooling off as he realized what the scheme was, "And he's denied you other options."

"Utterly." Neji took a breath.

"I am not one for advocating for a particular match, however…" Hideyasu rubbed the back of his neck anxiously, "Hikamei is 36 years old. Overdue for marriage, in Grandfather's opinion, although she never had interest in being wed…perhaps she will agree if you explain to her how dire our circumstances are?"

Neji just looked at him. He could hardly believe they were entertaining the arrangement.

"I respectfully ask that you do not consider your cousins." Hiashi added, "But do consider the importance of you remaining in your position. No matter what is said, elders underestimate what you will be able to do as a leader of this clan. Neji, I believe it's best if you endure and see to the changes we so desperately need."

Hideyasu chimed in, "Haburo-sama is old and he won't live forever. No one else on our council of elders is so strict and conservative. The rest will be more open to listening to you and finding middle ground."

Hiashi nodded, "This is an important time for someone like you to stay engaged with our clan. Do not surrender your potential influence because of Grandfather's threats."

"I will bear that in mind." Neji agreed.

"Very well. Take this day to…rejuvenate. Or at least make sense of our 'great nobility' and how we of the Hyuga contort sense into fear. I pray you won't let that continue to be the legacy of our clan." Hiashi advised.

Upon leaving, Neji figured that Hiashi and Hideyasu did not care what hour of the day it was. They
would consume the wine down to the last drop in the bottle. They had finally shared the heavy burden with him of what it meant to be the heir of the Main House. What it took to navigate the whims of draconian elders and conforming to their standards. Old men that perhaps even threatened and intimidated each other into keeping their timeworn ways.

Neji finally made it to the porch and tapped his shoes on outside. He had already made up his mind that he could not face his team like this. Not while he was a prisoner of his own brain. He went through the motions of Baguazhang on the house's lawn in an attempt to relax and hear his thoughts more clearly.

How had he not seen the big picture for so long? He'd been wrapped up in other things, Neji conceded. Haburo had some valid points. He had never given consideration to the thoughts and ideas of clan elders. He treated them as old, fragile satellites instead of resources. Only now did Neji understand why no one could rely on them as fountains of knowledge. They sought to control every facet of the Hyuga. Not just the Branch, but every last person on the playing board, moving chess pieces around according to their strategy. Haburo was a remarkably skilled player.

His first and strongest instinct, Neji noticed, was to remain. To keep going. To not be cowed by this threat and setback. Either he was brave by nature or it was bravery born from pride. He was smart enough to learn the game too. He would become leader and manage what he could, and have patience, waiting for the day Haburo went to sleep and never woke up. That was when he could campaign for bolder changes with elders, and not a moment sooner.

Yet the drawbacks of this decision were incredibly limiting and painful. Neji thought about it; palms up, arms bent, stepping in easy circles that Wong Leung had demonstrated.

Naturally, being forced to choose a partner from among three Main House peers meant that he could potentially damage the aspirations and well-being of his cousins. Not that he would ever sanely consider them, but it felt worse that Hikamei, who he barely knew, would have no choice but to agree or be complicit in Neji's poorly made match with a closer relation. It bordered on a cruel joke, on Haburo's part.

What came like a rushing undercurrent in his thoughts was the complete ineffectuality of Tenten's presence. Since he had already chosen to remain clan heir, Neji had automatically written her off. He pondered over it, surprised to conclude that she would agree with him if he told her all of this. She would understand why he couldn't stay in her life, or at least, not in the intimate way they had established. As a practical person, Tenten could look at the facts and encourage him to continue on the path he'd embarked on. She always had. Neji felt confident that she would not advise him otherwise.

He felt queasy. Neji had not bothered to eat anything. He also felt that maybe his train of thought was altogether wrong. Trading the future he wanted with someone he loved for a blood relation more than twice his age... was probably a horrible idea. No matter the benefits, there was going to be a catastrophe at some point related to his personal feelings.

Neji stopped practicing forms and stalked off. What a tragically beautiful summer day it was, a perfect day for his clan elders to smother hopes and dreams with verbal feces and intimidation. He left the Hyuga estate and went up town; taking side streets to be sure he would not encounter any of his teammates. They would be done waiting for him at the training field and out looking for him by this time.

He arrived at the village's central cemetery for departed ninja. Neji, half-crazy with anger, stopped at his father's grave and dropped his hands at his sides, accusing the headstone and symbolic, empty space below, "You did this."
"You facilitated all of this. You put the idea in Uncle's head to foster me in the Main family. You traded yourself to Cloud. You wanted more for me, and then I was given more than I could possibly handle…more than anyone can handle, it so happens." Neji balled a hand into a fist, "Father, you are not as selfless and good as I remember. Now I see how willing you were to let me hurt."

On the far side of the cemetery, a well-dressed man was laying a bouquet of flowers on the headstone of the Fourth Hokage. He had not noticed Neji at all as he set out in the direction of town again, leaving the graveyard empty. Neji stood alone in the space, processing rage and frustration.

"What were you thinking? How could you be more willing to die as a decoy than to live for me? What could I have gained in your absence, after you assured me you would stay with me? Insecurity. Acrimony. Skepticism. The sense that you're a liar. The sense that mother didn't die the way you said she did. Maybe everything you said was to make things easier in the moment." He dug his heel into soft soil, incensed, "You've left me this mess. So I can stretch myself thin trying to fulfill some obligation to you—to make you proud, to honor your memory. At how many people's expense will I achieve that? How many people I care about will be hurt because of what I must do?"

Neji added a clipped barb, "How can you rest peacefully in Heaven watching this mortal devastation?"

A summer breeze seemed to answer, rustling tree tops. It cooled him off a little.

"What did you want for me?" Neji wondered, "I have no idea…I thought I did. Am I supposed to learn of your intention now? Should I look back on these events and reflect, and then tell you what I've learned?"

He wandered into the hypothetical.

"That all ways are wrong ways. That our clan is despicable. That as much as I want to help it, I want to erase it. And…" He took a breath and shocked himself, "That is…what they also think." Neji wondered if he was insane or if he had found common ground with his elders, "So that is your point. I am the architect of these problems far more than you are. We all must be held accountable. How does anything I do matter, then?"

The anger seemed to evaporate and was replaced by something else; something he had not felt in a long time. Neji recalled what it had been like to settle into a three-man team without Tenten. How he had felt anxiety, longing, and sorrow, but then it had felt manageable by comparison. Now the weight of everyone he missed was oppressive, stinging his eyelids, making it hard to breathe.

"Why do I love someone if I cannot have her? Why was I hopeful? How do I reconcile with the end of the most important thing I've done?" Neji tried clearing his throat, staying somewhat dry and calm, "I don't want to end it to start something meaningless instead."

Rather than saying it out loud, Neji apologized in his head to Hyuga Hizashi. Hardly anything was his father's fault. He walked briskly out of the cemetery and would have felt stupid if not for the fact he felt much, much worse than stupid. He was frail and heartsore. Having a one-sided, accusatory conversation with his dead father was probably more normal than he wanted to own up to.

He traversed streets and back alleys, staying unseen. Starving near mid-day, Neji stopped near the central quarter of the village beside a freshwater stream. It was an area where Wong Leung had made him and Lee perform ridiculous balancing exercises in the past. He halted on the bank and controlled his breathing. For all intents and purposes, he had un-made up his mind. Neji had no pull in any
single direction, as every course of action was distinctly unappetizing. What was he supposed to tell his uncle in the next few days? Roll dice and assign a decision? He was getting to that point.

Neji realized there was one thing that would take his mind off of this detestable subject. He sank down into a balanced prayer crouch on one foot and folded his hands. His least favorite exercise would distract for a while.

Several blocks south, the gathering of old timers playing checkers timed out for the day. The geezers dispersed from their playing tables in the Han Ethnic Quarter, destined for other parts of Konoha. Wong Leung bought the day's paper from a local newsstand (printed in Nihongo) and walked toward home. Of course, he spotted someone familiar beside the stream near his house. Wong curiously ambled over to see why Neji was by himself as opposed to working with his team.

Wong Leung stopped behind him and got no reaction, though he was certain Neji had detected his presence. Kitten-paw, he greeted Neji with a Hanwen nickname. That did not register so Wong tapped Neji's shoulder with the rolled up newspaper. He rose from his crouch and shook loose.

"Neji." Wong Leung greeted again, "No team?"

He shook his head. It was obvious to the old man that he was upset, and did not want his teammates to witness it.

"Troubled?" The old man wondered.

"Shifu…" Neji took a chance and opened up, "I have to make a choice, and the only two options I have are terrible."

Wong raised his eyebrows, "Oh?"

"This is something I should deliberate on before bothering…Lee and Tenten." He explained. I know how such a thing feels. Wong related in his mother tongue, adding in Nihongo, "Do you know what I said?"

"That you have also felt that way." Neji presumed, gleaning a few key words of Hanwen. Yes. Wong Leung nodded, Could you tell me about it?

No, I can't. Neji sighed and used minimal Hanwen, shoulders slumped.

It would be too long of an explanation. Wong understood, So then…I will tell you of my own terrible choices that I had to contend with in the past, and which one I chose long ago.

Surprised, Neji wondered if he properly understood what had been said, but Wong Leung indicated that he had.

At a time like this, don't you wish to know how I made my decision? When I was younger I was much more foolish. Wong Leung went on, And I still had Lee's father with me, then. My only child. His name was Wan Kam.

"Lee's father?"

Another nod, Oh yes. Wan Kam was a street fighter and con artist in his youth. He was a hedonist who used my Wushu to profit. Wong Leung recalled, Wan Kam was beloved to me even when he did wrong. He would pretend to learn from his mistakes to make me happy…but in time I often
discovered that he hadn't.

"He was dishonest."

This part may be a bit more difficult for you to understand, but let's see... Wan Kam was always looking to line his pockets. While we lived in the Kingdom of Han, in Shanhu, my son convinced me to join his business venture in Nihon. The Third Great Ninja War was raging and had created opportunities for foreign merchants and businessmen, Wan Kam explained. He said I would attract many Wushu students there if I opened schools, which were not doing so well in Shanhu at the time. Wong Leung checked to see if Neji was getting it.

"You came here for opportunity." Neji gathered.

That's right. To the Fire Country. It was a long journey, and after we arrived in Tanzaku Quarter and completed deals for the buildings we would renovate for my schools... I learned that the property was all ill-gotten. Wan Kam had not told me that it had been stolen or that previous owners had died in war. The old man folded his arms behind his back, I found it completely unethical. It made me hesitant to finish opening my schools. And in no time at all, legally bound owners returned to discover our squatting and had us removed. I could not speak Nihongo or find work. Day laboring was all that I could do to feed my family.

Neji had for the most part understood, and wondered, "What did your son do at that time?"

What he did best. He and his girlfriend Pui Yee conned money and stole from many victims in this country. They partook of drinking, debauchery, and frivolous entertainment. My son sponsored music events and illegal fighting rings. Tasteless, loud music that he thought was a window into the rest of the world. Wan Kam thought that I did not look at other continents and nations and see opportunity in them the way he did. But I knew all he looked at were the popular drugs and Rock music of those countries. He smiled sadly, I knew I was losing him. When I pleaded with my son to follow a virtuous path and make an honest living... he always blamed me for everything.

Some of the concepts were a bit too abstract in the language for Neji to fully comprehend. He got half of the gist, supposing Wan Kam did deceitful things to survive, and that he also had a spouse.

Then he was a father. The least thoughtful one there ever was. He named Lee after his favorite music. Said he would take him around the world and show him the sights. Make him a Wushu star... Wong sighed wistfully, It was not long before Wan Kam grew tired of the responsibility. He and Pui Yee quarreled endlessly about the difficulty of raising a child. When they finally agreed to sell Lee to a buyer in the Tea Country, I could not take it anymore. I had a physical blowout fight with Wan Kam, trying to instill virtue and compassion in him in the exact wrong way. He felt no remorse over hurting me that day, breaking my bones and spirit... The man's lips quivered emotionally, My son told me... he never needed me. That he always hated me. He could make his own way. He shut his eyes, And in exchange for the last bit of saved money I had, Wan Kam gave Lee to me.

Neji watched the man and swallowed thickly. Little of that was lost in translation. He especially noted the part in which Lee was handed off like a bargaining chip to a heartbroken man.

That was the money I had worked for... to go home. Home to Shanhu. To get away from this place... and its strange ways and selfish people. But I... could not part with Lee. Wong Leung ran his hand under his eyes, dabbing at moisture, So I gave up that hope. I let Wan Kam and Pui Yee take my money to conduct their deals in the Kingdom of Han and Sindhu. At least then I was free of them... but I had to settle down and learn how to adapt to a place I did not call home. It was frightening to raise another boy after I had... raised such a rotten one once before.
Neji shook his head, "Your son's cruelty is not a reflection of how you raised him. Not if Lee is anything to go by."

Wong Leung chuckled through his tears; *Do you really think so, Neji? I have never been perfect. Certainly not a perfect parent or teacher...and at that time I had thought I made a mistake not taking my chance to return home... But I realized that being with Lee was the right choice. I impressed upon him strict rules and morals, and made my love for him...quieter, subtler... He concluded, Though I have no doubts that my grandson loves me. No matter how grizzled I've become...I take great comfort in that he never once said he didn't need me.

Neji stewed on what he had understood: that there was clearly love between grandfather and grandson. He watched a cupped leaf float down the stream, hearing Wong Leung make a rattling sigh as he relaxed.

"Do you hate being here?" Neji wondered, "That you can't return home to what you knew?"

*I don't really hate this place. Not now.* Wong Leung admitted, *I hated that I felt worthless for so long. That my son hurt me and made me believe...no one would care who I was, where I was from, what I thought...that the Hidden Leaf Village would never need the likes of me. The way Wan Kam didn't need me.*

"You can still open a school if you want to." Neji reminded him.

*With what money, Kitten-paw?*

"Mine. Ours. Whatever my team can provide for you, it would be adequate thanks." Neji shut his eyes, *Dreams should be chased.*

*You sound as if you are planning to stop chasing your own dream.* Wong Leung noticed, *Don't sell me dramatic words of support only because you are going crazy with grief. Come now, boy. What's happened to you?*

He didn't want to spell it out for the old man, but could share partially, *My ignorance finally caught up to me.*

"Ah." Wong said.

And... Neji recalled a useful phrase in Hanwen, *I am afraid.*

*Your clan has...high standards and expectations. Though your uncle is a decent enough man...* Wong observed nonchalantly, *But there may be some that want you to think you have no value. No choice. The way Wan Kam made me think for so long.*

They exchanged a glance.

*Do we really want to believe that?* The old man asked.

With a wane smile, Neji shook his head and accepted Wong Leung's reassuring clap on his shoulder.

*Take a hot bath, eat dumplings...* Wong recommended as he strolled back in the direction of his house, *And tell whoever is afflicting you to fuck off all the way back to their first ancestor.*

Neji guessed that the parting remark had incorporated profanity, but it had been too sophisticated for him to decipher. He peeled away from the stream and set out for the Hyuga estate again. Neji had no motivation to train or to ask for a mission to distract himself. Though Wong Leung meant well and
provided him with a listening ear, he was feeling marginally worse after hearing the anecdote.

It was rather strange sitting in a tub in the Hyuga's communal bath in the early afternoon. His tense muscles fought him, refusing to loosen. Not a single soul dropped by the bathing area while he sat there for a long while in silence, meandering through his options.

After that ineffective remedy, Neji dressed and wandered aimlessly around the clan property. He passed by the farthest yards where he had practiced Wind Release with Hideyasu, regarding the stumps and chips where trees had once stood. Neji circled 'round past the Branch quarters, noticing Hideyasu's youngest sister, Hizome, who had been expelled from the Main House.

Hizome was seated on the porch and wiping her youngest child's hands clean with a cloth. Frowning, she nagged at the boy, Tsukuru, to read his Academy Entrance Exam guide more and play in the mud less. Her elder son, Hirokazu, muttered at his brother and ushered him along into the house. With a stern look still on her face, Hizome turned and stared at Neji as he stood on the gravel path.

"Did you drink with my big brother this morning?" She snarked.

"I abstained." Neji confirmed.

"Good. He'll become a lush while resisting the pressures of our elders. Hideyasu hasn't stopped by to tell me what the problem is yet…" Hizome cocked her head at Neji, "But I bet I can guess."

He felt more resigned to it, "You'll find out soon enough."

"I suppose that I will." She was the feisty type, starting to grin, "Don't look at me like my life is horrible. I've lived exactly as I want to. What more can those old men do to me? Kill me? Lock me away? My husband is in the ANBU and he would be delighted to intervene."

Neji crossed over to the porch and sat beside her, "Is he the reason why you were expelled?"

"I am the reason why I was expelled." Hizome corrected him, "I was told to do many things I had no desire to do. So I married without permission and lived away from this estate…and when they dragged me back for my insolence, and I refused to apologize or dissolve my union, I smiled at Grandfather as he attached a seal to my head." She tittered to herself, proud, "Now look at my three boys! Nyozeka, Hirokazu, and Tsukuru…I can't enjoy life without them. Their father is fiercely protective of them."

"I should like to talk to him, sometime." Neji noted of her husband, whose name he did not know.

"He's busy. I apologize I've never properly introduced Masanari to you, Neji-sama." Hizome sighed, "Are you…preparing yourself? To join our House?"

"I think…I might be." He admitted.

"Ho ho! What have you done?" She snickered in amusement.

"Nothing yet." Neji pushed up from his seat to stand, "But like you, there are some things I cannot agree to do even when our elders mandate it."

Hizome waved a hand to get his attention before he continued on, "Neji-sama. Do you think I still matter even while I am a member of the Branch?"

His eyebrows raised slightly, surprised by the question, "I do think that. You and Hirokazu, and all
of your family. All of you matter."

"Then you will matter too." She stated simply. Hizome returned to the house.

Neji carried on to the Main House. The day was wearing thin, and he wondered only for a moment what his team thought about his absence. He stepped on to the engawa of the Main House to his corner room, slid the door open and shut it with a soft clack. He lethargically rolled front-ways onto his bed and then fell still.

Neji acknowledged that he was unaccustomed to coping with this level of turmoil. He turned his face to the side and breathed slowly. He could acknowledge something else after reflecting on his feelings.

He was incredibly selfish.

It was a work in progress. Neji certainly was invested in the well-being of others and advocating for them, and at the Tournament he had been determined to help as many people as possible. But in the end, these steps forward towards selflessness and compassion concealed his desire to keep everything valuable he had attained: his status as heir of the Hyuga clan, his influence in the Main Family, the respect of his friends, and the woman he loved. Once one of these critical stations was compromised by Haburo's threat, Neji had been quick to throw away the other gains he had made.

Neji tapped his thumb on the bed spread, growing frustrated with himself. It was deplorable. How he'd straightaway cast aside his free-will choice of Tenten as a companion. He had done so as if she had never endeavored or struggled to stay by his side—as if she had never had pains or losses of her own. What he believed was the unthinkable option, joining the Branch, was easier to evaluate after shedding the initial panic he experienced that morning.

Life would resume, albeit on a lower social rung. This did not disagree with him since he'd had humbling lessons over the last few years. Tenten's companionship was also a boon to him, and simultaneously negated one of Haburo's bids to control Hinata and Hanabi's future matches. Even Hizome's explanation of what had happened to her was comforting. She was doing well. Though she was still at the mercy of elders and had to curb her willfulness for the sake of her family, Hizome was satisfied with her choice. Neji was aware that whether or not he was in the Main House, he would be subject to Haburo's tyranny in some form.

But why was it still so frightening? Why did the prospect tear at his guts so, if he could rationalize that life would still be worth living?

Neji thought back to childhood, on the day that Hinata had frantically, in her chirping, squeaky voice, tried to remove him from harm's way after learning what fate awaited him. That she and her gaggle of misfit friends had been concerned about his imminent subjugation. Naruto hardly knew him then, but had gladly vouched for him and his chance to be free.

It was then Neji felt the distinct feeling, the childhood terror that still lingered...that he understood no one could protect him this time. Naruto and his fellowship would not parade onto Hyuga grounds to defend him again. And no amount of convincing on his uncle's part, or honoring the wish of his sacrificed father, was going to sway Haburo.

Yet knowing the root of his fear, dated and irrational though it was, seemed to clear the decision up adequately.

Neji rolled onto his back and stared at the ceiling. He would do it. He would join the Branch. He would stay with Tenten. He would deny Haburo some of the satisfaction he wanted in pairing off his
troubleshooting great grandchildren.

Shortly after that he shut his eyes and continued to ruminate on the knee-knocking uncertainty of it all, Neji slipped from consciousness. He slept, worn out from worrying and thinking.

Later, he woke in the evening and sat bolt upright. Neji blinked hard and fussed at his eyes. His heavy heart had completely wasted the day and made him useless. What could he expect to achieve tomorrow?

"Neji-sama," A voice spoke through the door.

Neji acknowledged the visitor, and the bedroom door opened when Kō poked his face in, "Are you feeling well?"

"I am not." He was honest.

"Your family has already taken their evening meal. Hinata-sama told me you were asleep." Kō informed him, "I'll have dinner arranged for you in the first floor tea room, if you're interested in eating."

Neji could feel his churning, empty stomach on the cusp of growling, "Not in the tea room. I will eat in here."

Kō covered up his stupefied look quickly, "Oh. If you prefer that, certainly. Is there anything specific you want?"

"Rice and herring." Neji went to his standby favorite comfort food, and then added, "And dumplings."

Kō smiled a little, "Of course. I'll be back shortly."

Wong Leung had said to eat dumplings. Maybe good could come of the suggestion. He lazed about on his bed for a moment before rising, raking his fingers through his disheveled hair to order it and retie it.

Well. He felt awful. Just about as awful as he had ever felt, if memory served. Though the trepidation of his choice to join the Branch Family was abating somewhat, Neji wondered if actually talking about it would clear away the last of his reluctance. He glanced out the window and saw new dark. He had missed sunset. Who would be available to listen to his dirge of discontent? Certainly he could not subject Hinata to it, and Hanabi lacked the maturity to sit through his reflection if it lasted for more than three minutes.

Perhaps his uncle and Hideyasu were anxious enough after the day's events, and it would be premature to share this decision until they checked in with him first? Neji rubbed his forehead and exhaled roughly. If he spoke to Tenten about it, he would have to prepare for an argument when she would inevitably tell him to forget it and hold his head high; to move on from her. Though he wouldn't listen to such a demand, Neji was concerned that Tenten may resent his motion of surrender in joining the Branch. She was nearly as hard-headed as he was.

Neji shuffled things around on his desk and then stopped. Oh.

Lee.

Lee would listen. Lee had always listened. And he could provide objective insight on the matter while still sharing in his pain, because Lee was the 'empathy extraordinaire' of Konohagakure and
also happened to be his friend. Underneath the youth, enthusiasm, and teary-eyed dedication; Lee was the best friend who he could not do without.

"Huh." Neji said to himself, crossing his room and thinking that maybe Lee had better things to do right now. Like have supper with his fantastic grandfather. Or generally unwind from a long day of training that Neji had skimped out on.

But since he had helped carry Lee home on the night of the festival, when he'd been too high to put one leg in front of the other to walk…Neji imagined that Lee wouldn't mind paying him back this evening.

At the porch exit, Neji slid the rice paper door aside and startled. Outside, Lee also looked spooked. He had his hand poised to knock on the frame and announce his presence on the engawa. Since Lee was able to close his mouth first while Neji continued to gape, Lee greeted, "Neji! I was compelled to come over. Grandpa said you were…despondent."

Neji surveyed with the Byakugan briefly to confirm that Tenten was not around. Then he rested his eyes and moved aside to let Lee into the room. Neji shut the door and groaned lowly. The coincidence bordered on a psychic connection.

"I did not tell Tenten I would be here, although I do not think it would matter to her." Lee filled him in. "After training today she had many orders to fill at her shop, and was eager to complete them. She imagined that you were occupied today, so at first I thought nothing of your absence…"

A small, low table at the edge of Neji's room was a reasonable place to take a seat. Lee noticed that the zabuton on the floor were still fluffy like new, as if no visitor had ever sat on one before. Neji sort of collapsed beside him onto a cushion, very unstable-looking physically and emotionally.

Lee dropped his voice to a whisper, "Was the introduction…poor? Did Tenten make a mockery of the event?" He was referring to the 'meet the uncle' dinner Tenten had recounted to him.

"Hardly." Neji sniffed, "She was impressive and it nearly made me look bad."

Lee laughed quietly.

"None of that was the problem." Neji assured him.

"Then…your uncle did find her to be agreeable? Ah! I am very relieved to hear it."

"In spite of what my uncle thinks of her," Neji leaned back to rest on the nearby wall at his back, "There were other complications that made her ineligible."

Lee just stared at him. He was waiting for the other shoe to drop.

Kō opened the door with his foot and stepped into the room while balancing a tray of food. He did not seem very surprised that Neji had a visitor. He gave Lee polite salutations before setting the food down and excusing himself, asking Neji to feel better soon.

Luckily, extra food items had been brought in addition to what Neji had requested. At first, Lee graciously declined Neji’s offer to share dumplings as he began to explain, between mouthfuls of herring, what his great grandfather Haburo had imposed upon him that morning. Neji recounted the details of that, then the AA conference with his uncle and clan steward that followed, and other odds and ends of his extremely unproductive day.

Highly concerned and listening carefully, Lee began to wolf down dumplings even though he'd
already eaten dinner.

When Neji finally came around to his final conclusion, Lee was stressed and looking at him with wide eyes.

"I decided that it's better to be with her." Neji spoke the words calmly somehow, "Joining the Branch Family seemed like a painful decision…but being with Tenten is not painful. I will be humbled and continue to work for improvement in my clan. Maybe this is what I needed all along."

Shiny-eyed, Lee spoke, "I…understand."

"I'm not sure how to bring it up to my uncle." Neji admitted before a sip of tea, "This may not completely resolve the challenges the Main House faces, but it should be a start."

"I…" Lee's voice warbled, "I am disturbed by the climate in your clan…that stunts freedom and change like this."

Neji shrugged and drank his tea. It would take time to figure out how to fight back. For now, he'd come up with the only solution that made sense to him.

From his seat beside Neji, Lee folded over above the table, adding, "And I cannot abide seeing you so upset." His face was genuinely anguished, "Your worries worry me too, Neji…I always did respect you, even when we did not see eye to eye. Now more so than ever before, I respect you…though I never…wanted you to give up the things that were important to you."

They had an unusual and amazing staredown, feeling the exact same way. Complete, mutual understanding.

"You worked hard to be the heir of the Hyuga clan. How is it that we can attain the things we strive for and then just…" Lee stared off at the wall, overwhelmed, "Have no choice but to give up?"

"That doesn't mean I can't strive for other things. I have no intention of moping or being cynical, because of this," Neji attempted to console him, "I'll have more important aspirations now. I could be freer than I've ever been."

"But what if your dishonorable elder tries to intimidate you while you are in the Branch? If he hurts you? Tries to stop you from advocating for change-?" Lee raised good points.

"Then I keep trying until I am dead, or he changes his mind." Neji supposed.

Lee was frowning but could not disagree. Worn out from the recap and conversation, Neji tilted and leaned his shoulder on his friend's. It was literal and figurative support. Lee had definitely helped.

"You have been a good friend to me." Neji acknowledged, "Better than I deserved, Lee."

Lee sniffled.

Neji further observed from Wong Leung's story, "I am grateful that you were never able to join your parents on their sybaritic journey around the world. You've been needed here." He clarified, "I need you."

"Eh…hem." Lee was choked up and cleared his throat, "I am surprised to say…that I am also glad I could not join them."

After gathering empty dishes onto the tray and deciding to call it a night, Lee wondered before he
left, "Should I not tell Tenten about the things we discussed?"

"No," Neji shook his head, "I will tell her myself tomorrow. She needs a full explanation."

Lee gave an affirmative bob of his head and bid Neji goodnight, setting out into the dark from the side door of the room. After that, Neji transported his tray to the kitchen of the household and left it near other settings to be cleaned. He looked around the house for his uncle, but ran into Hideyasu first in the corridor.

"Ah, Neji," The man seemed tired but somewhat content, "How are you doing?"

"Anxious…but lucid." Neji told him, "I want to tell Uncle that I will be joining the Branch Family."

A shocked expression froze on Hideyasu's face, and he took a moment to process the statement, "That is…your choice to make. We all know that."

"I will tell him now." Neji was about to continue on but Hideyasu barred him with an arm.

"Now is not a good time to speak to Hiashi." Hideyasu warned him, "We've been…well, all day it's been a circus of distress."

"Then when should I—?"

"Wait until after the full clan meeting in two days. It was pushed up to 10:00AM on Tuesday and so…Hiashi can take the rest of the day to digest your decision, after that." He recommended, "Your uncle probably won't be too upset or try to stop you, Neji. It is brave to fly in the face of what my grandfather says…and no matter what; I know you can help change things around here."

Neji thanked him and was surprised when Hideyasu attempted to scurry off towards his wife's dressing studio. Neji followed behind him, "Don't you have time to tell me what to say? How do I address it with Uncle or our elders? What if they protest-?"

"Now, now, Neji…not tonight." Hideyasu waved him off, "I have quite a bit to attend to at the moment, and an appointment first thing in the morning. Everything can wait until after the clan meeting. Rest assured that I will help you."

With that, Neji had to accept that he would not get everything addressed in a single day. He turned back to his room, snapped off the lights, collapsed in bed and knew no more.

Earlier that same day, shortly before noon, Naruto was devoting daylight hours to showing Hinata around the Toad Valley. Rather, he was touring around while on a break from Sage Training, and Hinata saw the sights and made small talk with their minds overlapped.

Naruto heel-toed across the thin trunk of a bouncy, horizontally bent palm tree. "Have you started taking missions yet?" He asked himself, but it was directed at his cognitive companion.

_Only one mission so far, Hokage-sama has devoted much of our time to resolving Tournament clean up and reporting. I think next week she might give my team a tracking assignment._

"That's not a bad start." He hopped away from the rubbery tree, down to grass, "Are you still wearing that amazing outfit, Hinata?"

_I-I-! It was damaged so Kayato-san is going to sew the tears when she can…but it's summertime so I'll still wear shorts and sleeveless tops._
Naruto's lips curled mischievously, "And your vest?"

Yes, but I don't think I want to wear it all of the time. Mostly for serious missions.

"I can just imagine how good you look..." He snickered with his eyes shut, listening to her stammering, bashful reply.

They passed behind the back of an enormous house that sheltered the mountain's largest toads. Hinata marveled at the assault on her senses: big and small houses and plants juxtaposed, sharp scents from the citrus grove around the bend, the constant vibrato of cricket song, the tickle of butterflies roosting on Naruto's shoulder. Though she dared not look down to see how Naruto was dressed for the muggy summer heat, Hinata had a sense his shirt was little more than fishnet material.

Naruto noted, "Man, this is like the hottest day ever since I got here. Are you doing okay?"

I'm fine because you're fine. Hinata paused to amend, I think.

"Phew. Hot. I'm on my way to the lotus pond and just wait 'til you see those flowers, Hinata."

Naruto chirped merrily, "So! Has anything interesting happened at home lately? I feel like I'm just about on the verge of Natural Energy balance."

That's wonderful news, Naruto-kun! The only interesting thing that happened was...yesterday, Neji-niisan brought Tenten-neesan home to introduce her to my family. Hinata's voice trilled excitedly in his head, Dinner felt a little too formal at first, but later I could tell that my father liked her very much.

"Well that's good. Then Neji won't have to sneak around to date her, right?" Naruto reasoned.

No he won't, and not just that...I think Neji-niisan always wants to be with her.

"Yeah, he's pretty stubbornly steadfast. I'm still kind of shocked that Neji got a woman to put up with him at all." Naruto observed, just slightly off topic.

Naruto...I mean that he might want to settle down with her.

Naruto accidentally kicked the top off of a large mushroom as he walked, "Wha— seriously? Neji? He has a heart that beats warm human blood—?"

Naruto-kun, don't joke! He really does love Onee-san!

"This is just sooo weird!" Naruto laughed, "You don't think he's gonna get married before I come home, do you?"

Oh no, no, no! All of this takes time. But I can tell that he has thought about it already.

"Wow!" Naruto was pleased as pie, "Good for him. I can't wait to tease him mercilessly."

Hinata's giggles echoed between his ears. At the end of the path, Naruto was happy to show his girlfriend what the pond looked like in the daytime for a change. Marvelous, pink lotus flowers floated serenely on the water's surface. A snow white heron waded in the mud and pond grass, looming above unsuspecting fish.

"Might as well show you what I usually do when I come out here!" Naruto pulled his top off and stripped down to undershorts, "Hinata, have you ever cannon-balled before?"

She was dizzied by the sudden disrobement, Oh, I...um! I-I've never-!
He left his clothing on shore and hurled himself into the pond with a running start. Hinata switched between tittering nervously and laughing, a faraway, disembodied sound that Naruto heard as he surfaced. He stroked over to a giant lotus petal, "Sorry if that was sudden. I just can't stand sweating my butt off all day. It's worse when I'm trying to meditate and, you know, I can't do anything about it."

As he had seen Jiraiya lounge around in a similar manner, Naruto relaxed in the curve of the petal while Hinata commented on the aroma and oddness of such an enormous plant.

*I wish I had this at home.* She sighed.

"I know. There's a lot of neat stuff here." Naruto agreed, "I'll try to remember to bring back some of Ma's amazing plants, or ask her to bring them over to you. They're great for medicine. I haven't had a single rash here that couldn't be fixed."

Hinata liked the idea, *Please do! The bulbs you sent me are doing very well.*

"There's more where that came from!" Naruto pinched his nose and front-flipped into the water again. He surveyed with open eyes the transparent, green-tinted aquatic environment, then fixated on an axolotl paddling above multi-colored pebbles below. Hinata squealed and demanded to know what the creature was. It was cute.

Naruto came up for air again, swimming for the stony bank, "You know, I don't know what you call that thing…but Kosuke said he's a nice guy…"

That would do. Naruto made land and clambered up stones stacked beside the pond's falls.

Climbing upwards, he took care to avoid slipping. Naruto made it up a small incline that recessed into a shallow, eroded den of marble, overgrown with vegetation. He snuffed a bit of water up his nostrils after passing through the curtain of the waterfall, but Naruto shook his head to clear himself once inside. "Whew. Gotta make sure I don't break my neck coming up here. Toads make it look easy…" With careful footing, Naruto maneuvered over smooth stones and took a seat on a flat spot, looking up at the cavern ceiling's skylights that let in sunshine and drops of excess water.

*This is…beautiful.* Hinata adored the charming, dripping hideaway, *Do you come here often, Naruto-kun?*

"Just twice after Kosuke showed me." Naruto confirmed, leaning back and stretching lazily, "If I want to get Ero-sensei off my back I know he can't follow me here. He can figure out where I am, but he'd prefer not to slip, fall, and drown just trying to get in here."

*You don't avoid him all the time, do you?*

"No…no. Everything's alright now. He explained a lot of things to me that…upset me. But I'm glad Ero-sensei told me." Naruto acknowledged, "Like my parents and all of that."

Hinata was thoughtfully quiet before asking, *Who were they?*

"Uh…” Naruto tapped his fingers to his chin, wondering if full disclosure of the matter would confound her, "How about I tell you everything I know once I get home? I do want to tell you, Hinata. It's just…a long, crazy story."

*I see, of course!* She was agreeable, as always, *Naruto, I'm going to have to repot many of the indoor plants you have. Sakura-chan said she would go to the apartment with me to help! Wait until you see it! It looks very nice.*
"What looks very nice?" Naruto yawned and made himself comfortable, laying back and stretching his legs out.

*Your apartment. Gaara-kun paid for renovations.*

"Renovations?" Naruto was cross-eyed at the news, "Like, cheap ones? Or good work-?"

*Quality work! The wall that divided the living area and kitchen was knocked down. And the floors and wall paint are new...everything is so pretty!*

"Good grief, that guy doesn't tell me about anything! What if I had color or design preferences?" Naruto complained. He was unaware that was exactly the reason Gaara had never asked for his input.

*I think you'll like it.* She ventured.

"I probably will." He half-thinkingly scratched an itch on his stomach, adding, "Thank you, Hinata, for taking care of all that. I owe you some gardening assistance when I get back."

He got no answer and realized he was looking down at his hand, or more specifically, Hinata had taken over to have a look. An itch seemed like a mundane thing to pay attention to, but Naruto considered the logistics of a visitor sharing in his experiences.

"Did that feel itchy to you? Like...you noticed it when I did?"

*I think so...*

"So maybe you...feel everything just as I'm feeling it?" Naruto was kind of embarrassed by the prospect. Passing gas and other such nuisances were out of the question. He would have to politely ask Hinata to cease the jutsu before something like that took place.

*I think that's how it works. It's as if...I am in my own body, almost. It's still very different, but many things work just the same.*

"Right..."

*Also, you need to eat.*

"Yeah, I'm kind of hungry!" He laughed, amused that she had acknowledged it.

*You...* Hinata trailed off and was silent.

Naruto was not especially concerned when his itch-scratching hand took a trip upwards, but he pursed his mouth and swallowed hard when Hinata replaced it on his neck. She was feeling around through his senses. If he truly thought it was too weird he *would* have objected, but not another soul was around and Naruto, for his age and inclination, was feeling indulgent.

Hinata rubbed Naruto's hand beneath his chin, detecting stubble. He was not at all like he had been when she'd last seen him. His hair fell in long spikes past his ears, overgrown even after he claimed it had been cut two weeks ago. When he spoke his voice was deeper, rarely cracked, yet it had the same upbeat and merry tone she knew well. Walking around the valley in his body from a first-person perspective revealed Naruto's new height and muscles coiled with strength. What a shame that he was away from home, endeavoring to learn Sage Arts when she would have liked to witness such changes with her own eyes and fingertips.
"I know. I don't want to be here. It'd be stupid to just give up this training when I've come so far… but I think about it all the time." Naruto admitted, "Hinata…I want to spend every day with you. In person. Don't get me wrong, I like that you can use this jutsu and talk to me…it beats the heck out of waiting for letters. And I like those too, you know? I…I just want to…"

His breath hitched when she directed his hand southward, over the slick shirtless skin of his chest. The input was not more than he could bear; little different from the feeling of touch while he dressed himself or inspected a suspicious freckle. But Hinata's roaming was bold— over the navel, then his hip bone, stopping at his waistband. She did not touch anything more after that. She seemed to hover in his consciousness on standby, fluttering like a hummingbird and considering him.

Hinata pointed out simply, I've never done that.

"No, I don't think you…we never…” Naruto caught his breath, still keened back in the marble hollow, "But…uh…” He cleared his throat, "You wanted to?"

I want to touch you. If I can't do it at home, I'll touch you however I can. I've missed you! I wanted to know— She was belatedly embarrassed by her actions, A-Ahh, I'm sorry, Naruto. I'd thought I was rude and forward in my letters to you even if I was truthful…but I shouldn't take advantage like this. Not in a physical way…

"What? No, none of that ever bothered me! Keep writing honestly about your feelings," Naruto encouraged, "And this doesn't…bother me either."

It doesn't?

He gulped. Her voice was so clear in his head. Naruto could still picture her perfectly in his mind's eye, when he had seen her likeness that day at the Tournament. How could he be so lucky? To love someone beautiful and good? Someone who never failed to reach him?

Then, remembering her appearance that day was a slippery slope: her attire, her hair, her eyes and lips, her hands poised as she stood to fight— these were not conducive things to think about. As a red-blooded male, reacting to this particular line of thought was inevitable. Naruto shifted and grimaced, making a pained sound in his throat while wondering if maybe, maybe, she wouldn't notice.

Surely Hinata wouldn't perceive his pounding pulse or hypersensitive nerves. Even though she was not doing anything currently, even when Naruto knew better than to combine the vision of her with that stray touch down his stomach…he was fit to snap. He thought it idiotic on his part, after he had established that if she could feel an itch…she could definitely feel arousal too. Not that she would recognize or understand it, at first.

Are you alright, Naruto?

He was splayed backwards, pointedly not looking at himself for fear of giving away the boner.

"Yeah, just…you know…” His voice cracked terribly, "I feel fine. I wonder if you don't have anywhere to be today?"

Father cancelled training with me this afternoon. I might garden or go somewhere with Hanabi.

"Yeah, yeah, not a bad idea."
Naruto. She was noticing nerve endings that she had no exact equivalent for.

"Maybe we should call it a day and I'll...get back to training. I can beat the heat in here and try meditating—"

You feel good.

Naruto struggled to reply to the flat observation, "Uh...so..."

Hinata made no comments. She merely listened and perceived the intense feeling.

"Pretty much a day in the life of a man...is to be annoyed by this every couple of hours..." Naruto hoped she could make the effort to understand such a plight, "I'm not trying to be weird, or to take advantage somehow, like you said! Please know that, Hinata! This is! It's just stupid, involuntary stuff that had better not happen when you use your jutsu and I still messed that up—!

Hinata made a hushing sound. She wanted him to stop talking. Very puzzled, Naruto shut his eyes and mouth, in denial that she had totally caught him and he had no idea what to do about it.

His breathing was uneven. Hinata helped steady the rise and fall of his chest. After a moment she told him, I...know that this is normal.

With his eyes shut, Naruto griped, "I'm still mad at myself."

It wasn't on purpose. I know that... Hinata's voice straddled the fine line between swooning shyness and delivering consolation, Did...um...did I have anything to do with...it?

"No. Yes. Don't ask me that. Let's maintain the façade of innocence at least until I get home..." He whimpered and apologized again, "Sorry. I won't look. I don't want you to look. I'm such a-

Bliss. It was only half a second of too exquisite a feeling before Naruto lurched back, reeling. He was not sure if it had been an inadvertent touch while reordering his limbs, an unconscious, willful act on his part, or if Hinata had experimentally felt around for the source of sensitivity with his own hand. In any case, Naruto thrashed his arm and yelped, his eyes snapping open. He bumped the back of his head on stone.

Naruto, I'm sorry-! Is your head alright? I didn't...mean to...

Naruto didn't really buy it, or rather, didn't want to believe she didn't mean it. It was hard to feel ashamed when no other soul was around to decry the nature of their encounter or his physical state. After all, human beings apologized enough for their bodies and things beyond their control— it didn't seem apropos to apologize to a bodily intruder...however welcome she was.

Naruto rolled to his knees and rubbed the back of his head until the sting subsided. "Don't be sorry," He had mellowed and allowed himself to pine a little, "I don't want to be sorry. Maybe you'll still love me if I admit it. That I think of you and get like this. That I'm a dog. You make me feel this way...I want you to touch me."

There was something high-pitched about her silence in his head. Hinata supposed that maybe she had overstepped bounds and was also not going to face any consequences for it.

She could feel heat in his cheeks as he flushed. He was making a serious face and staring out into the cavern.

I don't know why you ever thought...Hinata took a moment to compose herself, That I'd dislike it...
"When you hang out with Ero-sennin you don't see a lot of green light signals."

Her voice dropped and seemed sharper, Here, if you want. I will! I already thought about it, Naruto-kun. I'm worse than you. Let me, if that's what you're wishing for. Or I'll stay as you—

"No, no, no, this is just a bit too far beyond the natural order of things…and I know better. Just because I want you to do something doesn't mean you should!" Naruto informed her, "In person in our own bodies, well that's different…but I don't think this should be a spectator sport…ahh, I don't know."

Hinata was perplexed, Oh.

"We're both bad." Naruto mused, "Distance will do that. Bad influences too, I guess."

Is it really so bad? If we feel the same way?

"This isn't what your ability is for. And I shouldn't be an idle chump while trying to justify why I'm not home with you right now." Naruto reasoned, "How about I calm down and we can overlay again later? This is something we should totally discuss in more detail once I master Senjutsu. I swear…I will come running after that. Straight back to you. Like, brace yourself."

Hinata laughed in his head.

"Is that okay?"

Yes. All of it is. I learned something new, really. And…I miss you very much.

"I know. I miss you."

I should be going then. She sounded playful, When I'm gone…will you still think of me, Naruto?

"Silly question!" He was grinning, "You're my favorite daydream."

Rather abruptly, Naruto felt the severance of the overlap. Though he could feel the twinge of happiness and satisfaction Hinata's consciousness had left behind, she had given him his space. He crumpled backwards against a marble wall and exhaled shakily.

Though it was only natural for him to become closer to her, Naruto understood he had to capitalize on his time among sages. Even if he spent hours fooling around and chatting with Hinata through the conduit of her jutsu, Naruto realized it was still a subtraction of time he could spend face to face with her in Konoha.

"I have to get back to work. Either I'm a Sage by next week…and I really am a useless, salivating dog." Naruto tried to self-start but then looked to his left and right. The convenience of being alone was becoming a rarity.

And he'd only need a few minutes.

A short while after that, Naruto was still shirtless and had reported to the Toad Oil pool to be supervised by Fukasaku for training.

The old toad raised a fluffy eyebrow at him, "You've been up to something, Naruto-boy…"

"What? Me?" Playing it off was tricky because Naruto was sure he'd made a weird face.
Fukasaku frowned at him, "Yes, you. If we had begun training earlier this morning we could have avoided this heat. Where have you been?"

"Avoiding the heat." He replied conveniently.

"And now you must meditate in it anyway."

"Yup." Naruto sat cross-legged at the top of the steps beside the pool, "Sorry, Pa. I should've brought you some ice or something while you wait."

"Ma will bring me some frozen grasshoppers in a while. Our favorite treat on days like these…" Fukasaku settled down on a grassy patch and got comfortable, "Concentrate now, boy. I know you nearly have it."

He shut his eyes and cupped his palms in his lap. For some reason, the heat made relaxing a bit easier. Or, maybe it was the last traces of serotonin in his bloodstream that had calmed him.

Naruto exhaled and then entered his routine. He became conscious of his body starting from the toes and up, incrementally, acknowledging and then separating himself from physical feelings. With each increment, he felt more of what was outside. The rustle of arenga palms that sheltered toad statues, the energy and heartbeat of Fukasaku nearby, particles of pollen floating in air, the breeze in time with his breathing…

The heat was little bother, it turned out. Naruto lost track of time. His awareness expanded farther out, reaching new limits in the valley. He noticed rock spires in a field. He noticed a polished stone amphitheater beyond the residences of the valley's largest toads. He noticed the exchange of food from a mother bird's crop into the waiting mouth of her chick in a nest in a poplar tree. He was the mother bird. He was the chick. He was the tree. All energy felt as if it were one continuous, shining current.

Naruto let the current in, slowly, absorbing each bit thoughtfully. Life was a curious thing. It was so temporary, vast, and vibrant. Everything would die and start anew. Energy that had always been in the world and always would be.

He felt a trickle-down effect from non-living things. It was a deeper, stranger feeling. Microscopic amounts of water in every cell in the things around him—the rays of the sun warming him. Like she did. 'Hinata.' She was life too. She was a part of the current. He wanted to feel her the way he could feel everything else so vivid and alive.

And when he stretched and searched for that energy that he knew was so distinctly hers, Naruto felt himself get stuck. Beautifully stuck. It felt so good and simple. He was a blade of grass. He was in the flow of Natural Energy and maybe this, he wondered briefly, was the answer to everything. He was stuck. He was brimming. It felt like there was so much to know and un-know. Then, Naruto thought nothing more.

Fukasaku, by chance, glanced up from his Sudoku booklet and stared hard at Naruto. For a moment, he could hardly believe his bulging eyes. The boy was mostly stone. He was petrifying in the likeness of a toad while being over-saturated with Natural Energy.

Horrified, Fukasaku sprang and beamed his cane over the top of the young man's head. It made a harrowing crack sound and splintered the walking stick. Fukasaku gasped in a panic.

"Naruto-boy!"

With great strength, he lifted the near-statue of his pupil and laid him flat in the grass. Fukasaku
exhaled a volume of water from his mouth in an attempt to rinse toad oil from Naruto's body. That did little good. No amount of smacking or rinsing had any effect on the creeping stone exterior. The Toad Sage lifted again and, with the petrified boy on his shoulder, made haste back towards his house.

"Oh Great Elder Gamamaru! All the deities and hosts of nature! Oh one, Great Spirit that moves us all— Minato and his dear wife if you can hear me—!" Fukasaku cried as he rushed, "Please-! Please help me! Anyone or anything! Don't let this boy be lost to time like so many!"

He tripped and took a spill in his yard, dumping the petrified Naruto to the ground with a bump.

Fukasaku screeched for assistance. Jiraiya and Shima hurried out of the house.

"I rinsed and I whacked but I fear he's too far gone-!" Fukasaku announced as his wife and human companion kneeled over Naruto, "Shima, your apron—"

"Nothing a sponge-tag can't save!" The old female toad insisted. She reached into her pockets and handed off paper tags to Fukasaku, quickly patting them all over Naruto.

Jiraiya rested his hand on Naruto's forehead, "Kid…? Aw, shit…kid…" His adam's apple bobbed as he swallowed, fearing the worst.

"I don't know if our sealing tags can absorb a significant amount of natural energy…so late." Shima admitted. She and Fukasaku sat forlornly beside Jiraiya, tearing up, "They need to be applied right away to work."

"…I know." Jiraiya gulped. He ground the heel of his hand into his eye to resist crying.

They could only sit there on the lawn on a hot summer day, helpless, as other toads of the valley scampered out of brush to investigate the commotion. Newcomers stilled and folded their webbed hands to pay respect to the lost student of Senjutsu.

A full minute passed and the veteran Toad Sages had time enough to process what had happened.

"It was a risk." Fukasaku acknowledged sadly, "We always understood that."

"He must've gone quickly, if you had no time to stop him." Shima observed, "Pa…do we…should we speak to the Great Elder? Is there no way we can-?"

"There is no way to undo this." Fukasaku stated with finality.

Jiraiya lifted his face from his hands, tearful, "I'm t-to…to bla—"

"You are not at fault for this, Jiraiya-boy." Shima chided him.

"I never should have brought him here. He was too important. I was supposed to look after him…" With a running nose the man added, "And I just sent him back early to Minato…worthless fuck that I am!"

"He is in the World's arms now." Fukasaku folded his hands and bowed his head, "At peace."

Shoulders rumbling, Jiraiya bent over to give the boy an affectionate, heartbroken pat, and pulled up the sealing tags his masters had hastily attached to Naruto. Then he stilled. Jiraiya quirked his mouth and poked Naruto's stomach with two fingers. Fukasaku and Shima gave him questioning looks.

"Er…correct me if I'm wrong, but…Toad Statues are a full body transformation, right?" Jiraiya
asked. His toad companions made shrugging motions with their faces. Jiraiya prodded a graying but oddly not-crusty patch on Naruto's stomach again. The seal of the Nine-Tailed Fox glowed faintly.

Jiraiya frowned at the sight, "Honestly…I don't know what the logistics are of a jinchuriki turning into a Toad Statue."

"Let's agree that this is unusual no matter what those hypothetical results should be." Fukasaku wagered, "Perhaps the tailed beast…does not want to turn to stone?"

"There isn't very much he can do about it, is there?" Shima snipped, still upset. She leaned over and spoke to Naruto's stomach, "Well, you spiteful creature! Not willing to surrender to eternal peace, is that it? Then help the boy! Mix the natural energy with your own, you brute—you have plenty of it!"

The three balked when the suggestion was acted on. The stone coating receded slowly from the seal's epicenter, shrinking on Naruto's skin, back and back until he was pinkish and normal again. He was still very much unconscious, however. Fukasaku and Shima let out a whoop of relief.

Jiraiya rubbed his face vigorously on his tunic, in shock, "Hold on a second, Ma and Pa…this doesn't mean Naruto is still knocking around in there. When we meditate with Natural Energy, it feels like we can get lost in the flow, right? I don't know if the fox can fix that."

"I doubt that he can." Fukasaku agreed, "But have a little faith, Jiraiya-boy. I said my prayers over him and maybe we need to say a few more…"

The man let out a shaky sigh and bent down again, preparing to scoop Naruto up, "I'll bring him inside to rest. I hope we get him back."

A hand curled in Jiraiya's shirt. He looked down in surprise.

Two red eyes looked back.

"…hot shit on a shovel…" Jiraiya murmured. He gently set Naruto down and backed away carefully. Fukasaku and Shima were equally alarmed.

The young man slowly sat up and then examined himself disapprovingly, as if he expected to be bigger. It did not require a wild guess from anyone watching, or anyone feeling the chakra of the new presence, to know that Naruto was not Naruto. Kurama, the Nine-Tailed Fox had climbed up from subconscious thought and was in control. Kurama opened Naruto's mouth and let out an impressive, rolling belch that carried a wind with it. Natural Energy seemed to be expelled through the bodily function.

Grimacing, the jinchuriki glanced around through slitted eyes, taking stock of its surroundings.

"Here I am in the great cornucopia of fruit, toads, and pungent heat…" Kurama sniffed, crossing his arms, "And I can't even unlock my own body while that sage-wannabe-boy isn't here."

Jiraiya and Fukasaku exchanged nervous glances. Shima was bolder, "Nine-Tailed Fox!"

Kurama gave her his attention.

"Where is Naruto-boy? Is he safe and well? Return him to us." She demanded.

"I don't know where he is you purple-lipped prune." He growled, "I don't feel him. If I did, perhaps I could take a more comfortable shape and throw him into my bars for a change." Kurama braced his
human hands on the ground in an effort to stand, "So who is the spiteful one you were talking to before? Surely not me. I paid attention at Senjutsu lessons and learned enough to preserve myself in case Naruto pulled this sort of stunt…" When he started to rise he fell over on wobbly legs.

Some muffled laughter came from watching toads that had gathered closer.

Snarling angrily, Kurama weakly tried to lift himself up from the lawn, "Ugh! This pathetic form! This place weighs on me—!"

"This is Mount Myoboku. It takes some getting used to." Jiraiya felt comfortable enough to approach, "So, long time no see. Last time we met you were shoving claws in my chest cavity."

"And I will again, you white sagging ballsack." He flopped over again.

"Whoa there, those are fighting words." Jiraiya chuckled, "And you can't take me right now, Fox."

"I'll take you and your prune-head masters and the whole lot of tadpoles behind you!" Kurama roared, spittle flying from Naruto's mouth as he gestured at the crowd of tittering toads.

"You are terribly outmatched and outnumbered today, Nine-Tailed Fox." Fukasaku warned him, "But let us take this moment to thank you for saving Naruto-boy."

"I saved myself."

"Based on your admission…one might say you are now a disciple of the Toads as well. You could endeavor to be a Sage, if you so wished." Fukasaku offered innocuously.

"I so wish to gnaw your face off, pruneballs."

Shima laughed at the comeback.

"What's so funny?" Kurama managed to stand on shaking legs.

"Nothing. You have creative insults and you're like a tottering fawn. You are not the scary beast I've heard stories about." Shima waved it off.

"Oh, but I am." He assured her. Kurama noticed there was saliva all over Naruto's face, and ran the back of his arm over it to clear it away in annoyance. It felt uncomfortable. He took a few steps to gain balance but appeared to be quite tired.

Jiraiya crouched down and motioned for Fukasaku and Shima to huddle in.

"Okay." Jiraiya whispered to them, "While you keep him busy by teasing him, I'm gonna stop in the house to get a sealing tag to put the Fox under. I don't have one on me at the moment."

"Of course, but even then...if Naruto does not resist the flow of Nature, the Fox could resurface first again. Or indefinitely." Fukasaku observed.

"How dreadful! What would we tell the Hokage?" Shima wondered.

"We ain't telling Tsunade shit about this." Jiraiya hissed, "We can get it under control. We can get Naruto back. We just need to make sure the Fox doesn't mess around out here—"

About then, cries of alarm erupted from the gathering of toads. Many of them scattered into the brush and residences as Kurama drew on an alarming amount of Tailed Beast chakra, glowing with a red aura.
"If you plan to say such things, Jiraiya-boy, knock on wood as you do so." Shima sighed.

Kurama had conjured up two tails of chakra, laughing, "Ha! Run you cowardly lumps! I'll squash you. I'll sink my teeth into you! I'll—!" He made a powerful leap and crashed face-first into a giant, granite cauldron of stored toad oil.

"He's as coordinated as I am when I'm piss drunk." Jiraiya observed, "Hold him off for now, Ma and Pa. Don't let him bust up Naruto's face too much. I'll be right back." He set off for the house.

Fukasaku and Shima waited for Naruto to slide down from the giant cauldron before the bounced forward, hoping to grapple the Tailed-Beast into submission— but were thwacked away by a chakra tail for their trouble. Kurama rolled and skidded in the grass but picked up speed, charging for them, "Don't expect to stop me-!" With Shima's assistance, Fukasaku clotheslined the incoming jinchuriki with a tongue and flung him flat in the grass.

"If we fight you in earnest we may hurt Naruto-boy," Shima explained, "And if we hurt Naruto-boy, or if he dies, your life is forfeit as well, Nine-Tailed Fox." She hopped away before a chakra tail came smashing down over her.

"Don't lecture me you raspberry imps!" Kurama spat, standing again, "You can't hurt anything if you're dead." He went still and focused, hands balanced at Naruto's sides and mouth ajar as particles of energy were gathered.

The coagulation of light and dark particle chakra frightened the Toad Sages, who were not at all pleased that Kurama was aiming for their house. They gathered Sage chakra in about the time Kurama accumulated a rather modest Tailed Beast Ball of energy, and rushed with sliding tackles to send Kurama akimbo. The jinchuriki fell but loosed the freakish chakra attack, and the ball soared far before tapping a lush mountainside at the valley's edge. In a blast of light it exploded, leveling the once majestic slopes on the horizon.

Fukasaku was furious, "How many lives did you extinguish with such a thoughtless act, Fox?"

"Some toads and bugs, no doubt." Naruto was bent double in pain when Fukasaku tore into him with Frog Kumite punches. To salvage the situation, Shima gave the jinchuriki a mighty spin with her tongue before landing on him with a comet-kick, grinding him into dirt.

A lull passed in which Naruto heaved himself to his feet, sputtering, eyes shiftily watching Fukasaku and Shima on either side of him.

"I'll blow this place to hell. Don't tempt me!" The Fox threatened, "Father used to say this was a sacred place, but it's just a ramshackle storage cupboard for your sake and oil! I wouldn't be caught dead training here!"

Shima was stymied by the remark, not sure what 'Father' the Nine-Tailed Fox was referring to. She noticed Fukasaku's cue to attack, and she moved in time with her toad husband to jellify Naruto with a Frog Call Sage Art. Whether it was skill or by accident none could be sure, but Kurama fell over again a sixteenth of a second before the sound waves could grace his ears. As he rolled down the hill, Fukasaku and Shima had paralyzed each other with their jutsu.

When Jiraiya returned with his sealing tag, he discovered Fukasaku and Shima feet-up in the grass… and Naruto was rolling away down a mushroom slope.

"I think a mountain blew up." Jiraiya noted, shielding his eyes to squint over the distance, "Did he do that?"
"Yes." Shima squeaked.

"You guys okay? This wasn't his doing. I'll flatten him out." Jiraiya offered.

"Th-the…" Fukasaku spoke up, "Theater."

"The theater?" Jiraiya gave him a puzzled look.

"Going to…the theater."

"Ah, that's right. The outdoor theater." Jiraiya nodded, "Yep. Looks like he's headed that way. I don't suppose…that kid of yours is still working on it, is he?"

Shima was loosening up slightly, "He'll never finish building it."

"He'll definitely never finish it if the Fox wrecks it." Jiraiya observed, "What do you say…we let the Nine-Tails be his problem for now?"

The jinchuriki stumbled over laid bricks and cut stone, down a few steps in a wide amphitheater almost as large as a sports stadium. The Fox glanced around, hatching a plan to escape. It seemed as if the Toad Sages and Pervert had stopped pursuing him, and if he picked any direction to hurry in, Kurama supposed he could escape the valley and its saturation of Natural Energy.

One clumsy step made him trip and crash into a wall, knocking down a series of carved sconces and cracking them apart on the brick floor. Kurama would have thought nothing of it had he not immediately felt an irritated poke on Naruto's left calf. He looked down between his legs to see a small green toad in a colorful brocade jacket. The toad blinked up at him, with purple markings under its eyes.

"You payin' for that?" It asked.

"No." Kurama tried to kick the toad but stumbled over again.

"You break it, you buy it, buddy." The toad riffled around his jacket pocket and drew out a small moleskin notebook, "What's your name, eh? That Naruto kid. I've heard about you. I'm marking you down for 500,000 Ryo. An extra 90,000 for trying to kick me."

"I am the Nine-Tailed Fox, Kurama." He bent down and clacked his teeth at the toad, "Not Naruto. Naruto is gone. I don't owe you anything, not even your miserable life."

"The name's Kinji." He shook Naruto's uncooperative hand and ducked Kurama's swipe, "I'm the proprietor of this here theater of the arts. Kurama or whoever you are, you owe me 590,000 Ryo for repairs, or you can put in the labor to replace the light installations you broke…then we'll call it square."

"Nothing here is square— this place is round!" Kurama balled Naruto's hands into a hammer and swung down, gouging a huge crater in the circle seating.

Kinji sucked in a long, astounded breath of disbelief.

"You did not." The toad said.

"Will I owe you money when I crack your toady head?" Kurama laughed maniacally, amused with himself.
"I built this place myself. Brick by brick. I stage the productions. I hire the talent. *I keep the books. I direct the masterpieces—!*" Kinji's voice trilled in anger, "And *I* punish the nimrods that defile my greatest work. Me. All me! Pay up or I'll liquefy your blondie whisker-face, got that, chump?"

Kurama was still laughing and wiping tears from the corners of Naruto's eyes. "Oh, I've crossed the wrong toad! Hee-hee! Ho, ho, ho-! One little toad is going to punish—" Kinji's incredible mach punch hit Naruto's chin dead center and rocketed him to the far side of the theater, in and out of another stone wall.

Laying on his back, Kurama stared up at the sky and finished speaking, "Me…"

It took some time to claw and clamber out of the rubble, and the jinchuriki ascended unspoiled brick steps nearby to spot Kinji stock still where he had first poked Naruto's leg. Suddenly, the toad's eyes snapped open. He had finished molding Sage Chakra.

Kurama had a moment to consider this bizarre reality. That Naruto was not present to complain and groan at him. That he lacked sea legs in this environment, in this puny body, though movement was getting easier. That the jabber mouth toad whose theater he had smashed was also a Sage, and was demanding hefty remuneration. He threw quite the punch *without* Sage Chakra.

"I'll let you apologize now…" Kinji warned darkly, "Or you're toast, Whiskers."

"Bite me." Kurama was grinning.

And the two idiots raced at each other, Kurama glowing red with four glorious tails, laying waste to their surroundings as Kinji was extremely precise with Frog Kumite, striking Naruto's chin, ankles, and stomach dozens of times in two seconds. It was effective. Kurama wretched and moaned in between slashing at Kinji, trying to stomp him as he was slippery quick and avoiding the jinchuriki's assaults.

"Cheapskate Nosehook!" Kinji hollered, fitting two fingers in Naruto's nostrils, and flipped, hurling Kurama like a trick yo-yo down onto the theater's stone floor.

Dust settled and cleared around the new crater. In an agonized squat, Kurama clapped Naruto's hands over his bloody nose, "You motherfucker-!"

Kinji struck him again with mach punches, front and back, one into another…and Kurama coiled a chakra tail around him to finally catch the painful little beast. Naruto's propensity for healing had already fixed his nose.

"Pay up, chump!" Kinji demanded as he was squeezed with searing chakra.

"Doesn't that hurt? Why aren't you screaming *please let me go?*" Kurama sniffed, "I'd kill you now if I didn't want to humiliate you further."

"I'd have killed you by now if you didn't look like an old friend of mine!" Kinji insisted. Then, he lashed out with his tongue, reeled Naruto's face in close, and chomped as hard as a toad could chomp on a face.

Kurama wailed in anger and tossed the toad with a tail flick. Kinji nimbly landed in a fighting pose, his jacket unbuttoned and fluttering heroically.

"You said *bite me.*" Kinji reminded him.

"More like you tried to gum me—" Kurama bared sharp teeth, drawing on more chakra,
transforming his chakra cloak into a dark, hazy fox shape, "I'll show you how to bite!"

Naruto was a miracle of speed under Kurama's direction, but Kinji could predict his movements. He dodged and hopped, feeling the trembles of energy in the air, batting aside Fox-punches and weaving between furling Fox-chakra tails. Corrosive chakra was sizzling Kinji's skin off in flakes, but he fought confidently and without flinching. When an opening presented itself, Kinji flipped upside-down and mule kicked Naruto upwards, dashing away for distance. Kurama corrected the fall with chakra tails and landed lightly.

The Fox puzzled at the sight of Kinji creating a spiraling sphere of energy in his small toad hand… and then up-chucked all over it. A sloppy, splattering mess that swirled and was tossed straight down at Naruto, "Oil Rasengan!"

Kurama had time enough to wrap himself up in tails to defend against the Rasengan's impact and the toad oil mess, but not enough time to skirt away from the follow-up. Kinji exhaled a jet of flame that lit up the oil-coated theater. When Kurama made a break for it, he slipped and slid into the bonfire and exited, looking like a burning stuntman with fox tails lit like birthday candles.

"Let me make my wish, Whiskers!" Kinji cupped his hand and called after him.

He avoided the tails that vengefully swung and thwacked at him. Still mostly on fire and aware that it could eventually expire Naruto, Kurama had about enough. He tipped Naruto's head back and prepared the collection of light and dark energy again. Kinji was not unaware of what this precursor gathering of chakra would lead to. He zipped and dashed with Sage speed up behind Naruto with a bound, wrapped his toad legs around Naruto's neck, and pulled down like a wrestler while completing hand signs, "Senpo: Wrestlemania Shadow Banishing Goober!"

Privately, Kurama wondered if it was a real technique name or had been improvised on the spot. He took a loogie to the eyes and mouth, disgusted, and witnessed the wisping gust of Kinji's jutsu flutter away collected dark particles like harmless butterflies. It left an overabundance of light particles, however. Kinji had shut his eyes to avoid the light flash and bang. They fell apart on oil-free stone steps, the Tailed Beast Ball a failure, and Kurama wiped at Naruto's face blindly before another mach punch knocked his legs out from under him. By the way, he was still on fire.

"Holy high-flying fuck, Kinji! Put him out!" Jiraiya's voice screamed from the distant box office of the theater.

"I can't, he keeps rolling in the oil and fire!"

Dizzy, Kurama pushed himself up to Naruto's hands and knees. Nothing could be worth this trouble. Not even liberation. With his eyes still shut, he felt a series of jutsu be combined to cut oxygen from the fire, extinguishing it, and some flame-retardant foam washed over him in a gloopy puff.

He heard Kinji call, "Never mind, he's good."

Jiraiya was sighing in the distance.

"Fucker owes me big money for this, though."

"Fine, whatever. Just hold him still for me so I can get this tag on…"

Kurama's eyes snapped open. No. Liberation was worth it. He could run away. He could tamper and contort Naruto's seal. There was a way out if he could just get away from these godforsaken nuisances!
Recklessly, Kurama charged straight for Jiraiya, chakra cloak wilted and claws extended. He saw the man's wide, astonished eyes, felt him gasp as Naruto's tackle toppled him over onto a brick walkway. Kurama raised a hand triumphantly to julienne Jiraiya like peppers for dinner…but felt a slimy, chilling tongue run up his back from bottom to top. It neutralized the last of his chakra.

Jiraiya regarded the Great Toad Elder Gamamaru who was seated sleepily behind Naruto. He gave the boy a good lick and let Naruto flop over bonelessly, no longer influenced by the Nine-Tailed Fox.

"They just needed a nap," Gamamaru batted his old lips, "Me too."

"Great Toad Elder!" Contritely, Kinji dropped and prostrated before the elder, "Forgive me! I could have stopped him! I had no intention of troubling you. Did the rumbles in the valley wake you?"

"Yes, thought little 'Bunta ripped a big fart next to me," Gamamaru admitted, "I worried a little when I woke up…saw our western mountainside is flattened now. That's where we used to keep the old outhouses."

"No one lives out there, Great Elder?" Jiraiya wanted to confirm.

"Not that I know of. Stunk like doo-doo out there. Should be fine." Gamamaru yawned, "I'll be off for my afternoon nap now."

Jiraiya had hoisted Naruto (badly crisped and bruised) over his shoulder, "Thank you, Great Elder. Will Naruto awaken soon?"

"Sure he will. He's just visiting Nature. And when nature calls, he'll wake up to use the bathroom." Gamamaru assured him, "Kurama won't bother you again. He just feels neglected sometimes. Misses his Papa and the good old days…" The toad elder slowly waddled off, with a few small toad escorts waiting on the stairs for him.

Jiraiya gave Kinji a confused look. Kinji shrugged and buttoned up his jacket again.

"Sorry about the theater, Kinji. My student had a mishap today. Nearly turned into a Toad Statue during Sage Training." Jiraiya explained, climbing the steps beside the small Sage, "When we averted that crisis, Kurama took over Naruto's body."

"Ah, so his name is Naruto." Kinji nodded, "Well then, he's off the hook for repairs until he's better. I'll need help rebuilding."

"Why not ask Ma and Pa-?"

"No." Kinji said flatly. Jiraiya scoffed at him, "You know your mother and father would help you if you just asked them."

"I don't want Ma and Pa's help." Kinji insisted, "They'll critique everything I do and get in my way. I didn't need their help with Sage Training. I didn't need their help with my theater…"

"Kinji..." Jiraiya sighed, descended steps out of the theater and onto grassy path again, "They miss you."

"Yeah, sure. They miss bitching at me."

"No, they miss you. When you could just be in each other's company without the hostility." Jiraiya
corrected him, "Just talk to them, sometime. Children need to remember how precious their parents are."

"Hmph." Kinji turned his nose up at the suggestion.

"Kinji." Jiraiya added, "This is Minato's child. Do you know how badly Naruto has wanted to meet his parents all of his life? How much pain it caused him to be without his father?"

Kinji halted and fell silent, settling his eyes on Naruto.

"Try to understand how it would feel...to lose those who treasure you most...even if they annoy the ever-loving shit out of you." Jiraiya gave him a lopsided smile, "You knew Minato better than any toad in this valley. Better than Gamabunta knew him! It'd be easy for you to know what's in Naruto's heart."

"I..." Kinji pinched his lips shut and rubbed at his eyes, "I do know. I miss my friend. I blame myself for not being there...when Minato's village was under attack."

Jiraiya kept walking, "He knew he couldn't disrupt your training. He thought very highly of you. Shared many things with you..."

Kinji hopped on beside him, "Yes, well..." He cleared his throat, "I can stop by the house, I guess. To help clean Naruto up. I did this to him and I do feel quite bad..."

"He'll be alright. He's had a rough day."

"Are Ma and Pa around?"

"Resting. They kinda...Frog Called each other earlier."

"On purpose?" Kinji was bewildered.

"No, 'course not. They were trying to subdue the Fox."

"Ah." Kinji nodded, "Well good. I'm not ready to talk to them yet."

"Still?" Jiraiya pressed, "What are you waiting for? A gilded invitation? They keep asking to see you and even watch your shows from the back row...because you don't let them get better tickets."

"No, they don't buy early enough for prime seating."

"Kid, you could hold the seats for them. They're your goddamned parents."

Kinji groaned.

"They're like my mom and dad too, most days. I know their quirks. I know they like to tease me without end. But you know what? They're great. I love 'em. As much as I loved my own mom before I lost her." Jiraiya nudged him with a foot, "Don't you see how lucky you are that they're here for you?"

"I do. I get it, okay? But they'll ask me why I can't keep a good girl toad around, like always."

"I get the same shit too. But they know why women don't stick with me. With you, they worry what's the matter with their straight-laced kid."

"I work too much, or I demand too much...I don't know..." Kinji grumbled, "I guess it bothers me
most when Ma and Pa know what's wrong with me and I don't."

Jiraiya recommended, "You need to get comfortable with criticism. You are way too defensive, Kinji."

"And you are way too perverted, Jiraiya."

"It's my best quality, I swear."

Outside of the house, Kinji took a steadying breath and then hopped onto the porch. He opened the door for Jiraiya to allow him to pass through with Naruto. Kinji followed after, and no sooner had he shut the door behind him, he heard a cry in unison, "Kinji-boy!"

He muttered in annoyance.

Fukasaku and Shima had propped themselves up on a pile of cushions in the sitting room. They were still a bit stiff from their earlier scuffle.

"Hi Ma…Hi Pa…"

"Son, it's been so long! Did you help Jiraiya-boy stop the Nine-Tails?" Fukasaku was delighted. His foot appeared to be stuck in a Charley-horse.

"Yeah…sort of…the Great Elder woke up to give him a lick. I kept him busy." Kinji noted tepidly, "I won't be staying for dinner. Got a lot of clean up and repairs to do…"

"That's fine, dear. Fetch a basin of water for Jiraiya-boy to help him wash Naruto, please." Shima asked, "And if you do get hungry, tell me."

"Yeah, Ma…" He moved around to collect a basin and cloth.

When Kinji entered Naruto's bedroom and set the items down beside Jiraiya, he observed, "You set me up, didn't cha?"

"Nope. I have no clue how they hauled themselves into the sitting room, okay? They can hardly move. I guess they were excited that maybe you'd show up!" Jiraiya was smiling a little.

"You moved them."

"Na-aaw, not me-!"

Kinji flicked his ear in annoyance, "You're laying bricks with me tonight, ya bum."
The Fool and His Folly

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

*Chapter Soundtrack:* **/ "That Night" by Lovewave**

& **"Eternal Youth" by RUDE**

It was the *weirdest* thing.

He could almost, no, he *could* feel the split of the cleavage furrow in a microscopic animal cell. It was routine mitosis, a process greatly overlooked by large organisms that cannot witness miracles so small with the naked eye. *Pop.* The parent cell split. Over and over. *‘Whatever animal this is, it’s getting bigger.’* Naruto noticed. He still could not figure out on the macro-level where he was currently in the *flow.*

As far as consciousness went, Naruto was a bit more aware that he was stuck somewhere in Nature. Thankfully, everything was wildly interesting and distracting. Whether it was cheering on an orchid unfurling its petals over the course of several hours, or the worker ant that Naruto had joined on its 5-kilometer march in a single day… He was happily, obliviously occupied for 48 hours.

Naruto had even dreamed in the wilds. He dreamt of something that had happened once, long ago. A young man with dusty, beige hair was seated in meditation on top of a slab of slate, balanced on the point of a stone spire. It was a place in the Toad Valley, Naruto vaguely knew. The trainee seemed to be a student collecting Natural Energy. He did not move a muscle and kept perfect balance. Naruto admired such resolve and decided to chill with the supposed Senjutsu alumnus for a while. He kind of got the hang of it— relaxing and harmonizing with Nature from the stranger’s perspective, and also from his own position above a spire.

The breeze felt marvelous. The serene quiet of the rocky field was great for meditation. Naruto was not sure how long he was there before he felt balance and then a great liveliness, *‘Hm. Did I-?’* He had a feeling he had achieved Sage Mode, or maybe he was imagining it all. Before he could investigate or celebrate the feeling, Naruto scrunched his face when a bit of valley dust wafted up on the breeze and tickled his nose. He sneezed loudly.

The sandy-haired student’s eyes snapped open in surprise. He kept balance on the slate he was seated on while canting his head in confusion, wondering if he had heard something. Upon seeing that reaction, Naruto sensed that he had disturbed the meditating valley resident. *‘Yeesh. I shouldn’t bother him! I know how tough this training is.’*

Then, Naruto started to come to with the most radical headache he had ever experienced. With a low, bellowing moan, he cracked his eyes open, squeezed them shut again, and failed to sit up. Naruto felt that he had been laid flat on a futon. Light in the room suggested in was late morning or mid-day.

Why was it so hard to move? He ached all over and felt the sting of a bag of ice tied to the top of his head. Naruto tiredly moved his hand and felt around, noticing a change of clothes he’d been switched into. He also felt a few paper tag seals stuck to his skin. *‘What’s…all this about? Did I get sick during training…? Oh shit, maybe I died? I dunno. Maybe when I wake up I’ll be in the distant future like the premise of those lame fiction novels…’*

“You wakin’ up over there, Blondie?” A voice asked from the corner of the room.
Naruto opened an eye to spy the room’s other occupant: a small green toad in a glitzy jacket. The toad sat cross legged on a cushion and had a stack of reading material beside him.

“…uh…erg…”

“Yeah, I’ll bet that smarts. Ma and Pa told me you slammed face-first into our giant, toad oil cauldron. Do you know how solid that thing is? Pff! And don’t get me started on what I did to ya…”

Sputtering with a slightly stuffed nose, Naruto pushed himself up slightly, “Have we…met?”

“Not that you’d remember, ya got clocked so hard. I’m Kinji. Ma and Pa’s kid.” Kinji licked a finger and flipped a page in a theatrical manuscript, “And I know that you are Naruto, Jiraiya’s little golden duckling. You introduced yourself to me as some jerk fox, though.”

“Oh shit! I’m sorry—” Alarmed, Naruto struggled to sit up and tried to make amends, “I think I might’ve passed out and sometimes the—!”

“You don’t need to explain, Blondie. Jiraiya did a whole lotta gabbin’ already.” Kinji closed his manuscript and set it aside, “You’ve got a fuzzy tenant.”

“Yeah…”

“I beat the hell out of ‘em.”

“It feels like you missed him and got me.” Naruto rubbed his ribs tenderly through his shirt, “Are you a Sage?”

“I am a modern marvel.” Kinji puffed up a little, “You bet your yellow head I’m a Sage. I knew your daddy too. We clowned around when we were younger.”

Naruto was delighted, “You did?”

“Minato was my fellow bookworm and occasional karaoke partner! You know, when he was here in the valley.” Kinji recalled, “Otherwise he was pledging his life and service to his village, and just generally being a nice guy.”

He tossed his blanket off, “Are you kidding me-?”

“—nah, he wasn’t perfect. He chased some red-headed chick around a lot—”

Naruto sidled up to the toad, “No, no, I mean, he could sing-?”

“He was better than me.” Kinji shrugged, “And we were usually pretty sloshed by the time my Pa put music on.”

The gleaming, genuine smile on Naruto’s face took the toad aback. He gave Naruto a pat on the arm, “Uh…wait here. I’ve got to tell Jiraiya that you’re up.”

Naruto languidly rolled over on tatami mats and watched Kinji hop out of the room. He could hear a soft exchange of words outside. After that, Jiraiya appeared at the door and scrutinized Naruto suspiciously, “This isn’t some trick, is it, Fox?”

“Whoa, Perv, you know it’s me.” Naruto frowned.

“Like I’m going to take my chances after you blew up part of the valley…” Jiraiya sniffed, “Say something only Naruto would say.”
“I already did.”

“Just cooperate or I’ll slap another tag on you.”

“Uh.” Confronted with skepticism, Naruto was puzzled over how to prove his identity in a word, “Um…er…believe i—?”

“Alright, that’ll do.” Jiraiya cut him off and entered the room.

Immediately, Naruto had questions about Kinji, “Did he know Dad really well? How come I haven’t met him before today? Can I summon him? Well, duh, I probably can. Oh, and you never told me Dad could—”

Jiraiya clapped his hand over his pupil’s mouth, “Hold it. Let’s talk. You were unconscious for two days. Don’t you remember petrifying into a Toad Statue?”

“What the-! That happened?” Naruto gasped, “I thought I was just living the life of ants and flowers…temporarily.”

“Yeah, well, there’s nothing temporary about becoming a statue, Kid. For most people, anyway. Maybe that’s where your consciousness and spirit goes when your body turns to stone. You just wander around Nature for all time or until you achieve enlightenment.” The man smiled to himself, “And the thought of you becoming enlightened before me seems hilariously accurate.”

“What is enlightenment anyway?” Naruto only had a vague notion of spiritual concepts.

“That’s what the unenlightened ask.” Jiraiya teased, peeling paper tags from Naruto’s chest, “Sages are supposed to basically understand that mumbo-jumbo…which I may have glossed over. Sorry. Dhyāna is the term for meditation or no mind, and it’s supposed to give us the state of perfect equanimity and awareness. That you already understand.” Jiraiya acknowledged, “And when one is a Sage, that doesn’t make one enlightened. Bodhi is the awakening, or, the understanding of the true nature of all things. Toad Sages understand life, balance and some other core knowledge. We don’t necessarily understand how they connect with all the rest of the junk in this universe.”

“So we don’t get…Bodhi just by training in the valley?”

“No. Maybe you can, but I’m guessing you’ll need greater insight than what we have here. The Great Toad Elder is probably enlightened. Or something like it.” Jiraiya finished plucking tags from Naruto, “Anyway, don’t scare me again. I’m a little hesitant to put you back to work after the fox ran amok…”

“So I…started to turn to stone, but…the fox stopped it.” Naruto gathered, “And then he took over?”

“Yes. Granted, he did kind of save your ass. Then he gave us grief.”

“I don’t really know where I went wrong…why can’t I get this training right?” Naruto rubbed his head anxiously, “I felt like I was getting it!”

“You probably were.” Jiraiya gave him that, “But was anything different that day? Did anything throw you off?”

“Er…” A few recollections drifted to the surface, “Well, maybe.”

“Maybe?” Jiraiya arched a brow at him, “Define maybe.”
“I spent most of the morning with Hinata, you know, the only way we can.” Naruto admitted, “I showed her around and we talked…”

“And you think that impacted your ability to meditate?” Jiraiya ventured with a stern tone.

He felt rather cornered, “I…think it could have. I’m not saying it’s her fault! I’m the one who has to get my act together.”

“Right. But you don’t want to create any more risk than what you are already up against.” Jiraiya advised, “So, less with the remote-controlled dates and more with the discipline and focus. That’s your recipe for success.”

“Got it.” Naruto agreed glumly.

“Good. You hungry? You haven’t eaten in over a day.”

“Yeah.” Naruto pushed to his feet, “Literally any bug or fruit you put in front of me will do.”

“Then let’s funnel all that down your gullet, Kid.” Jiraiya turned merrily out of the door, “And while we’re at it, let’s bother Kinji with embarrassing stories from when he was young.”

It almost felt like watching a sitcom when he watched Ino’s family.

Ino’s mother Noriko was a demure brunette, her hair coiffed in a bun and her sundress immaculately pressed. For a moment, she and her daughter looked each other in the face while laughing girlishly. Shikamaru missed the joke from his place seated at a table. As he was visiting them for the morning and having tea, he watched his girlfriend interact with her parents. Noriko could finish Ino’s sentences for her if she was given the chance, but she was much nicer than her filter-less, opinionated child.

Shortly after that, Inoichi thundered back into the kitchen for the third time, as he had clearly forgotten his keys, then the department memo, and then the swipe-card pass for high clearance Intel areas. Cursing his forgetfulness, Inoichi grudgingly accepted another pity-kiss on the cheek from his wife and then stalked out. ‘He’ll probably be back.’ Shikamaru wagered. A bagged bento box was still sitting on the counter, and he imagined that was meant to go with Inoichi as well.

He stared blankly at wall artwork and sipped his tea. At the Nara house, his father would have already been long gone for a morning briefing at the office and then the Jounin Standby Station. Had he lingered at home, Shikamaru guessed his mother would have made small talk with him before diving into embarrassing subjects and/or grown impatient with him and shooed him out to be productive. The Yamanaka family actually liked when he hung around.

When Ino leaned down over the table and he accidentally, sort-of-on-purpose saw down the low cut of her top, it snapped him out of his contemplation. The blonde woman smiled slyly at him.

“Shouldn’t we be going too?” Ino asked him, “If you’re done with your tea. We have a mission assignment today.”

“Yup.” Shikamaru stood from his seat, “Chouji said that you two need to make a stop at the first floor offices?” He moved the teapot and cup from the table.

“Yeah, at the administrative building. We have to turn in paperwork for higher clearances.” Ino clarified, “It should only take a few minutes.”
After cleaning up and saying their farewells to Noriko, they set out through town for the Hokage’s tower. Strolling side-by-side down the street, the pair engaged in sidelong conversation.

“That tea wasn’t your favorite. I could see it on your face.”

“That doesn’t have to be my favorite to be drinkable.” Shikamaru pointed out.

“How does my outfit look?” She was, as always, very polished-looking.

“Fine. Just like yesterday’s. And whatever you threw together the day before that. You can wear your vest over anything, Ino.”

“I was thinking maybe I don’t want to…”

“You’re wearing it today.”

“I’m capricious.”

“I know.”

“Shika, I’m still surprised you woke up early today.” Ino reflected, “Early enough to catch breakfast with my family at least.”

“I prefer your schedule. My parents are nutjobs up at the crack of dawn.”

“Yes, but…I’m surprised.” Her lips were curling nefariously, “That you’re okay with so little sleep.”

“…it was enough.” He was watching her from the corner of his eye, “I don’t see you complaining either.”

“I’d trade beauty rest for a few hours of empty house with you any night.” Ino was humming happily to herself. He knew very well that she was referring to nocturnal activities he had initiated. Even though sex had to be scheduled to avoid pestering families and conflicts of time, Shikamaru could admit it was still the greatest thing ever.

The subject of conversation drifted away from: could you do that again sometime? and don’t hate on violet lace, you still pulled it off me with your teeth! to: Shut up, there’s Chouji.

And Chouji greeted them in the warm, sunny way he always did while offering a tin of muffins he had been eating from on the way to the tower. They politely declined and entered the building together. Chouji left his muffin tin with Shikamaru before he and Ino continued on to the Processing Bureau down the hall. He loitered in the lobby and nodded in salutations when some Chunin associates scurried by.

Asuma rounded the corner after descending the stairwell and immediately honed in on the muffins. He said hello to Shikamaru after his first bite.

“Are you not being fed well?” Shikamaru snarked.

“Kurenai and I don’t do breakfast anymore. That shit’s for newlyweds and posers.” Asuma announced, scarfing the food, “Sato gave her coffee for her birthday and we’ve been converted.”

“That still won’t stop you from starving.”

“Sure it won’t, but coffee works quicker.”
They took a seat on a lobby bench.

“You came in with Ino?” Asuma noted, “I saw you from the window upstairs after my briefing.”

“That’s right.”

“Huh, so are you living there now or what? I hardly ever see you come from the Nara House.” Asuma snickered, “Her parents should charge you rent, at least.”

“I don’t have that kind of money and it’s just a meal here and there. I’m still at home for the most part.”

“Why don’t you get a place together?”

“Because that’s wasteful.”

“How about: because you’d want to?” Asuma wondered, “Couples do that.”

“Dad said we could, but it won’t look right if our clan elders examine the formality of everything.” Shikamaru explained, “If Ino said she wanted to, then I would.”

“Then that makes sense.” Asuma agreed, sighing, “You know what Kurenai said to me after we first moved in together? We were still pretty young. She said: I don’t want to do anything else for a while. I want to make Jounin rank and train up a team of Genin. So I said: Train them up? Into what? Apparently she meant to Chunin or adulthood, or whichever came first.” He finished off his muffin, “That’s a long time to live together and do nothing; I’d just like to say.”

“So then why did you stay with her?” Shikamaru snorted, “She made it clear what she intended to do.”

“Because of two main reasons: One, I was the one who liked her and suggested that dating me would be a good idea. And two, after we became a team out of the Academy and got to know each other as Genin, I knew it was best to let Kurenai do exactly what she wanted to do.” Asuma replied evenly, “That’s what made her happiest.”

“What about what made you happy?”

“*She* made me happy,” Asuma grinned like a sap, “She still does.”

“Hm.” Shikamaru said, considering it.

“I think…now that all of you youngsters have made Chunin rank…Kurenai feels like she can take a step back now.” Asuma observed, “If I’ve been reading the signals correctly, I am pretty sure she’s ready to settle down.”

“Is that so?”

“Yeah. We’re itching for kids. Every toddler we see on the street is suddenly interesting and worth critiquing.”

Shikamaru was not sure what to say. For his part, he was still mostly ambivalent about marriage, children, and other such commitments. He gave his sensei a slanted, bamboozled look.

“When we get married I’d like for you all to be there.” Asuma added.

“Are you so sure she’d say yes? You’ve asked her before. 12 years of turning you down is enough
time to make someone comfortable.” Shikamaru was a bit sharp with his response.

“Shit, Shikamaru…” The man chuckled softly, “I’m not sure if you are speaking in defense of me… or if you genuinely disagree that an investment of over a decade is worth anything.”

“I don’t know if it is.” Shikamaru replied.

“That’s the difference between me and you, I think. You’re skeptical of everything.” Asuma reflected, “I, on the other hand…am too optimistic for my own good.” He lectured a little, “You don’t achieve your dreams by questioning the odds constantly. You need to take some risks and be willing to get hurt. That’s the only way you ever truly come to appreciate something.”

Shikamaru noticed that today, for some reason, this sentiment resonated with him more. He wasn’t feeling as sure of himself. He was acutely aware of the future, and some of his insecurities had manifested. He’d been preoccupied with the reality that the Nara and Yamanaka clans could enact provisions, or strip inheritance and responsibility from him or Ino if they pursued their relationship seriously. A future together was not forbidden or frowned upon, but at least one of them, Shikamaru was aware, would give up the majority of his or her clan-related duties if marriage was in the cards. Since that was bothering him, perhaps he ought to reign it in and give his sensei a break?

“Sorry, Sensei. I don’t know what’s gotten into me…” Shikamaru edited himself, “Kurenai-sensei will—”

Asuma gently knuckle-punched his student’s cheek, “She already said yes, you brainiac. Why else am I inviting students and talking about this stuff?”

“Oh.” Shikamaru straightened up on the bench. Yeah. Projecting his concerns onto others made him awfully blind.

When Ino and Chouji returned, Asuma did not bring up the subject again. He engaged in pleasantries and good-humored teasing with them before asking Shikamaru to, “Lead this team well. I’ve got my hands full today…” Then he was off.

Shikamaru supposed Asuma would update his students on the matter when things were official. He returned Chouji’s muffin tin and followed a step behind him and Ino. He was transfixed on the to-and-fro swing of Ino’s long, cornsilk ponytail.

Maybe the other thing that was eating at him lately was that he was starting to think Ino was a bit too good for him. Though boisterous and confrontational at times, Ino had fulfilled three interviews with the Sensory Corps, the Intel Corps, and the Medical Corps for significant auxiliary positions and had turned heads in every building she set foot in. The thought made him restless. He envied her family and their congeniality. Her confidence. He heard the mutterings of those admiring Ino as she passed by.

And yet, Shikamaru thought to himself as they scaled the stairs of the building: she’d chosen to have a morning meal with him, cracked jokes with him, dated him exclusively, and had also made five hours in his bed last night so memorable that he still saw her behind his eyelids when he blinked. So he bucked up a little and smiled to himself.

Ino noticed. She canted her head at Shikamaru and stopped while Chouji proceeded into the Hokage’s office. The angles of her lips and eyebrows noted: That smile of yours means something.

He touched the back of her arm as she walked into the office, angling his eyebrows in a silent reply. Astute, Ino nodded and flipped her hair out of her face. She got it. She smiled to herself.
“Make this quick because I have three consecutive briefings after you.” Tsunade greeted and then added, “Good morning, all.”

As a team, “Good morning, Hokage-sama.”

Tsunade gladly accepted a muffin from Chouji when he left it on her desk, “Oh! You angel.”

Shikamaru approached the desk and accepted the scroll the Hokage handed him, listening as she gave a short briefing to the team.

“Don’t expect any stimulation from this assignment. You’re going to Tanzaku Quarter, reporting straight to the court offices on the east side, you know—the white brick building.” Tsunade sighed as she went on, “You’ll oversee the proceedings of a case with the Shibusawa family, accused of defrauding a host of their clients to make a fortune. Maito Ken will be there with two attorneys and witnesses…and I’d like you three to make sure that our people could not be safer in that building.”

“They’re having a rough year, that family.” Shikamaru recalled bankruptcy and other woes that had befallen the Shibusawa clan.

“It wouldn’t be so rough if they could so much as attempt a legal transaction.” Tsunade sniffed.

“Tama’s father is on this case?” Ino verified.

“Yes.” The Hokage smiled and added sarcastically, “He’s charming.”

Chouji and Ino knew definitively that was a false statement.

“Return tonight and give me details tomorrow morning. If…any thugs or mercenaries happen to drop by that court room…make them squeal before arresting them. It’s clean up season and I want that district swept for low-lifes that the Shibusawa family gave a pass for so long. Intel will help us empty Tanzaku Quarter, or at least start to.” Tsunade lifted her muffin and gave it an experimental nibble, “Hm!” She liked it.

Shikamaru assured her that they would see it done, and then his team carried on after being dismissed. They passed by Neji and Lee as the pair dropped into the Hokage’s office immediately afterward.

Tsunade held a finger up to them so she could finish chewing. She needed to relish her breakfast.

Respectfully, Lee greeted the village leader while Neji stood in silence. He looked gray and weary. Tsunade cocked an eyebrow at him.

“Hyuga, I’ve seen corpses that looked more approachable.” She concluded chewing, “Ah. Eh-hem, so, it’ll be the two of you today.”

“You are confirming that, Tsunade-sama?” Lee asked with a hint of concern, “Neji and I have not…been able to find Tenten since the day before last.”

“Gentlemen, she has obligations and they were cleared with me. I excused her from missions.” She waved it off, “You will see Tenten tomorrow morning, I assure you. For now, I ask that you kindly supervise the transportation of expensive medical equipment to the clinic in Kaido. 20 kilometers south of Leaf, if you’re rusty on that location. It’s a watering hole of Hatake Sato’s and he’s chummy with the mayor there…” Tsunade handed a scroll with details to Lee, since Neji was still not animated, “Please. Take this seriously. This a gesture of good faith with that town whose preeminent medic-nin is almost as experienced as I am, Eto Sarincha. Or whatever her surname is now… See to
it that shipment gets to town without issue. The likelihood of interference is rather high…but you two should…” She paused and frowned at Neji, reconsidering her confidence in them.

“No such interference will disrupt the delivery on our watch, Hokage-sama!” Lee tried to avert the Hokage’s notice of Neji and his glum expression.

“Do you need a shot of Vitamin-B?” Tsunade tried to assess the problem, “Or is this a personal problem that is going to affect performance, Hyuga?”

He straightened a little, for Lee’s sake. Neji replied, “There will be no disruption, Hokage-sama.”

“Good. I expect you back tonight and a follow-up report in the morning. Give Sarincha and her mayor-husband my best. And if her father is ever local again…” Tsunade simpered, “Migawari has something of mine that I intend to win back. Be sure to pass that on, Lee.”

“‘Yes ma’am!’”

And they were off after dismissal, walking a bit slower than usual down the hall while discussing the elephant in the room.

“Tsunade-sama did not tell us what Tenten’s obligations were.” Lee observed.

“She isn’t anywhere. Not her home. Her shop. Our training areas. Nor with friends, who were suspicious of my asking…as it was uncharacteristic.” Neji added, “Tenten did not tell either of us she would be…out.”

“No, she did not.”

“Because of her impeccable timing…” Neji rubbed his head, vexed, “I haven’t been able to tell Tenten anything.”

“But Tsunade-sama said she will return tomorrow morning. Perhaps it was some sort of work or personal matter?”

“Can you think of a time that Tenten has not expressly told us where she would be, when she intends to be absent?” Neji countered.

“Never.” Lee yielded, “Not since the no-contact order…”

Lee watched his friend’s face, negotiating the steps in the stairwell while Neji stewed on Tenten’s unexpected absence. She would have no idea what Neji intended to do. Now responsible for a mission that would take up the better part of a day, Neji was probably imagining where to start looking for her when they returned at night; moreover, how Tenten would react to his decision to join the Branch.

On the first floor, Lee cleared his throat. Neji snapped out of his musing and blinked at him.

“This scroll says we will meet the equipment manager at the shipping depot. It is close by. What I mean to say is…we can expedite this mission if it will take your mind off the matter, Neji.” Lee offered, moving a bit more briskly as his friend matched his pace, getting it, “We can make good time! Then I will assist in searching for the flower of our team when we return.”

Neji was grateful for the suggestion, “Lee—”

“Do not tarry!” Lee caught Neji’s shoulders and pushed him into a run.
After concluding her morning meetings in the administrative building, Tsunade handed off a variety of paperwork and incidentals to Shizune and Sakura before migrating to Konoha’s hospital.

Venturing up from the hospital lobby and through the ward on the second floor, Tsunade was briefly detained by her celebrity as some Chunin-ranked medics, still shiny-eyed with pressed lab coats, stopped to chat her up and ask for wisdom. She allowed for six minutes of ego-plumping conversation before she barked at her subordinates to “check charts and quit socializing!” At the far end of the corridor, Tsunade strolled into a patient room without announcing herself.

Tama looked up from reading an unwound scroll in her lap, rolling it closed at she acknowledged the village leader, “Good morning, Tsunade-sama!”

“Hello, Tama.” She stopped to glance over a patient chart at the side of the room, “You’ll be happy to know I left your father in capable hands while he works on a case today. Shikamaru’s team will ensure his safety.”

“Thank you, those are capable hands indeed.” She was merry and pain-free, but Tama sobered up a little when the Hokage shut the door to the room and then strode over to the bed.

With no preamble, Tsunade laid her hands flat on each of the girl’s knee caps and stared off unseeing, surveying the state of Tama’s crushed legs. Shortly after that, her sensing-fingertips travelled to Tama’s left hand, “Better? Sakura and I worked to mend this famous punching hand of yours.”

“Yes. Much better! I’m still getting motion back through physical therapy with Sakura-chan.”

Tsunade stopped the examination and took a seat on a rolling stool, “I want you to be honest with me.”

“Yes, milady.”

“Any feeling in your lower legs or feet?”

“…no.”

“About what I expected. How about your back? Any trouble there?”

“No. My back feels fine. I told Sakura-chan I can move and feel down around mid-thigh.”

“That’s encouraging to hear…” The Hokage frowned, “But I suppose we should discuss your options should you wish to continue being a shinobi. You do still want to serve, am I right about that?”

Tama had a stern look not unlike her uncle’s most serious expressions, “Yes, I really do.”

“Then your options are few, considering your physical state. On the one hand, you can accept a permanent disability status in Leaf and choose from any clerical opening in any of the Corps that are hiring. We could leave it at that to guarantee your health and well-being. Or, you could elect to take an elevated risk and visit Kusagakure for its renowned medical tourism, as I’ve heard that they have those with talents and Kekkei Genkai that can address severe injuries…” Tsunade trailed off and looked out the window, “But your ability to access such treatment is unlikely, because the demand for it far outpaces its supply and the availability of physicians.”

“On the other hand…” Tsunade’s tone took on a blade’s edge of severity, “You take the most risky option and seek treatment with me.”
It nearly seemed like a no-brainer cue to agree, but before Tama could assert her confidence in the Hokage, Tsunade stopped her with a raised hand. Tama stayed quiet.

“What I can do for you is uncertain.” Tsunade clarified, “In all of my years of experience, I have only once treated a similar extent of bone and connective tissue damage. That was some time ago. Though my patient had a good result after the procedure, he died shortly after of complications.” She looked Tama squarely in the eye, “Reversing your injury will have a 50 percent success rate at best, not counting possible post-op issues you may experience. Should you survive surgery, rehabilitation will take time and dedication to yield improvement, and it does not guarantee the same standard of life you knew before injury. Do you understand?”

“I understand, Tsunade-sama.” Tama was listening carefully.

“I say this to you in confidence because you are of the age of majority in Leaf, and so you can make this decision without parental guidance. However…” Tsunade balanced her chin on the back of her hand, “With such a high rate of failure to be considered, I hope you ask yourself what you stand to lose by continuing a career as a shinobi.”

“Quite a lot…” Tama noted, shoulders drooping, “I…I know my family would be…frustrated if I made a careless decision that cost my life.”

“And your husband-to-be…I don’t know how I could ever deal with him if he lost you.” Tsunade thought of Sato, adding, “He and Kakashi…they consider you their family. They have already had their share of loss…and I dare not imagine what it would be like if you died under my hands instead of living in safety in their care.”

“…I understand.” The young woman grew quiet, her eyes wandering to watch the wall clock as the minute hand made its revolution. Tsunade also took the moment to stare off into space.

“Maybe I shouldn’t.” Tama supposed. A silence hung in the room.

Tsunade sighed and fidgeted with the end of a pigtail that was draped over her shoulder. She was not very good at giving counsel about these sorts of things. She painted a scene with a brush of truth and facts, and sometimes that hurt far more than the sugarcoated optimism she wished she could peddle. Tsunade, a survivor of lost loved ones herself, could certainly relate to the pain that would be felt by Sato, Gai, Kakashi, and Tama’s family, were Tama to perish. Not that Nawaki and Dan had any real choice in their respective demises, but Tsunade hoped that Tama would see the value in that she had a choice at all.

“Tsunade-sama…do you know what I’m good at?” Tama wondered absently, still watching the clock, “Lots of things.”

“Yes, I’ve heard.” The woman smiled wanly.

“My father saw to it that…there were few things I couldn’t do. Self-sufficiency, skill, and knowledge…that’s my father’s mantra.” Tama closed her eyes and leaned her head back, “I can make budgets. I can memorize laws and texts. I can negotiate deals. I can calculate probability and percentages in my head. I can cook most anything. I can build a house. I can dance. I can ride a bike without touching the handle bars. I’m getting good at hot-wiring things, and I can tell you what day of the week any calendar date was or will be.”

“Huh.” Tsunade said.

“I can get a job doing…anything. I guess.”
“Perhaps going into your father’s field would be lucrative.” Tsunade imagined.

“I could…but all of those things I can do…aren’t the things I want to do.” Tama admitted, “I want to be a shinobi. Most of my life, others made decisions for me. My uncle and Kakashi-sensei, and my mother too, decided who I would marry. My father told me to turn away from a ninja career and the Taijutsu style of my family. Even my friends at the bakery, though they mean well…tell me what they think is best.”

Tsunade was nodding and watching the girl from the corner of her eye.

“For so long I’ve been comfortable…humoring the people that steer me. But I am tired of that.” Tama explained, “I’m so tired of that.”

“So then you want to undergo the procedure here in Leaf?” Tsunade ventured.

“I don’t need to inform anyone that I’m going into surgery, do I?”

“Generally it’s a best practice to tell someone. You’ll put me in a precarious position if you should die, you realize.” Tsunade advised.

“I…” Tama pursed her lips and thought on it.

“Maybe we should schedule it for down-time between Sato’s missions.” Tsunade assumed, “I sent his team on a tracking assignment, and I have a few other requests much like it that I need them to fulfill.”

“Right, well…” Tama appeared clearer in her decision, “I want to speak to Kakashi-sensei.”

“Oh?”

“Do you happen to know if he’s in the village-?”

“Well of course I do, I have a bone to pick with him.” Tsunade pushed up from the rolling stool and stood, “Before I nag him, I will send him to you. Talk. Consider everything. Then give me your answer.”

“I will, Tsunade-sama.” She offered the Hokage a small smile.

“Oh and do you have any special food requests?” Tsunade stopped at the door on her way out, “I can have your Sensei bring you something.”

“A doughnut.” Tama said hopefully.

The table of the apartment was littered with fine jewelry and ornaments. Shell bracelets trimmed with gold, magatama pendants of jade and quartz on gold, beaded chains, tassel earrings dripping in sapphires and rubies, a platinum dragon pendant with scales cut from rainbow bismuth; brooches, headpieces, hair pins fitted with diamonds and silver.

Haku nearly fell over when he watched Zabuza turn out the silk bag on the table top and sniff disinterestedly at the spoils. “Y-You-! You didn’t steal that from the dignitary—?”

“Can it, Haku. I grabbed the oaf’s whole goddamn bag. How was I supposed to know he had a fuckload of gems in there with the agreements from Mist?” Zabuza chucked the silk bag aside, “Guess I can dump it all at an auction in the Lightning Country. Aristocrats there love this kind of junk.”
“You are richer than sin already.” Haku’s hand thunked down to emphasize the point, “You don’t need to sell this, Zabuza. We should distribute it the townspeople here.”

“In case you’ve forgotten I have to buy Terumi’s men out. And their loyalty to her has made them expensive.” Zabuza growled, “We’ll hit up an auction in a few months’ time.”

“If you insist on doing so then you can part with a few pieces.” Haku disagreed, “The old Shibasaburō sisters and Oguni-san can use this to fix their houses. Tomo-san can use this too for the children’s schooling…and Hiroshi-san…”

“Alright, just take whatever.” The grouchy nukenin loped away from the table to prospect for food in the refrigerator.

Haku thoroughly ignored Zabuza’s grousing and muttering in the background while he examined a few specimens. Not that he had a trained eye for luxury, but Haku assumed some of the finer metals and gems would fetch higher prices for the struggling retirees of the island. He set aside what looked like it could have been the headpiece of an empress, some brooches and other jewelry.

He fell still while handling a magnificent hand fan. The hinoki material was printed with impossibly rich colors; a blue sky strung with clouds that bled into a sunset scene, and in the foreground, brushwork of a kite flying in the shape of a swallow. On the table beside it were a hair pin and ring inlaid with gems of the same color scheme. Perhaps it was more than Zabuza would allow him to take and set aside for neighborhood senior citizens, so Haku pocketed those items without a word for himself.

Zabuza told him to fetch nori, miso and mushrooms to throw into a pot of simmering broth for noodles. Haku moved about the small space, stuck in his thoughts which he collected the foodstuffs…and they paused as Ranmaru entered through a creaking door and slowly tottered into the room. He had a noticeable, red lump on his forehead.

“Did Thunderbrain do that to you?” Zabuza was half-concerned at the sight of the apprentice who he, for the most part, considered competent and trustworthy now.

“No.” Ranmaru took a seat on an armchair and rested a healing hand on the lump, “I failed Migawari-sensei’s healing exam.”

“A second time?” Haku was surprised, and handed over a bag of ice to his friend, “He barely had the patience for your first evaluation. Migawari-san gave you extra time to study and practice, Ranmaru. I didn’t think he’d…actually whack you with the paddle he’s been brandishing. I thought that was just a threat.”

“You passed on your first try, Haku-kun. I mixed up a few things and…” Ranmaru sighed, “It wasn’t a threat.”

Haku clucked his tongue disapprovingly.

“He said that because we don’t pay him for lessons that the least I can do is not waste his time.” Ranmaru recalled glumly.

“This was the arrangement he asked for. We help around his office in exchange for lessons.” Haku returned to the table to clear away spoils and prepare to chop vegetables, “Well then, Migawari-san won’t see a single bead of what Zabuza brought back with him.”

“He better fucking not, that cheap pickle drum.” Zabuza agreed distantly from a storage closet.
Ranmaru raised his lavender eyebrows at the last shining pieces being dropped into the silk bag, “Oh…! He would want that whole bag of riches. I won’t say anything to him, Haku-kun, promise.”

“I know.”

Another sigh, “I didn’t want Raiga to see my head or he’d get angry.”

“Just wait here until the swelling goes down.” Haku recommended.

“I’ll study a bit harder.” Ranmaru resolved, and then looked up at Haku from his seat, “Haku-kun, because you passed Migawari-sensei’s exam…that makes you a medic-nin.”

“No officially.” Haku chided, dicing leeks on a cutting board.

“But Migawari-sensei said that was the test he used to give to Chunin in Kusagakure before they were certified.”

“That doesn’t mean I am certified. It just makes me knowledgeable; that I can save lives if I must.” Haku reasoned, “I’m a Genin. I’m nothing more than that.”

“Well,” Ranmaru smiled to himself with his hands in his lap, “I’m not even that. But I’ll be something someday.”

Haku laughed quietly at him.

“Quit yaking and make yourself useful if you’re gonna lay low here, Pipsqueak.” Zabuza warned as he returned to the kitchen area, “Mix or chop something.”

“Yes, Zabuza-san!”

Zabuza gave the child a weird look, absorbing just how unusual it had become to hear such a thing from another apprentice’s mouth. Not long after preparations, boiling noodles, and pan-frying thin fillets of pork, Zabuza grudgingly allowed Ranmaru to join them for lunch as well. Ranmaru was not a big eater, so Zabuza permitted the small purple remora to hang about.

They ate and Ranmaru’s head lump faded. After folding his hands in thanks for the meal and washing some dishes, Ranmaru was off again to find his master.

Zabuza was about to settle down for a nap when Haku plopped down on the sofa beside him.

“What? Are you going for the world record in irritating me today?” The man rumbled. He peered through a slitted eye as Haku held open a scroll for him. He wanted an opinion.

“See this? For me to apply this Yin Seal, I would need to write all of the script formulas in multiple matrices. Flesh, parchment, and soil, I’m guessing…” Haku handed the scroll off to Zabuza who brought it closer to his face to read it and understand, “Have you ever done something like this before?”

Zabuza wondered, “What is this shit?”

“It’s the Godaime Hokage’s Yin Seal.”

“Hokage’s seal my ass.” Zabuza snorted in disbelief, “If this is her seal then I’m a florist.”

“Then you’re a florist.” Haku asserted flatly.
Zabuza just looked at him. After a moment, he unwound the scroll and suspended his disbelief, examining more of what was required to use the technique.

“How the fuck did you get this?”

Haku shrugged it off, “Does it matter? I asked you if you’ve ever applied something like this before.”

“Not recently. Not ever this complex.” Zabuza admitted, “And all you get for it is a bindi, this says.”

“Ah.” Haku said faintly.

“Who the hell has worked on something this convoluted before? Sealing Corps Commissioners, maybe, or other formula-scribbling geeks with no lives…” The man supposed as he sat up, “You’re gonna need a lot of ink—serious ink, to write this. We don’t exactly have that shit handy.” He exhaled between the line of his lips, thinking about it.

“So we could feasibly accomplish this?” Haku wondered, leaning over to see how far Zabuza had gotten.

“Feasibly.” Zabuza snickered at the word, “Yeah. This looks like…I don’t know. Four hours’ worth of Fuinjutsu writing? Not that I can judge accurately, because I was never a candidate for the Sealing Corps. This is technical stuff that, as you know, you can’t fuck up. If you write a single character of the formula wonky or omit anything, you can fry yourself, seal your chakra, or waste all that work once it sits there inert. There are jutsu that can help you avoid mistakes but, again, not my field of expertise.”

“How do you know so much?” Haku took back the scroll and rolled it shut, “Even at the Academy we only got the bare minimum of Sealing information.”

“Yeah, well, I had this crap drilled into my head when I was a kid.” Zabuza pushed off of the sofa to riffle around a chest of supplies.

Haku was mildly curious, “Drilled into your head…by whom?”

“My old badger of a grandmother.”

“Really?”

Annoyed, Zabuza glanced over his shoulder at Haku, “You really don’t know a damn thing about the Water Country, do you?”

Haku frowned, “What should I take that to mean—?”

“My old badger is, oh I don’t know, kind of a big fucking deal in these parts. Even more surprising is that she’s outlasted everyone else in my family and is still kicking. She just refuses to die.” Zabuza went back to fishing parchment, ink, and other materials from the chest, “Momochi Honesuki. She was a Sealing Corps Commissioner in Mist when I left, and then for a while I think she was the Director of the whole fucking operation…but I guess now…”

Haku filled in the blank and recalled their discussions of possible Akatsuki interference.

“I guess she’s been demoted, murdered, or she wipes the Akatsuki’s ass these days. I have no clue.” Zabuza presumed, “She liked to call me the biggest disappointment of her life.”

“You sound alike.”
“Maybe we are. Maybe it pays to be a ruthless motherfucker like her. My parents weren’t. They were soft...and they wound up dead.” The man observed. He brought an armful of supplies over to the table, “So yeah. Get educated. People in this land may know my name or at least my alias, but everyone everywhere knows my grandma is hot shit.”

Haku was intrigued and also disturbed.

“Get over here, Numbnuts. Bring that scroll.”

He moved to the table and set down the Yin Seal scroll, watching as Zabuza lifted and clacked ink containers on the table top.

“No good. We’ll need at least triple this. Since it requires multiple matrices then writing on dirt will be a pain in the ass, so we’re better off with stone or concrete. You’d need to pick the proper area to even start putting this thing together…”

Haku nodded and watched, impressed. Over the last few months, it had felt as though Zabuza had become incredibly unhelpful by withholding information about the Yuki clan, and also because of his volatile hostility levels, ‘But I can’t deny he still teaches me things routinely…”

They talked briefly about an ideal place to apply the seal, where they would attract the least attention or hassle. Hiroshi’s fenced-in courtyard seemed like the frontrunner of their options, but Haku digressed again with another question.

“Zabuza, could your grandmother help us learn if—”

“Don’t.” Zabuza stopped him, “Don’t even ask. We’re not on speaking terms and haven’t been since I first got good at assassinations.”

“But she might know-!”

“She resents me. I didn’t want to inherit her Sealing twaddle and all that shit; not the distinction, not the money, not their problems, or the nose-up bravado that commissioners use to justify how they stand on the backs and shoulders of everyone else in the village.” Zabuza shut the idea down, “She can strain and die on a toilet for all I care. In Mist, she signed off on bounties and warrants for me. Fuck her.”

Haku sighed heavily.

“Don’t fucking sigh at me. You’d hate her too if you met her.”

“I’m not so convinced that I would.”

“Oh, so you want to sass me and ask for my help with this sacred Leaf shit?” He snorted.

“More of the latter, honestly.”

“Fine. If sticking this thing on your forehead will make you less likely to die and more useful to me, sign me up.” Zabuza finished jotting down a list of items necessary for the project, “But shut your fucking face and go buy all the ink the old farts have in town. All of it.”

He swiveled Haku around by his shoulder, directing him out of that flat as he muttered, “That’s the last time I bring up the badger…”

On the way back to the Hidden Leaf Village after completing a mission, near the border of the Tea
Country, Hinata picked up medicinal herbs as she and Shino spotted them in the wilderness. It was a bonus task from Tsunade. Hinata’s salves could fetch a nice price in Kaido, which had increased its imports from Leaf following the Chunin Exam’s success.

When they lagged, Sato whistled for them to keep up.

At about that time, Hinata leaped in surprise when a green toad bounded over an ancient tree root in front of her. Though about the same size as Kosuke, this was a toad she was not familiar with.

“Leaf headband, very pretty, within the approximated area…” The toad went over a mental checklist, “You’re Hinata-hime, is that right?”

“Yes! Do you have something for me from Naruto-kun?” Hinata brightened in excitement.

“Nope.” The toad handed over a scroll to Hinata, “I’m Kinji by the way. Pleased to make your acquaintance, your loveliness.” When he extended his webbed hand, Hinata dubiously and graciously shook it, returning the sentiment.

Nearby, Shino and Sato had stopped on a nearby tree branch to watch the exchange.

“It looks like you’re a bit busy, so I’m just gonna head back to the valley.” Kinji observed, “You can send a reply with ‘lil Kosuke in Leaf, when you want to.”

“Um…thank you, Kinji-san.”

“Nah, just Kinji’s fine.” The toad waved it off, “See you around, Hinata-hime!” And as quickly as Kinji had arrived, he was off again in the forest.

Hinata stood there for a moment and wondered why anything had been delivered at all if Naruto was not the sender.

“Random!” Sato assessed, “Come on Sunshine, Shino. We’ve been pretty slow today and it’s another five hours to Leaf. Want to make camp tonight and set out in the morning?”

The team unanimously agreed to gather food and tinder to make camp. As afternoon waned and the starry dark of the deep forest crept in around them, the group huddled up in the evening around a campfire.

While Sato and Shino discussed why the squirrel meat they had caught, skinned, and cooked was the worst thing they had tasted in a while, Hinata sat and read her correspondence by firelight.

Dear Princess,

Hope you’ve been well! I bet you never expected to get any kind of communications from a coffin-dodger like me, but this is Jiraiya writing to you on Naruto’s behalf. I need to catch you up on a few things that happened. Based on my account and, thankfully, Naruto’s account of the events, let me try to sum it up for you.

Shortly after your last visit with Naruto by way of your teleconference jutsu (Tell me if you have named it yet, for I am ignorant) there was a training accident that occurred while Naruto was distracted. He gathered too much Natural Energy and petrified into stone. My colleagues and I here in the valley were pretty sure he was a goner.

Hinata gasped while she read, pressing on quickly. She ignored Sato’s concern over her squeal.
Through a series of unexpected circumstances and maybe divine intervention, Naruto’s life was spared and I can report that he is all flesh and no stone at this point in time. He was unconscious for two days, but woke up with no visible side effects or impairments after absorbing that amount of Natural Energy. With that said, my point is this: I want to respectfully ask you to refrain from “visiting” Naruto while he is training here on Mount Myoboku. The good news is that he’s on the verge of a breakthrough, but the bad news is that if he gets distracted and slips up again, I don’t know if he’ll be so lucky next time. Just for now, avoiding him will be to his benefit and can keep him safer. I know you’d want that for him too.

But to allay any of your concerns, please don’t hesitate to contact me if you have questions or need an update. I get it, he’s a lovable idiot and more importantly he is YOUR idiot. But soon he’ll be a Sage, so let that sink in. Anyway, let me know if you need anything and you’ll be hearing from us before you know it. Take care of yourself, and congratulations on your Exam performance! I hear that people are still talking about it.

Regards,

Jiraiya

She set down the scroll and took a chewy, unsatisfying bite of roasted squirrel.

“Is it gross?” Sato asked her.

“…a little. Just a little…gamey.”

“Sorry. Next time we’ll go with tubers, fish, and mushrooms like Shino suggested. Not the nearest squirrel in the nearest tree.” Sato resolved.

Shino asked her, “Is that correspondence from Naruto?”

“Um…no, actually.”

“No? But a toad delivered it.” Sato noted.

“It’s from Jiraiya-sama.” Hinata clarified, “He had some things to tell me.”

“Wow! I didn’t know that you’re with the in-crowd of Sages and stuff.” Sato remarked, letting Aree and Aroo finish his unwanted share of squirrel dinner, “Though isn’t he, like, pervy and girls should avoid him-? Or so I’ve heard Tsunade-sama say.”

“He’s always been good and respectful, to me at least. I trust Gama-sennin.”

“We all can.” Shino agreed.

“Well yeah, and my uncle is one of his biggest fans. Do you know how much money Kakashi spends on that book series per year?” Sato fuddled around to try to boil tea beside the campfire, “An obscene amount.”

Later, after winding down to sleep, Hinata lay awake and thought about Jiraiya’s request.

There was absolutely no way she wanted any kind of harm to befall Naruto. She certainly understood the sense in the request. But she felt like tossing and turning on her bedroll, uneasy and upset that something could happen regardless of whether or not she communicated with Naruto. It would be terrible to find out he had turned to stone and learn of it days later from Jiraiya!
‘No. He’ll be safe.’ But it had happened, it had already happened once, and how could she be sure it would not happen again? Hinata had never taken much time out of her schedule to sit and ponder what life would be like if, abruptly, Naruto could no longer be in hers. The visions in her mind were conjured up in sepia; bleak, arduous, but perhaps rimmed in silver lining that she had been fortunate enough to know and love him once.

‘I can’t get so worked up about this…I need to sleep…’ Hinata balled the edge of her blanket beneath her chin, fretting with her eyes shut.

Or.

Or she could continue to get the reassurance she needed by communicating with an alternative party. Hinata imagined that since it wasn’t so late at night, and because her jutsu would not disturb Sato and Shino as they were beginning to doze off, she ought to drop in on the Toad Sage himself.

By her estimations of brain-based global tracking, and overlapping with Naruto on Mount Myoboku, which was a bit further away geographically relative to her current position…Hinata did feel more resistance and tug on her chakra as she searched with the Misago Byakugan. Though it only took a few minutes before she was seeing out of a new set of eyes. Two large, age-roughened hands slammed down in shock on a low table’s top in Fukasaku and Shima’s house.

At about 10:30 that night, Jiraiya let go a bewildered, caribou-like bellow of surprise as he felt a very distinct, ghostly occupation. Though not quite. There was nothing ghostly about a very alive-and-well presence that chimed in greetings in his head, Good evening, Gama-sennin!

Jiraiya screamed again and fell backwards.

Shhh! Shhh! It’s alright—!

“Confound it all!” A rice paper door slid aside at the edge of the sitting room, “Are you acting out scenes from your book again, Jiraiya-boy?” A small, elderly toad accused, “Ma and I are trying to sleep. Do you intend to wake Naruto-boy as well—?”

“Shush, whoa, shush Pa!” Jiraiya hissed, splayed on his back on tatami mats, “I’m hearing voices.”

“I will burn that book and turn you out if you can’t be quiet!”

“Look, you’re the one who’s shouting now.” Jiraiya sat up and rubbed his head, “Give me a second, will ya? I think I might know what’s going on.”

Gama-sennin, I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to startle you! Kinji-san delivered your letter to me.

“Ohh—! Princess!” Jiraiya chuckled quietly, “You scared me into an early grave…phew.”

Fukasaku sniffed in annoyance and warned Jiraiya to keep it down, if he insisted on having single-participant conversations. He shut the door.

I’m sorry, I know it can be very jarring…

“It’s alright. I’m getting over it.” He straightened his tunic and scooched back towards the sitting room table, “You caught me in the middle of a brainstorm. I’ve been writing for the last few days, and I wanted to make sure that you knew what happened to the knucklehead.”

Is he really unharmed?
“Near as far as I can tell…” Jiraiya spoke softly and marked a journal page, closing it over a pen to keep his place, “I won’t lie. I’ve never been that scared. I’m not a man in the habit of crying either, but that sort of thing… I just can’t let it happen again. It was sudden. He was gone just like that.”

Hinata made a small sound of distress in his head.

“I’ll look after him, Princess.” He added thoughtfully, “Naruto came back with more knowledge, he said. Spouting all kinds of Nature mumbo-jumbo and the things he saw. Maybe this was a good thing?”

*Maybe.*

“Yeah. Maybe, maybe not.” Jiraiya agreed in a mutter, reaching for a tea pot, “He excels at testing the limits of my blood pressure.”

*Gama-sennin…*

“Yes, Princess?”

*I don’t want to lose him.*

“I know you don’t.”

*But I know there isn’t much… we can really do. None of us are made to last forever.*

“Not made to last! Heh.” He chuckled, “Certainly not this crude matter we parade around in.” Jiraiya soothed her, “But here in the valley we are taught… that death is an illusion. Life itself can’t be destroyed. It changes. It turns over and over into new forms and fibers of the universe.”

This ran contrary to what Hinata understood of universal balance, *But life must have an opposite-*?

“Yes.” He lifted a cup of tea and took a sip, “The absence of it, not the end of it. The negative of what we know- of what we experience. The azoic and insentient… Lots of space and inverses. There are all kinds of old Nihongo and Sindhi terms for it. It’s hard to explain this stuff… Sages deal in metaphors and will shrug at me and say: well, you’ll just need to see it for yourself so go meditate by that pond over there!” Jiraiya shook his head in amusement, “If we can’t last as ourselves as we know ourselves, maybe there’s comfort in knowing there’s more. Whatever that more is.”

*Yes.* Hinata had a more upbeat tone of agreement, *I can understand that feeling.*

“And you’ll never really lose him.” Jiraiya reminded her.

*If I did,* Hinata thought, *I would live well. Like Naruto-kun would want me to.*

“Good girl.” Jiraiya smiled to himself.

*I may drop in sometimes… just to know if everything is well.* She advised him, *I promise I won’t disturb him. I will wait. He’ll be home soon…*

“He will, he will…” He went on, “And Princess, really. It’ll be fine. You can check with me anytime. Well. Avoid 8AM and 5PM, that’s lavatory time. Other than that, I’ll keep my eyes on Naruto.”

*Thank you, Gama-sennin.*

“Say. Where are you right now?”
Oh! The Tea Country border. With my team on a mission.

“South of the Fire Country? Yikes, that’s a bit of a stretch for you isn’t it?”

It is…I don’t think I could ever reach much farther than this. When I do, everything goes black. Hinata recalled being knocked unconscious by a previous, long-distance effort, It takes quite a bit of chakra.

“Then kiddo, call it a night. Get some rest and do your best for Tsunade.” Jiraiya added, “Give her my best, and let’s keep Naruto’s sojourn in nature between the two of us.”

I will.

“Well then, goodnight and safe travels to you, Lady of the Hyuga. I’ve got some outlining to do.” Jiraiya yawned, “And not long to do it! I’m bushed.”

Good night, Gama-sennin.

Then, Jiraiya could tell with certainty that she had gone. He relaxed and returned to his journal, rubbing at his tired, craned neck.

‘That’s quite an odd power. Can do a world of good, though…’ The man thought to himself, ‘Naruto is blessed. May he stay blessed. And may the universe give me the means and strength to look after those two…and everyone who I refuse to lose this time.’

The quiet of the house was peaceful, edging into the later hours of the night.

“Oh! That was a delightful conversation.” Jiraiya noted out loud.

Mornings are for tea and contemplation at the Hyuga house.

But not this morning.

The sun rose and Neji heaved himself from bed in the dim light, dressed, and then crossed town to continue his search. Quite unlike Tsunade had promised, Tenten was nowhere to be found in the morning. Not in her home, not her workshop, and not at Lee’s residence, though Neji passed by to confirm it.

Her inexplicable absence made his imagination run wild. Neji surveyed corners and passageways of the village with the Byakugan in vain on his way back to the Hyuga estate.

Perhaps she was out, beyond the borders of the Leaf Village. On what business she had gone he could never guess, but Neji supposed that could be the case. He would be sure to make Tenten explain herself as soon as she reappeared.

Perhaps she had decided, in whatever state of mind she’d been in after her introduction to Hiashi, that she would rather not be his companion. Tenten herself had declared her appreciation of independence, and had been challenged by the etiquette of his clan. It was not so far outside the realm of possibility.

But call him presumptuous— Neji would insist that if she had dealt with his temper and bad choices over the last five years, Tenten was not likely to be dissuaded by one evening among the Hyuga’s Main House. He wanted to believe that she valued him enough to put up with the extra botheration.

Then the other, more nauseating, most unnerving thought came to mind. At least from the most basic
information he had gleaned from Gai and the Hokage, Neji understood that Huo’s post-exam interrogation and evaluations were to end with his chaperoned extradition back to Iwagakure. What if he had slipped away from supervisors? What if he had snuck with Shadow Step through the alleys of Konohagakure, since he’d had a month to study the city’s roads? What if he had been successful in his hunt and Tenten was now at his mercy, or worse?

“Neji-niisan!”

On the lawn of the estate, Neji stopped and noticed Hinata trotting in from the front gate. Very quickly she took stock of his appearance, unsure of why he had such pronounced under-eye discoloration and ruddiness.

“Good morning, Hinata-sama.” His voice was gravelly. He walked with her back to the house.

“Nii-san…”

“How was your mission?”

“Pleasant. A good stretch of the legs.” Hinata railroaded the description in favor of asking, “Um…is something the matter? You don’t look dressed for the meeting.”

“What meeting?” His memory was fuzzy, but as she spoke her next words, Neji immediately remembered.

“The full clan meeting. It begins in one hour.”

Neji palmed his face and groaned quietly. So. He would not be recruiting Fujita and others willing to join a search party to see if Huo and Tenten were locatable, or perhaps locked in a life or death duel. Clan obligations took precedence.

Once inside the house, Neji fed his cousin a few white lies: yes, he was fine. No, training could wait, his team would wait for him. Yes, fine. Tired, though, and that’s why he had forgotten the meeting. He would clean up and be presentable. Yes, he’d like to hear about her travels later.

They went separate ways in the corridor, and Neji mustered the gumption to wash his face, tie his hair acceptably, and determine that he was wearing a messy, day-old shirt before changing into something clean. His body was in the Hyuga house, but his mind and spirit had taken flight and were searching in all directions. He felt sick with worry.

In the tea room Neji barely ate. He sat at the table and tumbled through his thoughts. Hanabi flicked a piece of orange peel at his face from across the table, snapping him out of his trance-like state.

“Neji-niisan. If you don’t feel like eating I can throw things into your mouth.”

“No, Hanabi-sama—”

“You’ve been acting weird.” She deadpanned.

“I have no appetite.”

When Hinata entered the room, changed and cleaned up from her mission, Hanabi warned her sister, “Onee-san, he’s been acting weird for two days! Not talking or eating, wandering around!”

With a distressed look, Hinata took a seat beside Neji and processed that his “I’m fine” statements were probably false.
Neji gruffed at Hanabi, “I’ve had a lot of thinking to do. I have been asked to not share any major
decision of mine until after today’s meeting.”

“Oh?” Hanabi was cramming orange slices into her mouth, “Major decisions?”

Hinata gave him a sidelong look while picking at her own fruit plate, “Nii-san…what else?”

“What else?” He echoed.

“Something else happened. You look terrible. I could tell something was wrong.”

He was silent, twitching his nose. He could not get away with withholding information for long. Neji
elected to be honest, “I have no idea where Tenten is.”

Hanabi set her bowl down on the table, slowly and dramatically. She made a face at him, prying for
some kind of elaboration while also making her own assumptions.

Hinata was not yet panicked, “She doesn’t have a mission or-?”

“No activities that I know of. She is nowhere in the village that I’ve checked.”

Hinata pressed, “And she didn’t…?”

“No.” Neji added, “She didn’t tell me or Lee…that she would be gone.”

“You’re dumped.” Hanabi forecasted.

Neji continued frowning.

“You’ve been dumped.” Hanabi emphasized, “She was cool and I liked her. But when Tenten was
in this house she checked every room for an exit like she was ready to make a run for it.”

Hinata hissed and swiped at her trouble-making sibling, “Hanabi! You know that isn’t true!”

“No, I don’t know. All we know is that she’s not around, and Neji-niisan is freaking out.”

“Well…”

Hanabi tossed an orange at Neji and it struck him in the clavicle, falling with a dull thud to the table.

“Eat.” She commanded.

Hinata took another corrective swipe at Hanabi.

“You’ll live.” Hanabi encouraged Neji while ducking away from the corrections.

Neji finally spoke again, “After the meeting…I’m going to keep looking for her.”

“I’ll help!” Hinata immediately volunteered.

“Me too, I guess.” Hanabi supposed, starting on a plate of croquettes.

With that settled, and Neji too agitated to try to bring up their great grandfather’s machinations, he
took unenthusiastic bites of watermelon. He listened to Hinata’s recollection of her mission, and
grew interested when she mentioned a message from Jiraiya.

“Why would he write to you instead of Naruto?” Neji was keen to the change.
“Well…” Hinata wondered how to put it, “Naruto’s training has grown more serious. Gama-sennin hopes that a reduction in communication will distract him less.”

“I don’t see how the occasional letter is a distraction.” Neji gruffed, peeling an orange for himself.

“Depends on what’s in the letter…” Hanabi snarked.

Neji froze and stared in shock at the young girl. What a suggestion. Hinata was slack-jawed as well. After a moment, the two girls reached simultaneously for the fruit bowl in order to begin a tangerine and apple-throwing war. Annoyed, Neji barked at them to knock it off. Hanabi just cackled and wrestled the bowl from her sister, clocking her with an apple as Hinata blocked with her arms.

By some miracle, Kō opened the door of the room and interrupted them, “Eh-hem! My lord and ladies…Hiashi-sama asked that you get to the auditorium early. He expects the forum to be full today.”

“How early?” Hanabi wondered as she put the bowl down.

“Now.” Kō clarified, “This meeting may run long. There are many topics to discuss…” He eyed the mess on the table, “And I hope that you three will have at least settled your differences before you enter that room.”

He chuckled to himself and moved on, leaving the door of the tea room open.

They finished a few last bites before setting out, turning down long hallways towards the large tatami room that connected the Main and Branch houses. On the way, Neji gazed out of windows and watched fierce winds bend and rustle trees outside. It was the kind of overcast day with winds that heralded an approaching summer thunderstorm. The chaotic *plinking* of wind chimes hung above the outdoor engawa drove Neji mad.

He was supposed to be a genius. He was supposed to figure it all out. How had he come to feel so helpless, so clueless on how to approach these issues? What was the right thing to do? Where was Tenten? How was he supposed to explain to Hinata and Hanabi the duress he was under?

Neji took a deep breath through his nose and resigned to himself, no, maybe he wasn’t so smart. Maybe he was hurting too much to remember how he normally solved problems. Genius is an unfair standard, he thought, when all he wanted was to feel like a person; not the figure on the pedestal or the strongest piece on the chess board.

Maybe this was exactly what Haburo wanted. That he wanted to reduce Neji and make him so emotionally raw that countermeasures could not even come to mind. Neji wondered if he could have ever expected, as a younger man, that he would become so unreliable when his emotions and dreams were crushed.

At the meeting room, Neji followed Hanabi and Hinata to the front where Hiashi was already seated on a cushion on the right side of the room. Slightly beyond was an elevated section of wood flooring where elders would take their seats on zabuton cushions. Branch members filed into the room, chatting quietly amongst themselves, and on the left side opposite of Hiashi and his youngsters, Hikamei, Kayato, and Fujita settled down. The soft din of talk and catching up persisted until all of the Main House elders had arrived.

Hichida, who was the youngest serving member of the clan’s elders, raised his hands to signal the start of the meeting. He glanced over a list in hand, scanning his eyes over the crowd, “No need for role-call with such a full house…and I have nine absences marked for missions…”
“And two out for Intel Corps committee meetings.” Elder Hosuke added in a raspy voice.

“And two more, yes Hikomi and Hasedera…” Hichida marked his list and commented sidelong to his elder companions, “They’re qualified for promotions, no? They’ve been with the Corps for seven years and haven’t been elevated above analyst level. They work much too hard to not be recognized as advisors…”

“We can discuss that when they return, if they would like us to make recommendations.” Haburo offered. His eyes were drooping and he looked uninspired for the meeting.

After that, Haburo called the meeting to order and the agenda was adhered to. Everything was covered: birth announcements, achievements and awards, enrollment at the Academy, annual budget estimates and projects, replanting the back property with trees (that Neji had cut down accidentally with Wind Release), and recognizing the one year anniversary of Elder Hagumi’s death, the only serving female elder in recent years.

It was hard to digest the drivel. Some input from Branch members was much easier on the ears. Neji would have preferred jamming chopsticks in his eyes to gazing upon the line of elders ahead of him, so he stared catatonically at the floor. Near the back of the room, a baby started crying in her mother’s arms. The Branch member smoothly excused herself into the hallway to soothe the babe.

With so many human bodies crammed into one room in summer, it began to warm up uncomfortably as time passed. Neji trolled his eyes to the left, and noticed that Fujita was looking uncharacteristically alert. He seemed healthier and well-dressed. He was probably taking missions again, Neji assumed. He also noticed that beside Fujita, his mother Kayato was seated without her husband. Neji wondered why Hideyasu had not been marked absent at role-call, or if he was expected to arrive late.

Two-thirds of the way through news updates from the Taketori clan, corroborated by a few Branch members as elders Hayama and Hizen covered topics, the side door of the forum slid open. A servant shut it after Hideyasu entered, and the man greeted his elders wordlessly, but caught their attention with a hand gesture. Hichida nodded to him in acknowledgment.

Smiling, Hideyasu sat down beside his wife. Then Kayato started smiling too.

Neji had never seen anything half so strange at a clan meeting. He snuck a look at Hanabi and Hinata seated to his right, who seemed to pay the arrival and facial expressions no mind. They were bored to tears.

When Taketori news was concluded, Hideyasu made eye contact with Hichida and Hosuke, prompting Hichida to speak up, “We move on to acknowledge one final matter before taking questions and adjourning the meeting. Hideyasu-sama and Kayato-sama…” He gestured to the pair seated beside Fujita, “Have an announcement they would like to share with the clan.”

Hinata and Hanabi seemed to wake up a little. They paid closer attention to the clan steward and his family. Beside them, Neji was perplexed.

Hideyasu exchanged a glance with Kayato before turning to Branch members, “As you know, our eldest son died earlier this year…and nothing has been the same since.”

The thing of it was, Hideyasu and Kayato were very popular with the Branch. While most preferred keeping Hiashi at arm’s length, and many had warmed up to Neji and Hinata, Hideyasu commanded most of the Branch’s respect. So it was no surprise when a chorus of sympathy, remembrance, and kind words came back to Hideyasu and he gently tried to quiet down the chattering.
“But we have some good news we would like to share with everyone.” Hideyasu went on, “My wife and I just adopted a child.”

Sympathetic chattering converted into surprised, excited mutters. This was not something that happened; not any more often than a rare, once-in-a-blue-moon occurrence within the Branch, maybe every decade or so. But for it to occur in the Main House was unusual. Many were pleased that Hideyasu and Kayato, who were famously skilled parents, were willing to go at it again.

What Neji found stranger than the announcement itself was Elder Hosuke’s endorsement, “Yes, all of the Hyuga clan has grieved the loss of Hikune, our young lord. We elders can vouch that your parenting,” He was speaking directly to Hideyasu and Kayato, “Will make any child more secure and bring them prosperity. Not since my wife and I took our own oaths to raise two additional boys…there can be no safer haven for children than the Hyuga clan.”

Ah, so, Neji gathered Hosuke must have adopted too at some time in the past. He sort of tuned it out when Hosuke asked Hideyasu if the child had been brought home or was still in the care of a facility. Hideyasu mentioned that if everyone did not mind a few extra minutes in a hot room, he would be happy to introduce the new addition.

Haburo interjected, “That isn’t optional, Hideyasu. Your child is a member of the Main House and must set an example for all of the clan. If the adoptee is present, bring them before us now.”

“Right…” The man rose while Kayato and Fujita stayed seated, watching as he returned to the side door and poked his head out of it. He had a word with someone outside and the attending servant. He took a step back and let a very well-dressed girl enter, making a poised, one-foot-in-front-of-the-other walk to the front and center mats before the elders. Without any cue from Hideyasu as he took his seat again, the “child” sank into a highly formal bow and touched her head to the floor, thanking the elders for receiving her.

There are times when the human mind needs a few additional microseconds to catch up to what the eyes see. This was one of those times.

Neji’s vacant expression was steadfast as he watched the newcomer’s back, rising up to sit on her heels while dressed in white and red cheongsam. The braided buns were familiar, the hues of skin and hair, the approximate height, all familiar—but the statement made by crest of the Hyuga clan embroidered in a circle on the back of the young woman’s dress made no sense. At first.

As Tenten sat there, focusing her attention on Hosuke’s drivelings and greetings, Hinata reacted far more (though infinitesimally) than Neji did beside her at the edge of the room. She fidgeted and made a tiny sound, completely bewildered that Hideyasu and Kayato had not only adopted someone who was not an infant, but was also someone she knew incredibly well. Neji was just not processing it. Hanabi pinched his arm discreetly and he gave her his attention.

“Found her.” Hanabi muttered.

Neji did not have the capacity to reprimand Hanabi for the sarcasm. He retreated into his brain where a yes-no flow chart popped up to make step by step sense of what was going on.

Haburo set his eyes on Tenten and made some considerations. He did not question the legitimacy of Hideyasu’s choice or his motivations, but Haburo was not stupid enough to ignore how big of a loophole had been exploited in his mandate because of this occurrence. For the time being, he addressed the young woman with dignity, “Welcome. We elders of the Hyuga clan will recognize you as Hideyasu and Kayato’s daughter, and Fujita’s sister, henceforth.”
“Thank you…” Tenten had her ear trained on Hideyasu a few steps away, and he inaudibly fed her lines, “…Haburo-sama.” Hideyasu have her a tiny thumbs up, as she had used the correct name to address the elder.

Haburo turned to Hideyasu and the man seemed to remember himself, “Oh! Yes, Great Elder and everyone!-” Hideyasu addressed the clan as a whole, “This is Tenten, I meant to say. Please accept her and share our ways with her.”

That’s when all Branch members began buzzing at a higher volume. Many people recognized her, and some even knew that she had been a Semi-Finalist at the Exam and was Neji’s teammate. Questions and murmurs abounded.

“Tenten,” Haburo went on, “You shall represent our clan with distinction in everything you do. You shall bring your honorable parents pride and be loyal to the Hyuga clan. Respect our traditions and your elders.” When she nodded and agreed in a small voice, Haburo addressed all other clan members, “Let it be understood that this is a daughter of the Main House. Our Branch members will recognize her legitimacy and call on her as a Lady.” He then motioned dismissively with his hand, signaling Tenten to relocate beside Hideyasu in a free seat.

The elders welcomed her in unison. Only one elder raised a hand to wave frailly at the adopted girl, the 100-year-old, nearly deaf and age-brittle Elder Akataiyo. He was smiling warmly.

“I’ll add her to the roster.” Elder Hichida added as an afterthought, scribbling on his clipboard.

“And pass this update along to our absentee members.” Haburo advised Hichida, then to the clan, “For any questions—”

His voice was drowned out by a clamor as all Branch members stood from their seats and bustled to the front of the room. They paid their elders no mind as they circled ‘round Hideyasu’s family to inquire and congratulate.

With a sigh, Haburo adjourned the meeting and excused himself from the room. The other elders followed suit, evacuating on tired legs and knowing better than to get tangled in the crowd. Their personal introductions could wait.

Neji had come out of the other end of his brain flow chart, trying to answer his own questions. This was intentional. Hideyasu had actively tried to subvert Haburo’s mandate in an effort to give Neji a more suitable option. Haburo was probably aware that this was the scheme, and Neji dearly hoped he would not concoct a new method of retaliation to respond in kind. After overcoming a few seconds of panic about how this development could be thwarted regardless, Neji took a breath.

Kayato and Hideyasu, he realized, quite liked Tenten. The fact that they were willing to adopt her, for his benefit, probably had to do with the fact that they could all get along. Yet the craziest aspect of this conspiracy was Tenten herself, Neji thought as he sat in a stupor. She had not sought him out yesterday to bring any of this up, although now he guessed she had probably been busy preparing. Likewise, he had been unable to explain to her any of the recent events he needed to get off his chest. But why? He wondered why she had agreed to it. On such short notice, bowing her head for one of the most stringent, self-aggrandizing clans in Konohagakure; how had Tenten abided by this adoption knowing full well it would exact a tremendous toll on her?

Hanabi jabbed her elbow in his ribs. He sputtered angrily and rounded on the girl.

“Hello? We’ve been talking to you, Neji-niisan.” Hanabi indicated Hiashi and Hinata were watching him as well, “Dad asked if you are in shock.”
“Is that what this is called?” He blinked slowly.

“It could be. I apologize for not providing you with any warning, Neji.” Hiashi informed him, “But time constraints and your…frequent comings and goings from the house prevented me from bringing it up.”

“Father, why would Auntie and Uncle want to do something like this so suddenly?” Hinata was curious, “Tenten-neesan just had her introduction with us. Did something happen?”

“We can get into the details later.” Hiashi decided as he got to his feet, “When complications made Neji’s request difficult to fulfill, Hideyasu decided there was a more roundabout way to achieve the same result.” He excused himself to go have breakfast and tea.

Hanabi was only partly flummoxed, “I don’t get it, but whatever. Now she’s just going to have to deal with the same headaches we do.” She stood and extended a hand to Hinata, pulling her up, “Tenten will be busy in that swarm of Branch members for a while. Onee-san, come outside with me and let’s get some fresh air.”

While giving Neji a parting look of cautious optimism Hinata asked, “That wasn’t a bad surprise, was it?”

“I…ask me again when I take corporeal form.” Neji recommended.

Hinata patted his arm and then left with her sister.

Neji set aside his stupefaction in favor of rising and trying to covertly muscle in through a wall of Branch members. He gave up after seeing the rest of the clan patiently take turns to meet their newest member. He should wait his turn too. After all, Neji thought, he got to see Tenten on an everyday basis. Letting others get to know her was more important. Neji skirted around to the side of the room and watched the interactions.

Hizome had gotten first crack at congratulating her brother and sister-in-law’s adoption of Tenten. Hikamei stood nearby, silent and impassive, but Hizome closed in to clap Tenten’s cheeks in her hands.

“So now I have a niece!” Hizome crowed, “Very nice to meet you, young lady. I’m Hizome. Hideyasu is my big brother, and Hikamei there is my big sister. Oh and look here— this is my husband, Senju Masanari.” She passed Tenten down the line of people to say hello, “Our sons: Nyozeka, Hirokazu, and Tsukuru. Here’s our cousin Arisu, and over here we have Tokuma, Kei, Hisako, Hatora, Jun, Iroha, Hoheto and there’s Kō…”

The amount of handshaking and bowing was surely going to snap Tenten’s neck, though she pleasantly greeted each person. All seemed surprisingly amicable and interested in her, despite the Hyuga’s reputation stating otherwise. Kayato was bubbly and going on about how nice it was to have a daughter to design things for and talk about girly things with. Many Branch women robustly agreed with the sentiment. Fujita, after escaping Hideyasu’s mirthful introductions, was able to introduce Tenten to many of the children who had pressed forward to get a closer look at her. She was a sensation among curious clan members.

After nearly thirty minutes of salutations, the room was stifling and the crowd began to disperse. Tenten respectfully asked Kayato and Hideyasu to let her have a break outside on the porch. She retreated to the engawa to get a breath of fresh, cool air. The wind whipped her face as it propelled storm clouds overhead.
Tenten exhaled roughly and leaned against a wooden support beam. It was a gauntlet just surviving the welcome, but actually abiding by Hyuga clan standards? ‘I don’t know if I can do it with finesse, but I can give it the old college try…’

She shut her eyes and calmed down. It was only a little insane to agree to all of this. To react to everything she had been told in a single day, and take on such a challenge in so little time. But since everyone had been nice about it so far, that took the edge off. Tenten appreciated that.

Neji slid the door shut behind him when he stepped onto the engawa. Then he stood there and watched Tenten decompress until she noticed and acknowledged him, “Oh, hi Neji! I haven’t seen you in…I don’t know how long.”

He nodded.

“It’s a bit windy today.” Tenten sat down, dangling her legs off the porch’s ledge, “I…uh…” She looked at him and motioned him over, “Come sit down. I just need a few minutes.”

So he did. Neji closed the distance and took a seat beside her, coming to his senses finally. He stared out at the lawn and, ever so slowly, let the corners of his mouth tug into a smile. While he was restless over her absence and what decision he should make, Tenten had been at the estate the whole time. Right under his nose.

“This is quite the undertaking, you know.” Neji told her.

“I know.”

“Do you understand the implications of your fealty to the Hyuga clan?”

“Yup.” She confirmed, “I’m already getting bossed around. I got a spiel about being educated in other traditions…you know, which I’m so good at already. I have to learn about the Caged Bird Seal, since that’s some sick prerequisite for being a part of the Main House. I’ll need to keep up appearances and maintain good relations with other clans. Stuff like that.”

“There is much more than that.” Neji turned toward her, “You will be subject to intense scrutiny and other duties. You won’t be permitted to live outside of the estate.”

“Yeah, Kayato explained that me. I had no idea.” Tenten’s shoulders drooped, “Hideyasu said I could take my time to pack belongings at home…but I will have to live here.”

“You have to.” Neji did not sound like he was disappointed about it, “But you’ll live in relative luxury.”

“Well, that’s a trade-off, true.”

“You won’t need to bring much with you.”

“For sentimental value, there are some things I don’t want to leave behind.” Tenten disagreed, “So congrats, Neji, you’re hired to help me stuff things into boxes later.”

Neji did not object. He could distantly hear the wind chimes on the far side of the house swirling in the strong breeze.

“…it will be a burden.” Neji aired some of his concern, “On you. All of this will be difficult. I have no idea if I can even…defend you from what influences will try to act on you now.”
“You don’t have to.” Tenten smiled and poked his thigh, “I’m here to defend you. Hideyasu told me about the whole predicament. He said…you wanted to join the Branch Family. There were a lot of reasons why,” She tilted her head back and added, “But I didn’t want to be one of them.”

Staring at her in profile felt surreal, almost as if he was imagining all of it. He had been so caught up in trying to think his way out of a jam; Neji did not notice the rest of his family had been working on solutions to help. Of course they had approached Tenten for assistance. She would be more than willing to stick her neck out for him, even if it meant her routines, environment, and freedoms would be shaken up and turned inside out.

And the mon of the Hyuga on the back of her dress looked like it belonged there. Kayato had seen to that.

“You know what’s embarrassing?” Tenten lowered her voice, aware of how he had laid his hand over hers on the porch, “All of the paperwork. I mean, it was a tall, extensive stack. Signing all of that and then the legal name change…it was downright weird.”

He raised his eyebrows, “Name change?”

“Uh…is it technically a change if my files never included a surname?” She wasn’t sure.

Neji just looked at her as it sunk in that she had taken the Hyuga name.

“Also, Kayato told me not to be too chatty with some Branch members because gossip does spread around here, apparently. Hideyasu said that I can’t act too familiar with you either, at least for now. We can get approval to date, but he asked me to really sell it for your elders. I should act disinterested in you— like this isn’t some big conspiracy.”

His chest hurt a little. While she made remarks about how she had been advised, watching clouds roll darkly overhead, Neji felt a sharp pang of gratitude he had never before experienced.

He had been prepared to sacrifice something he had valued above all else, for so long, because she had surpassed that goal’s value. The fact that Tenten had sacrificed something for him first assured him that he had chosen correctly. Even if he took the rest of his life to thank her, it still wouldn’t feel like enough. Even if Haburo still desired to hurl obstacles at him, and Neji ended up in the Branch anyway for convenience’s sake or sheer insubordination, he would always be thankful for this day.

Tenten cleared her throat. Neji glanced back to her as she gently pushed on his shoulder.

“You’re a little too close. I was told that we’ll be watched for a while, or until I become commonplace around here.” She shimmed for some space, and drew her hand away from him, “Sell it, Neji. I know you’re probably feeling—”

“Happy.” He supplied a word.

“Huh…I was going to say antsy.” Tenten fought a smile, “How about…we talk to a few more people inside? Then, you can show me where my habitation is and where I can find the restrooms. Critical information. Later, we’ll pack up stuff at my flat while you explain what I’m in for.”

“And while off premises there will be no need for us to keep up appearances.” Neji reminded her.

She cheerily agreed, “Absolutely not. I have no intention of keeping my hands to myself while off-site.”

“Neither do I.”
Maintaining an arm’s length distance, they returned indoors as the first heavy drops of a summer storm struck the ground.

Chapter End Notes

You may have noticed the Anchorman (Ron Burgundy), Star Wars (Yoda), and Stranger Things (Jim Hopper) references in this chapter. That merits a double high-five!

Clan politics don’t get any easier, but it helps when someone is on your side. A track list for this fic is available on SoundCloud under tigerowl-sensei, see my profile page up top for a link.

I think we got a bit deeper than usual with the Buddhism concepts and very real human emotions that affect landmark decisions. Thanks for taking the ride, Reader

Chapter 42: Blondie Sage (subtitled: A Nine-Tailed Fox Introduces Himself)
Blondie Sage (A Nine-Tailed Fox Introduces Himself)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter Soundtrack: "Kumori Yozora" by Akeboshi

While Lee compared one framed team photo from two years ago, and another framed team photo from last year, he held them up to Tenten.

"Neither of these are worth packing." Lee insisted to her, "Neji did not smile in either shot."

"Lee, I've learned to take what I can get." Tenten plucked last year's photo from his hand and placed it in a cardboard box, "He's nothing if not consistent."

"Yes, consistent. Maybe this year he can be persuaded?" Lee wondered and then turned around to ask Neji as he examined two boxes Tenten had so far packed, "Neji, you ought to experience a much greater margin of happiness now that Tenten is a member of your clan. Smile in this year's photo!"

Neji gave him a slanted, *I-don't-think-so* frown.

"Merely a suggestion." Lee reminded him.

Tenten stopped picking the sitting-room keepsakes in her flat that she would take with her, and rounded on Neji as he began extracting things from the boxes she had organized, "Wha—what are you doing-?"

"You don't need these. You'll have cushions, bedding, and storage at the estate—"

"I'm not leaving that, my mom made it for me." Tenten nudged Neji aside, retrieved the pillow, and returned it to the box, "You don't need to make hyper-logical judgements right now, Neji. If it's too much when I unpack at my new *abode* then I'll remove superfluous stuff. But I want to keep some things of my parents.' Alright?"

He relented and sealed the container, motioning for Lee to hand over the packing tape.

Lee handed it off and then tapped his chin, "Tenten, you have not yet told me how you came to possess adoptive parents."

"It's not— I...ugh." She sighed and cupped her forehead in her palm, "I don't possess them, Lee. It's more like teamwork. I co-conspired after they explained to me everything that Neji was going through. It's not as if we had plenty of time for heart-to-hearts and bonding."

"But surely they will grow to care for you!"

"Ah...yeah, I hope so..."

"How were you contacted?" Neji wondered, "I couldn't find you anywhere."

"Well..." Tenten took a moment to recall the odd meeting from a day and a half before.

Tenten was both surprised and economically motivated after spotting a gaggle of ninja lined up outside of the Pailü Weapon Shop. Had there not been an assemblage of potential customers, she
would have stuck with her original plan to find Neji. He was absent from team training the day before—not that she found this unusual. She’d been rather occupied herself since business had ticked up after the conclusion of the Chunin Exam.

Tenten waved to the customers as she trotted up the sidewalk, and engaged in idle chit-chat as she unlocked, lit up the shop, and assisted them with shopping and questions. All had been served within 40 minutes, and after that the high of making sales and placing orders fizzled and took a nose dive.

She stomped around the place, updated a supply ordering journal, and then greeted a punctual delivery man at the rear of the building to sign for a shipment. Tenten and a Shadow Clone heaved the heavy box inside while the delivery man looked on worriedly. She shut the door on him before a polite ‘have a nice day’ could be said.

"Neji should’ve told me if he wasn't going to show up." She reasoned with her clone, "I mean, I know I've been busy too, but I went to that fancy dinner and impressed his family. I feel self-conscious when Neji doesn't come by to say 'everything's fine.' It makes it feel like everything is not fine, you know?"

"Of course I know." The clone agreed. It held the box steady as Tenten tore the wooden plank lid off with a crowbar. The yanking and beating of the box soothed her grumpy disposition.

"I feel awful today." Tenten noted.

The clone pointed her thumb over her shoulder to a wall calendar, and Tenten took a cursory glance at it.

"Oh. Plunging levels of optimism? Craving seaweed? Unusual irritability? Must be your period." Tenten told herself. She tossed the crowbar and it clanged in the periphery of shelving and tool drawers of the workspace. The Shadow Clone flinched.

Tenten picked at the synthetic packing materials of the box and then asked the clone, "Would you please unload these and make sure everything I ordered is accounted for?"

It had little other choice than to nod fearfully in agreement. While it unpacked the order, Tenten picked up a box of antique throwing darts in a "service required" queue, noting the attached message that the small blades were exclusively made for the Shimura clan, and more may be ordered at year’s end if she was available to reproduce them.

At the front of the store, Tenten took a seat at the counter and began to polish the darts one by one back to a pristine shine. She had already sharpened them yesterday. She set another Shadow Clone to work sweeping and reorganizing storefront shelves. Tenten worked on a particularly stubborn scuff in the metal of a dart when the work room’s clone showed up, reporting, "Look, there was a double-order and we weren't charged for it." It held up an extra package of leather and hilt-making materials.

"Wow, really? That's from the old man's shop in the Land of Rivers. I don't want to short him if he made a mistake." Tenten shooed the clone off, "Mark it down and we'll pay him for it."

The clone resumed work in the back room and the store's door chime sounded. Tenten turned to try to muster a pleasant greeting for the shoppers, even though she was a sore, temporary misanthrope. Except that she gave no greeting at all, because the two standing in the small showroom were not shoppers. Tenten blinked in bewilderment and stopped polishing darts with a fluffy cloth.

Hiashi had a grave look on his face as his eyes trolled back and forth over displays of merchandise.
Hideyasu had taken a few steps past the Hyuga clan head to greet Tenten at the counter, "Good morning, Tenten. Ah, is that a Shadow Clone?" He gestured to the clone dusting signage at the edge of the room.

"Yeah, wuh— um, just trying to keep things orderly…without employees." Tenten curled her lips inward, highly embarrassed. The place was a bit messier than what she'd want to present to any Hyuga clan associates who were not Neji. Also, it was a small, humble store and she felt like Hiashi was inspecting it a little too hard.

Trying not to feel judged, Tenten set the darts down in the storage box, getting a grip on herself, "I apologize. I didn't know that my place of business would be considered—"

"No, no, it's nothing like that." Hideyasu assured her, "Hiashi-sama and I need to talk to you about something wholly unrelated to weapon sales..." He glanced around, "Although the variety in this shop is staggering!"

"Oh, well, this isn't the place to talk. You might start to smell of turpentine and grinding dust…" Scuttling to stand, Tenten motioned to the men, "Would it be alright if…we spoke at my home? It's up the street. I can make tea—"

"Thank you." Hiashi said, "Please forgive this abrupt visit, Tenten."

Tenten assured them it was quite alright, and left her clones behind to clean up. She locked the door behind them and led the way, stiff-backed and uncertain, to the apartment complex up the road, through the vestibule, stairs, and third floor, feeling ashamed as she arrived at the door of her lowly flat. It was pathetic compared the place the men behind her called home.

With little commentary, Hiashi and Hideyasu followed her inside and took seats at the low table she directed them to. Tenten was harebrained while considering how to entertain high-profile guests, and nearly ran around to boil water for tea, and find any loose leaves that were not of overpowering Han flavor; but she wisely set a Shadow Clone about those tasks so she could sit at the table to speak to her visitors.

"This is quite nice." Hideyasu said in reference to her home, with a distinct friendliness that sort of made her relax.

Hiashi was not observing their surroundings. He was looking at Tenten as if her head was about to explode off of her shoulders. By detecting that alarming facial expression, Tenten assumed that the visit presaged bad news.

"I'll have tea ready in a few minutes. Can I ask…? What went wrong?" She directed the question at Hiashi.

Hideyasu sighed heavily and seemed to mope in his seat. Hiashi gave her the update, "We are beholden to the guidance of our clan’s elders...and our elders are directing Neji down a path that does not include you."

"Oh." Tenten could feel a wave of inflammation and cramping assail her body as the words were spoken. And she thought her period was the only bad aspect of this day.

"Hiashi, don't phrase it like that— our elders are shuffling all of us as they see fit." Hideyasu amended, "Quite frankly it's time we put our foot down. Feet down. Well, you understand what I mean."

"Uh." Said Tenten.
"We seek your help." Hiashi elaborated, "But what we would ask you to do is not a foolproof solution, and it will also demand much of your time and effort."

"To help Neji?"

"Yes," Hiashi went on, "Our grandfather, our Elder Haburo, has advised Neji to seek companionship only from eligible Main House members of our clan. That would mean either of my daughters."

"Or my sister." Hideyasu added.

Tenten laid her palms flat on her knees, seated cross-legged on a cushion, "Wow. Is this in response to my introduction?"

"Not exactly. Our grandfather enjoys making demands of us at every meeting we attend, and the subject of the day happened to be his great grandchildren." Hideyasu clarified, "We all have low rates of approval with him."

"I did not discuss Neji's interest in you at all." Hiashi told her, "Which could be to our advantage."

Tenten was listening astutely as her clone set cups and a pot of tea on the table. She poured for her guests as Hiashi went on, "Neji may choose from the Main Family or he may join the Branch Family if he seeks more freedom of choice. As it so happens, we are aware that he intends to join the Branch."

She set tea down in front of the men, "No wonder he didn't speak to me yesterday. I would staunchly disagree with the decision," Tenten raised her eyes to Hiashi, who seemed perturbed, so she went on, "And not because I would begrudge Neji his choices or happiness! His compassion for the Branch means he would have a good life among them, I know it. But I want him to...one day be someone future leaders of his clan look up to. Give guidance that won't hurt his clansmen, but raise them up. I don't want him to give up on that. Not for anything."

Hideyasu shut his eyes and tried to disguise his smile by sipping tea.

"If you feel that way, perhaps it is best you join our scheme." Hiashi took two consecutive gulps of tea, "A relatively harmless one."

"Soundly legal." Hideyasu echoed.

"Scheme is not a term that goes hand in hand with 'legal,' but I will certainly hear you out." She agreed.

"You told me you have been parentless for six years. I also understand that Kayato and Fujita are fond of you," Hiashi brought her up to speed, "To that end, Hideyasu suggested that he adopt you to give you legal status in the Main House, which would allow Neji to choose you under those circumstances."

"Of course we can't rush any arrangements between the two of you, or risk arousing the suspicion of our elders. You see, you would have to convincingly uphold traditions as our daughter. Beginning a courtship with Neji would have to wait a bit longer." Hideyasu talked with explanatory hand gestures, "Kayato thought it was a good idea. She already stopped by the law offices with me for paperwork." He tapped a manila folder on the table top for Tenten to see, "She was eager to sign these so I let her. Fujita is aware too, of course. There are no hard feelings if you're not up for it."

"I...I..." She slid her thumbs along the circumference of her tea cup, astonished.
"It would not guarantee anything," Hiashi warned her, "It would only make you eligible."

"Right."

"But also, consider that this wouldn't be a strict formality—not pure, paper contract stuff. My wife and I would teach you everything we know, if you'd like to learn." Hideyasu tried to soften the hard edges of the offer, "There are advantages to living with the Hyuga clan, no doubt about it! Though... you would also have to give certain things up. There are always trade-offs."

"And if our Elders are overly critical of this arrangement, which they may or may not be...we may all face retribution at a later time." Hiashi also tried to steer clear of the consequences, adding, "But it is legal and can certainly work as a deterrent. You have my word that you and your interests would be shielded to the extent of what law and my influence can allow."

Tenten nodded dizzily, "I understand."

"My, this tea is so unlike what I drink at home. It's different in a good way." Hideyasu noted out loud, "If you are in agreement, Tenten, please bring some of those tea leaves with you. I want Kayato to try this."

"Sure. Yes, I agree. It's called Biluochun." She was snapping out of her thoughts and into reality, "Do we...so what do we do now?"

"Paperwork, and acquiring the appropriate witness." Hiashi informed her.

"After tea we can get a notarization. Then Kayato will help us set up a few things..." Hideyasu checked with her again, "And are you sure about this, young lady? Your integration won't be easy. I can't promise that elders will be fair to you once you join our house."

"Aside from being able to give Neji a modicum of choice..." Tenten wore a far-off look, "It would be nice to have a family again...after being alone for so long."

Even Hiashi was visibly touched by the sentiment, and Hideyasu pursed his lips as he listened to the admission.

Before she could really make sense of the fact that this was happening, and that they had finished their tea and were crossing town as inconspicuously as possible...Tenten was blinking rapidly and taking noisy breaths through her nostrils when they arrived at the administrative building. So much for thinking it over. There was no time for careful consideration. No time to preserve her identity or privacy, or even check in with Neji to tell him to cool it and not make rash decisions. Because she was kind of making a rash decision herself. At least, Tenten thought, the consequences of her choice were not as severe as what Neji could potentially deal with.

At the Legal Bureau of the building, second floor, Hiashi sat down and scared the daylights out of the attorney at the desk who dared question why the Hyuga clan was adopting anyone. Hiashi's glare shut the thin, suited man up. Hideyasu was nicer. He explained that he had already begun preliminary paperwork, he adored kids, Tenten was an orphan, and that he and Tenten got along swimmingly.

"So here we are." Hideyasu concluded.

The attorney did not question it further, though he certainly wanted to. Hiashi's eyes were on him.

"Ah, look, the green 'sign here' stickers are yours, and the yellow stickers are mine." Hideyasu flipped pages, glancing over document sections he had already read, and adding his signature to
Hiashi was telling the attorney about some additional agreements from the Hyuga clan that were added to the office's adoption forms. That paperwork would protect Tenten's assets, examine and secure her records, and provide the Hyuga's legal defense team to represent her and things of that nature. When the attorney said it would take his interns about a week to review and process those additional documents, Hiashi corrected him, "It will take them an hour."

"But sir, please try to understand we've been working on several cases—"

"I understand that your office's preoccupation with trivial lawsuits, drafts, and advising are not as urgent as this matter the Hyuga clan needs fulfilled." Hiashi spoke over him, ignoring Tenten's look of concern from her seat on Hideyasu's opposite side. "Unless you would like a representative of mine to go over it with you?" By representative he was indicating Hyuga Arisu, who was not a very friendly lawyer-nin and took on projects with Maito Ken from time to time. So this particular office was already well aware it did not want to tango with her unless absolutely necessary.

The man at the desk reached with a few fingers and pulled back the folder to examine the documents, "...an hour."

"Ah, there," Hideyasu traded his pen to Tenten, "Your turn, young lady."

"Um. Your clan has...a legal team?" She began to slowly add her given name to blank spaces.

"It has everything." Hideyasu informed her, "Our diversity of skills comes from making good matches and arrangements with other clans and interests. Our legal representatives are sagacious and among the best in the village."

"Though they are predisposed to have hawkish interpretations of Law." Hiashi added.

"Arisu charges quite a lot per hour, for those outside of the Hyuga." Hideyasu noted, unwrapping a hard candy from a bowl on the attorney's desk, "But clan members get a much better rate. Sometimes even her pro bono hours."

"Did she write any of the-?"

"Let's not implicate her in this." Hiashi recommended.

"Hm." Tenten continued signing, thinking it over, "Kayato has...a successful apparel business. And other members of the Hyuga clan...have trades and skills?"

"Yes, of course."

"Would my business...benefit from Hyuga contacts?" Tenten wondered.

"I had a few vendors in mind who would like to partner with you." Hideyasu assured her.

She smiled a little and started signing faster.

Hiashi advised, "Let's not get too far ahead of ourselves. There are still obstacles we must be ready for."

When Tenten concluded signing, she turned to Hideyasu and accepted the candy he handed to her, "I feel like I should shake your hand, like this is some kind of deal."

"You can if you want to." Hideyasu told her.
When they tried to shake, Hiashi got annoyed and disrupted it, "Children and their parents do not shake like business partners."

"Hiashi, as you are not an immediate member of my family, don't claim to know about my family's handshakes. Fujita and I still have a secret shake from when he was young." Hideyasu chuckled playfully. Hiashi may have rolled his eyes, but he was turned away from Tenten so she couldn't see it.

When they rose and gathered paperwork that the coerced, suited attorney was not reviewing, Tenten followed the men to the third floor and realized, by the heavens, she and Hideyasu probably had the same sense of humor. She could not yet confirm it, but she suspected it. Time would tell.

She was somewhat surprised and also not surprised when they knocked on the door of the Hokage's office. A shout sounded, "Did I summon you for a briefing? If not, get lost."

Hideyasu exchanged frazzled looks with his companions and called back through the door, "My lady, it's a rather important—"

"Don't make me repeat myself. No frivolous requests. I'm having a bad morning. Come back tomorrow."

"Hyuga Hiashi wishes to speak with you." Hiashi said.

After a pause, "Fine."

Hideyasu led the group inside and they noticed the aftermath of what looked like a tall stack of correspondence had toppled off of the Hokage's desk. It was scattered all over the floor like a papery throw rug. The office window behind Tsunade and to the left was broken, as if a projectile had crashed through it. On the far side of the room, a softball sat guiltily in the corner. Tsunade had pressed a healing hand to the back of her head.

"Some sporting idiot made an inadvertent attempt on my life." She grumbled to them, "What's this about?"

Tsunade stopped and did a double-take at those assembled, repeating, "What is this about? Who died?"

"No one died, Hokage-sama." Tenten was half concerned, "Are you alright? Is Shizune-san—?"

"No, no, I sent her to apprehend the idiot with the bat outside." Recuperated, Tsunade laid her hands on her desk and laced them, "Naturally I have to ask what you are doing with the Head and Steward of the Hyuga clan, Tenten."

"Paperwork." She said truthfully.

"Huh." Tsunade poched her lips and regarded them, pointing to the scattered correspondence, "Tenten, be a dear and pick all of that up for me, will you? Hiashi." Her tone grew sterner, "What sort of paperwork is she talking about?"

"I would like you to be a witness to Hideyasu's adoption of this young woman." Hiashi clarified it for her.

The Hokage leveled her gaze on Hideyasu, who was trying to crunch the last of his hard candy in his teeth. Eventually he stopped chewing since he'd been put on the spot, "It's true, my lady. Kayato and I agreed to adopt Tenten. Because the Hyuga clan will need a credible witness to approve of it,
Hiashi and I felt that we would need the oversight of the most credible witness in Hidden Leaf."

"That's comical." Tsunade said dryly, "I'm seeing double right now and you want me to witness something such as this."

"Our elders don't need to know that you had a head injury at the time of this notarization." Hiashi assured her.

"I suppose they don't." She ushered them towards her desk, holding her hand out for the documents. Tenten watched from where she was crouched on the floor, scooping up leaflets and letters.

"I would like to point out the elephant in the room." Tsunade added drolly as she carefully flipped pages, "That Hyuga Neji is, to my knowledge, extremely attached to this young woman. You two are not unaware of this?" She asked Hiashi and Hideyasu.

"We are well aware."

"Why complicate the matter by bringing her into your clan?" The Hokage asked, her eyes pointed downward as she read.

"It will actually simplify the matter." Hiashi replied, "Neji has been subjected to a mandate that restricts him from looking outside of the Hyuga clan for a companion."

Tsunade froze, "Oh. " The realization of what was going on became evident by her morphing facial expressions, "Oh, oh, oh ...I see. So you two, of the Main House, are exercising what control you can to negate this circumstance. And Tenten, are you sound of mind in agreeing to this?" She asked the kunoichi who had stood and set papers on her desk, "You will be subject to their venom when you are legally bound to their clan. Elders never like to be made fools of."

"I know what I'm agreeing to." Tenten said, even though she really meant she understood about thirty percent of what she was agreeing to.

"This reeks of conspiracy." Tsunade turned to the last page of the packet and fished around her drawer for an official seal, "And I'm none too fond of putting my hand on the chopping block for signing anything that could cause your elders to call council...and take issue with this adoption or its motivations in a village forum." She gave a sharp look to Hiashi, "Yet you are confident enough to endorse this, Hiashi?"

"No harm will come to anyone here." He said with certainty, "Not so long as we can argue that this is in compliance with rules the Hyuga clan has set, and we abide by those rules."

"Then you had better be able to argue it." She warned, "Very well, I press this stamp and it's done. Then you navigate the legal minutiae and do it wisely. Though, if I'm going to take on a small degree of risk in doing this then I want some incentives."

Hideyasu plopped 15 Ryo on the Hokage's desk, "The bureau downstairs said that is the fee for the Hokage's notarization—"

Harried, Tsunade flicked the paper notes aside, "Don't listen to the bureau, the bureau makes up prices because it has to! I don't want you to buy me a soft drink with those notes, not for my troubles — you had better remember the Hyuga clan owes me a favor when I next call on them."

"We will remember." Hiashi gave the concession.

"Also, any parties like the one you hosted after the Tournament, I am always welcome to join."
"You were never unwelcome." Hideyasu pointed out.

"If that is so then kindly give me a head's up." Tsunade demanded.

Hideyasu felt that was fair.

"And if there is a wedding and it's a big elaborate affair I am also invited." Tsunade added, "Because I am setting this up I refuse to be excluded."

Tenten stood there feeling supremely awkward in response to how the Hokage was nosily investing herself in the possible outcomes. She had always admired and respected Tsunade, looking to her as an example of how to comport herself as a shinobi. When Tsunade looked at her she saw the means to live vicariously and decadently through Tenten's life and career. What an odd reciprocal.

The Hokage pressed her seal down on the page and dated it. With that done, she nonchalantly extended the papers to Hideyasu and he gratefully accepted them.

"If anyone ends up dead or calamity ensues because of this adoption and its ripple effects," Tsunade cautioned them, "I will be putting the three of you in jail first."

"And that," Tenten concluded for Lee, "Is how I got a new set of parents."

"A fascinating tale." Lee nodded.

Neji was digesting the retelling of Tenten's experience, opening a new cardboard box to be filled, "I still don't understand why none of my relatives told me they were planning this."

"Because we were concerned that you would think it was crazy and tell us not to." Tenten explained, "And if you were aware of it, it wouldn't look like a genuine, independent decision at the clan meeting, remember? Your expression that morning was—" Tenten imitated the look of surprise she had seen on Neji's face, "You obviously had nothing to do with it. That would clear you with the elders."

He conceded, "I suppose it would."

"Oh, Tenten, you said the Hokage had been hit in the head by a softball before she notarized the contract." Lee quoted part of her story, "Do you think she will remember what she agreed to, or is she still suffering from a head injury?"

"I certainly hope she remembers." She took the box Neji handed her, "Or our next mission assignment is going to look really weird when she sees my profile's updates…"

Tsunade had no such trouble with her memory or higher functions that day. She was an adept healer, after all. Her head was in perfect working order.

Maybe she should have questioned Tama's decision to keep her surgery election secret from everyone except her mother and sensei, but she went ahead and assigned Sato's team a mission anyway, sending him off without a word on the matter. Tsunade expected he would have said his farewells to Tama before the mission, and that contact would have sufficed for her.

It was a bit of an odd assignment though, sending Sato and Shino off with Sai as a substitute. Hinata had been tending to a clan obligation, and Tsunade figured that since the hiring client was investigating fraud at an art auction, maybe Sai would be a valuable addition? 'Or he'll be a social..."
hindrance.' The Hokage admitted to herself. Sato and Shino would just have to deal with it. Sai was on temporary leave from ANBU to learn how to integrate more with 'the public' of the village. Tenzo had reported his need for improvement in this respect.

Later that morning, Tsunade steeled her nerves and joined a few experienced medic-nin in the OR to perform Tama's procedure. By early afternoon, surgery wrapped and Tsunade was rather pleased with herself that the kunoichi's extensive injury was, for the most part, reversed. She had not died on the table as Tsunade had imagined in an anxious daydream, perhaps because Tama and her ilk preferred dying on missions and not in hospitals.

At that point in the day, both Sakura and Hinata were available for post-op assistance, and Tsunade directed them about tasks and checks that would ensure Tama's safety during recovery. Sakura was concerned that Tama was taking quite a while to wake up from the fog of anesthesia, but Tsunade waved it off as her teammate was wheeled into the recovery room. "Be attentive, watch her vitals." The Hokage recommended, "And don't imagine things are going wrong when they aren't."

While Sakura took a few notes and glanced at the bedside monitor, Hinata stared out of the room's window while in thought. Tsunade watched the girl space out and cleared her throat, catching her attention.

"Hinata, you've been quite occupied with your clan lately. There's no need for you to oversee anything else." Tsunade recommended, "Go home. Relax for now. Your team should be back in two days, and Sakura can look after Tama."

"But Hokage-sama—"

"That's enough for today." The Hokage repeated, strolling out of the room. She had to inform Kakashi and Miako that Tama was doing well.

Sakura gave a shrewd look to her friend when they had some privacy, "Hinata…I've heard a rumor things got crazy in your clan?"

"Oh it's not a rumor, it's true." Hinata sighed and sat down on an upholstered bench, "Tenten-nee-san was adopted by the steward of the Main House. Neji-niisan and I were shocked, but now I understand why it was arranged."

"That's just—that, how—?" Sakura flapped her arms at her sides, "You'd think something like that would be redundant when Neji can just, you know, get married to her? That's usually how it's done."

"It isn't that easy. Our great grandfather prohibited him from looking outside of our clan for a spouse." Hinata rested her chin on her hands, leaning on her knees in contemplation, "It made Oniisan so upset that he did not tell anyone about it."

Sakura shook her head, pulling an extra blanket over Tama, "Stone cold crazy. I don't know how I would have reacted to that either."

"Me neither," Hinata agreed, "Uncle Hideyasu is very kind and wanted to help, and Tenten agreed to do it. I think Neji-nee-san may feel some relief knowing that there is still a way…"

"I doubt that'll be easy either, but it's pretty interesting." Sakura admitted, "I can't wait to talk to Tenten about it later and get details for Ino…"

Hinata was staring at the wall again.

"Hinata?"
She blinked and gave Sakura her attention.

"Is everything okay? You've been a little... out of it, lately." Sakura pointed out, crossing the room to stand near her friend, "How is Naruto?"

"I..." Her voice wobbled, "I don't know."

"You don't know? You talk to him all of the time." Sakura raised her brows.

Hinata released the dam of concern she had held in for a total of 60 hours since she had returned from her last mission, "I was on a mission two and a half days ago and then when we finished our work in the Tea Country and made camp a toad—"

"Slow down—" Sakura braced her friend's shoulders as Hinata continued without drawing a breath.

"Brought be a message from Gama-sennin, and he said that Naruto-kun turned into a statue while he was meditating and I was scared, so I contacted Gama-sennin with Samanvaya and he said that Naruto-kun was fine but I shouldn't distract him so—"

Sakura had pressed a finger to Hinata's lips, "Easy there. I got all of that. But try to breathe, okay?"

Hinata nodded and Sakura withdrew her hand, "Phew. I'm sorry Sakura-chan. I just can't believe it. I don't want to distract Naruto-kun and endanger him during Sage Training... but I want to know how he is doing."

"Well, I bet you can ask Gama-sennin with... uh... what's it called?"

"I spoke to Gama-sennin the other day, he said I could... He suggested we call my technique Samanvaya because I can synchronize to overlap body and mind." She tapped her fingers on her knees, "He said it's a concept from Sage teachings."

"Cool." Sakura rested her hands on her hips, "I'll remember that. Have you ever tried to use different jutsu with your Misago Byakugan?"

"I get nervous. I'm afraid of what might happen." Hinata wilted, "But maybe sometime I should try."

"Sometime, but not today." Sakura recommended, helping her friend to her feet, "Why don't you get some rest for now? I'm going to monitor Tama until Tsunade-sama assigns me something else."

"Alright..."

"If you're free in the morning we can meet up and do something! Before our mission assignments."

Hinata liked the sound of that. She left the hospital and returned home, feeling a bit glum that Neji and Hanabi were out for the day, for training and schooling, respectively. 'Neji-niisan said he was going to help Tenten start packing her belongings too... Hinata recalled. She was not inclined to garden at home since the ground was still muddy and oversaturated from a recent thunderstorm.

At the Hyuga estate, she tried not to think about Naruto and kept herself heavily occupied. She slipped through Jyukken forms in the quiet pebble courtyard. Later, after socializing with a few Branch members, Fujita noticed her from a window and called her inside, "Oh, Hinata-sama, would you mind helping my mother and I with something?"

She followed him indoors, "You don't have a mission, Fujita?"

"Not today. Mom and I are trying to get things organized for Tenten." He restrained a childish smile,
"There isn't any space for her on the second level of the house."

"No?" Hinata was curious about that. Most of the Main Family had their personal quarters upstairs, with the exception of a few Elders, Hiashi, and Neji on the first floor.

"Yeah, I mean, Mom and Dad didn't really think through where they were going to put a new kid. My big brother's room was left alone out of respect, plus we kind of use it like another kamidana." Fujita explained on the way down the first floor corridor, "So Mom is trying to fix another room that Elder Hichida said we could use."

They stopped at what was categorically a closet: 3.5 by 3.5 meters in dimension, windowless, and stuffed with filing cabinets and other office paraphernalia.

"Elder Hichida recommended this space?" Hinata murmured.

"Yeah. Mom moved most of the important paperwork and stuff to storage out back…but she wanted me to move the heavy cabinets." He turned to her with a sigh, "It won't be a very good room even when we empty it out."

"Onee-san won't mind it," Hinata supposed, "But I mind. This doesn't reflect the respect our elders should have for her. She is entitled to something comfortable."

"I know, and the tatami mats in here look like they were ruined a while ago…stains and breaks…"

Hinata huffed.

"We could…clear out Hikune-niisan's room. If Mom and Dad don't protest." Fujita suggested, "He would have totally be fine with it. He really liked Tenten-neesan."

Hinata made a point not to comment on the subject beyond recommending, "Let's not tamper with his room. I'll ask around."

So Fujita carefully moved what pieces he could into the hallway, and on the far side of the house Hinata politely asked elders Hayama and Hizen if there were any other spaces to accommodate their new addition.

The old men were somewhat apologetic, "Terribly sorry, dear. Hiashi-sama has more space than he really needs, he's said, and Hikune's room is unused, but we need to make do with what we have."

Hizen added, "It'd be difficult to move everyone around. The corner room on the second floor would be an option if you and your sister shared a room, but I don't think that's wise," Hinata thanked them and took a look around anyway.

She returned to Fujita and determined that the closet was all there was. Fujita reminded her it was in fact a bedroom used by Elder Hagumi before she passed away. After her death it had been filled up with odds and ends. It took hours to move heavy objects and small pieces of furniture. Kayato returned to examine the tatami mats on the floor, frustrated with their terrible condition.

"Children, whenever there's an ink spill like this on your tatami mats, make sure you take the proper steps. Step one: lay down flour to absorb liquid, step two: vacuum," Kayato began pulling up the mat sections, "Step three: flip them over and see how the mats still look unsightly. Step four: give up. There's no salvaging anything this damaged."

"Mom, you might as well convert step four into step one." Fujita was amused.

"Might as well. Come here you two, help me throw these out."
Luckily the house was well updated, and the cedar wood floor beneath the mats was in acceptable
condition. An area rug would do the trick for the interim, since, as Kayato voiced her opinion on it,
"Tatami mats are my worst nightmare. I don't want to put any more in that room if we can avoid it.”
She wanted to clean up the space to pristine condition and let Tenten decide how to personalize it. It
would not need paint or drastic repairs. Kayato was aware that Tenten was a relatively low-
maintenance individual.

And they moved, cleaned, and rearranged things until the closet/bedroom was almost habitable.
Kayato was still not completely satisfied with it, but shooed the children along to prepare for dinner.
They would finish it another day.

When Hinata joined her father, sister, and Neji for an evening meal, she was mildly surprised that
Tenten had joined her adoptive family on the other side of the house to eat. Neji indicated that he and
Tenten made a point not to mingle while in the house. Until they had express permission to spend
time together, even Hiashi agreed that they maintain some distance. After dinner, Tenten would
likely return to her flat. It would be a few days until her space in the Main House was ready.

The notion stuck with her. All through dinner, cleaning up, and then doing needlework in her room
as night fell; Hinata sat wearily and thought how distance from Naruto was a good thing. It was
going to help him and prevent further accidents. She changed into her pajamas and tried not to sulk,
'I shouldn't bother Gama-sennin too much...and if I write a letter to Naruto, I don't want all of these
feelings cluttering the page.' She flopped on her side on the bed, her knitting project dangling from
her hand.

Something like this should be easy. It was straightforward and logical to not jeopardize the man she
cared about, certainly not after he'd had a close call already. Missing him was not reason enough to
reach out, no matter how intensely the tightness in her ribcage and throat felt. No matter how much
she envied Neji being near his treasured one regularly, or when her kunoichi friends discussed dates
and experiences so casually. She had waited for so long, and it felt unnatural to stay away from
Naruto.

Hinata turned over and snapped her lamp off, morosely pulling her blanket over her head. 'I am. I'm
so jealous of all of them. I almost don't care how hard Naruto is training, or what he needs to do. I
just want him home.' She curled up in a ball, 'I've worked hard and I've been patient. Maybe I
shouldn't feel so entitled, but I don't want to stay away.'

Well. Hinata considered another angle. Jiraiya had not wanted her to divert Naruto's attention away
from his studies, but what if she didn't engage? What if she covertly stole the glimpse of Naruto she
wanted? He could not come to harm if he wasn't aware she had dropped in.

Rational thought suffered a little as the clock ticked ever closer to midnight. Hinata laid awake with
her eyes shut, debating with herself if there was an ethics breach in going against what Jiraiya had
specifically asked her not to do...because she thought it was possible to circumvent risk. But she felt
tired and impatient, so Hinata reached with her Kekkei Genkai and cautiously tapped into Naruto's
mind in the Toad Valley.

As luck would have it, all was dark and still while he slept. Short of jarring him awake, Naruto
would be none the wiser about her presence. 'There. I shouldn't be disappointed. He's safe and
comfortable.'

By the feel of it, Naruto was spread-eagle on his futon and mashing a pillow to the side of his face
while asleep. Hinata resisted the need to giggle.

Then, an unusual feeling made her less aware of Naruto's external senses, and she turned inward
curiously. The lone *plop* of a droplet of water somewhere had caught her attention. Such was not a typical feature in a person's mind or body, Hinata wagered. In the dark of thought and internal sense, she wandered a little.

Away from physical sight and senses, it was bewildering to detect the mental terrain—a narrow corridor, so dim, and its floor flooded with a thin sheet of water. A path less traveled in the mind delivered her to the end of the narrow space, and it opened into a wide, yawning cavern, torches lit by human spirit, barely warding off the dark. When she stepped, ripples raced over the watery floor's surface.

'I'm still with Naruto, I think.' She wondered to herself, 'I don't know if this is a dream. Can I visit a dream?'

She surveyed the unusual surroundings and judged that it was some part of the unconscious mind. It was curiously well-defined and structured. Not like her colorful, surrealist dreams that siphoned abstracts from her imagination.

Hinata stood still and looked down at her feet, watching as a ripple of water rolled *toward* her. '…I didn't do that.' She looked ahead, squinting in the dimness, treading closer to the end of the atrium that arranged its features into the gigantic, towering bars of a cage. Within the prison it was dark and unknowable, but she peered interestedly at it anyway.

Then a sound came. A deep, reverberating voice. 

**Hmf.** It said, **Little snoop.**

The words stopped her in her tracks. It was completely unlike Naruto's voice. Hinata was certain that by using the Misago Byakugan's *Samanvaya* she could not have mistaken her target, but intuition screamed at her, alarm bells blared that this consciousness speaking to her was not Naruto's. She glanced around, alone in the dim, watery space, and tried to work up the courage to move. A rush of fear rattled her. She was being watched.

Hinata spoke in a whisper, "Naruto…?"

Silence endured. Mustering the nerve, she proceeded toward the bars. As she drew closer, a presence within the dark of the prison became more noticeable. Though she couldn't see it, there was a volume that displaced everything around it. It exerted pressure on the environment. She could hear slow breaths being sucked past the teeth of what waited behind the bars.

"I am…looking for Naruto." She kept her distance and tried to steady her quaking knees.

There was no answer.

"I didn't make a mistake. I know I'm with him." Hinata clasped her hands, "Is this a place only my technique can find? Who is talking? Is-?"

**Hush.** The voice gruffed, *You are not so unique. Others could find their way here if they have enough insight. This construct is only a seal. It isn't a physical place.*

She was stunned and lost her voice. She was awake. It was real. Something was talking to her. Something self-aware and not a figment of her imagination could speak out from the dark.

Hinata heard a rumbling, throaty sound as the caged occupant took stock of her, **Hm.**

She back-pedaled a few steps, considering it was best to make a hasty exit. The trouble with using
jutsu through the Misago Byakugan, she had known for a while, was how little she understood of the boundaries she tested. It was always difficult to tell if she was in imminent peril or not. ‘But then, if Naruto is here in a place like this…or if this is a seal…’ She wondered to herself, ‘Is he unsafe?’ And that thought stopped her. She did not try to flee with a shriek, or scurry quietely back the way she came.

**Daughter of the Hyuga.** The voice recognized her, **Don't you find this cozy?**

"…w-where is this place?"

**This is Naruto's subconscious.**

Hinata muffled a small gasp. She had arrived as intended, even if this was not what she expected. She was calming down a little, edging closer to the bars and the massive presence.

"…I'm Hinata."

**I know who you are.**

"Because…Naruto knows who I am?"

**Hmm.** An annoyed grunt.

Within arm's reach of the bars, Hinata stopped and asked, "Who are you? Why are you with Naruto?"

The introduction sounded like a low roll of thunder, **I am Kurama. I've always been with Naruto. And before that, Kushina. And before that, Mito…**

She wasn't sure what to make of the statement.

**You are meddling in things you don't understand.** Kurama warned, shuffling around in his prison as if turning away from her, **Now go.**

"But I want to understand. I don't know what my jutsu can do yet, this hasn't happened before…"

In the dark, Kurama **harrumphed.**

"Are you a part of Naruto's imagination?"

Annoyed and distant, **No.**

"This seal looks like a prison."

He responded with a resigned growl of acknowledgment.

"Do you get lonely here?" Hinata asked.

After a beat of silence, Kurama muttered in the dark, **Why should that matter? I get out sometimes.**

"Have you ever spoken to—?"

Kurama interrupted to mock her, **You, small daughter of the Hyuga, don't you have better things to do? I know your sort. You slap the Caged Bird Seal on the heads of toddlers and create strife on councils.**
Astonished, she angrily rebuked the claim, "I don't! I would never do that!"

_Then what do you do?_

She had to navigate feelings of defensiveness and curiosity as the speaker, Kurama, could not make up his mind to send her away or provide an ice-breaker for conversation.

"I…um…well, I'm a shinobi."

_You and everyone else around here._ He sniffed, unimpressed.

"I was promoted recently, and my teammates are Chunin-level like me." She fiddled with her hair and added, "When we don't take missions together I like to garden or make salves. I've gotten good at knitting. I can cook too. I like to wear sweatshirts when it's cold out. I spend a lot of time with my family and friends…I don't ever try to hurt others or make life harder for them."

The growling presence had gone quiet, and Hinata took that to mean it was done with this exchange. When nearly a minute had gone by, she began to make her way back through the atrium towards the narrow path she had arrived on. She would go home and not think too much about the rude personality lurking in Naruto's subconscious.

The floor's water was jostled, and the heavy sound of the cage's occupant brushing the bars caught her attention, _Stop._

Hinata looked over her shoulder, wary.

_It does get lonely._ He admitted in a small voice, _I've gotten used to it._

She turned to face the prison and was moved by the truth in the specter's voice. Hinata trotted back, and then watched in mild alarm and fascination as what appeared to be a large claw reached through the space of the bars. It stopped harmlessly near her.

_No one really cares that I exist, or that I too want fresh air and light._

"There, there…" Hinata patted the gargantuan claw, not sure of what it was attached to.

_Why do I long for you so?_ Kurama wondered, _You feel like Father did…vast but small. Like there is peace._

"Oh. Peace is a good thing." She kept patting, "One of my favorite things."

_It is because you are like Moon Brother._

Hinata stopped for a moment and considered that maybe she understood more of this than she realized. If she took a wild guess— a shot in the dark— she might claim that her disjointed 'Reflection Buddy' could be this 'Moon Brother' that Kurama spoke of. Not that she could get absolute confirmation beyond the feeling in her gut.

"I think I know about that. My clan reveres the sun, but for some reason…I do look to the moon often."

Kurama asserted, _That is only natural. Half of your ancestors went there, to watch things from their bridges and gardens on the moon. The others, the Hyuga, they stayed behind to defend the lands under the sun._
"Oh!" She was intrigued and smiling, "You know quite a lot of history!"

*I'm old enough to know it.* An amused chuckle.

"You are called Kurama."

**Don't wear out the name. Or do. Hardly anyone uses it.**

Hinata made a few observations, "You remember things from long ago, and you must be…quite big."

*The word huge wouldn't offend me.*

"Are you a Tailed-Beast?" Hinata asked astutely, "My friend once told me about—"

*I don't want to discuss that.* He drew back into the dark, *Are you…? Maybe you are trying to trick me.*

"I don't know anything about you. I don't know why you are a part of Naruto." She reasoned, "But I would never hurt or trick anyone."

*Maybe.* Kurama conceded, *Maybe you can't harm me with those little hands. But you can leave us in the dark. Then I'd hate you. I'd find a way to hate you…*

With a protesting shake of her head, Hinata stood by her assertion, "I wouldn't do something like that!"

*I am always left behind. No one ever cared what I thought. And you're just here to look for Naruto…* Kurama growled, *Well? Naruto isn't here! How would it feel if he forgets about you? Or if he leaves you?* The agitated voice threatened, *What if I made him do it?*

She slammed the heel of her hand against a prison bar, distraught, unwilling to stand by and take abuse aimed straight at her insecurities, "Stop saying cruel things when I've done nothing to warrant them!"

Then, a huge, red eye opened directly in front of her, attached to a vaguely furry, ginger face in the dimness. Kurama warned her, *Don't hurt me. Don't make me upset. I can take everything away, just you wait and see.*

"I don't know what it is that you want." Hinata squeaked in frustration, "Do you want me to return here? To talk about things? Or should I never come back?"

After a long pause, the prisoner cooled off again, *You should return.*

"If that's what you want, then mind what you say." Hinata scolded, "If you feel hurt, you don't need to make others feel just as bad."

*If I don't do that, then you will come back.* Kurama reasoned, *I want to feel moonlight again.*

"Then I will. I have a mission tomorrow that will take a few days." She reached into the dark and patted fur that may have lined the underside of an enormous animal chin, "I can visit when I finish my mission. I'm not supposed to bother Naruto…but I can drop by at night."

*Doesn't it matter to you that I am not human?* The large eye rolled down to look at her, *Don't you
"I don't think you are." She said with a degree of certainty, "But I've not yet gotten to know you. I will tell you what I think once I have learned enough."

There was a great rumbling sigh from the dark, and Hinata rather amicably retreated. She returned down the flooded corridor from whence she came, drifting back into the dark, hazy fabric of the mind; Naruto's mind and her own.

And when the Samanvaya link expired, Hinata found she was still safely curled up in bed. She pulled her blanket taught around her frame, considering how she had learned that her ancestors had, long ago, made a choice between serving under the sun or the moon. She had also had a conversation with a being in Naruto's subconscious, and that being's mood turned on a dime, particularly prone to being jilted or ignored.

Maybe it was another personality. Maybe it was a complex figment of her imagination. Maybe it was a great chakra beast that had been sealed inside of Naruto. Hinata pressed her hands to her forehead, thinking back to Sakura's discovery in the Star Village. Her friend's findings seemed increasingly relevant, though Hinata still doubted the credibility and reality of what she thought she saw. If she had not imagined or dreamt it, then perhaps she had come across something she was not supposed to know?

Hinata rolled over and tucked her hands under her chin. It took a long time for her to fall asleep.

In the morning, Naruto followed Shima around the yard and helped clip laundry to drying lines. He munched on a mango and conversed with her.

"Does being married for so long get annoying after a while?" He wondered.

"Well, we don't pay much mind to anniversary dates anymore." Shima conceded, "I'd say it's about as annoying as it was when I first met Pa, as a young toad. Our quirks didn't change much over time."

She handed Naruto a corner of a sheet to hang while she stood on a stool, "Naruto-boy, the truth is that years seem to slip by. We've been busy and we try to have fun. There's no need to count days or years, and no need to count mistakes or fights." Shima tittered, "I still like him! I really do."

"Phew." Naruto said half to himself. He'd been thinking about these sorts of things.

"Pa and I make a point not to get angry at each other these days." Shima explained, "We know we can't last much longer in this world at our ages. We don't want to have regrets about how we treated each other."

"That's really nice, Ma." Naruto said with a mouthful of fruit.

They finished laundry and then set out down the mossy path toward the Toad Oil Pool. It was Shima's turn to supervise his training. On the way, she talked about becoming a young mother to a small girl toad, Hazumu, and how she and Fukasaku had handled their daughter's Sage Training long ago.

"It was different from how we trained Kinji. We treated her so delicately...always worrying about her...it wasted a lot of time when we distracted Hazumu with our safeguards." Shima remembered, "She would have done fine without the coddling. She completed her training."
"Hey, how come I haven't met her?"

"She died, Naruto-boy." Shima told him, "Hazumu was summoned to war long ago, to fight for shinobi we were contracted with."

"Oh." Stiff-backed, Naruto set his mango down on the grass and stopped at the yard entrance, "… I'm sorry, Ma."

"Don't be. Hazumu always fought bravely." Shima was not ruffled by the memory, "Pa and I only wish she survived long enough to meet Kinji." She hopped up the steps of the pool, "Come now, Naruto, let's get you patted down with oil."

He removed his shirt and proceeded with the routine. Naruto twiched his nose and watched Shima from the corner of his eye, taken aback by a new emotion. It was one thing to lose friends or parents, but imagining the pain of burying a child had never occurred to him. He took a seat on the stone step as Shima scooped Toad Oil over his shoulders.

"Ma?"

"Yes, Naruto-boy?"

"Is that part of the reason…why you don't count fights or mistakes?" He wondered, "Not to…dwell on regrets?"

"My daughter is part of the reason." Shima sighed softly, "In life, it's so easy to complain and struggle…and move so quickly that we forget to treasure what is most important to us." She rubbed his arms thoroughly, "But Naruto, I swear…days like today were her favorite days. A good breeze…and the hibiscus that bloomed outside of the house this week, did you see them? She always planted those flowers to attract hummingbirds. I think of Hazumu on summer days and feel…a little bit better."

"Hm." He smiled a little.

"So if I tell you that it's a 'Hazumu day,' you will understand." Shima chuckled, "Pa will be surprised that you know what it means."

"It is a nice day…"

After that, Naruto set to work. Maybe he should have felt a shred of trepidation while resuming the collection of Natural Energy that had petrified him days ago, 'But today I think I know my limits better than ever!' He felt great. The valley was a blinking disco-ball of energy, movement, and creation. Chakra of creatures great and small, of all ages and dispositions…Naruto could feel them with a new sense that was far more acute than the feeling of touch his skin knew.

For most of the morning, he toured the valley with that sense, carefully extracting Natural Energy, letting it swirl with his own chakra reserves. 'I could do this anywhere now. Huh, I remember that guy I dreamed about. He was meditating in the stone field…I bet I could too. I wonder if Ma and Pa knew him?" Naruto noticed he had left his no-mind state and was actively thinking to himself. He was also feeling strangely peppy.

"Naruto-boy!" Shima shrieked, hopping up from her seat in the grass.

He opened his eyes and blinked at her, only just noticing a flock of sparrows that were gathered peacefully on his head and shoulders. Shima bounded up the steps toward him, laughing merrily. She clapped Naruto's arm, "You've done it! Look at you!"
"Look at what? Me-?" He was a bit confused. He wondered if there were streaks of bird crap all over him again.

"Child, you've achieved balance! I can see it from the marks on your face!" Shima crowed, bouncing, "You have mastered Senjutsu!"

Naruto held Shima's gaze for a long moment, digesting the announcement, and then his lips spread in a wide, foxy grin. He leaped to his feet with a small roar, "Yee-aaah! I'm in balance! I get Nature! I'm a Sage! I..." He stopped cheering and swiped a hand across his lower back, "I've got shit on me." The sparrows had since scattered and flown away.

"That doesn't matter, Naruto-boy, quickly!" Shima took off in a hurry, "Come this way!"

He made haste after the female Toad Sage over the statues surrounding the Oil Pool yard, past a tangle of vegetation and mushrooms, over a grassy knoll and onto a plot of flattened dirt where stocks of enormous lumber were stacked high. Shima took a moment to gather Sage Chakra and then turned to Naruto.

"See if you can do this!" Shima encouraged, seizing the end of a timber beam fit to build Gamabunta's house with. The toad raised the tower of a log above her head, and with her Sage strength, flung the beam in what was the mightiest caber toss to ever fly over the valley's east end, spinning away in to the wild blue yonder.

Naruto was incredulous for all of a second before he spat on his hands and rubbed them together. He marched up to the next behemoth beam and got a hold of it, "You just want me to throw this, Ma?"

"You couldn't before with just your twiggy human arms! Now you can, Naruto-boy!"

With a small snarl, Naruto replicated Shima's throwing technique with a short running start, Sage Chakra curtailing his exertion as he lifted the giant beam, and Naruto heaved it up and away to goodness knew where. He shaded his eyes with a hand to watch it spin away. He was a little surprised.

"Here! Over here!" Shima led him along the knoll towards an older training area. Naruto kept up.

"Give Masaru-chan a gentle lift, we mustn't break him." Shima gestured towards a large toad statue ringed by flowers and toadstools, "Move him over there by that palm, Naruto-boy!"

As if he were a super-strengthened day laborer, Naruto handily complied and lifted the monstrously heavy statue, walking it over to replace it by Shima's specified tree. When he set it down she hooted in approval. Gleeful, Naruto rested his hands on his hips.

"Now, try to avoid me!" The old toad launched herself at him over the lawn, her furiously fast swipes aimed for his head and chest. She bounced and spun with Sage tenacity, and could level buildings with her fingers...but Shima was pleased that Naruto could duck and shimmy to evade her strikes, "Good, good!"

He dodged and weaved with a grin plastered to his face, "Ma! I can feel it coming— before you hit me! I know how to avoid you!"

"You should! A Sage can feel minute disturbances in chakra and air!" Shima kept attacking, "We can sense it!"

Their contactless scuffle lasted until Sage Mode wore off after a few minutes. Chuckling, the two sat on the incline of the grassy hill and caught their breath.
Shima patted Naruto's knee, "Well done, Naruto…phew! You are off to a perfect start."

"I'll say! I'm like a slippery otter when I feel hits coming! And where do you think that beam went?"

"It looks like you tossed it over the orchard. We'll have to go find it and bring it back." Shima advised, "Take a moment and then let's try again. See if you can enter Sage Mode safely. Then we can continue with lessons."

Naruto sat and relaxed. He was still dampened with oil from the pool, but he suspected that after sweating some of it off he could still successfully gather Natural Energy on his own. He had a very good feel for it. Within minutes, he had accumulated Sage Chakra again. Naruto turned to Shima beside him and then she accepted his high-five.

"I got it."

"I know." The toad chirped.

"I can totally do this. Anytime."

"I know you can, Naruto-boy!" Shima sprang to her feet, "I haven't been this proud in a long time."

"Me neither, actually." Naruto stood and stretched, "Now let's go clean up. I hope no one got hurt when we threw stuff…"

It took a while to find Naruto's timber beam, which had landed and flattened a diagonal segment of the citrus grove's rows. They returned that first to the storage yard before hiking deeper into the valley to find Shima's beam. It was stuck vertically into soft marsh soil, a straight and solitary turret against the backdrop of sky and mountains— artsy-looking. Shima and Naruto stared at it for a moment. Shima decided, "I think we should leave it like that."

"It looks pretty cool." Naruto agreed.

"Our builders won't notice one less plank…"

They ventured west again towards the valley's center, rinsed their muddied feet and hands at the lotus pond (Shima washed the bird poo off of Naruto's back), and then they accumulated more Natural Energy to show off. Shima felt it would be more entertaining to let Fukasaku and Jiraiya see the result of Naruto's training as opposed to merely hearing about it.

At the house, Jiraiya had opened a window to air out some smoke. Fukasaku had overcooked lunch. Some arguing was audible from the open window as the two bickered and tried to blame each other.

"Ero-sensei!" Naruto called for the man's attention outside, "Quit burning our food!"

Jiraiya glanced out of the window, scowling, "I didn't burn anything! Besides, I didn't ask to eat these bugs anyway…" His speech trailed off as he narrowed his eyes and observed Naruto. Shima was blithely standing beside him.

Jiraiya wondered in a shout, "Did you get a haircut?"

"My hair is, like, ridiculously long, Perv." He restrained a laugh, "Do I…look different?"

Jiraiya withdrew inside and Naruto overheard an alarmed 'holy fuck' spoken within the house. Fukasaku was wrangled to join Jiraiya when he rushed outside. Naruto and Shima rounded the corner to meet them at the porch, and then Jiraiya ambled forward to take Naruto's face in his hands.
He was astounded. He gave Naruto a long, fierce look.

"Whoa, kid." Jiraiya said.

"I don't look all warty and toady, do I?" Naruto asked.

"...all you've got is a bit of Aposematism...red marks around the eyes." Jiraiya informed him, and then grew more excited, "Holy shit, kiddo!" He hugged Naruto's whole head. His student struggled uncomfortably in his arms. Shima and Fukasaku snickered in delight while standing on the porch.

Naruto wriggled out of the near-headlock and stood upright, his smile a bit more sedate, "You told me you wanted to be astonished."

"Yeah, well...that is the case. Color me astonished. You breaking my record time for achieving Sage Mode is freaking me out, Naruto." Jiraiya added, "In a good way."

"I worked my butt off...and almost became a statue." Naruto pointed out, "This wasn't easy."

"I told you it wouldn't be, didn't I?" The man chortled, ushering him back toward the house, "Is this your first successful attempt?"

"Third attempt."

"Damn." Jiraiya rubbed his chin, "You got the hang of it, alright. Before lunch time to boot..."

They sat down to eat soup and vegetables, since Fukasaku had accidentally overcooked the day's protein—grasshoppers. Naruto and Shima's Sage Chakra wore off before they tucked in to eat.

Over lunch, Naruto shared the experience with his elders and thanked Shima for keeping an eye on him. He also wondered about his vision of another student of Senjutsu.

"Yeah, he was in that stone-spike field in the valley. I saw him sitting on some slate and meditating there." Naruto recalled.

Fukasaku contemplated it, "Did you, Naruto-boy? Advanced students go there to train. What was this student's description? Ma and I ought to remember our share of disciples."

"He was a human and he had this sandy hair, and he was kind of pale...and..." Naruto frowned as he thought about it, "He had bumps on his head."

"You lost them at human." Jiraiya spoke sidelong to Naruto, "There have been very few human students in the Toad Valley before my time here."

"Well, only two human pupils that Pa and I personally knew during our lifetimes. And they passed away before we met Jiraiya-boy." Shima observed, "Are you sure of what you saw, Naruto?"

"Positive. He might've been a bit older than me, and I think he had, uh, horns." Naruto defended his statement, "But you have to know that at the time I had just finished marching with ants for forever. I don't know if I dreamed him up or if I met him."

"Met him?" Jiraiya picked out the word choice.

"Well, when I sneezed I think it startled him." Naruto recalled.

Fukasaku and Shima exchanged puzzled looks. They offered to fact check it with the Great Toad Elder and see if such a student existed in the past. Or if Naruto had been tripping major balls out in
Nature and imagined the whole thing.

After lunch, Naruto and Jiraiya shot the shit for the rest of the day. He briefly had a contest of Taijutsu with Naruto while both in Sage Mode, and afterward Jiraiya took a breather on the green lawn. He complimented Naruto's reflexes, "Looks good, kid. We'll get you started on Frog Kumite soon. And some other nifty tricks..." He took a breath, "Just so you know...I don't plan on staying here much longer, now that you can use Sage Chakra."

"I was hopping you'd say that." Naruto sat cross-legged in the grass, "So...are we going home in a couple of days?"

"Oh hell no," Jiraiya shook his head, "We've got plenty more to do. I'm waiting on official correspondence from Gaara. He's putting together a small promotional Exam in Suna so you can make Chunin. What a friend! He told me that he'd send a confirmation of your registration to me."

"Gaara was already working on it?" Naruto was bewildered and also thankful.

"He was, although I don't have the full details on how complex it'll be. I'll send a message to Haku to encourage him to enter too..." Jiraiya sighed and leaned back, "But I get the feeling he may be in too deep where he is. I don't expect a nukenin to just let Haku go where he wants without a fuss these days. I've got to figure that pickle out before he ends up dead..."

Naruto presumed, "So we're going to Hidden Sand next?"

"We are. You and I will train and practice some concepts on the way. I'll give Obito the heads up about our travels so he can track the Akatsuki's movements relative to ours. Hopefully we'll be a bit early in Sand so we can catch up with Gaara."

"That" had him positively stoked. Naruto laid flat in the grass and grinned up at the sky.

"But after this nonsense, you know— your promotion and us annoying Gaara as much as possible..." Jiraiya went on, "I'm cutting the cord, kid. You're able to handle yourself now. I owe training time to Gaara and Haku, so naturally they are next on my list. Also, you've got a lot of people in Leaf who need you."

Naruto agreed that made sense, and after recuperating, the two continued testing the limits of their Sage Chakra and strength without using Ninjutsu. Well. They still tossed their respective Rasengans at each other to satisfy their curiosity, and were later chastised by Fukasaku for gouging holes in his pristine lawn. They were told to vacate to a non-residential area until it was dinner time. Naruto got the idea to show Jiraiya Shima's impromptu art installation in the mud of the eastern marsh.

Later, with their stomachs growling, they were back promptly at sunset. The evening meal was an open potluck of dishes with toads of all ages and sizes in attendance. Gamabunta, Gamaken, and toads of their prodigious stature stayed near the edge of the property as the dinner took on the spirit of a celebration in Naruto's honor. Word got around quickly that he was the valley's newest Sage.

Naruto tried to downplay the praise and congratulations, embarrassed that though he'd accomplished the feat, he also nearly lost his life days before. It seemed that not all toads were aware of that.

He ate too much stew. Full of food, Naruto lazed about as lanterns were lit, stars spilled across the dark canvas of night sky, and toads shifted conversation between him and Jiraiya. Kinji eventually found Naruto and set a large jug of sake between them.

Kinji proposed a toast to Naruto and his success, and every of-age guest happily drank in his honor.
It was then that Naruto noticed an abundance of alcohol had proliferated around the potluck. He poked Kinji's stomach in annoyance, "Who brought all of the booze?"

"The Chief Toad is very generous when he wants to party. Check out Gamakichi down there…" Kinji pointed out Gamakichi, now grown considerably large, had rolled on top of some smaller toad guests and fallen asleep, "He overdid it. Amateur."

"Yeesh…"

"Here." Kinji held out a sake cup to Naruto, "Let's celebrate, Blondie."

"I don't—"

"You don't drink because you haven't yet." Kinji sniffed, "You've got a stomach full of food anyways. Take it slow and you'll get yourself a nice buzz. Go too fast and you'll puke up dinner. It's simple science."

Naruto sipped it, "This tastes like…a household cleaner."

"This is the good stuff. I only let my Ma and Pa try this wine out. You, my friend, can consider yourself privileged." Kinji wrapped an arm around Naruto as they sat and sipped, "Kanpai, you handsome dandelion!"

So Kinji educated him for the evening, beckoned over some toads of his size to teach Naruto drinking games and songs, and generally coached the young man not to rush the sake. By the time Kinji was blatantly ossified, Naruto was only mildly affected.

"Hey…I'm sorry I was such a stuck-up ass." Kinji hiccupped, "Mostly to my parents. I've been pretty nice to you by comparison." He was leaned against Naruto who was rosy-cheeked and swaying where he sat. He was still at a high-functioning conversational capacity.

"Just spend more time with them. They'll be cool about it." Naruto recommended. He was eating chips even though he could hardly fit any more food in his gut.

Kinji pulled his jacket over his head as if to hide, "How are they going to take me seriously…like this? If I say anything to them?"

"I don't think they care how drunk you are as long as you mean what you say." Naruto opined, steering Kinji by his shoulders, "Ma and Pa are over there! Go talk to them."

Kinji waddled away to go apologize to his parents near a small bonfire.

Naruto also stood, bidding his drinking companions adieu, and then made his way toward Jiraiya was ostensibly hammered. The man was reclined in the grass.

"Ero-sensei." He said and then he collapsed beside Jiraiya.

"See what happens when you accomplish something, Naruto? It's always an excuse to party." Jiraiya spoke without opening his eyes, keeping his hands folded on his chest, "Imagine how nuts it'll be when you're sworn in as Hokage. I can just see the drunken anarchy in Konoha now…"

Naruto pointed out, "That doesn't sound safe."

"Nothing in my imagination is safe."

Naruto burped.
"Oooh, good one." Jiraiya complimented him.

"I wonder if Mom and Dad would have celebrated like this with us, or if they were too genteel to get messed up?" Naruto stretched out and wondered.

"Oh, they'd get messed up." Jiraiya assured him, "Especially if it was you who achieved something."

"Really?" Naruto raised his eyebrows.

"You never got to know them like I did, kid. Believe me…the two of them would be drunkenly crooning karaoke tunes as soon as Fukasaku got the bright idea to play music. That was like their bread and butter during their down-time." Jiraiya recalled, "Man, if you could've heard Minato's singing voice…huh. Maybe you've got a good set of pipes too?"

Amused, Naruto laughed at the notion and then asked after a pause, "Ero-sensei…did they have any relatives? Could I-? Am I overlooking extended family I might still have?"

"There's a thought." Jiraiya tried to sit up to sip sake, but dribbled it over his tunic, "I know that all of Kushina's family is long gone. Hm…but Minato's parents lasted longer. His dad died late in the war…and his mom died in a group home in the Tea Country about fifteen years ago."

Naruto sat up, alarmed, "Only fifteen years? I could've known her!"

"First of all," Jiraiya held up a finger, "That poor woman suffered greatly. She never would have known who you were. Minato took care of his mother for as long as he could, but she had dementia that hit her young and fast. She was combative and hostile, Naruto, and stress ate Minato alive when it got to be too much. She didn't know him as a teen. In her mind he was just a stranger. He hardly ever caught her on a lucid day." Jiraiya took another sip of wine, "Your dad's life wasn't easy. His little sister died when she was just a toddler. Minato had to rebuild his happiness when his family fell apart. Kushina helped with that."

Naruto was rightly shocked to hear that bit of history.

"Sorry, kid. That's not an easy subject to bring up." Jiraiya apologized.

"No, it's okay. It helps to know about it." He shook his head, "I'd never want to…lose my family. Not when I get to have one."

"Huh, this reminds me of a conversation I had recently…" Jiraiya yawned, "You don't ever truly lose someone, Naruto. You know that. You've seen life go on and on, you told me so."

"…I know." Naruto leaned back on his arms, "But I can't help but be selfish. I just want to keep them by my side for as long as I can…"

"With the way you are now…I bet you can do that." Jiraiya fell back with a puff to relax.

A moment later, Kinji toddled over and clambered dizzily into Naruto's lap, "Yo…my Ma and Pa are cool with me—! Blondie, they said I wasn't that much of an ass…"

"See?" Naruto patted Kinji's head.

"You're the best, man. Like Minato. He was a bro. Here!" Kinji raised his empty cup, "Fill me up! I want to toast to the Blondie Sage again."

The next afternoon, harsh summer sunlight beat down on Shincha's mountaintop in the Land of
A small courier toad from Mount Myoboku passed along a scroll to Sesshu when they met in town, and then hopped off to find a cool place to rest. The golden dog carried the correspondence in his mouth while bounding up the forest trail to his home.

As Sesshu crested the steep, wooded slope at the far end of the front yard, he watched Rin and Yuma set out with totes, towels, and bathing suits on the far end of the property. His bark for their attention was muffled by his full mouth. Sesshu hurried over the lawn, up the porch steps, and then bumped his head against Obito's leg to get the man's attention. He was shutting the door when he glanced down at the dog, "Oh, hey boy! I thought you said you weren't going to come swimming with us at the pond."

Sesshu nudged the scroll into the man's hand and then spoke, "I'm not. I told you some friends and I like to lay in the shade beside the ice cream shop on hot days like this."

"Right…waiting for kids to drop their ice cream." Obito discerned.

"Their loss is my gain."

"Which friends?" The man wondered as he unwound the scroll.

"Two friendly cats." The dog reported.

"You don't say? I didn't take you for a cat sympathizer." Obito frowned as he began to read the message, "This is from Jiraiya-sama, right?"

"Yes, a toad brought it into town."

"It's been a while…" Obito sat down on a step and set his tote bag aside, "Go ahead to the ice cream shop, Sesshu. Don't make yourself sick on treats."

The dog enthusiastically tore away and down the hill again. Obito read the message:

Hello! Forgive me for not addressing you by name, correspondent, I just can't be too careful about where these messages go or who might intercept them.

This is an official warning. My charming, blonde pupil and I will be leaving The Valley soon. We're headed to a dry place. My pupil has completed core training in Senjutsu. Please be vigilant for any increased activity within the Akatsuki, and keep me informed. Also, I am not sure if you've heard this rumor yet or gleaned it from your dabbling with criminals…but I've heard it said that Hidden Mist may be an Akatsuki-controlled state. My hunch is that other villages may also be under this type of veiled influence, or to a lesser degree be infiltrated by Akatsuki's agents for info extraction.

In the near future, we should investigate these allegations. If it's true, we're going to have some extra work to do. May as well get these well-trained youngsters to pull some of the weight with us! Send a reply with little Izumaru, he's a yellow-and-green fella. I told him to stay in town.

Keep your eyes open. Take care.

A coffin-dodger

Obito carded his fingers over his head through recently shorn, summer-short hair. He exhaled and then smiled to himself, "Wow."

Minato's teenaged, hyperactive doppelgänger who had played with Yuma for a whole day in the Apple Village was now a Sage. Whenever life started to seem ordinary and predictable as he frittered
time away, Obito had a shock of the unprecedented that opened his eyes again.

He tucked the scroll into his tote of snacks and towels, then pushed off of the porch. Obito chuckled quietly as he crossed the west side of the property to reach the wooded mountain trail, *I am some slacker! I can copy jutsu and rely on stealth to get by, but I've never endeavored to train that hard… maybe at no point in my life. Senjutsu training is supposed to take years!* He hiked the bag's strap up on his shoulder, *Minato-sensei, your child is really something else. Like mine will be too…*

Obito figured he could write an affirmative reply to Jiraiya after a swim in the chilled, stream-fed pond with his family. While he never delighted in keeping closer tabs on the Akatsuki, Obito had a feeling that Rin would agree with his motivations for increased surveillance. Moreover, Jiraiya's tips about the Akatsuki were distressing. He stepped carefully over forest debris to prevent pine twigs from catching in his sandals. Rin and Yuma had gotten far ahead, but he could hear their excited chattering echo from around the bend. He also heard a stray snap of a tree branch come from behind him.

On alert, Obito turned his face towards the sound. He immediately knew that it was no passing deer, traveler, or other such explanation.

It was the visitor. The same one from the stormy night that had kept watch and left footprints in the mud, scaring the daylights out of Obito. Though he could not catch a glimpse of the hidden observer, or a trace of suppressed chakra, Obito stood still and silent in order to acknowledge the contact. This was the fourth time the visitor had returned to the mountaintop, unseen.

*I'm pretty sure it's an adult man. Those tracks didn't come from a kunoichi or trainee. He's been gone for a few weeks…his surveys of Shincha are always spaced out. Like he's been busy elsewhere.*

Obito rubbed his nose with his thumb, his eyes shifting from side to side, *Yeah, it's been a while. Never does a damn thing except watch us…I can't figure it out. If we were being reported on, wouldn't we have experienced some kind of conflict by this point? What kind of scout watches a target and then doesn't act on what they see?*

He had a single holster of kunai clipped to his waistband—meager defense provisions, Obito noted. If today was the day a fight broke out, Obito imagined that he would make liberal use of his Sharingan in self-defense. A hand hovered over his kunai holster for a few seconds before he thought better of it. Obito sighed and straightened, trying to understand. He could feel a set of eyes watching him. He felt the lurker scanning his scarred face and features: his right-sided prosthetic limbs in plain view while he was dressed in a sleeveless top and swim trunks; spots of sunscreen on his skin that he hadn't rubbed in well enough.

*For a while I felt so sure that this could be an enemy keeping watch…’ Obito thought to himself, slowly resuming his trek through the forest, ‘But now I have no idea.’ He kept his ears pricked for any suspicious sounds or activity behind him. *I don't want him watching us while we go for a swim… I'll feel even more vulnerable. I don't want to freak Rin out either…’*

Obito then realized that the visitor only seemed to show up when Sesshu was not around. The ninKen would easily detect an outsider's scent. *Huh. So he's being thoughtful about these visits. I wonder how he knows when Sesshu is distracted?’* Obito gradually began to relax, taking two slow steps backward, *So just who are you, mysterious visitor? Why don't you attack me? Why do you watch my family like some peeping lowlife? You've got to have a reason…’*

He felt confident enough to turn his back to the property and continue down the forest trail. As Obito expected, no ambush or anything of the sort occurred. There was only the sound of trilling cicadas in the trees. Further down the path, Obito stopped with an idea. He rifled around his tote bag and drew out a boxed lunch. *If you're a spy, you're a bad one. I've detected your presence plenty of times, and*
no one has come to my home yet to harm me or my family.’ Obito thought, ‘I should tell Jiraiya-sama about this weird scenario…and while I'm at it…maybe I'll treat you like a creeping stray cat.’

Obito raised the meal briefly above his head to make it visible, and then set it down on a tree stump. The action advertised: Whoever you are, eat this and don’t cause trouble.

After that, Obito proceeded ahead to the pond. He and his family had an uproarious afternoon of swimming, games, and an attempt at teaching Yuma to walk on water with chakra control (which didn’t work out this time). Then they napped and swam again, re-applying sunscreen after every dip. Yuma caught a wild turtle and presented it to his parents, asking if they could feed it their extra cucumbers.

Later, Rin walked hand-in-hand with her husband on the way home as they scaled the forest trail. He stopped for a moment to stare at a tree stump.

She peered at him over her sunglasses, "Is something the matter, Obito?"

"No, no…” With a reassuring smile, he tugged gently on her hand to keep moving. Yuma ran ahead of them with his beach towel tied around his shoulders, streaming behind him as if it were a cape.

The boxed meal on the stump was long gone.

The day that followed was sweltering. Summer heat drove citizens of the Leaf Village into air conditioned spaces, crammed into shady shelters, and sent them flocking to the nearest cool sources of water to dip in.

Lee was still comfortable enough to jog uptown in his Wushu attire.

His grandfather had wrapped up training early so he could relax indoors and chill his feet in a bucket of ice water. Before he sent his pupils away, Wong Leung asked Neji if he had made a decision between his two terrible options.

For a change, Neji tried replying in beginner Hanwen, No, I have not made a decision. With a bit of language coaching and help from Lee, he added, I did not realize my family was looking out for me. They helped me.

As family should. Wong Leung gruffed, smiling a little. The old man waved before strolling up the walkway to his house.

After that, Neji excused himself, "I was told to go to the Jounin Standby Station to retrieve something."

Lee tugged on the collar of his cheongsam top, uncomfortably sweaty, "Oh? But you will be joining Tenten and I—?"

"I won't be long. I'll meet you both at the shop."

And from there they split up: Neji to complete some odd task, and Lee trotted to the nearest convenience store to buy heaps of packaged ice treats and watermelon bars. He would have changed clothes at home, but his jumpsuit and Chunin vest would have been far less comfortable in the heat. With his bag of cold snacks in hand, he stuck to shaded alleys and streets on his way to the Pailü Weapon Shop.

Lee gave a soft Phew! of relief when he dashed into the store and shut the jingling door behind him.
The air conditioning had been on for a long while, and Tenten had set up an oscillating fan to blow cool air into the back room. Lee found her there seated on a stool, leaned over the work table as she tapped an etching design into sword steel with a thin chisel. She glanced over her shoulder at him, half of her face shielded by protective goggles.

"Don't knock that acid over." She gestured to a container on the counter, "What'd you bring, Lee?"

She chirped happily when he handed her a melon bar. Tenten took a break from etching to enjoy the treat.

Between licks of an ice pop Lee explained, "Neji told me he would join us soon. He had to pick something up from the…Jounin Standby Station." Even as he said it, he was perplexed by the errand. They would be briefed for a mission within an hour, and so Lee was unsure what his friend needed to accomplish in so little time.

"Huh. It's not like Gai-sensei was asking for him?"

"If that were the case, I imagine that he would have mentioned it."

"You guys won't have time to clean up or change before we report to Hokage-sama." Tenten observed, "But maybe Hanfu is better. Shorter sleeves."

"Yes, that helped for yesterday's mission."

"Yeah, I thought yesterday was hot. Psh!"

"Tenten," Lee finished chewing a chunk of melon ice, "Have you settled in at the estate yet?"

"Not quite yet…" She admitted, "My room is pretty shabby and they're still trying to fix it. Kayato said it'll get pretty hot in there until summer is over…" Tenten sighed, "I am staying in my flat for now. I'm going to miss my place. Every time I stop at the Hyuga house I find a new way to make a fool of myself."

"Surely you do not." Lee disagreed. He was starting on a second ice pop.

"Yeah, I really do. Take this morning's visit, for example," Tenten recounted, "While you two were training with Grandpa, I brought a box of stuff over. Kayato was taking measurements for room shelving and then the…children," She elaborated, "From the Branch— pounced on me. They're inquisitive and they spot me as soon as I show up. They keep looking through my things and asking me questions."

"Adorable!"

"Persistent is more like it. And I have to be nice to kids that young, because I don't want to come off as a snob or unapproachable." She gestured with her melon bar, "You know? So I entertained them and their grubby little kid hands all over my possessions; then Kayato tells me that I should take measurements for my shop's signage and give it to Hideyasu." Tenten's face lit up, "He's going to update my shop's sign with the Hyuga sigil."

Lee was equally as enthused and wooping, "Is that good for business?"

"I'm pretty sure that is great for business. Respected names attract consumer confidence!"

"None of that is so bad." Lee pointed out.
"Hold on— so then, of course, I was excited. I took off down the hall and I guess I just forgot that you and Neji were training? It was kind of a brain fart. I thought I saw Neji on the porch and I wanted to talk about the signage and how I couldn't wait to update it—" Tenten hung her head in shame, "And I grabbed someone who was not Neji."

"Ah." There was a beat in which Tenten wallowed in her shame and Lee said what she was thinking, ",…they do not all look the same."

"Lee! I know that." She reached into the bag for another watermelon bar, "But I swear, Tokuma is like a slightly older carbon-copy of Neji that chopped his hair off. I was mortified."

When Lee laughed she grew more frustrated.

"Laugh if you want, but it wasn't funny when I got stuck in a conversation with a surprisingly nice Branch Member. I tried faking that I actually meant to talk to him…but I think he knew it was a mix up." She waved her ice pop threateningly at Lee, "Not a word of this gets back to Neji, got it?"

"Not a word."


Lee was nodding, "It will be challenging for you."

She gave him a flat look.

"Challenges are good things!" He insisted.

"Hmf. Guess I should've known what I was getting myself into." She chomped on the last of her watermelon bar, "Nothing outrageous has happened yet. My, uh, parents—" She continued when Lee understood who she was referring to, "And Neji said that clan elders might try to…mess with me."

"Just as they did to Neji." Lee grimaced.

"Right. We're still playing ball. We need to stay on our toes…" Tenten tossed snack refuse into a trash bin and pulled her eye visor down again, "I keep thinking if they do something, and I don't have the chance to ask anyone in the Main Family about how to respond…I…I just don't want to mess up."

Lee was nodding as he tossed his garbage away as well. She warned him again not to knock over the container of etching acid.

"Nah, I can do this. I can make the most of this." Tenten puffed her cheeks, "I mean, I never thought Neji would've given me the time of day a few years ago. I'd squared myself with that. Now here we are."

Lee took a seat on the stool on the opposite side of the work table and assured his friend, "Tenten… even then he would have. You have always been important to Neji."

Her tap, tap, tapping on steel slowed as Lee added in reassuring Hanwen, His worst days were the days without you. I learned a lot about Neji. And I also learned to be a better friend.

She grinned and kept etching the inscription, Lee, you're more than a friend. You're like family.
I think so too about you and Neji. Even Grandpa feels that way, I can tell.

While they pitched sentimental compliments at each other in their mother tongue, the shop's chime sounded. A moment later, Neji arrived in the work room and immediately fetched himself a watermelon bar from the bag Lee had brought. He didn't say anything while he cooled himself by the fan and unwrapped the treat.

Tenten eyed Neji's high ponytail, "Oof, it must be bad out there."

"Oppressive is the word for it." He grunted, nipping at the ice pop, "And I imagine the Hokage will assign us an outdoor mission."

Lee was keeping the faith, "Tsunade-sama wouldn't—"

"Her most senior ninja will get favorable, more comfortable missions in these temperatures." Neji presumed, "We must still earn our keep."

Tenten sighed in dismay as she leaned over and rotated her chisel carefully to create the decorative curve of a *magatama* on the blade. She spoke over her shoulder to her boyfriend, "What were you doing at the standby station, Neji?"

"Tenzo was there. He had something to give me." Neji explained, setting a scroll down on the counter. Tenten and Lee barked at him not to knock the acid over. He did not.

"What did he give you?" Lee wondered.

After a lick Neji elaborated, "A Jounin recommendation letter."

Tenten nearly *tapped* in error during her work but stopped herself. Lee balked from across the table. They snapped their heads around to look at Neji. Their Chunin promotions were still so fresh in their minds that it was difficult reconciling further advancement on Neji's part.

"That's a…bit sudden isn't it?" Tenten asked as she lifted her protective eyewear, "I mean, I know Tenzo has kept an eye on you for a while…"

Neji shrugged with one shoulder, "Not that sudden. Hideyasu-san and my uncle have also given me letters. A few weeks ago."

Lee's nasal, *wooooooot* shout of shock was his reply to the news and Tenten leapt off of her stool, ripping her visor off.

"Three?" She sniffed, "You were moping at home not two days ago, but you received three recommendations in the meantime?"

"I didn't ask for them." Neji reminded her, "When I submit them to the Hokage, it is at her discretion whether or not I may take an evaluation. They are administered by other Jounin. If no one is available to host a test, then I will be admitted to a waitlist with other potentials."

Lee wanted to know if Gai-sensei was aware.

Tenten wanted to know if Neji would leave the team if promoted.

"Gai is aware. No Jounin is required to dissociate from his or her team unless the Hokage mandates it." He tried calming their fussing, "Mission assignments are adjusted by aggregate team skill levels. And…" Neji smiled a little before finishing off his treat, "You have my word I would never leave
They exhaled and relaxed slightly.

"Huh. I bet Tsunade-sama would have a veteran Jounin evaluate you, to knock some sense into you." Tenten put away the near-finished sword steel and pulled her work gloves off, "You may not get promoted on your first try, Neji. Do they let you retake evaluations?"

"I imagine so, but I do not know how frequently."

"I have faith Neji would pass, no matter his evaluator!" Lee gave his vote of confidence.

After that they cleaned up the space, shut the fans and lights off, and set out for the Administrative Building for a mission briefing. Gai would be on another assignment and could not join them. There was one last ice pop in the bag, and so Lee gave it to a passing child on the street who thanked him merrily. On the way, Tenten tried to walk within the lanky shadows cast behind Neji and Lee, savoring any scrap of relief from the heatwave.

It was near the memorial fountain, where some villagers were assembled and dipping—prohibiting sign be damned, that a voice called out to the team and they stopped. Fujita tottered up to them and caught his breath, swiping his arm along his slick forehead.

"Neji-sama, Tenten-neesan, forgive me," He rested his hands on his hips and keened forward tiredly, "And Lee-kun, hello…"

"Good to see you, Fujita-kun!" Lee's greeting was sunny, but his teammates were a tad quailed by the visit.

"I came to tell you that our Great Elder has asked Tenten-neesan to come back to the estate immediately." Fujita reported, "He said that he sent an excused absence ahead for your mission to Tsunade-sama, and that I can act as a substitute for your team."

"No." Neji said rigidly, "That's completely unnecessary."

"Great Grandfather said there was an urgent matter Onee-san must attend to at the house." Fujita passed along the message contritely, "I am sorry, Neji-sama, he only just told me. He did not explain what official clan business it was."

The look on Tenten's face expressed that she was fortifying herself to get whatever the aggravation was over with and not screw up. She had been expecting a stunt like this, after all. Surely Hyuga clan elders had concocted some kind of response to Hideyasu and Kayato's adoption of her. Neji, on the other hand, bristled when he noticed the resigned air about Tenten. When she moved to leave, he snatched her wrist and insisted, "You do not have to agree to anything. Don't engage their schemes or paralogizing."

"I know, Neji, I know." She patted his arm, "Take it easy. I'm not going to let them intimidate me into anything."

Lee looked on worriedly as Fujita wrung his hands.

"Speak your mind without fear, Tenten." Neji gradually let go of her, his glower softening on her, "We'll finish this mission quickly. Don't—"

"I got it, whoa. Take a breath." Tenten smiled, "Neji…go ahead and I'll see you in a day or so. I can handle it."
Fujita gave her an apologetic squeeze of a hug, "I'm sorry, Onee-san…"

"Stop, Fujita. It's fine. Just keep up with these bellyachers." She reassured the boy, "I feel sorry for you three. Working in this heat…"

With a small wave, Tenten turned about to cross town back to the Hyuga compound. She could feel their worried stares at her back.

The most rational course of action, she figured, would be to locate her adoptive parents and ask for coaching before trying to humor a clan elder. 'What a day to pick, though…I'm soaked with perspiration and covered in steel shavings. That'll definitely impress…'

When she arrived at the compound, much damper than she would have liked, Tenten peeled off her sandals and trudged into the Main House. It was marginally cooler indoors. She hung a right down the corridor and nearly crashed into Natsu, Hanabi's once-upon-a-time babysitter, "Ah, Tenten. Kayato-sama was asking for you."

Tenten unstuck a sweaty strand of hair from her face, "Oh? Yes, I heard that…I was needed for something."

"Hmm." Natsu gave her the up-and-down, "Why don't you go to Kayato-sama's studio and I'll drop by with a cold cloth?"

"I'll owe you one, thanks!" She kept moving.

At the corridor's end, Tenten wrapped on the doorframe before poking her face into the room, "Kayato—?"

The woman pulled her into the room by her shirt and Tenten gave a small yelp. Kayato positioned her in front a fan blowing full-force, "Thank goodness you're a bit early, dear! I sent Fujita running to find you. I'll have some time to dry this sweat off of you…"

"Uh…" She craned her neck to watch her adoptive mother frantically collect things around the studio, "Am I in trouble or something?"

"Oh, no! You're in demand. Not that being in demand is any easier, just ask Hinata-sama." Kayato gruffed, "Great Elder Haburo is entertaining Taketori guests today. He doesn't want to just talk about the newest member of the Hyuga clan. He wishes to introduce you to them."

Tenten unbuttoned her shirt and slid it from her shoulders, turning to catch the fan's breeze all over her skin. She nodded, "Right, the Taketori clan. Neji told me about them. They're important to the Hyuga clan."

"Very important."

"So I guess I'll have to look nice before I say hello?"

"You do, but I'll be damned before I put you in full kimono. You'll melt in front of them." Kayato drew out a cream and marigold yukata with bird designs on it, "Here, this is a very nice piece and you'll a bit more comfortable in it…"

Natsu stopped in with a bowl of cold water and a cloth, amused as Kayato moved to undress Tenten despite her mild protests. She asked if they needed any assistance.

"No, Natsu-chan, thank you." Kayato shooed her off and the door shut behind her.
Tenten patted her face and neck with a cold towel, "How much time before this introduction?"

"About fifteen minutes." Kayato took the capri pants Tenten kicked off and folded them.

They sighed in unison and then Kayato laughed to herself.

"Hm, hm! Someone knows how it feels now." The woman chuckled, "This is just the start of the train of inconveniences, Tenten."

"Oh, so it's a train? Does it ever pull into station?" She joked and set the cloth aside, pulling on the robe as Kayato held it out to her.

"Not that I know of, but at least we're all on it together." Kayato smiled at set to work, expertly tugging and adjusting, "That's what Hide-chan says."

"Speaking of—" Tenten referred to Hideyasu as well, "Is he here? Are you both introducing me?"

"I can't, dear. I have an appointment in about a half hour. Though I would be delighted to praise you in front of Taketori guests. You'll just have to rely on my husband." She added, "And he may not be quite so inclined to make lighthearted wisecracks with his grandfather in attendance. Great Elder Haburo could make this meeting...stressful."

"Well if all I have to do is make a good impression and not anger our Elder…" Tenten was optimistic, raising her sleeves up as Kayato fitted an obi around her, "No problem."

"That's the spirit. To tell the truth, Hide-chan told me earlier this meeting will help Haburo-sama get to know you better. He hardly knows a thing about you. Certainly he knows nothing about your team or your bond with Neji..." Kayato pulled the extra length of the obi 'round itself in a knot, "I hope he cares enough to learn more. You are one of us now."

Tenten's eyebrows scrunched, "I don't know if someone like him will ever believe I belong."

Kayato finished her work and patted her new daughter's cheek, "Then I pity his loss in these late years of his life, ignoring those who deserve to be treasured." The woman gave her a sniff, "Good, you can pass without a bath."

She exhaled in relief, peeking at herself in a mirror. Tenten estimated her appearance bordered on pretty; her face plain and braids minimally frizzy from the heat. Decent-looking enough to meet people and get a favorable reaction at the most superficial level.

"Let's have a quick primer on Taketori relations, with these few minutes we have left…" Kayato fished a spare pair of earrings from a jewelry box, "Hide-chan mentioned that Magan-sama, the leader of the Taketori clan, may be joining Great Elder for lunch today. Usually he brings his wife, sister, two retainers, and the occasional dignitary-in-training of his clan for sit-ins. They are all very nice. They maneuver conversations with poise considering how brash our Elders' comments can be."

"So…be respectful, be myself?" Tenten wagered as she hooked the earrings on.

"Oh yes. But because Great Elder Haburo will be there with you and Hideyasu…you may need to censor yourself a little. Not to speak out of turn, for example. Dignified ladies suit Great Elder's tastes...he's no fan of working women or outsiders to begin with." Kayato explained, "Some role-playing of the delicate lady may help you garner favor with Haburo-sama."

"Wow. That may actually be beyond my capabilities." Tenten admitted, aghast.
"I'd give it a whirl if I were you." Kayato laughed, "They've already sat down to eat, I expect. This will be a brief post-lunch meeting. You only need to keep it up for a short while."

"Alright." Tenten took a breath.

"I'll walk you to the tea room. Hide-chan should be there waiting for us." Kayato ushered her along and kept pace beside her, "You do look wonderful, dear. It's a shame Neji-sama can't be in attendance."

Tenten quirked her mouth in a half-smile as she imagined it, "It's for the best. He had a small fit before I came here. I don't know if he'd make it through an introduction without biting someone's head off." She sighed, "I'd prefer a mission even outside in the heat, honestly."

"I know you would."

Hideyasu met them near the tea room and pecked Kayato's mouth anxiously in greeting. He'd swapped his typical gi for a more formal tunic. He turned to Tenten with a lopsided smile, "There may be a slight problem."

Tenten and Kayato's faces dropped simultaneously. He kept his voice low, "The good news is that Grandfather's guests will be ready to leave soon…but the bad news is that I don't think this is an introduction."

"Of course it is." Kayato hissed, "Tenten hasn't met any of our clan's allies yet."

"Well, you're right about that," Hideyasu huddled in like a sports coach, "But I took a peak in there and Magan-sama brought his son Kitano with him."

While Kayato frowned in understanding Tenten glanced between the two adults in confusion, "What's wrong with that?"

"I can't put my finger on the matter quite yet…but I suspect Grandfather may have asked Kitano to join us while he's still eligible." The man rubbed the edge of his nose as he thought.

"Eligible? That boy just had a meeting with Hinata-sama a few months ago!" Kayato whispered, "Haburo-sama can't just pawn a child of ours off when previous arrangements were made, right?"

Hideyasu gave Tenten a sidelong look and noted her mild but escalating distress, "I...think Grandfather may overwrite previous arrangements if he's determined to do so. Or he may send Tenten as a ward to the Taketori."

"He can't send her as a ward, she's an active Leaf ninja, and," Kayato snipped pointedly, "She just joined us. She won't leave us."

"I don't know what Grandfather will do, but unless we go in there and join him we won't find out." He patted his wife's arm and added to Tenten, "Young lady, don't worry about thing. Just be as polite and unmarriageable as possible. My Grandfather won't send my daughter away, I will see to that."

Slightly reassured, Kayato wished them luck and then departed for her studio as Hideyasu led the way to the tea room, sliding the door aside to let Tenten enter first. Her ears were ringing from her elevated blood pressure. Once the door was shut behind them, Elder Haburo announced them to Magan and Kitano, and Tenten took the cue to bow, 'I have no idea how to worm my way out of this one.'
Hideyasu thanked his grandfather and when he and Tenten joined the table, he added, "Magan-sama! It's been a while since I've seen you. I hope you and your family have been well."

"Exceptionally well. I see you are the proud father of a daughter now." Magan had a squared face and warm eyes, regarding Tenten curiously, "Your name is Tenten, Haburo-sama told us. I am Taketori Magan, and this is my son, Kitano."

"Yes, it's a pleasure to make your acquaintance." Tenten bowed her head in what she imagined was a demure manner. She stole a glance of Haburo at the head of the table. The old man made no effort to greet her or Hideyasu. His stare was trained on Magan.

Kitano, who was polite in most other situations, had shifting facial expressions. It took him a moment before he acknowledged Tenten, "It is good to meet you too, my lady. It's a bit short notice to have this meeting just before our departure."

"I would gladly have stopped by sooner if—" Tenten trailed off when Hideyasu discreetly poked her arm, warding off the subject.

"Tell me, did you attain Chunin rank as well at the most recent Exam? I heard that Neji-sama and Hinata-sama were promoted." Magan made a bid for cordial topics.

Before Tenten parted her lips to recount her participation, Elder Haburo answered for her.

"She too was promoted, for her exemplary matches that were fought prior to her withdrawal from the Semi-Final match." Haburo explained, "Unlike Hinata-sama, who explicitly ignored her father's and my warning not to participate in the Final Round. It could have cost her life."

"But Hinata-sama prevailed, didn't she?" Kitano recalled.

"She disobeyed." The old man snipped.

"I heard that she was seen using—" Magan was watching Hideyasu's face as his eye twitched again in warning to not bring up any mention or elements of Hinata's success. It was not a favorite subject of Haburo's. Magan switched gears and told Tenten, "Well congratulations, my lady. Haburo-sama's praise speaks for your prowess."

"You both would have enjoyed watching Exam matches that day, had you not been away on business." Hideyasu assured them as he tested a tea pot and was disappointed to find it empty, "While we're on the subject, have there been any interesting developments?"

The arch of Haburo's eyebrow indicated that he wanted the scoop as well.

"We've increased security at the Moon Pool after we found a child from Tanzaku Quarter wandering there." Magan indulged them with news, "I still can't understand how a young boy wandered through our grounds and into the cove past the attention of our posted guard…however that watchman has been dismissed and reassigned elsewhere."

Haburo's tone was clipped, "Good."

Tenten canted her head curiously toward Hideyasu, "What's the Moon Pool?"

He smiled at her, "It is an ancient, sacred place to the Hyuga clan and we visit it from time to time. The Taketori, as our retainers, house that location on their property and guard it as part of an agreement between our clans."
Kitano spoke up on the subject, "Though it is not recommended anyone visit without supervision. It is used for certain rites…but the connecting tunnel can be dangerous."

The men at the table cleared their throats to discourage that subject and Tenten pursed her lips. She pointedly chose not to be irked by being denied certain information at this early stage. She supposed Neji could fill her in sometime on why this 'Moon Pool' or portal was important and/or dangerous.

"Magan," Haburo was on the prowl for other details, "It is my understanding, based on discussion a recent Village Council meeting, that you held an audience with representatives of the Aburame clan. The nature of such a meeting was not disclosed to me."

"It was an environmental conference last month, my lord. The Lady of the Aburame clan respectfully requested a survey of the south end of Taketori property. Some native insects that inhabit those grounds are of interest to them, and my elders and I agreed we would be willing to authorize them entry to preserve wildlife there." The Taketori clan head elaborated, "It was a small, inconsequential contract that does not affect our relations with the Hyuga clan. I did not think it was necessary to follow up with Hiashi."

Haburo was icy, "Did any transaction take place?"

"No, my lord. Signatures only, no collateral."

"How foolish."

"Great Elder…” Hideyasu gently reproved his grandfather's sour mood.

"Very well then. Throw in your lot with Shibi and his wife who can only see the forest for its many trees— that google-eyed woman." Haburo growled.

Tenten sat still and silent, wondering if a bit of Haburo's elderly discontent was excused by senility, or if he just didn't care about who he belittled. Also, she never imagined someone would speak so coarsely about Shino's parents.

"Great Elder…” Magan elected to be understanding, "We would never seek to trade our standing with the Hyuga clan for the favor of any other clan in Konohagakure. Surely you know that? Today we have discussed many things, such as the Taketori's outreach to the Tide Village's council and merchandising shipments to Hidden Sand. If we are only discussing such trivial matters as these, please tell me why Kitano was requested to attend this meeting instead of attending to previous engagements he had arranged?"

"Yes, I am curious as well." Hideyasu jumped at the chance, "Tenten was also called away from a mission this afternoon."

Kitano perked up again and blinked at the young woman sitting ramrod straight at the table, "Really? You had an assignment?"

"Yes my, uh, brother is filling in for me. Which is fine…but maybe there would have been a more convenient time to meet and be introduced?" Tenten said what they were all thinking at the time.

Haburo shushed the comment, aggravated.

Then, Tenten witnessed something remarkable. Magan gave a look to his son, as if it were some kind of unspoken signal between father and child. He wanted Kitano to speak on the matter. Intrigued, she watched the odd, bumbling scene come to a head as a sixteen-year-old boy shot Great Elder Haburo a plainly angry grimace.
Kitano peeled his eyes away from Haburo for a moment to shed the last vestiges of politeness he had on the appropriate person, "Hideyasu-sama, it is nice to see you again and please accept my congratulations on expanding your family." Kitano then leveled his yellow gaze on Tenten, "You are certainly an impressive addition to your clan, Tenten-sama."

His tone rouged as he added to Haburo, "If I can be candid, Great Elder… I don't understand what this meeting is about. They can leave now. To get to know each other better, I will invite Hideyasu's family to the Takteori castle in the Fall…"

"You should be honored to meet with an eligible lady of the Hyuga today." Haburo disagreed.

"I have no intentions beyond my agreement with Hinata-sama." Kitano countered, adding a nod to Tenten that she took for no offense, "Tenten-sama is the picture of skill and beauty your clan has long yearned to offer, and she seems very nice, but I have no interest in match-making anymore." Kitano clarified, "I was promised no further omiai introductions. I am focused on my shinobi career and fostering good relations at this time."

Magan happily sat back and said nothing. Hideyasu was outwardly impressed he let his child take the reins and snap back at an overbearing old tyrant.

"Kitano-sama, I suggest you rethink your choice of an agreement with Hinata, as she is self-serving and disrespectful." Haburo retorted, trying to balance negotiation and hostility.

Kitano was shrewd, "With all due respect, I am not sure what internal disagreements exist in the Hyuga clan at this moment in time, but I will not reconsider anything I have agreed to. My word is not a ribbon that bends in the wind."

Tenten exchanged soundless, amazed glances with Magan and Hideyasu. If only they had popcorn.

"Haburo-sama, I am deeply insulted that my time has been wasted here. As if a single business discussion were the time and place impose another potential suitor for my hand." Kitano was beautifully poised as the old man squared his jaw furiously at him, "I would not inconvenience my friends in the Hyuga clan this way."

"You." Haburo gruffed. He then looked to Magan as if the man was going to lean forward and apologize profusely at any moment, but Magan did no such thing.

Hideyasu somehow did not let out a squeak of astounded delight while he bit his cheek to keep quiet.

"The elders of the Takteori clan will not be pleased with this." Haburo insisted.

"Will they?" Kitano seemed older and surer when he spoke, "Allow me to extend you an invitation to visit in the Takteori Sun Garden next week, Haburo-sama. It's where my elders like to sit and have meaningful discussion. You are welcome to join them." He added for goading effect, "Just yesterday when I visited, my elders were praising Hinata-sama's performance at the Chunin Exam, her victory, and commended me for considering her as a spouse someday."

This was all news to Tenten, but she sat with her hands crammed in her lap and tried to stay a fly on the wall.

"If you wish to tell my elders that Hinata-sama is not what she seems," Kitano went on, "Please feel free to do so. I've no interest in Tenten-sama or Hideyasu-sama's family beyond wishing them well."

Magan nodded slightly at this, which Haburo certainly did not appreciate.
"Please do not frivolously ask me or my father to come visit in the future, as the Taketori clan strives to never waste the time of its friends." Kitano advised. Then he rose to stand from the table and Magan mirrored the gesture, "My lords and lady, take good care. I have charity work I will see to this afternoon. Pardon my haste."

"It's been a pleasure as always, Kitano-sama!" Hideyasu was the polar opposite of the fuming elder at the table, positively buoyant, "Magan-sama, do make time for us in the Fall. Tenten, Fujita, and Kayato would love to see your gardens and aviary."

"I will send for you then, friend." Magan smiled to himself and set out with his son, exiting the room and let their retainers seal the door behind them.

There was a tense silence at the table as Hideyasu and Tenten were left alone with Haburo. Until the elder dismissed them, they would be required to remain out of respect.

"The insolence." Haburo muttered, "It's as if he and my great granddaughter were made for each other. *Never* has a Taketori prince disrespected me so!"

"Such nerve." Hideyasu agreed softly. He was still trying to stay in his grandfather's graces.

Haburo sat there and stewed while more silence prevailed. Tenten had a moment to think at that time. Surely this incident presented an opportunity, what with Kitano villainizing himself in Haburo's eyes, much the same way the old man so vocally disdained Hinata. It was as if those pieces on the chess board had been eliminated. Tenten realized she ought to make a move here and now, *'But how do I go about it? How do I get a stubborn old man like this to look at me and try to position me favorably? Or I'll screw up and he'll hate me just as much as the rest…'*

Tenten snuck a glance at Hideyasu, who also appeared deep in thought. Haburo's eyes had glazed over as he reviewed avenues of revenge to exact on Kitano in his imagination.

Then, the mood shattered when Tenten abruptly erupted in violent sobs.

Highly alarmed, Hideyasu turned to the girl and raised his hands comfortingly while Haburo looked on like a deer in the headlights— flabbergasted.

"Dear! Sweet girl, what's the matter?" Hideyasu yelped, "That wasn't so bad! They're still quite nice aren't they?" Right then, Hideyasu picked up on the cue. He knew Tenten well enough to know that she *was not the crying type*. But of course, Haburo didn't know that.

"He, he…" She sniveled theatrically, "The prince hates me!"

"No, Tenten, Kitano-sama doesn't hate you. He just felt compelled to reject you based on previous agreements." Hideyasu's reassurance was perfectly tone-deaf.

"It was humiliating!" Tenten harped on it, "How can I maintain good relations for my clan if I'm dismissed as quickly as that?" A convincing hiccup, "No one is going to want my company!"

"Don't get hysterical…" Hideyasu chided while his face encouraged, *please, keep being hysterical.*

Teary-eyed, Tenten turned to Haburo for validation, "Great Elder, do you think I'm repellent compared to Hinata? That young men will hate me?"

Flummoxed, Haburo replied uncertainly, "No, they…shouldn't necessarily think that."

When *that* comment deliberately did not make her feel better, Tenten faked more teary lamentation
while Hideyasu patted her back and mimicked authentic concern.

"I'll never get offers from men my age! I should join the Black Ops and forget everything! That's what I planned to do..." She blathered.

Haburo didn't like that train of thought, "Young lady, calm yourself. You mustn't react in such a manner before giving your circumstance serious thought. I expect other young men will consider you."

Tenten disagreed, "No, Great Elder, the truth is..." A sniffled, "I am too tomboyish, rough, and unrefined. A woman who works with her hands isn't desirable! I fight better than most of my male peers. What kind of man wants that when they can have a cultured, gentle wife?" As if she had any remote desire to marry and settle down whatsoever, but her crocodile tears were working very well.

"The Aburame clan would accept someone of your disposition." Haburo imagined.

"But we just insulted the Aburame clan at this table!" Tenten reminded him dramatically, "Kitanosama and his father will pass along those comments."

Right there, Haburo nearly went cross-eyed as he realized his contemptuous words had actually shot Tenten in the foot—at least for that option. But he didn't need the girl or Hideyasu to explain that Tenten was not classically feminine or mild, and that such a kunoichi may struggle in the match-making department.

Hideyasu further sold the sentiment when he turned to his grandfather frantically, "My daughter... she's worked for everything she has. We can't set her up for failure like this, Grandfather! So she's hardy, feisty, and has more moxie than what her peers prefer... I don't think all is lost. We just need to find someone who can overlook that roughness!"

"I am aware of the challenge, Hideyasu." Haburo snorted, "But what such man exists? If I can't arrange any takers while she is still young and eligible...perhaps I will have to allocate a larger dowry?"

Tenten was privately astounded that Haburo weighed her chances to be so low. The man was unaware that she often had no problem catching the eyes and interest of men. But whatever. It was pure pretense now.

"Perhaps we can find someone equally as difficult to like? That could be a sounder option for a match." Hideyasu suggested with as much laughter-free seriousness he could muster.

Haburo, for the first time, settled his gaze on Tenten as she gradually calmed and dabbed at her eyes with her sleeve. Though a clever man on most occasions, he had completely fallen for the pity party. Contrary to popular belief, he didn't want to destroy the futures of his great grandchildren, but aggressively sought to secure them. To think he had personally dismantled Tenten's opportunity that day struck a blow to his pride. He ought to repair the damage and consider his words more carefully next time.

For a few moments, Haburo held his chin sagely and thought on it. Then he said to Hideyasu, "I have someone suitable in mind...and hard to like. Let me speak to Hiashi to see if he will broker his nephew in an arrangement. I've asked that child to think of such things recently."

"You think that would work?" Hideyasu wondered impishly.

"Heaven knows. My great grandchildren are rapscallions, the lot of them. I will see to Hinata and Hanabi's affairs later, then. For now..." Haburo sighed, "I'll consider more practical arrangements."
Hideyasu motioned for Tenten to bow her head with him, "Thank you for your guidance, Grandfather."

"Enough out of you, you clown. You were oddly prim today, Hideyasu…I expected some jokes." Tiredly, Haburo pushed off of the table to rise on shaky legs, "I may drive a hard bargain, but I do not wish for your daughter to sustain any trauma because of strained negotiations with the Taketori."

A servant opened the tea room's door to allow Haburo to exit, with Hideyasu and Tenten following closely behind.

Before parting ways, Haburo added, "Hideyasu…"

"Yes, Grandfather?"

"Tenten is a strong kunoichi. I expect you to teach her to care less of how men will judge her. She is a sword in the hands of the Hyuga, not a flower." Haburo warned, "And I prefer that to irritant flowers. Teach her to value herself enough to not throw her life away in the Black Ops."

Hideyasu was nodding while marveling at such a rare accolade, "I will, Great Elder."

Haburo tottered off to go negotiate more deals and spin ideas in the heads of other elders. Hideyasu and Tenten then traveled eastbound down the corridor, still hesitant to crack their falsified exteriors.

Further down the hall, Tenten asked, "Do you think that worked?"

"That was quite a show. I'd say Grandfather is genuinely convinced." Hideyasu admitted, pleased, "Whenever he has time to prepare and think, he's an immovable wall. But when he's put on the spot…he is surprisingly pliant."

"I knew I had to put him on the spot." Tenten concurred, "I wasn't sure how. It was sort of instinct to be a sissy, self-conscious girl right then."

"That certainly was not the normal you." He yielded, "It startled me at first."

"I don't know how to cry. I bit my tongue to do it." She revealed a bit of blood in her mouth, "Can we stop so I can spit this out?"

Hideyasu brought her to a half-bath and let Tenten rinse her mouth at the sink. When they carried on to the studio, Kayato excused herself from her client briefly to speak with them out in the hall.

"Well?" She asked quietly.

"It was a disaster." Tenten reported. She and Hideyasu exchanged a low-five.

Kayato was frazzled by such a reaction, "A disaster? Since when do disasters make people look so happy?"

"To be clear, Grandfather actually botched an amicable introduction of Tenten to Kitano-sama. The prince had some choice words for Grandfather before leaving…and Tenten played up the dramatics a little." Hideyasu explained, "And now I suspect Grandfather is concerned that Tenten is not a catch, and that it will be tricky business matching her with a man who doesn't care that she walks around smelling like metal polish and furnace debris."

"Thanks." Tenten said flatly.

"Hmm." Kayato smiled.
"Well, I hope that display will move Great Elder away from vengeance and towards making more sensible arrangements. He does fear jeopardizing the Hyuga's influence with other clans. And crying girls, apparently." Hideyasu concluded, "So take heart, girls! I think we may be headed in the right direction."

"We may just be." Kayato agreed, "Tenten, since you have no mission to complete today, why don't you help me with my client? And you, Hide-chan—can you lend me an hour to help with some needlework?"

"I thought you said my embroidery can be shoddy." He sniffed as the entered the studio.

"Not all of it. Your hand stitching is great but takes too long. You need more practice on a machine." She chuckled, "Don't you think it would be meaningful if you worked on your own daughter's tomesode?"

"Oh!" The man changed his mind, "That would be nice."

"Uh." Tenten circled around a work bench, "What's a tomesode?"

"Something you won't need for a while...but you'll definitely need it." Hideyasu explained vaguely. Kayato ushered Tenten along to meet the client to learn more about business deals.

Naruto lagged the next morning when it came time to pack his belongings. Shima had kindly gifted him a red sage cloak with black trim to commemorate his Senjutsu achievement. Because he and Jiraiya were preparing to traverse Toad Valley jungle in mid-summer, and then cross the desert to Sunagakure, Naruto had dressed down in lightweight, beige-toned clothing. With a sigh, he pulled on his cloak and travel bag before leaving the guest bedroom.

'I know that I wanted to finish my training and leave...but know it kind of feels hard to leave.' Naruto noticed.

Outside on the property's sprawling lawn, Jiraiya was extinguishing his smoking pipe while conversing with Kinji. Fukasaku, Shima, Gamakichi, and Kosuke had also gathered to see them off.

When Naruto came to a stop beside them, Fukasaku explained, "Gamabunta and the Great Toad Elder will not be saying farewells today, but send you both off with fond wishes." He and Shima shared a disappointed look, "We are all surprised this day came so fast."

"Well the kid's training ain't over yet. I'm still gonna brush up on Frog Kumite with him on the fly." Jiraiya stuffed his pipe in his bag's side pocket, "And while I'm thinking about it, Ma and Pa...is there any reason the Great Toad Elder decided to not hold an audience with Naruto yet?"

"We did ask him that yesterday." Shima confirmed, "The Great Elder said...Naruto will have to learn about one more thing before he is summoned back to Mount Myoboku. Then the elder will share important things with him."

"Hm." Jiraiya rubbed his chin, "If that's so, I hope you won't mind reverse-summoning him back here?"

"Certainly not. We know your time is precious." Fukasaku turned to Naruto, "When the Great Elder asks for you, we will retrieve you."

"I hate to sound so uninformed, but how is the Great Elder gonna know when I know that one other
thing?" Naruto asked quizzically.

"He will." Fukasaku assured him, "He will feel the change in you no matter how far away you are."

"Weird." Naruto accepted the answer.

Jiraiya agreed, "Isn't it? Cool stuff though. We've been very lucky to have these stand-up toads in our corner." He settled his gaze on those assembled, "Really. Thank you all. What you've done for us means the world. Don't forget you can depend on us too, alright?"

Kinji teared up a little, "Do you have to make this a sappy moment, Jiraiya?"

"Is it as sappy as your drunken apologies to Ma and Pa the other night?"

"Hey! Watch ya mouth!"

Meanwhile, Fukasaku and Shima huddled in to squeeze Naruto as he kneeled down, wrapping them in his arms.

"Thanks for everything, Ma and Pa. I'll see you soon." He tried to keep it together, "I'll...miss you guys..."

"Naruto-boy, whenever you need us please don't hesitate to summon us." Fukasaku reminded him, "You and Jiraiya-boy are dear to us, just as Kinji is."

His throat felt phlegmy. Naruto tried clearing it and managed to keep his eyes dry. He then accepted hugs from Kinji and Kosuke next.

"Like Pa said, anytime you need us." Kinji reinforced the promise, "I've got your back, Blondie."

"Thanks, Kinji."

"Boss, do you have something you want me to deliver to Hinata-sama?" Kosuke chirped.

"Yup." Naruto handed off a scroll to the vermillion toad, "Thank you for keeping in touch with her, little guy."

Kosuke saluted him.

Naruto got a friendly pat on the head from the enormous Gamakichi, who was grinning his toothless smile, "Take care, Naruto. We'll be together again soon."

With all farewells and safe travels said, they set out along the flower-trimmed path on a northerly route. Jiraiya heaved a long sigh as they ambled down verdant knolls cluttered with life.

After the toads watched their treasured human companions leave, Kinji followed Fukasaku and Shima back into the house. He was inquisitive about something.

"Hey Ma, Pa?"

"Yes, Kinji-boy?" His father was settling down at the table.

"About the Elder...he said Naruto needed to know one more thing before he could come back for an audience. About the prophecy, I'm guessing." Kinji had been filled in by Jiraiya, "What does he need to know about?"
His parents exchanged a hesitant look.

At length, Fukasaku shared the requirement, "He must know loss. Pain."

Later in the day, Naruto and Jiraiya had embarked on the wild, tangled nettle of the secret valley path that would eventually deposit them near the western border of the Fire Country. It was a long, thicketed road with dense canopy that blocked the sky and sunshine.

"Also, as a heads up, there's a lot of poisonous shit in here." Jiraiya informed his student, "So try not to touch vegetation and then rub your eyes. I've had my share of woes on this byway in the past…"

"Got it."

"Damn, too bad I forgot mosquito repellant. It's a different scenario when you're surrounded by toads all the time to eat them for you…"

"Well we could just summon Kinji or someone for that." Naruto suggested.

"You think it'd be polite to make them wait on us even as we're blowing this popsicle stand? They've done enough for us. For now, anyway. I'm not desperate enough to bother them yet." Jiraiya reasoned.

"So how long does it take to get to the end of this trail?"

"About two weeks if we stay on track and keep pace. It's handy because it'll dump us near the Wind Country border, relatively speaking." Jiraiya nearly tripped over a raised root and wiped out, but Naruto caught him by the back of his tunic, "Whew, thanks kid! It's a certified green inferno in here."

"Two weeks." Naruto mumbled and then asked, "After that, how long does it take to get to Hidden Sand?"

"Eh? Well, for that results vary. Maybe a couple of days. Maybe a week. The trouble is the elements and my age might slow things down. I was quicker when I was young." The man complained, "But we'll get there, make some stops in hotels on the way for a decent night's rest…oh…and here."

Jiraiya handed him a correspondence scroll, "Gaara sent that to your attention, actually."

Naruto examined the official letter and the attached, laminated ID card.

"That's a temporary pass into Suna. You can take a photo and pick up the real one when we get to the Administrative Offices there." Jiraiya informed him.

Naruto was amused, "Did you get a pass too?"

"No, and kid, I don't need a pass. I'm a famous author!" Jiraiya hyped himself up again, "I might have to do impromptu book signings when I'm out there. I'll be waiting on my agent to let me know when that new manuscript will begin publishing. I could announce it to fans and stuff…"

"Yeesh." Naruto was almost sorry he asked. He continued to examine the scroll.

Accelerated Chunin Exam information, which was rather sparse, stated that the program was capped at 135 applicants, or 45 teams of 3. Many teams would be lacking a third team member, and single applicants would be assigned temporary teams with other participants.

"Hey did you see this? Gaara's willing to arrange perfect strangers on teams!" Naruto pointed out, "I
guess the tasks he has set up don't necessarily require us to know our teammates well?"

"That seems to be the case." Jiraiya said before taking a swig from a canteen. The heat and humidity were stifling.

Naruto read other odds and ends, such as entry requirements, accommodations, liability limitations, date and time info...then he moved on to a section that Gaara had written to him personally. Naruto read it silently and reduced his trek to a complete stop as Jiraiya slowly pulled ahead.

Naruto,

Regarding the Accelerated Chunin Exam details attached, make note you will not need discounted hotel rates in Suna. You and Jiraiya-sensei will be staying in my home. This Exam will be rather simple and straightforward, but should challenge you enough to determine if you are worthy of promotion. I would be tremendously surprised if that were not the case.

It’s been so long. I have to admit I am very much looking forward to seeing you. I am driven to distraction lately, expecting you and Jiraiya-sensei to arrive. We have much to discuss. I hope you would be willing to stay for an extended period of time after the Exam’s conclusion. I want you to see what my life is like now.

Naruto swiped a tear rolling down his cheek, a bit overwhelmed. It was exhilarating to know he would see his dearest friend again. He jogged over toadstools and greenery to catch up to Jiraiya before pausing again to read.

As exciting as this time is, I must also express how frustrated I am with Haku. He does not anticipate being able to enter this Exam. While he danced around the subject, I gathered that the nukenin whose company he keeps is a deterrent and prevents him from returning to us. To that end, I expect you to keep what I will now tell you confidential. I do not want Haku to know about this:

I have assigned Temari to head a special task force to track and retrieve Haku. I have also given the order that, if necessary, her squadron may kill Momochi Zabuza if he is imperiling Haku or other bystanders. I imagine that is the reality of the situation. Temari will begin her assignment this evening. If she does gather definitive information on Haku's whereabouts, I see no reason not to share it with you and Jiraiya-sensei while you are staying with me. I do expect you not to act on any intel that Temari gathers. This mission is hers alone, until such time I feel we should personally escalate the matter. I hope you understand that, Naruto.

He felt uneasy. Perhaps in passing, Naruto had gathered that Haku was stuck or possibly in danger, wherever he was, but Gaara was no longer toying around with the possibility. He was taking initiative. With that in mind, Naruto rushed ahead to catch Jiraiya while accepting that, yes, he would respect Gaara's wish. He would not tip Haku off about what was to come. *I'm in no place to meddle with official missions like that...* But still, the potential outcomes worried him.

Safe travels to you and to Jiraiya-sensei. I've set up more frequent patrols locally and at the Wind Country border to ensure that the Akatsuki is not lying in wait. Tsunade-sama has also increased patrols at the border, as she is aware that you are on your way to Suna. Prepare to learn while you are here. There are many in Konoha who are anxiously awaiting your return, and I want to send them the best version of you.

Gaara, Godaime Kazekage

Exhaling, Naruto rolled up the scroll and crammed it into the top flap of his travel bag. He caught up officially to Jiraiya and then pulled a few steps ahead of him.
"Read that letter?" Jiraiya asked.

"Yep."

"You okay with what could happen?" The man wondered.

"What's gonna happen?" Naruto scoffed, "Haku won't put up a fight. He'll go with that team so he can grovel and apologize to Gaara personally. And if his lowlife tutor-buddy crosses a Sand team and doesn't live to talk about it, that's his own damn fault. Isn't it?"

Jiraiya half shrugged, "I suppose it is."

"I dunno. It makes me nervous." Naruto admitted.

"Me too." Jiraiya echoed, "I understand why Gaara feels like he has to get it done…but if he gave me more time, I think I'd have better luck extricating Haku myself."

"You don't even know where he is right now."

"Yeah. But I could wait for that Sand team intel. Except, it'd mean I'd have to leave you flying solo for a while so I can look for my goody two-shoes pupil." Jiraiya mapped it out in his head, "Though I did plan to let you manage yourself for a while, Naruto."

"Well, you old fart; you're going to have to make up your mind if you want to track Haku down or not." Naruto informed him, "Gaara said I can't go out there looking for him. But he didn't say anything about what you could do."

"Ah, how astute of you. That's right."

"And once he's back, that'll clear up the whole lying-to-Baa-chan thing." Naruto recalled, "I don't think she knows, even after all this time."

"Let's see how long it stays this way, if Gaara can bust this wide open without Tsunade hearing about it." Jiraiya laughed to himself, "That'd be impressive."

Still slightly stressed, Naruto ventured, "Do you think…he'd come back to Konoha?"

"Kid, I honestly don't know. Haku will probably go where he thinks he's needed most." Jiraiya flapped his arms, smacking banana leaves on both sides of the pathway."

"Probably." Naruto agreed.

Jiraiya consoled him, "Look, Naruto, think of it this way. Even if Haku chooses to stay in Suna just like Gaara's been pretending he has, you think you wouldn't see him enough to get lectured by him? Let him annoy you about health, hygiene, and good housekeeping?"

Naruto laughed with a small snort."

"Exactly." Jiraiya made his point.

"You know, Gaara's gotten pretty good with keeping a home too. He talks about all kinds of stuff that I don't get." Naruto recalled.

"With any luck he'll educate you while we stay with him."

"…Haku will be fine." Naruto felt a bit more confident about Haku's retrieval, "I know he wants to
"There you go. Yeah, I'm thinking Haku's had enough of the wild side of things." Jiraiya rubbed at a crick in his back, "Jeez, we're barely underway and I'm already sore. So. While we're out here, let's play a game I like to call *Itchin' and Bitchin'*.

Naruto hiked up his bag's strap on his shoulder, "Sounds fun?"

"The only fun you *can* have on this godforsaken trail. Anyway, we'll place our bets. Let's say 600 Ryo. Whoever gets a rash, bug bite, or otherwise itchy malady out here and *complains about it* first loses and pays up." The man raised a hand, thrilled, "I used to kick Minato's butt whenever we hiked this route."

"You're on. I bet you're prone to bites and stuff now." Naruto wagered, because he was a hardy individual and confident in his resistances, "Body chemistry changes as you get older, Perv."

"Heh, you would know about that, right kiddo?"

He gave Jiraiya's ankle a good kick and watched him topple.

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Chapter End Notes

Readers! Thanks for your patience. I've been up to my eyeballs in accounting homework these past few weeks and I just. Wanted. To. Write. For. My. Nerds.

Here I will cite the paraphrased quote of Jun's regarding tatami mats from Rachel and Jun's YouTube video "Idiot's Guide to Japanese Apartments." I've loved those dweebs for years.

Comments, questions, concerns? Please submit in the box below. You have my most heartfelt gratitude.

Chapter 43: Budding Oats

Bonus Soundtrack: "Zephyr's Flutter" by NIKK BLVKK
Chapter Notes

This chapter contains people feeling joy! Also, there will be: scars, sneaking a peak, traveling, quibbling Sand Siblings, mixed messages from Zabuza, Kakashi's approval, adventures in real estate, and bro talk.

Mature scene advisory: There will be brief, survivable, explicit material early and later on in this chapter. The keyword is explicit. Marked ### for your convenience. You know the drill, sinners and scholars.

Chapter Soundtrack: "Luv (sic) Part 2 [Instrumental]" by Autumn Raine

He stayed several strides behind Shino and Hinata on the return route to Leaf.

"Are you sure Kurenai-sensei is going to the Obon Festival tonight?" Sato called ahead to his teammates.

"She told us she would before we left for our mission," Hinata reminded him, "That's why we're bringing the honey wine along with us that we bought at the traveler's market. Sensei said it's one of her favorites!"

Sato had a laugh, "I don't know if Sensei ever met an alcohol she didn't like."

"For the record, she disdains licorice flavored beverages," Shino relayed over his shoulder, "Sensei said we should be mindful of that."

"Right," Sato nodded, "Lest we buy her a gift she can't drink…"

Hinata laughed at that, but then gave Sato a mild scolding for the comment.

It had been nearly two and a half weeks of frequent missions, high-security zone patrols, and other drudgery. Not so bad, Sato conceded, now that the summer heat was ebbing and growing cooler. Perfect festival temperatures, Hinata declared.

He didn't mention it then, but Sato had no plans to be out that night dancing, honoring the dead, or otherwise enjoying festivities. 'I haven't been in the village enough. There's barely been any time to visit Tama in-between my missions.' Sato thought as he picked up the pace, moving to head the team, 'She's probably bored out of her mind! I've gotta show her the snaps I took of that wisteria tunnel. And maybe later we can at least sit somewhere so she has a view of festival lights…'

During their scouting mission, Hinata briefly mentioned a procedure that Tama had undergone while he and Shino had been out on another assignment. She lacked the particulars of what the surgery was specifically intended for, as it had been a project of Sakura's. Bedrest was key, she understood. "I'm sure Tama-chan will be happy to see you home." Hinata added, "She'll feel like herself again."

Sato was taking that to heart as they closed in on a northwestern service road to the village, his teammates scrambling to match his speed.
After plodding through a clearance gate into the village proper, Hinata and Shino voiced their complaints about being pushed so hard.

"I was already feeling tired after supervising the exposition last night…" Hinata was rubbing her temples, "Then we helped move shipping containers…and interrogated the would-be thief at the warehouse…"

"Not a very good thief." Shino pointed out.

"There was no need to rush, Sato-kun." She concluded.

"Maybe not, but you guys can go home and rest now." Sato offered a bit of consolation, "I'll turn in the mission report, alright? I'll catch you later. I just want to—"

Shino already understood, "Tell Tama-san we hope she is feeling well."

Hinata seconded the motion and even offered to pay Tama a brief visit later. On the northernmost thoroughfare, the teammates set out in three separate directions.

Standard procedure would be to check in and debrief with the Hokage first, but Sato was a man on an elastic-snap trajectory with his better half. He turned down a brick alley lined with young, potted tree saplings that belonged to conservancy offices looming tall over the main avenue.

'Kakashi had better be visiting her— the hospital is boring as heck. I hope Tama's not mad that I've been busy…' Sato ruminated as he headed due south down the wide street, 'It's been killing me. I wanted to get promoted so badly, but it turns out the mission deployment schedule for new Chunin is brutal. I just want to see her! I need to take her out for fresh air tonight, somehow…'

The aromas of pre-cooking festival food stands wafted in the air. His half-empty stomach whined in response to the smells. Sato passed various cafes, buildings, and the outpatient therapy center, mere blocks away from Konoha Hospital before he gave up and stopped in his tracks.

"I'll be bitchy if I don't eat…" He muttered, "And Tama's a sucker for doughnuts, so…"

By that logic, Sato about-faced to march back to the nearest cafe with half a mind to order one of every confection on display. It took a moment to discern amongst the bustle of passers-by and activity on the street a familiar silhouette that had emerged from the therapy center. The young man frowned and blinked slowly. Sato's expression softened when he realized he had in fact spotted Tama, perfectly upright and unaware, in an eggshell blue sundress, exiting from the automatic sliding doors.

It definitely startled people on the sidewalk near him when Sato bellowed her name in shock.

Tama turned toward the call and was surprised to lay eyes on him, sheepish that she had been found out. She had been playing up the bed-ridden angle a little bit since his last visit, whilst religiously attending physical therapy sessions and adhering to Tsunade's prescriptions. Once Sato had returned from his mission, Tama planned to drop the happy bombshell on him. Though this moment would have to do, she supposed.

Sato stood rooted to the spot and wracked his brain while village pedestrians maneuvered around him on the busy street. How in the world was she so drastically improved? By what jutsu or intervention? 'Tama kept this from me—? And since when does that tracksuit-worshipping woman wear pretty dresses!' Sato's face lit up with a bamboozled grin. Now he didn't really care how exactly she was walking on her own two legs again. It was a thrill to see her do it. Without going so far as to assume she was completely recovered or able to take missions, just seeing Tama stand and wave to
him with an embarrassed smile was enough.

Foot traffic circulated in the space between them, and Tama squinted when Sato gestured to a nearby storefront. The boutique’s sound system was playing a favorite song of hers. She returned his grin when Sato mouthed the artist name to her. Their simultaneous head bobbing to the beat did not draw any attention. A few villagers did start to give them strange looks as they moved towards each other with gradual, slinking footwork. It was a brief, giddy dance in which they managed to avoid crashing into anyone. When Sato closed in and folded her hand against his, it was as if an electrical charge raced up his fingers. She was back. She could move! In so far as mild boogying, at any rate. That was a great sign. His heart was soaring.

"Lady—what are you doing walking around and looking so gorgeous?" He pulled Tama close, cackling with elation. Sato held the back of her head and kissed her before she could give a comment.

Two or three startled stares lingered on the public display of affection. Context may have explained the joyful meeting, but eventually people just kept walking.

"I'm sorry," Tama caught her breath after the kiss, "I wanted to surprise you! I've been going to physical therapy for over a week while you were on missions."

"I thought you'd— never again…" He shook his head and calmed down, "Tama, how are you doing this? Does anything hurt?"

"Nope, not really." Her smile was mirthful.

"Sunshine said that you had surgery for something, but you didn't tell me about that either." Sato sniffed in mock-annoyance, "The jig is up."

A voice carried as it exited the automatic doors of the therapy center, playfully taunting them, "Huh! You're like a pair of magnets…" It was Tsunade. She stopped near the two young ninja and rested a hand on her hip, "You've improved quite a bit, Tama-chan. Today went well. You only need to come to the center twice a week from here on out."

"Thank you, Tsunade-sama." Tama put a polite distance between herself and Sato, although he still held on to her hand.

"Hokage-sama-!" By then, Sato had mostly worked out the riddle of Tama's recovery, "You did this for her? Tama's going to be fine-?

"Just fine." Tsunade assured him, "The procedure was risky, but as you can see we were successful. High-risk bets tend to pay out for me, I've noticed. I'm glad I was able to help."

"I need to repay you somehow…" His throat felt thick and Sato gave a small bow while adding, "I'll never be able to thank you enough, Hokage-sama."

Tsunade waved him off and turned up her nose, "If you want to thank me, work hard. I want the two of you to make me proud." She couldn't resist a small smile, "Seeing two grinning yuks in love brings me back to the days I miss most."

Sato kept thanking her and tried to transition into debriefing about the results of his team's mission. Tsunade silenced him with a raised finger.

"Submit a report to me in the morning. Tonight is Obon and you have catching up to do." Tsunade insisted, "Tama-chan: that medication I gave you is taken three times daily. Keep up with it. I'll let
you know when I think you're fit enough to resume mission activity."

Tama nodded chipperly, "I will. Tsunade-sama, thank you so much."

"I just did what I do best, young lady. Now I expect the same of you." The Hokage flipped a pigtail off of her shoulder and turned up the street, "Hatake— bright and early tomorrow."

Once the Hokage had moved on, Sato could barely contain mile-a-minute questions as he accompanied Tama down the street. She tried to keep up with her answers: no, no pain— at least not as bad as it had been. Yes, she was wearing full-length black leggings because her legs were now rather unsightly. Sato scoffed at this answer, but Tama insisted, "Because of the surgery, I have a patchwork of scars that won't go away. I'm glad I have my life ahead of me… but I know I'll be a bit self-conscious from here on out."

"Don't be." Sato squeezed her hand, "You can't help being beautiful at all times, no matter what you go through."

Thrilled, Tama bit her lip.

"Are you going home now?" He asked her.

"Yeah. Dad's at work and Mom has workshops all morning. I thought I'd go home to nap until she comes back from grocery shopping." Tama filled him in, "Why don't you come over? We cut up a huge watermelon and I can't eat it by myself."

"Sure. But uh… doesn't your dad call dibs on watermelon at your house?"

"Usually he does. For some reason he forgot to pack slices before he went to work." Tama recalled, "His head's been scrambled since I recovered. I think Dad's happy… but whenever I go to therapy or see friends he needs to know where I'm going and when I'll be back. I can tell he's still worried."

Sato supposed quietly, "That's only natural."

They turned onto the boulevards of the more affluent side of the Leaf Village. The suburban vista was more peaceful and the homes more uniformly nouveau riche than the rest of Konoha's battle-battered and reconstructed neighborhoods. Maito Ken and most of his well-off acquaintances inhabited this community.

Tama's questions snapped Sato out of his sight-seeing, "What have your missions been like? Is it any different now that you're a Chunin?"

"Uh… kinda the same, honestly. Maybe even before we were promoted Tsunade-sama was trusting us with higher difficulty tasks. Patrols are way more frequent now because we're on alert for the Akatsuki and other threats… " He caught himself and then turned to Tama, wide-eyed, "Hey, did the Hokage promote you? She said you were eligible! Where's your—?"

"My Chunin vest is at home." Tama laughed softly.

"So she did give it to you! Good!" Sato was relieved, "I blew my top about that a while ago."

"I know. Sakura-chan still talks about it. She said you were like my chivalrous knight when you objected." She was smiling and rosy-cheeked, " Though you could've been more even-keeled about it."

"I can only do even-keeled about fifty percent of the time." He gave a small shrug, "Or whenever my
The many trees and flowerbeds on the Maito property were bursting with life and color. Tama led the way up the stone walk to the front door, then opened it and retrieved mail that had been dropped through the postal slot. Sato reminded himself as they went inside that the house was not staged for a magazine spread. It was a real home that people lived in, albeit the furnishings, paintings, potted plants and décor were ostentatious by plebeian standards. They removed their shoes in the fanciest genkan in existence.

"Come in!" She dumped the mail on a white stone countertop and directed him to sit in the kitchen. Tama retrieved the watermelon and set it on dishes, "Here you go. Hm. Do you smell something?"

"Other than the twenty scent-diffusers you have in your mansion?" Sato verified. He bit into a juicy slice and his eyes rolled back in summertime bliss.

"Other than the scent-diffusers." Tama snickered, "I'll find the odor. Maybe I need to take the garbage out?" She sat at the counter with him and munched.

"So have you seen Kakashi lately? Does he know?"

Tama nodded, "He and Sakura-chan know. I'll tell Kiba-kun soon."

"Is anyone else in the dark?" Sato wondered.

"Most everyone else doesn't know I'm up and about, I figure." Tama imagined, "But I thought I could take it easy and walk around the Obon festival to say hello."

"Great idea." Sato concurred, "I'll show you off to everyone."

"Well, I'm still a little beat-up." She conceded, "And I won't be able to stay out for long. I get tired."

"That's why you said you wanted to nap?" He said between mouthfuls of fruit.

"Yeah. It'll take time to build my strength back up to what it was. I'm not going to torture myself about not being as fit."

"That'd be stupid. It's a miracle you can stand and move! Who cares if you can't punch walls down yet?"

"Not you." She chuckled.

"Yo, this is like the best thing I ever tasted."

"You said that about the scones at the hospital." Tama spat seeds out onto her plate.

"Oh yeah. Those were good too."

"You can count on me, Sato. I know where to find delicious stuff. Chouji-kun goes out shopping with me sometimes."

"Say what?" Sato's face lit up, "Chouji takes you on gastronomy expeditions?"

"Sure does. Since last year! Sometimes Sakura-chan comes with us."
He employed faux-outrage, "How *dare* you leave me out."

"I feed you don't I?" She teased.

"More than you should, probably." Sato dropped a third gnawed-on melon rind on a plate, "Your dad's gonna be mad. We barely left any for him."

She shrugged, "He'll deal with it."

Sato started to wipe his mouth on the back of his hand, but Tama *tsked* at the behavior. So he bunched up his shirt to dab at the corners of his mouth just to annoy her.

"You're making a mess of yourself!" Tama leaned across the counter to pluck a watermelon seed from his unzipped vest, "Can't take you anywhere…" She paused and sniffed him, "Oh. It's you."

"What's me?" Sato was confused.

"It's not the kitchen garbage that stinks." Tama informed him smugly.

*Al-right. There's need to antagonize, because you were the one who invited me over after a strenuous mission.* Sato snorted defensively, "And said mission may have involved me diving into a dumpster to pull a thief out of hiding."

"Ah. Now it makes sense." She took the plate away to dispose of the rinds.

"I couldn't send Sunshine in after him when she spotted him! If she went home stinking and covered in garbage, her dad would go nuts. Ditto Shino, believe it or not. So that just leaves me because I've got no one to offend at home." Sato meant the anecdote to be amusing, but he wilted a little as he realized his situation.

"Well…" Tama rounded the corner and kissed his cheek, "You're home with *me* and your smell is offending *me*."

"That makes me feel less lonely." He admitted. Sato moved in to peck her lips affectionately, but Tama pushed him back while fanning a hand in front of her face.

He barked in embarrassment and Tama laughed as she retreated up the staircase to the second level, calling back to him to follow. Sato ascended the stairs and tried not to touch anything with fruit-sticky fingers.

Tama gestured to the bathroom, "Go shower off please."

"I *could*, but my clothes will still smell."

"I'll wash them." She offered, "If you're going to join me for naptime, I don't need you smelling unpleasant."

"Excuse me; I didn't know I was invited to any such *nap.*" Sato pointed out archly. He detected that maybe she was luring him into something other than just a *come-over-and-eat-watermelon* visit. Which was *great*. He didn't feel the need to ask questions.

"Yes, you're invited. You had a long day, Sato-kun, and so…" Tama shooed him into the bathroom and then moved on to a linen closet to find spare towels.

Sato spoke from within the echoing washroom, "Just wondering— what am I supposed to wear in the meantime?"
"A t-shirt and sweatpants."

"Of yours?"

"You'll fit. You have slender hips."

"...I don't know how to take that." Sato was not sure if that was a compliment.

"Relax. Go clean up!"

So he did, mostly because the bathroom was the pinnacle of modern amenities and it fascinated him. Everything was bright, shiny, and spotless. The mirror was sprawling and backlit. The glass shower was giant and took over space that could have housed a tub, 'But there's no tub! This place is barbaric! All this modern stuff...' Certainly the family had enough money for a hot spring membership to bathe whenever they felt like it. Sato undressed, turned the shower tap, and then moseyed on in. He stood under the shower head as his eyes fluttered shut, muscles loosening under the rain of hot water. 'Actually...modern isn't so bad.'

"Towels!" Tama shouted into the bathroom. She had left a pile on the vanity, collected his ripe clothing, and then bustled out to throw it in a washing machine.

'Ahh... Life's good. I got my act together. Tama's okay! My team is handling tougher missions...’ He sighed and let his head droop forward, 'Maybe I'll just take my nap in here...'

It occurred to him while fussing at a spot of dirt on his skin that maybe soap would help...but there was none. 'Okay, so the fancy shower is also pretty empty. Should've paid attention to that...

Sato called out to Tama until she popped back in, winded, "What is it? Trying to make me run around my house on busted legs?"

He protested, "Your legs aren't busted anymore!"

She was entertained, "Can't wash your back?"

"Literally. I can't. Don't you have any soap in this futuristic palace?” He immersed his head in the stream and let it sodden his hair, flattening it to his head. It was fun by Sato's standards.

"Oh, sorry.” Tama tottered in and riffled around in a cabinet, extracting a bottle of shampoo and bar soap, "Dad's rules. We put stuff away when we're not using it."

"My god, no wonder this place looks like a museum."

She tossed the items over the top of the glass panel and the small shampoo bottle bopped him in the head. The soap zipped across the shower's bottom, too slippery to catch.

"Ouch." Sato said as an afterthought.

Tama ordered other odds and ends on the vanity, "I know it looks tidy and un-lived in, but if I had it my way I'd have a normal, traditional house. It gets on my nerves how Dad needs everything so...

"Editorial-worthy?” He supplied.

"Regimented."

"That's his whole life." Sato agreed, "But I kind of like how your house looks."
"You still make fun of it."

"Maybe because I'm a little jealous."

"Don't be. It takes a lot of work to keep a place looking like this..." Tama sighed.

"So," Sato imagined blindly as he rinsed shampoo from his hair, "You want a house that looks more...lived in?"

"Like, a house that I can take my jacket off and maybe leave it on my couch without getting harangued? Or, dishes can wait in the kitchen sink for a while?" Tama laughed, "Could you live like that?"

"Tama, I do live like that."

"That's what I want."

"Then let's get you exactly what you want." Sato decided, "I'm happy either way, as long as it's got at least four walls and a roof."

It was quiet after that. Sato supposed she had gone out again to attend to laundry. He soaped up his hands and rubbed behind his ears, beneath arm pits, and under finger nails. He tried to cry out the shampoo that had gotten into his left eye. 'Ow. I've been blinded for life.' He wasn't used to this upright-showering business.

Then, Sato nearly jumped in fright when he felt a fingertip slide down his back. He lost the soap again as it slipped from his hand and zoomed away. Like a one-eyed fool he glanced over his shoulder.

"Is something wrong with your eye?" Tama asked him.

"Yeah. Shampoo got in it." Sato cut to the chase, "Tama, what're you doing in here?"

"I wanted to clean up too. I lift weights and do exercises at the therapy center."

"But you don't smell, and there's this thing called waiting your turn." Sato reminded her.

"I know." Tama picked up the wayward soap, smiling to herself.

###

Sato tried rubbing the sting from his eye because it would be better to see the incredible, naked woman with restored vision. For the moment, he had reached a bizarre mental impasse in which this could have been the most superb thing that had ever happened to him, but he was also distinctly bashful and thinking about how Tama had just recovered. What was this hasty flirtation about? If it could even be called that? Maybe it wasn't. Maybe she was trying to conserve water? Have conversation? Maybe she just felt like seeing him naked? He snapped out of it when she gave him a small nudge.

She moved Sato aside so she could wet her head and smooth her hair. Tama assured him, "I'll be out in a minute."

"Yup. Or, you know..." He said in a small voice, "A few minutes."

Tama was watching him in her peripheral after setting the soap bar down, "We could do a few minutes."
She rubbed herself down with suds and Sato made a half-hearted attempt not to watch, but all he could really do was watch. He wondered if she knew that his breathing had been reduced to short gasps, or that his heart rate was rocketing. With his back to the cool tile wall, Sato maintained what distance he could. She was there, right in front of him, not yet noticing the many ways he was reacting to her.

Remarkably calm, Tama held up a soapy hand and asked him, "Want me to get your back?"

To speak would mean risking his voice cracking in a pitch that straddled ecstasy and terror. Sato turned around without a word and let her set to work. He stopped a soft whimper from passing his lips, because she didn't need to hear that and he didn't need to make it any weirder. He pressed his forehead to patterned tile and tried to breathe.

"Is this okay?" Tama asked him, "Are you okay?"

Sato gave her a look over his shoulder, "You're asking that now?"

"…maybe I am a bit late with this question."

"You definitely, deliberately want us to see each other like this?" He asked, "Not that I would ever protest…only that I hope you know you don't need to rush. You just got better, Tama. If you want to be close, if you want something from me…"

Tama rested the pads of her thumbs over the base of his spine, eliciting an eep from him.

"We've both wanted each other for a while now." She noted.

"There's no denying that." Sato confirmed.

"The only reason I asked you to wait for me was because I didn't understand. Not the way I do now." Tama clarified, "When you come so close to dying and losing the ability to live the life you want to…your perspective can change."

He turned around to look at her, bemused, because this was exactly the same thing he had thought. Sato raised his eyebrows and understood that, ah, she'd gone through it too. Tama had nearly died. When she'd survived, Tama had nearly accepted a life in which she had limited use of her body. Many of the things she wanted would have been forfeit— the things he had also once taken for granted. Sato realized she was chuckling at him because he was subconsciously cupping his chin while he thought about it.

"Sorry, I just," Sato moved to hold her elbows as her hands settled on him, "I completely understand what you're talking about."

"That's a relief. But…on top of all of that…it's kind of an exercise in self-esteem." Tama admitted, "I didn't look like this two months ago. I was smooth and pretty…"

"Are you saying that you're not-? Because you sure look super smooth and amazing." He didn't get it.

She furrowed her brow, "The scars and marks. These won't go away. I worried that you wouldn't…like what you saw."

Sato blew a small raspberry, "That's crazy talk. You are the hottest thing I have ever seen. Now made hotter by badass scars. I'm not happy about how you got them, but believe me, they are not a turn-off."

Tama nodded and smiled a little.

"Oh and in case you haven't noticed," He took her hand and traced one of Tama's fingers over the puckers and marks on his chest and side, "I was looking like ground-beef for a while even after Sakura-chan and Sunshine saved my life. I didn't exactly feel attractive after that, and it took some courage to actually dip in a public hot spring again. I am way more fucked up than our guy friends, and Neji's got his share of scars too."

"Thanks in part to you." She reminded him.

"Eh, what's one more? I don't think he cares."

Tama curled into him and let her fingertips acquaint themselves with the scores on his skin. "I like how you look." She told him.

A pleased rumble escaped him as Sato pressed kisses to her temple. Being nude around each other felt much easier after that heart-to-heart. Not to mention exhilarating—his hands roamed easily over Tama's shower-slick skin, slipping up from her exceptional bottom, over her flanks to rest on her waist. He was examining faded bruises along her ribcage and the spots where he knew her ribs had been broken, and had since healed. Tama tipped her head up to press her lips to his.

Light-headed, Sato happily participated in the lascivious kiss. He was also having a low-key, ethical debate in the right temporo-parietal junction of his brain, just behind the right ear. *I am all for existential conclusions leading to possible shower sex, but if I am honest...I am still nursing my wounded conscience back to health. Before either of us forgets—Tama is recovering from a serious injury.* His inner specter added, *Though she is hot and very willing, and I do appreciate her enthusiasm, now is a good time to slow it down. Give it a couple of days! Yeah. Besides, we'll prune up in here—*

But oh hell she had touched him there and suddenly his train of thought careened away into misty nothingness. It was a stray touch that traveled away from his erection and up his abdomen, and Tama made a peep of apology as she was unsure what the quivering of his eyelids and the bowing of his back meant. She was prepared to rethink the close proximity until Sato looped an arm around her, pressing himself into her stomach-to-stomach.

She was not resisting the drenched kisses that followed. Tama was lively, making soft sounds, exploring him with her hands. What brain function Sato *could* muster suggested that Tama wasn't hurting or doubting, and oh, how her skin slid superbly over his with the smallest of motions... At worst, he figured, the liaison would waste water. They took an intermission for air.

"You know, it was kind of never polite to say it before now," Sato said while rolling his palms over her breasts, "But Tama, these are awesome boobs."

"Thank you, it's definitely more polite to say it now." She agreed smilingly.

"Like, proportionately perfect boobs. Like— artists should reference you for legendary statues—boobs."

"Huh." Tama was gliding her fingertips along the array of scars on his torso. "That's some high praise. They aren't big."

Sato nodded, "Exactly. But the shape and texture...this," Sato gave a light squeeze, "Is why art tries to imitate life. You are Exhibit A."

"I think I'm flattered." She pecked his mouth and then asked, "Can I touch you?"
"You are touching me." His hands were migrating back to her bottom.

Tama wrapped her hand around his length, "I meant here."

Sato folded over slightly with a soft whine, resting his forehead against the side of her face. He took a moment before confirming in a squeak, "Yeah, that's— that's good. I can handle that."

"Are you sure?" Tama snaked her free hand up the back of his neck to brace his head as he leaned into her, "You are allowed to say no. Maybe this isn't a good time…or place. Even no, maybe later is okay." She was smiling at him and just enjoying the embrace. She was not about to proceed unless she got an affirmative from him.

"Tama." He laid his hand over hers to indicate the right pressure and direction of touch, "Yes now and yes later."

Her mouth hovered just a breath from his as she amended, "Well, not later, because later it'll be nap time."

Sato had no problem with that arrangement, exhaling harshly before slanting his mouth over Tama's lips again. So much for thinking straight…and so much for patience and water conservation too. But since Tama had initiated it, and Sato was aware that he was a total fool for this exquisite woman who'd miraculously recovered, he was going along with the feeling.

Tama's ministrations were clumsy, unlearned, and perfect. Sato could only watch her for a few moments before he shut his eyes again, kissing blindly along her neck and shoulders. The sensations flashed through him.

Her palm and fingers stroked along the curvature of the head and then the underside of his shaft, dazzling the nerves there that felt so good Sato sucked in a hissing breath, snapping his eyes open again. He stared at her face in an effort to comprehend it, and then noticed that he wasn't doing much reciprocating. After having his lower lip gently nibbled by Tama he asked, "Where's best for you? I want you to feel good."

"Your hands are doing wonders so far…" Tama informed him. Though that assurance did not stop Sato from sampling other locations, and before long she gave up trying to convince him otherwise. The caresses up and down her sides, over dusty rose nipples, and circling below her naval made her shake from the stimulation. She was muttering small sounds she had no idea she could make. Her legs were not especially strong either, knees trembling in excitement.

A bit tired, Tama braced herself against his body, and while she was at it she indulged a little. With a furtively satisfied look on her face, she rolled her hips and ground against him, sliding him slowly along her shower-damp mons. About then Tama got the idea that maybe there was a more mutually gratifying way to go about the act, and she was aching for it, but before she could suggest it she felt Sato's nails sink into the flesh of her upper arms.

Startled, Tama regarded him as the muscles in his neck tensed, his handsome face suspended in dreamy astonishment and his eyes narrowed to slits. She felt him twitch against her stomach and fingertips, trolling her gaze down while Sato was lost in the waves of release. Tama was not at all offended that he had finished on her lower stomach and hip. She was still feeling the whir of arousal as she marveled at his charming, silver features and vulnerability. Tama was also rather intrigued by the slippery, pale, pulpy result on her skin, but Sato snapped her out of her examination when he too realized what had happened and squawked in horror.

"Oh my god—" He shoved her back into the direct stream of the shower, which was colder now,
ignoring Tama's sputtering as she was wetted down and he swiped the ejaculate off of her, "—I really didn't think I'd-!"

"Sato, it's fine. I was the—"

"—some goddamn jerkoff like me doing this to you! You need to take it easy and I know it. What's the matter with me—?"

She shut the water off and then turned to him, holding his face in her hands, "Sato, do you think I would have tried any of that if I didn't know how it could've ended?"

His mouth and cheeks were scrunched as he answered, "…maybe?"

"I have kunoichi friends who never stop talking about this stuff." Tama reassured him, "So I've heard a lot. Just so you know, it was great and I think we should do it again tomorrow."

"Uh." Sato inhaled and took her hands in his, "Okay…but I really need to think this sort of thing through more. We ought to be careful…and what if you slipped in here and broke something again?"

"Don't worry so much." She reached for towels and handed him one, "I'm tougher now. I've been tempered in battle and this shower is no match for me."

"Well, I also meant careful as in—"

Tama notified him as she patted her hair dry, "Even if you were inside of me you couldn't make a baby. Not right now, anyway."

With a slow, owl-like blink Sato said, "Whoa. That sounds scandalous when you say it." It was the first time anything like that had been declared to him, "By the way, how do you know that?" They continued toweling dry.

"I've been on medication for…hm…five years? To treat other issues. That's why you can't." She stepped out cautiously with his help, "And back then you didn't need to know."

"I had no clue..." He mumbled.

"It's okay. Most men have no clue."

"Hey, there's no need for blanket dismissals like that."

She was laughing quietly as she wrapped herself up, "Even if it's true?"

Sato followed her out, "Many of us care and are diligent about contraception. Shikamaru knows everything, I swear. He's a very reliable encyclopedia. I think this was even a topic of conversation once while I was out somewhere with my dudes. At least until Shino and Neji told us to change the subject."

Tama snickered at that.

###

In her bedroom, she handed Sato a dark pair of sweatpants and a stretched-out tank top to put on. He was not thrilled about being commando until his clothes were clean and dried. Tama dressed in athleisure and told him to bear with it, "You won't care about that so much if you sleep a little."

"These are kinda tight. I feel like you can see my everything." He pawed across her bed and flopped
"I already saw your everything." Tama hummed happily. She rolled over onto her sheets and fluffed a pillow, motioning for Sato to raise his head and then drop it again on the cushion. They settled down and curled into each other. Tama added, "Your butt looks good in those."

"Thanks, I bet yours does too." He slipped his arm under the pillow and her neck, pulling her closer, "Are you sure your mom won't flip out when she comes home?"

"I'm sure. You're one of my mom's favorite people." Tama yawned, "And it's just my dad who flips out. He won't be home until late tonight."

"Phew." Sato breathed easier at that.

She was genuinely tired. Tama tapped her fingertip tenderly to his lips as her eyes drooped and then closed. He watched her and let his thoughts amble off the beaten path.

To think this had nearly been taken away from him— this simple and joyful fulfillment. Sato had once come close to losing his life on a desperate mission, had carelessly and drunkenly risked his relationship with Tama for the company of a stranger…and had watched Tama imperil herself at the hands of a vicious psychopath at the Exam. This moment, just to relax in good health and peace beside her, was so valuable that it stung Sato to think of how he used to overlook such precious gifts.

'And if I ever see that bastard again...I'll cut him down no matter what. He can hide in any shadow he wants, but I'll still roast him with a light-wing...' Sato believed that Huo had not been adequately punished. According to Kakashi's most recent update, Leaf's Torture and Interrogation Corps was preparing to package Huo in such a way that he would be deprived of his Tao Arts and Jutsu when turned over to Iwa at an agreed upon mid-point. He had half a mind to follow behind the assigned team and bump off the bastard during the journey, no matter the consequences.

"Hm." Tama cracked an eye open at him, "Why are you scowling, Sato?"

"-oh! I was just thinking." His face slackened again, "I'm still not over what Huo did— the cheap shot he used to hurt you. If I ever get the chance...I know I would kill him. I wouldn't think twice."

"That's not good." Tama's fingertips continued brushing the side of his face, "Huo should be judged by those who are responsible for him and those who let him enter our village. He's not worth your time, Sato. Take it from someone who's fought him."

"I just hate feeling that powerless— that I couldn't do anything to protect you or shut him down." He admitted.

"I understand...but you don't need to hold on to that feeling. It'd be exhausting to maintain that anger wouldn't it?" She reasoned, "There are better things to feel. More important things we can do now..."

Sato couldn't resist the wily smile spreading on his face, "You've got a point there."


"Since we've both been promoted to Chunin, we're now in higher income brackets."

"Yeah." Her eyes shut again as she listened.

"You could...move out of your parents' house, if you wanted." Sato suggested.
"Maybe once I'm done with physical therapy…I could start looking on the west side of Konoha for a place." She guessed sleepily.

"And why would you do that?"

Tama peeked her eyes open again, "Because the west side is cheaper?"

"Actually, Tama, I was thinking you should live with me." His smile widened.

She seemed slightly more awake, "Oh."

Sato waggled his eyebrows enthusiastically at her.

Tama gave it a moment before she asked, "When do I start packing my things?"

"Well, don't hurry. I think we should look at some new places. I'm attached to my flat…but it is kind of beat up and small." He conceded.

She scooched closer to be nose-to-nose with him, "So…still on the west side of the village? Where would you like to go?"

"Anywhere. Let's talk to someone who knows about property hunting."

Tama nodded, "Of course. My dad has a friend who's a realtor, and I bet we can find a nice place to rent if he helps us look."

"Speaking of, I should probably talk to your mom and dad soon." Sato added as he fiddled with strands of her black hair.

"They've both been in higher spirits lately so your timing is ideal." Tama encouraged, "Is it about looking for a pl—?"

"I should get permission first before I marry you." He informed her, "That's the right way to go about it, and maybe it'd make your dad feel a bit more at ease." Sato exhaled roughly as an afterthought, "Or he'd relish one last chance to tell me to go scratch…but I'm hoping that he'll understand."

Tama had gone very still and quiet.

"But what do you think of…something small? It doesn't have to be ornate or garish if you're not into that. Maybe not a wedding-wedding, but, you know—a civil officiant thing." He tried to describe what he had in mind, "It'd be kind of amazing to…come home to you…every day."

After what felt like a while Sato observed as Tama lifted his hand (it had been laced with hers) and lightly slapped her cheek with it. She blinked hard to make sure she was awake.

"Come on now, don't do that." He rubbed her face and then wrapped his arm around her waist, "Did you…have any thoughts on this? Honestly, I think it can be whenever. I've missed you and I just…" Sato gave her a squeeze, "I'm so glad you're okay. I'll always be grateful for that. I can't stand not being with you all of the time." He gulped when she did not respond, and Sato wondered if she was taking him seriously, "Woman, don't leave me hanging! Say some words!"

"I…" She was smiling, "Just wanted a nap."

"You are killing me."

"Well…" Tama grinned a little, "I kind of wanted to get laid first. Before I become a respectful
woman who will carry on your family name…"

"Oh for crying out— yeah, sure, if that is a point of contention," Sato tried to wipe the smug look off of her face, "Once you are a bit stronger and out of that therapy routine, I will take care of that for you. No problem. But please tell me that is kind of a yes—?"

"It's always been yes." Tama reminded him.

"But not because someone told you it was. You want to marry me because you want me?" He pressed.

"Purely of my own accord and love for you…" She assured him, "Free from external demands, recommendations, or obligations…that is an unfiltered yes."

"Even if it won't be perfect?"

"Nothing ever is."

He cupped her face and kissed her again, "You know that I'm crazy about you, right? That I love you? Even though it took me a while to understand…"

Tama nodded sleepily, "I know it."

Sato pecked her lips and face while she struggled not to drift off, muttering, "Thank you, thank you…I've been dumb. I was scared. I love you…thank you—" Tama silenced him with a warm kiss. She drew back and gave him a bleary-eyed look, "You're still spiraling with a little bit of post-mission stress. It's okay. You really need a nap, and then afterward you can re-propose if you want to or we'll just accept this one as is…because it was very sweet and I didn't expect it."

"Ah, good. Did it get full points?" Tension seemed to whoosh out of Sato as he relaxed in the embrace.

Tama only yawned back at him and nuzzled into his neck, making happy affirmative sounds.

"Thank you for hanging in there. Thanks for the watermelon…and that shower. And for these pants, and…" A sympathetic response made Sato yawn, "Thanks for…just being glorious."

"Shh." She rested her hands just above his belly button.

Sato took the cue to stop extolling and thanking her, then shut his eyes and settled down to enjoy a rejuvenating, brief sleep.

Naruto wondered if it was only his imagination as he and Jiraiya finally began to see more consistent swatches of blue sky up above. The treacherous, winding path through the hills and jungles surrounding the Toad Valley had made for quite a claustrophobic trip. Also, they were going at a slower pace than anticipated. Jiraiya had complained frequently of lumbar pain as they carried on.

"I think…" Naruto did not want to speak too soon, "We are almost out of here…?"

"Goddamn." Jiraiya took a few tired steps forward to get a glimpse of the waning wilds and greenery ahead, "That took way longer than I remembered. Must be because I'm older and creakier now…"

"That might have something to do with it." For Naruto, it had not been nearly as rough.
"Look up there: a dirt path instead of debris and moss, some unobstructed sky…that's the Fire Country out there. The human-friendly portion of it, anyway." The man mustered the will power to keep moving, "Don't let me stop until we make it to an inn or something. I'm due to pass out."

"You're fine. I'll piggyback you out of here if I have to." Naruto was buoyant, "You can even feel a breeze now!"

"Pff. That's nice. Tell my legs and back that I'm fine. They need some convincing."

By mid-afternoon, after their slow exit from the cusp of the toad wilds and setting out a dirt road spanning rolling hills dotted with sparse trees and plants, a building was spotted on the horizon. Naruto did have to keep up the morale just to get Jiraiya there, schlep him inside, remove his crusty geta in the genkan, greet the innkeeper and then reserve a room. His mentor barely made it through a proper bath to clean jungle grime off before collapsing in a hotel room on a futon.

"You didn't even eat dinner yet. They'll be serving it any minute now." Naruto reminded him from a low table in an adjoining room, "This is a nice place, Ero-sensei. Don't you have another hour in you somewhere?"

"Kid, you don't know what it's like when everything hurts and exhausts you. Nope. You don't catch colds. You don't ache. You don't even bleed for very long with all of that Uzumaki vitality of yours." Jiraiya sniffed, "I am gonna lay here until dinner is served because it makes me feel better."

"Have it your way, you old bag of bones." He chuckled, "I can still talk to you from over here."

Jiraiya let out a long sigh.

"That bath was really nice. I was way dirtier than I realized." Naruto stretched his arms above his head, luxuriating in the robe the inn had provided.

"Yeah, it was refreshing. This is great place…just as pleasant as I remember it." Jiraiya laced his hands and rested them on his chest, "I haven't been here…since I last stopped by with your dad. That was a hell of a long time ago."

"Wow."

"Yep. Your hair's gotten so long you've started to freakishly resemble Minato, so I'm trying not to mistakenly call you by his name. When you get haircuts it does my memory a favor."

Naruto was amused by that, "Really? I wonder if people would notice if I went home looking like this?"

"In Leaf? I'm thinking it could confuse a good portion of older citizens. Give 'em flashbacks…"

"I don't know if I really want to tell anyone about...Dad. Or anything personal."

"Then don't. Even if they ask you who you're related to, it shouldn't matter." Jiraiya gruffed, "You're amazing all on your own, kiddo. I know they're gonna realize that. Everyone who's ever doubted or overlooked you…"

Naruto pooched his lips at the sentiment.

Jiraiya picked at crust in the corner of his eyes, "Of course I'll take a bit of credit for how amazing you are. I put work into you."
Shortly after that, various plated fish fillets and meats, pickled vegetables, dipping noodles, and soups were brought to the room and carefully set on the table. Jiraiya eventually hobbled over to take a seat across from his student.

Naruto pointed out before tucking into a bowl of soba noodles, "You probably can't tell right now…but everything feels light out here—thin and airy outside of the Toad Valley."

"You're right. I don't feel that because I'm an arthritic mess at present…but I used to be able to notice the difference in chakra density shortly after leaving Mount Myoboku." Jiraiya agreed, "It'll wear off in about a day. You won't notice after that."

"That's what I thought. So, have you ever been to Hidden Sand? What's it like crossing the desert?"

"Well. A lo-oong time ago I made some visits out there. Usually for diplomatic assignments…" The man stopped to bite through a cucumber, "Uh…if I recall…it's not the cleanest, easiest trip. If weather permits and we don't have to deal with a sandstorm, then all we need to do is avoid too much sun exposure and accept that we're going to have sand granules up our ass cracks and everywhere else. For a while."

"Sounds great."

"The crossing isn't great, but Suna is. It's nice there, actually. And going off of what Gaara has shared with us, they've invested quite a bit in public works and greenhouse projects. The city itself has a lot going on, plenty of shade and shopping…" Jiraiya squinted his eyes as he recalled, "Also, the Kazekage's mansion is spectacular. We can count ourselves lucky that Gaara decided to put us up in his home. But he might be singing a different tune after he has to live with us for the first week…"

Naruto gestured his chopsticks at his mentor, "Come on, it won't be that bad. We minded our manners at Ma and Pa's house!"

"Yeah, but you'll get excited and forget yourself. I'm calling it now. You always used to goof off around Gaara." Jiraiya smiled mirthfully, "And I don't think that's ever going to change."

Naruto had to admit that, no, it would probably never change.

With the end of dinner, Jiraiya predictably retired to his room with some fond remarks to his student, shut the shared dividing door, and was soon snoring after that. As it was still a bit early that evening, the sunset darkening along the horizon, Naruto took a seat beside his room's wide glass window. He peered out at the slow waltz of fireflies above the grass of the inn's yard. He felt somewhat anxious to be apart from Mount Myoboku's lush beauty and security, but the hints of nature blinking and breathing outside calmed him. Naruto stared for a while, propping his cheek up in his palm while he leaned on the pane.

'…so this is weird. I was excited to leave. I wanted to go home and see my friends…get promoted and get back into a mission routine…' Naruto thought to himself, 'And yeah, sure, I am excited, but there's a coating of uncertainty on top of that. I feel nervous. Like, scared of how people might react to me. And-! How am I going to resume life at home without Gaara and Haku around? At least for a while…What's that gonna be like?'

Maybe he would have described himself as an outgoing, courageous fellow before embarking on this training trip with Jiraiya, Naruto figured. But he'd been humbled. He had seen and learned so many incredible things. Valuable things. The more there was to cherish, the more that prickling fear and doubt nipped away at the edges of his bold, vivacious disposition. The well-defined parameters and expectations of his life before the journey, before making discoveries on his own— they had been
knocked down and rearranged. Such a change probably wasn't a bad thing, Naruto thought to himself. He'd walked out of that valley wiser than he'd gone in. These changes, even with the anxiety that accompanied his outlook, these changes were going to benefit others. He could return to the people that needed him with new knowledge to back up his convictions.

'It's benefited me too for sure. Even the sad stuff. As hard as it was, knowing it and going through it just...frames life. What I want to do and how I want to live. How to get it right and how to accept when I get it wrong...' Naruto exhaled deeply through his nostrils, 'And...I'm kind of freaking out. It's benefited me too for sure. Even the sad stuff. As hard as it was, knowing it and going through it just...frames life. What I want to do and how I want to live. How to get it right and how to accept when I get it wrong...'

Naruto thought to himself. He'd walked out of that valley wiser than he'd gone in. These changes, even with the anxiety that accompanied his outlook, these changes were going to benefit others. He could return to the people that needed him with new knowledge to back up his convictions.

'And...I'm kind of freaking out. What are Gaara and Haku like now? Well, aside from how bitchy they are on paper. Or sometimes sentimental. Seems like I only get one tone or the other when they write to me...' He frowned, 'Come to think of it...those guys...' It occurred to him he was mildly annoyed at his two friends.

Not in a friendship-shattering, argument-worthy sort of way. Rather, Naruto was not pleased that Gaara and Haku had unknowingly developed a habit of keeping secrets from each other, while fitting Naruto in the middle as they only shared truths with him. 'God! What is that about? They really need to knock it off. I mean, I know they went through that phase around the first Chunin Exam where they were arguing and resorting to fisticuffs...but like! That better not be the norm now. When they're relaxed they get along great...' Naruto scratched his chin and stewed on it. 'I don't want to be a middle-man when they run afoul of each other, jeez! They need to develop coping tools that don't constantly involve me.'

'Yeah. I won't divulge any of the stuff they keep from each other— that's baggage they can work out. I'm not gonna be a therapist or convey favoritism...because I'll need them to help me when I feel overwhelmed and pissed too.' Apart from his concerns about the Akatsuki, enemies of Leaf, and the mysterious attacker who had struck on the night he was born, Naruto was sure he would need backup for other matters as well, 'Trust! And stuff. I hope that when Gaara gets Haku home, they can take that opportunity to be honest with each other.'

As full dark stretched over the landscape, Naruto noodled on the possible outcomes and watched the intensifying light show of insects trying to attract mates.

'I guess while I'm in Hidden Sand I can suggest that to Gaara. Gotta be subtle about it, though. He can get so damn defensive...' He sighed softly, 'If all else fails I can sick Sakura-chan on him. That'll keep him—' Naruto blinked as a rush of longing for his own girlfriend stormed the front of his mind, 'Hinata.' He rubbed his face roughly in his hands, 'Now that I think about it...she didn't answer the letter I sent with Kosuke when I left the valley.'

Naruto stood and crossed the room to his travel bag, retrieving a tooth brush and paste while reasoning, 'Maybe she's busy?' He snapped the light on in the connecting washroom, thinking to himself as he brushed his teeth, 'But even when she's busy she'll usually write a little something...' He spat and looked up at himself in the mirror, 'Maybe Kosuke's just running late finding me? Gamakichi didn't always have the fastest turnaround when he was doing deliveries...' More brushing.

He finished and rinsed his mouth, feeling restless again, 'I've just been spoiled. When she'd use her jutsu to visit me— that was instant gratification. I should be patient.' Naruto splashed his face with water at the sink, 'She'll send a response. It'll be soon. I just want...'

Sniffing at his harried reflection, Naruto shut the light off and saw nothing more in the mirror, 'I want her to drop by, even for a minute. Just to say hello or that she is busy. She's been absent for weeks. I
Naruto hiked a thin blanket over his head, muttering, "Yikes, what a spoiled kid I am."

In the dark and still quiet of the hotel room, he let his racing thoughts coast to a stop while breathing evenly. 'I don't think Hinata is displeased with me about anything. I told her I was getting close to a breakthrough in Sage Training, so maybe she wanted to give me space to concentrate? That makes more sense.' Naruto took the rational side of it, 'Or maybe she just needs time to herself when she doesn't have missions? That's not a crime.' With his eyes shut, Naruto settled on those assumptions and made peace with it. It was alright to miss her. There was no real need to panic, as all of their previous encounters had proven very encouraging.

Soon, after his objectives in Suna were seen to, he would return home to Konohagakure. Naruto reminded himself that he wouldn't be waiting on Hinata's correspondence or jutsu to get a fix. He could see that marvelous young woman simply by crossing town.

Naruto rolled over onto his stomach and exhaled shakily, thinking about hearing her voice, catching up with her, reaching out to feel her under his fingertips, breathing her airy, blossom scent, becoming closer…

After silently venting some of this frustration, Naruto drifted into a tranquil, opaque sleep.

Fireflies made their appeals to one another deep into the night, beneath the tall moon that shone diaphanous light through a filigree of clouds. Penetrating the window, moonbeams stretched across the floor and brushed Naruto's back while he was curled up in deep dreams.

When Hinata did flit her consciousness over in the dark hours before dawn, she did not notice much of anything from Naruto's surface senses. While he was asleep, her presence was funneled into the dim paths of his unconscious mind, back to the place where she had encountered a strange prisoner. She hesitated for a moment in the wide, watery space. It was tempting to wake Naruto and greet him, congratulating him on his success and asking about some of the things he had recently written to her.

'But I promised that I…would come back here. I don't know if I should tell Naruto-kun just yet.' Hinata considered, 'He may not be comfortable telling me about Kurama yet, or what all of this means…'

That alone indicated to her what a violation of privacy it was, but Hinata also recalled that she had promised the prisoner of the seal that she would return. 'Tomorrow. I will see how Naruto-kun is doing in the morning and not bring any of this up. I know he will talk to me about it when he wants to.' She crossed the space and stopped just short of the bars, glancing around curiously at the featureless dark.

"Um…" She was not precisely sure this was a good idea.

…I was skeptical that you would come back here. You took your time.

"Y-Yes, I…had a lot of work to do. Also, I don't know if it's alright for me to be here." Hinata peeped.

Nothing is stopping you. Doujutsu that peer into the fabric of existence are not much concerned with consent or silly things like that. Kurama scoffed, Had you arrived earlier this evening, you would have found Naruto slaking his lust for you. Even if he's quiet about it, his thoughts are
very loud.

She stammered and then stopped to gulp air. It wasn't entirely surprising. By now she was well aware of Naruto's feelings. Hinata collected herself to advise, "Please do not discuss the…private business of others…"

Why not? A growl came from the dark, Your ability disregards the privacy of others completely.

"Yes, but I won't make rude comments about anyone." She defended in a small voice, "All my life, accidentally seeing others when I shouldn't…I try to be respectful."

Or at least make it seem you are respectful. The voice drawled.

To change the subject, Hinata brought up some of her recent missions and pastimes, and how a friend was recently healed from a grave injury. Kurama wondered if she had anything to do with her friend's recovery, but the girl admitted, no, not really. She would celebrate it all the same.

Kurama rumbled, I know something else that will please you. If you hadn't already noticed, Naruto has left the home of the toads and is heading to Hidden Sand.

She had noticed a slight change in geography when contacting Naruto. Hinata tried not to convey too much excitement, "Yes, Naruto-kun told me he is on his way."

How can you say that so calmly? Don't you suspect him? To make haste to you and have his way with you? The unseen voice snickered, He is such an obvious creature.

"N-No…" Hinata made an attempt to bashfully wave off the topic.

I have seen how you two interact. How dare you deny it, you red-faced human! I've witnessed the act from every mortal perspective. Male and female. My previous containers were women and I remember what debauchery they partook of. Kurama prattled as if he had authority on the matter as a bystander, It's never boring. Sometimes it's funny, but always a spectacle.

She cleared her throat and requested, "Please don't talk about that."

Then what should I talk about? I'd hate to disappoint as a conversationalist. The subject seemed relevant.

"Well, I think it is relevant, but—"

Then I will talk about it. The voice was amused.

Hinata tried to keep it together, "I-I-! Um. I just don't know how to bring that subject up…to Naruto…"

Flat out tell him to his face. Kurama recommended, Or you can wait until he's begging on his knees for you. Thoughtfully, he went on, Or I can make Naruto do it to you, if you like.

Hinata was visibly startled by the suggestion. In the dark of the seal's prison, Kurama was softly laughing, You don't know how to be teased. I don't do things like that.

She held her face in her hands and tried to settle down, her shoulders dropped as she took a cooling breath.
Little Moon Children get flustered so easily. Kurama observed.

Curiously, Hinata looked up into the dark space, "Why do you call me that? What does that mean?"

I told you already.

"But my ancestors were—"

Look at your reflection. The voice insisted.

It took a moment, but Hinata recalled she would be able to glimpse herself in the water of the flooded floor. She about-faced and glanced down, not as astonished as she once was to see the horned man looking back at her. She tried to make some estimates while able to see the disjointed reflection so clearly. He appeared middle-aged, silver-hair furling down his back, white eyes on a careworn face, small horns as pale as the rest of him curling up from his forehead.

"Who is he?" She wondered.

Kurama spoke casually, as if he could see what she was seeing, That is Lord Hamura, the Moon Brother. He was a good brother to my father. I never got to know him well, but he visited occasionally until Father died and gave him instructions. He and his people went to the moon as guards, I told you.

Hinata turned about, terribly confused, searching for the source of the voice, "Your father? His brother…is…why am I like him? Am I him? And why did they go-?"

We are all more closely related than you know. Kurama told her, It would take too much time to explain, and these visits of yours are unsanctioned. Naruto probably won't like it. But when you see to that, you can come again if you want me to explain. I know some, not all. He yawned, And you are cutting into my rest now.

"Oh!" She felt the need to apologize.

You have nothing to fear when you see your reflection. He added, You are merely a protector.

"…that's…good." Hinata reasoned, "The next time I visit…I would like to learn more. And to learn about you too."

Go now and sleep. Kurama recommended tiredly.

She set out to cross the room, exiting through unconscious dimness. Hinata was yet undecided on how to broach her discovery with her boyfriend, but as she withdrew and returned to her own body in her own home, it did not trouble her much as she fell asleep.

The next morning, when Temari pointed out to Gaara that they were dressed in corresponding shirts (oxblood) Kankuro stopped to give them a comparative once-over.

"Hmmm. You were all buddy-buddy before we left the house this morning…I guess the mimicry is a subliminal thing." Kankuro assessed. He'd missed breakfast and was still wearing his customary black outfit, but if he had joined his siblings maybe he too would have jumped on the psychological matching band wagon.

"We just own a lot of the same colors." Temari led her brothers down the street as they left the
grocery store together, "And Gaara buys three of the same top, for some reason, so it's just simple probability."

"Not always." It was a weak protest. He did wear a lot of red, black, and beige multiples of v-necks, but not for everything.

"Hey, whose bag has the coconut water in it? I wanted to drink mine now." Temari was examining her tote grumpily as she walked. Her brothers obediently searched their bags, and Gaara handed over her boxed drink.

"Thanks." She unscrewed the cap and resumed the march, "Do you think this is enough for dinner tonight? We have a few extra mouths to feed."

"It had better be. If not, I'm kicking those Tide kids out and they can eat at Tanwei or wherever." Kankuro turned to look at his brother, "Gaara, don't you have that meeting with Wind Country diplomats to get to?"

"I'm stalling."

Temari gestured to him with her boxed water, "Obviously. Why else would he accompany us? He hates sitting in his office, and he doesn't like food shopping much either."

"They're not going to adjourn that meeting even if you show up late." Kankuro reminded him, "Get over there already."

Another flimsy excuse on Gaara's part, "Baki and Zeriko are there. That should satisfy Tide's questions."

"Nah. Since our subcontracting for Tide's shinobi training ended, they keep honking about setting up major trade deals." His brother tried to snatch a grocery bag from Gaara, but Gaara nudged him away, "Those are discussions the Kazekage should sit in on."

"Menma's there, I presume." Temari took a wild guess.

"No duh." Kankuro sniffed.

"We should be discussing how to prepare for the Accelerated Chunin Exam." Gaara tried to steer towards a new subject, "Trade talks can wait."

"You're already making them wait." His sister chuckled, "Just go. Kankuro and I have time off, so we're going to nap and cook all day. Get your least favorite tasks over with and then join us."

Gaara's pout wavered slightly, supposing, yes, he'd get it over with, rush a few things at the office, and then go home to eat and sleep. Live a little.

"Look," Kankuro said in all seriousness, "Menma's a good guy. I've gotten to know him, and to be honest, I put that kid through his paces back when I didn't trust him. You'll warm up to him, Gaara."

"I'll warm up to him when Matsuri stops sighing all the time and rushing her assignments while Menma is in town." Gaara countered.

"Do you have a problem with efficiency?" Temari wondered, "Because Matsuri's speed is something any leader would use as an example to throw in the faces of lazy, slacker teams."

Gaara just made a noncommittal nasal sound in response.
Kankuro provided additional perspective, "Maybe it's not her speed and efficiency, but, you know, the romantic sighs and stuff?"

"Get over it." Temari deadpanned, "Is anything else bothering you Gaara? Just so we can get any other nonsense out of the way now."

"No." Gaara said.

"That was the least convincing no I have ever heard." Kankuro swung a bag to whack his brother in the leg.

"Wait, let me get a look at him." Temari scrunched her face at Gaara, evaluating him, "Something tells me you're thinking about all the people who annoy you today."

"Ah." Gaara sighed a little, "Can you tell if you're on that list?"

"I'm not. Kankuro isn't either."

"Not yet." Gaara warned.

"It's Haku." She guessed again.

Gaara only frowned at her while Kankuro concurred, "Bingo."

"He didn't give you the response you wanted when you asked him to come here for the Accelerated Exam." Temari was ever-observant, "So that's been eating you up, eh?"

For a few meters of walking, Gaara did not reply. Then slowly he admitted, "He didn't even sound that sorry or concerned about declining."

"Not on paper." Temari snipped, "But you can make him sorry in person."

"So what's his hold-up? Is he down south curing diseases or something?" Kankuro was genuinely curious.

"No. He just continually abuses the refuge of my patience." Gaara concluded, "While having little to show for his expedition in finding the Yuki clan."

Kankuro turned to Temari, still not up-to-speed with his brother's and sister's knowledge and correspondence with Haku, "Yuki clan…?"

"Oh yeah. He got a name, at least." Temari tacked on.

"Huh, well, good for him." Kankuro said as he drew the glares of his siblings.

"He can postpone the search, or at least accept my help from this point." Gaara asserted, taking the lead as he moved a bit faster than his siblings, "I'll make him regret not coming here to join Naruto and I."

He was growling, "I have work for him. Terrible work."

Kankuro checked him, "You sound a little salty, bro."

"It's justified."

"As much as I agree and relate to how you feel," Temari advised sagely, "You need to put all of that out of your mind for now, Gaara. Seriously, get to that meeting."
"I will." He acknowledged as he gave his sister a weary look, "But I need you to think about and be prepared to track Haku. I'll be putting an experienced Sensor team under your command, and give you what intel we've collected so far on where to look around the Water Country."

"Right." She seemed rather bemused even though she had already accepted the mission assignment. Temari cleared her throat and retreated into her own head to actually give it some real, substantial thought. Beside her, Kankuro could sense her abrupt disquiet.

"Kankuro." Gaara addressed him next.

"Yeah?"

"I also need you to think about how we are going to put up with Naruto and Jiraiya-sensei in our home for the next few weeks."

"Really? You didn't stew on that before you invited them?" Kankuro groused, "Or consider the logistics of feeding them, sheltering them, and dealing with their personalities?"

"I have a meeting." Gaara deflected, and then he was off to the city council building.

Temari and Kankuro stopped on the street and goggled at each other. Even on a day off, they were still heaped with quite the workload.

15 meters of sealing calligraphy slowly began to creep across the dirt and stone floor of the courtyard. The writing stretched in a circle around Haku where he sat cross-legged, the shrinking diameter picked up speed as the formula condensed and wound in on itself. The seal crept up from the ground and over his body, streaming into a focal point on his forehead.

Nearby, Hiroshi stood and watched in bemusement with the rear of his tea shop behind him. Ranmaru, Raiga, and Zabuza were also in attendance, stock-still and quiet as they watched the sealing jutsu run its course. Hiroshi tried not to fidget. He'd never seen anything half so strange, least of all on his property.

After all of the brushwork had disappeared and amassed on Haku's forehead, he blinked his eyes open. Zabuza took a loping stride forward and extended a hand to him. Haku regarded the offer for a moment before he took it and was pulled to his feet. The man then scrutinized his face up close, "...well it worked."

Haku exhaled a small sigh of relief.

"Let's accept this development as the newest reason not to use the Cursed Seal that snake gave you." Zabuza reiterated, muttering, "Four hours of my life...writing those seals..."

"I do appreciate your help." Haku thanked him.

"Hmf." Zabuza palmed the young man's cheek and took another hard look at his forehead, "Yeah, it's there alright. Can't see it yet...but it'll show up as a permanent mark once you finish working on it." Some of the ink on his hand swiped off onto Haku's face. When Zabuza moved to the side of the yard to pack up the seal-writing supplies, Hiroshi and Ranmaru came forward to examine him.

"Hold still a moment..." Hiroshi tried to dab at Haku's messy cheek with a dry rag, "Seems like you'll need to wash up later. You've got a bit of ink just there..."

"That's alright. I can't believe we were able to reproduce that formula correctly." Haku was still
astounded they had accomplished it, "If Zabuza or I made one single mistake…you all may have witnessed a grisly mis-sealing."

"Perhaps you are blessed?" Hiroshi surmised warmly, "You've been bestowed with a gift from each of the Legendary Sannin. Take these chances to grow into someone great."

Haku shared a fond chuckle with the shop owner before he felt Raiga's finger flick strike him in the forehead. The swordsman was not impressed, "I don't see what the big deal is. There's nothing there."

From the workbench, Zabuza growled over his shoulder, "That's why we've never counted on you for your powers of perception…goddamn ignoramus." Raiga ignored the remarks.

"Raiga, special things don't always happen right away." Ranmaru reminded his companion.

"Yes, I still need to charge the seal with chakra." Haku explained, "I don't know how long that will take."

With the spectacle concluded in an anti-climactic fashion, Zabuza hauled away his supplies and made himself scarce, and Ranmaru and Raiga set out shopping at the main street's market. Haku ventured indoors to help Hiroshi prepare the tea house for a late opening. The portly man asked Haku to wash his hands and face first before touching anything in the shop.

Hiroshi made small talk as he set Haku to work fetching ingredients for a kuzumochi mixture to be chilled, "I'm sure Migawari-san will be pleased to hear that you were able to make use of that jutsu he's held onto for so long…"

"I think he only gave it to me out of pity…that he expects I'll only invite unwanted attention or danger here." Haku imagined, "He isn't wrong about that."

"Well you said it can save your life, if used correctly. I suppose that make less work for him if you ever get into another fight."

Haku tipped a cup of kuzu root starch into the bowl Hiroshi was mixing, "It could happen. We need to keep the peace on this island. I don't like that Zabuza's presence has made this town less safe for the elderly who live here."

"Look at it both ways— we're securer in some respects with the two of you around…Raiga and Ranmaru too. There are other benefits to it, besides!" Hiroshi recalled cheerfully, "That jewelry you handed out to townspeople…though I don't know where you got it…the Shibasaburō sisters told me they were able to sell it and pay off their mortgage with that income. Your gesture helped many people here."

Preparing metal pans to mold the mixture, Haku assured his friend, "That was the idea." He was hopeful that Temari received some of the pieces he had sent to her with a message. He doubted that she would reject such rare finery.

After filling six molds, heating tea kettles, and setting snacks and breads on display in the shop, Haku unlocked the store and swept the floors as Hiroshi directed. The man counted a cash drawer to begin the day. The morning dragged on with no visitors, and Haku was about to relax and share a pot of tea with Hiroshi when Zabuza suddenly returned. He stormed through the door in a great hurry, snatched Haku by the arm, and pulled him into the back room of the shop just off of the anterior kitchen. Hiroshi sputtered over his tea cup, unsure of what that interruption meant.

Squashed flat against the plaster wall of the pantry, Haku snapped indignantly, "What are you
"Shut it." Zabuza held him still and hushed him, turning his head to listen for any activity in the shop. The door chime rang again as visitors entered the tea house and began conversing with Hiroshi.

"Zabuza, you—"

"You seriously need to shut the fuck up right now." Zabuza hissed in a whisper, "A team from Hidden Mist is on patrol."

Haku fell silent after receiving the news. He and Zabuza listened in, and neither were surprised to hear the voices of two adult male strangers asking to be served tea as they noisily took seats at a table. One of them also asked if Hiroshi had encountered any rogue ninja lately.

"I can't say that I have." Hiroshi replied innocently, "Not unless these rogue ninja are pushing seventy years old?"

"Nah. More like early thirties…and a teenager." The Mist nin grunted.

"This is a retirement town. We don't appreciate mischief here." Hiroshi defended, "I'm sure I would have spotted any troublemakers of that description."

"Then you don't have very good eyes." A sharp voice replied. The speaking Mist ninja was not as lax as his teammate, and continued to pry for information, "More than a month ago, Hidden Mist put out an alert for a missing Hunter squadron. Do you know how often our Hunters go missing?" The man sniffed before taking a sip of tea, "They don't. We've been scouring five of the islands west of Kirigakure that the squadron was overseeing. Nanakusa is one of them."

"I still don't see why you would look here for anyone dangerous enough to trifle with Hunter-nin?" Hiroshi stuck to his convincing, ignorant-old-man tone. He was also serving cheesecake, which the less-astute Mist ninja began gobbling up.

"One in five odds gives us a good chance of finding whoever took out that squad— really one in four odds now that we've completed a clean sweep of an island south of here." The Mist team leader announced, "I wouldn't give so much as a backwards glance at this mountain of adult diapers if not for the fact that the Sensor-type nin of our team went missing. Do you know what that is, old man?"

"No."

"A Sensor is a ninja that can detect who the fuck might be hiding in this piss-hole." The man clacked his tea cup down angrily, "Yusho doesn't carelessly wander off during assignments. He checks in frequently when he goes off to investigate suspicious shit."

Worriedly, Haku flicked his eyes up at Zabuza, determining from the look on the man's unwrapped face that he had absolutely killed and disposed of Yusho, the Sensor ninja. Haku's scowl conveyed what a terrible mistake that had been on Zabuza's part.

"We do have some secret gambling houses here." Hiroshi conceded, "Maybe he got caught up in a game?"

"Yusho doesn't gamble." The subordinate Mist shinobi spoke as he munched, "But he does like to get drunk and laid though. Maybe he found a nice old lady here?"

"Not on assignment he wouldn't, Norio." The team leader then sneered at Hiroshi, "My team wouldn't be caught dead looking for leisure in a place like this. So that got me to thinking…what
might the seniors here have to gain if a rogue ninja was taking refuge in one of their little cottages? Quite a bit, in times like these."

Hiroshi calmly brought over water to refill the tea pot. Norio wanted another piece of cheesecake.

"People like you can go missing." The Mist captain lowered his voice, "A modest tea shop owner… his whole livelihood stolen. He can disappear without a trace. An old man like you… knows the value of protection when he sees it. How else can you live peacefully in the Water Country?"

"Good luck, I suppose. And a pension."

The Mist captain pushed back his seat and stood, towering over Hiroshi. His stare bored holes in the man's head, suspicious and impatient.

"Yo, Suetada-taicho. At least let him bring me my cake first before you make him squeal." Norio grumbled.

In the back room, Haku tensed. The escalating danger made him want to act— if he was quick enough, he could at least subdue the captain to protect Hiroshi. Yet he couldn't budge Zabuza. Incredulous, Haku glared at the man for a long moment before silently struggling, unable to escape the grip that pinned him to the wall. One hand was clapped over Haku's mouth as the boy's eyes darted wildly, alarmed, and Zabuza held his hip in the other, locked a leg around Haku's to stop him from bolting.

Suetada wrenched the plate of cake from Hiroshi's hand and dropped it in front of his whining subordinate, backing Hiroshi against the counter as he loomed furiously, "I know my way around these parts. I can smell secrets. Are there Swordsmen hiding around here?"

"T-The—?"

"Any of the disbanded Shinobi Swordsmen of Mist— any of those fuckers." Suetada elaborated, "I wouldn't put it past a fat hog like you to trade shelter in exchange for protection. I've got news for you, porky. Mist isn't blind. It sees more than any of you impoverished bumpkins can imagine. We have eyes and ears everywhere, even among you old fuck's." He bared his teeth threateningly, "So it doesn't pay to side with the resistance. You either work with Mist… or you can die like the hog you are while we eat our lunch here and take you for every Ryo in that drawer."

Teary-eyed, Hiroshi spoke in a quaking voice, "I d-don't know…anyone like that…"

Norio watched curiously from the table, stuffing his face. He wondered how his captain was going to work over a defenseless tea shop owner.

"But I…wish I did." Hiroshi sniffled.

Suetada gave him a baffled look, "—what'd you just say?"

In the pantry, Haku was struggling again, biting Zabuza's hand and kicking him as quietly as possible. If Hiroshi did not have the sense to protect himself or misdirect the Mist captain, they needed to do something.

"It'd be wonderful to have some protection around here…the kind you were talking about." Hiroshi elaborated, "Every year it's the same old thing— we pay dues to our Mist contact named Kino. I don't know if that rotten slob's still alive… but this island has made him rich if that money never made it back to Kirigakure." Hiroshi shrugged with hefty shoulders, "If I am going to die here, I suppose that's it. We don't have much left to give. We don't have anything to hide. I only have 3,000 Ryo in
that drawer, if you're interested. Eat the bread on the bottom shelves, it's fresher...but I still try to sell
the stale stuff."

Norio exchanged a glance with his captain, perplexed.

"I hate to waste your time, really. I couldn't even point you in the right direction if I wanted to, but I
just— I have no idea what you've been talking about!" Hiroshi falsely confessed, "I don't know
about Sensors or Swordsmen or whatever Mist's doing, besides taking my money. You can kill me if
you want, but that would just encourage townspeople here to harbor the rogues you're imagining,
no? It'd just make it worse."

"Then we could flush them out." Suetada growled, "Should we leave your corpse here...or out in
the street?"

"The picnic tables beside the crematory would be most convenient. I wouldn't want Hasekura-san to
throw his back out disposing of me. Make it a short walk." Hiroshi suggested.

Suetada leveled a discerning look at the old shop owner, mulling it over.

"We don't need more angry old people on this island— not like the first one. It could promote rebel
sympathy." Norio polished off the last of the tea, "I don't see the point in killing an old fat guy who
doesn't know gumdrops about anything. He's a dumb 'ol brick who makes a mean cake..."

"Or he's a liar." Suetada sensed it.

Hiroshi just shrugged at him. Truly, if this was the end, and his friends in the back room did not
spring to his rescue, what more could he do but make things less of a hassle for the elderly mortician
up the street? Life was hard enough in Nanakusa.

Norio stood from his chair with a burp, announcing, "Well, I'm gonna look around for Yusho. He's
off fucking a granny somewhere, I bet. Gotta keep him on task. Do what you have to, Captain." And
he was off and out of the shop with the door chime's sounding.

Things became eerily silent. Haku had no idea what was going on at the shop's front, and resisting
Zabuza's hold was proving fruitless. *He won't let me do anything! How unlike him to act so
cowardly...and if this is a serious threat, surely we could do something about it together?* A puff of
air escaped his nostrils, frustrated, and Haku gradually noticed the hand not covering his mouth had
wandered. Zabuza's hold on his hip had strayed upward, the rough pad of a thumb swiping
purposefully over his stomach. Haku stared without seeing, massively confused by the grope. That
had not been an arbitrary touch— not like an exchange of tools, utensils or food, nor like the contact
of training. With a furrowed brow, he mouthed the words against Zabuza's palm while thrashing
again, *What are you doing? Let go of me.* He met the man's narrow, steel eyes without flinching, *You
don't get to touch me.* Haku got a good shove in and nearly freed himself, but after that Zabuza
wrapped a hand around his neck as if to choke him.

Beyond the storage room, the silence was broken by the door's bell once more. Hiroshi let out a long,
petrified sigh that his concealed companions could hear. The choke hold was only for show, as
Zabuza applied no force behind it. Haku tore away from him after that, knocking into a prep table
and sending bowls clanging and tumbling. He hooked around the corner doorway and into the shop,
bracing Hiroshi as the man keened sideways over the display counter.

"Are you alright? How did you get him out, Hiroshi-san?" Haku was aghast.

"Easy...I gave him all of the money in my drawer. As one often does during a stick-up..." The man
chuckled in fright, "He said it would have been too much effort to kill me…"

Haku braced his shoulders, "I'll get it back for you. Stay here while I—"

"Don't move a fucking muscle." Zabuza warned from the doorway, "We're not messing with rat-face Suetada. That's not a fight worth picking."

"He just—!"

"I know what he did. I know what he didn't do." The man stalked through the room and peered out between the blinds of the shop window, "For instance, he didn't vaporize your old man with Boil Release right where he stood."

Haku kept a hand on Hiroshi's shoulder, still listening to Zabuza in spite of his indignation, "Boil Release?"

"Terumi Suetada is loyal only to the Mist Village. He's good at two things: reasoning and fighting in close quarters." Zabuza snorted, "Polar opposite of Thunderbrain, really. At least Raiga had the sense to duck in cover too when those fucks started strolling through here…"

Hiroshi had wilted from anxiety, breaking out into a sweat. Haku shot Zabuza a livid look before he guided Hiroshi to the back stairwell and up into his living space. He set Hiroshi down on a sofa to relax and promised to check on him soon. Then, Haku returned to the tea house on the first floor, finding Zabuza still standing by the window and watching activity on the street.

"You would have let him die, if that captain decided to not take Hiroshi-san at his word." Haku locked the shop's door for good measure and dimmed the lights of the place, "You had no right to stop me from helping him. Even if he killed me, Suetada was alone. You could have—"

"Spare me the lecture. I know what kind of a threat he is. At any given time, you have no idea what the hell is going on down here or how things work." The man grunted at him, "I'm not going to let you drag me into fights I know I can avoid."

"You can't always fight for money. You need to fight to help others." Haku stood in the long shadow cast by a tea display, "If you intend to free Kirigakure and mend what its current leadership has destroyed, you can't be just like them. You can't become what you replace."

"That bleeding heart sentiment won't win any—"

"Stop acting as if you don't need anyone or that you're incapable of concern for the welfare of others!" Haku railed at him, wide-eyed and bristling, "Even you can't go on like that! Not for the goal you've set— it'd be pointless! Why change anything if you don't care? So that you can revel alone at your accomplishment?" He brought his fist down on the countertop beside him, "Are you so afraid of growing and changing that you can only hide behind an image? To be something better terrifies you."

Zabuza turned away from the window to stare at the whelp, briefly lit with an apoplectic expression that colored his face with an unusual amount of emotion. He said nothing because Haku's words had sunk in and rang true. That momentary anger fizzled while Zabuza stood there, inured to the subject that Haku had brought to the forefront and challenged him with. There were many days he wanted to claim that he knew better than the righteous, know-it-all waif, but today Zabuza could not.

"You have said yourself that you can't do anything about Mist's oppression on your own…that you would need my help." Haku reminded him, "That you would have to bribe Terumi Mei's rebel forces to cooperate with you— and you've even accepted Raiga and Ranmaru's assistance. Why in the
world would any of us try to aid you when we can be sure that you care nothing for our prosperity?"
He lowered his voice, "I have done more for you than I ever should have. You've told me nothing about my clan. You trade empty promises in exchange for an onerous goal."

Not visibly moved by the plea, Zabuza plucked a pastry from the display and helped himself, "So you're saying that none of this is worth it?"

"If you were in my place trying to find out where you come from, would you think any of this is worth it?"

"Probably not." He could admit that in fairness, "I would have killed me already."

Haku had his mouth pressed in a hard line, staring boldly. If he could not make a clear point now about Zabuza's most obvious flaw, there may never be another chance to do it.

The man was chewing nonchalantly, "But you didn't."

"Plenty of others will have the opportunity and desire to kill you." Haku pointed out.

"What do you want? Some metamorphosis out of me? That I might do any of this the right way, or actually win people's trust? Because that scenario has been stacked against me for a pretty long time." Zabuza quipped, "Even if I gave a shit about people, saved them, whatever...they'd never believe it. Anything I did would not be considered authentic. I won't genuinely be trusted. That's what is really pointless."

"Try anyway." Haku insisted, "Should you never be accepted or trusted by others again, you can still choose to do good things."

"Doesn't sound like there's much gratification in that line of work." He set the pastry down and stalked closer, "And that's easy for you to say, coming from you—a shiny do-gooder who's so invested in making life great for everyone."

"I haven't gotten all of it right. I've made mistakes and hurt others." Haku moved back a step when Zabuza approached him, "But the attempt holds more value than the excuses we make for doing nothing."

"So I make excuses?" Zabuza was less than an arm's length away, and the proximity again stirred the uncomfortable feeling that Haku had experienced earlier in the pantry.

"All of the time."

"How do you know the difference between me making an excuse or using common sense?" He rumbled.

"I don't always know the difference." Haku stopped inching backwards, deciding that it was better to take a stand against the intimidation, "But I'm a fast learner."

"Ohh. Then I should be more like you? Think and act more like you?" Zabuza was still too close, and slipped a strand of Haku's hair between his fingertips where it framed his face, "Do I need to start looking like you too?"

He jerked his head away, baffled by the weird interaction.

"If I'm going to stick my neck out for people and be sensitive and all of that shit...though I'm going to fuck that up plenty...you're telling me the attempt matters," Zabuza leveled with him, "In that
case, I'm going to get something in exchange."

For a harebrained moment, Haku was not at all sure what Zabuza wanted in compensation. He dearly hoped it would not have to do with any of the vaguely non-platonic signals he'd gotten that day. To escape the awkward vicinity, Haku brushed past him to clean up the mess that Mist ninja had left on a table. He asserted while he worked, "I am not exchanging anything for that. You still owe me information about my clan. Because you feel it's fair to withhold it until we liberate Kirigakure, if you know anything at all…this change should be voluntary."

"No. It won't be voluntary."

When Haku felt Zabuza's hand close around the scruff of his tunic, pulling him away from his task, he felt an urgent flight instinct kick in. Something about this was most assuredly not the same. His suspicions were immediately confirmed when he couldn't SWAT the man off, and then began to struggle to avoid being restrained again. Haku used a succession of Taijutsu arm locks in response to being dragged, and nearly got the better of Zabuza with a swipe to the eye before an elbow jab in the stomach doubled Haku over. While he gasped for breath, he was again pinned to a shop wall, but Haku had a hand free. He slipped a small knife from the holster under his shirt and pressed it to the area above Zabuza's larynx, cutting into flesh there. The man froze.

"I don't know what you think you're doing…" Haku was electrified with adrenalin, "But you can stop, or I will make you stop."

"What, do you think I've been doing these things for you for free? Sealing projects that go beyond basic training, letting you take shares of a bounty, talk to mob contacts…humoring the posse of dimwits you keep around?"

"Let go of me." He watched Zabuza bleed.

"I don't give handouts. I never will." Zabuza warned him, "And you like to take an awful lot from me."

"I'll kill you." Haku reminded him of the position he was in.

"You would have done that without hesitation if you actually meant to." The man scoffed, "You cause me a lot of trouble, Haku. You can't pay me with money, and you have lousy judgement about how to tackle Mist Village issues." Zabuza asked him, "What do I get out of this?"

With an athletic twist, Haku kicked Zabuza off and cut a line over his clavicle, incensed, "Are you out of your mind? I would never agree to something like that—I'm not for sale—I'm a student and maybe even an ally in your endeavor to stop the Akatsuki in Mist." He righted himself and took a breath, "If I had known you expected repayment for the things I asked your help with, I never would have asked."

Zabuza had ventured around the corner into the kitchen, stemming the bleeding at his neck with a towel, "Who else are you gonna ask?"

"You are shameless." Irate, Haku returned to the table to take away settings and the teapot, "Go back to Moji, you dog. Attention there is cheap."

"That's not on the agenda."

"Right. With Mist patrols active on the local islands, you might be apprehended." Haku recalled, making a racket in the kitchen, "And I would not be motivated in the slightest to intervene."
"Quit fussing like a woman, no one needs that bitchfest."

Haku maintained, "I'm reacting the way anyone would react to what you did."

"Well if that's off the table, you carping prude, I've got another suggestion." Zabuza was glancing down interestedly at the cloth that had been soaked, as if his own blood was an uncommon sight, "You want me to adopt some selfless, altruistic attitude wherein I respect and serve ungrateful denizens who already hate me. That it? Be more like you." While Haku watched him warily from the sink Zabuza elaborated, "Then you should be more like me."

"I don't have the stomach for it."

"Likewise, dipshit. Do you see now what you're asking me to do? To be something I'm naturally not?"

"You are not naturally an unfeeling, selfish brute. What was denied of you in Kirigakure as you grew up, and the horrible demands made of you— that's why you're convinced who you are now is who you were meant to be." Haku chucked another dry towel at Zabuza so he could put pressure on his injury, "I could have been the same as you. I know you remember me— where I was, that day. Alone and near death after I killed my father." He shared a sensitive detail about his past, "The environment you are in changes your perceptions. If you had a different opportunity, the support of others, a secure village, and dedicated yourself to a different goal…you wouldn't even know yourself as you are now. You would be someone else."

They had a staredown for a time and Haku supposed he was preparing a counterargument.

"Fuck it. You're right." Zabuza conceded.

Haku's eyebrows shot up. He had left the tap running and hurriedly shut it off before the sink overflowed.

"That doesn't mean you aren't still asking a lot of someone who wouldn't know decency if it fucking slapped me in the face." The man gruffed, "But it isn't something I've tried yet. If that's what it takes to get those rebel twits to work with me, and to actually affect change in Hidden Mist…screw it. You said attempts matter."

"They do." Haku said in astonishment, "Then for your first exercise: consider helping your friends when they are in crisis..." He added harshly, "And keep your hands off of me."

"Don't bombard me, fuck. One thing at a time."

"These are simple demands."

"Whatever. Then in exchange— you've gotta think more like me. Less reckless, bleeding-heart bullshit. Suetada would've sautéed your organs before you even knew about his Blood Limit." Zabuza informed him, "You're going to learn your way around here...recognize the names and descriptions of Mist ninja who are trouble, I've got old records and stuff for that. You should also start practicing with a spare needle, because I need you to get familiar with Kushimaru's blade."

"-I don't know what you're—"

"Mine is a replica of the real Nuibari, and it's busted...but hell, start somewhere. You need to get a feel for it." The man noticed his bleeding had slowed, so he removed the cloth from his neck, "Before I go digging around for the Master Scroll...wherever it was buried with Mangetsu...I want you to know what you're doing."
"I don't need any of that." Haku protested.

"You're going to need it, even if you didn't sign up to succeed a Swordsman. You already have." Zabuza leaned on the prep table and crossed his arms, "That's a weapon you'll want at your disposal when we're knocking at Mist's door."

"I won't be keeping it when all of this is over with. I'll return to my friends."

"Suit yourself. Pass it on to the next shinobi worthy of it...or leave it behind for pig-headed kids to scrap over because they think they can handle it. That's how it worked in the old days." He gave a small shrug, "Are you gonna heal my neck or not? Get over here. I'm practically hemorrhaging."

"You're joking." Haku said flatly, "You deserved that."

"I already agreed to the stupid, compulsory hero shit you shoved down my throat."

"That has nothing to do with the unpardonable molestation you tried to get away with!"

"I explained that already, and I'm not going to bother with your frigid ass again." Zabuza assured him, "What's that medical training good for? Get to it."

Haku muttered in irritation, "You really do have a long way to go..." He crossed over and demanded, "Keep your hands like that where I can see them, and don't move." Scowling, he clapped his palms over Zabuza's injuries to seal them up with chakra.

"Suetada and his lackey might still be out there." Zabuza wondered out loud.

"Then you can deal with them on your own."

"The best way to deal with them is to lay low. And what was all that junk you were spewing about caring and cooperating?"

"You requested one step at a time." Haku reminded him. He finished his work and then turned for the stairwell to the second floor, "I'm going to make sure Hiroshi-san is feeling alright. Since you're trying to understand what it's like being concerned about others, you should come along and see how it's done."

In great annoyance, Zabuza watched the back of Haku's head as he carried on. He followed after him while tenderly rubbing his neck.

A few days later, the first leaf on one of the thousands of trees in Konohagakure was tinged red in anticipation of autumn. The rest remained stubbornly green, dedicated to the lingering warmth of late summer.

That day, returning from the easternmost reaches of the Fire Country, Kakashi's team was traveling with a bit less speed after completing a mission. It was the first mission that Tama had been cleared for after Tsunade's evaluation of her. It involved diplomacy, supervision, and haste-free travel. The Hokage figured that was a reasonably prosaic assignment that would get her late-bloomer Chunin back on track as her body strengthened.

Of course, in spite of the unbearably dull task, Sakura and Kiba were ecstatically happy. Kakashi too was in a most pleasant mood while concealing a persistent smile beneath his mask.

When Tama began to lag behind from exhaustion on the return route, she gave in and summoned her
bicycle from a tool scroll. It was a bit easier to coast along beside Sakura as Kiba and Kakashi headed the front of the group. Akamaru orbited between the divided parties of the team.

"So you were saying-?" Sakura asked with hushed enthusiasm.

Tama had a forgetful look on her face, "What was I saying?"

"Before the bike— you were telling me about a shower."

"Oh, right," Tama recalled where she left off, "I washed off with Sato and it was nice. We caught up and talked."

"Anything else-?"

"…well yeah."

Sakura applied the gossiping pressure and flared her nostrils, "Did you...Do. It?"

"Sort of." Tama yielded with a small smile, "I was feeling way more tired and frail that first day he came home. So it was just—" Tama gave a casual shrug as she pedaled, "Lots of touching and kissing and he enjoyed it a lot."

"Oh," Sakura was mildly crestfallen, "Right, I know you're still on the mend. Well, did either of you finish? Being handsy doesn't have to be boring." She of all people would know that.

"Yep, he did."

"Why aren't you more excited about it?"

"Because that wasn't the exiting part," Tama clarified, "Then I settled down for a nap and I let him borrow my clothes."

Sakura scrunched her face, "...seriously, you and I do not have equal definitions of excitement, Tama."

"Sakura-chan, wait! What I meant was that I wanted to take a nap, but Sato-kun proposed to me. That's what I didn't want to tell you until after the mission." Tama's smile stretched in response to Sakura's whooping, grinning reaction, "He was actually very romantic about it. He'd been so worried and kept talking about...coming home to me...and keeping it small..." She sighed.

Ahead, Kiba and Kakashi only overheard a distant, screeching: Oh-my-god-that-is-amazing! They exchanged sidelong glances, curious as to what the kunoichi were talking about.

Tama went on, "And then after the nap we got properly dressed and visited some friends at the Obon festival."

"Yeah, that was fun...much calmer than the last festival." Sakura had extra spring in her step.

"Later I went home with him and stayed over!" She recalled cheerfully, "I told my mom I'd be too tired to cross town at night."

"You always give that excuse."

"Because she always accepts it. I think she covers for me when Dad comes home and asks where I am."
"Wow." Sakura was envious, "I wish I had a mom that did that."

Tama tilted her head back to enjoy a breeze as she coasted downhill. At the bottom, Sakura asked her, "So you haven't actually done it yet?"

"Not yet, but before we went to sleep we…um…" She frowned and tried to find a less graphic way to phrase it, "I still can't do much, so…Sato-kun just used his mouth."

Sakura's face conveyed a sense of total understanding.

Tama admitted, "I liked that."

"Honestly, that may be the best part. It doesn't get much better."

"Well don't tell me that! I haven't tried it all." She tried to shut down spoilers.

"Right, right…" Sakura waved off her friend's objection, "Then let's get into what Kakashi-sensei was talking about this morning."

"His new book?"

"No, how he brought up our peers getting Jounin recommendations…even if Sensei only mentioned it for a minute," Sakura reached out to pat Akamaru's head as he galloped beside her, "He said that Shikamaru's gotten at least one recommendation." She grinned, "And that he's willing to write ours next year, if we keep performing well."

"Wow, the three of us?" Tama was surprised.

"That's what he said. Kakashi-sensei also mentioned that Sato got at least two recommendations, and Neji received three." Sakura added, "Allegedly. I guess we'll know for sure if they apply for evaluations sometime this year."

"I didn't know all of that could happen so fast."

"Sensei said that Jounin are motivated to recruit and test new Jounin because it promotes mission availability, and boosts team success rates. Statistically speaking…and the other reason was because they like to hand off undesirable missions to newbies and otherwise take advantage of them."

"That sounds about right." Tama nodded, "All of that hard work…I can see why they want to delegate it when they can."

"Now that you and Sato are really thinking about getting married, do you think now is a good time for him to try for another promotion?"

"Sure! He can definitely handle more challenging missions. I don't think it'd hurt for him to be tested." Tama imagined, "That doesn't mean that he'll be certified. Or they might only classify him as tokubetsu."

"I don't know." Sakura tried to forecast the outcome, "He's a bit too well-rounded to be a specialist. But I guess that call is up to an evaluator?"

A short time later, the team passed a security checkpoint into the village and avoided a bustling flea market that had spontaneously appeared on a main avenue.

"I guess we're not getting lunch at the tavern." Kakashi supposed, "That area is teeming with people." Cheerily, he waved goodbye to his students, "Well, we can share a meal some other time."
Good work today, you three. I'll turn in the report."

"Kaka-sensei, are you going to show up for training tomorrow morning?" Kiba checked with him before he wandered off, "This will be the first time in a while that Tama can join us."

"We'll see. I may not make it. I've got a few committees to deal with tomorrow." Then he was off, departing just before Kiba and Sakura confirmed tomorrow's plan and also set out for home.

Tama pedaled tiredly across town and into the *nouveau* community, parking her bicycle out in front of her house. She trudged through the front door and announced her presence with a waning voice. She had put up a front for her team. Hoping not to seem weak, Tama withheld complaints or whines of pain while keeping pace with her teammates, even as her muscles and surgery sites ached.

From around the corner in the living area, Tama heard her mother speaking to her, "Dear, you're home? Are you feeling alright? Two days of work might've been stressful for you…"

"It was alright, Mom—"

"Are you hungry?" Miako zipped from one room to the next, taking Tama's travel bag from her, "I'll put this away for you, Tama, ah, let me…come have something to eat before you go. Oh! I'm so happy you have your Chunin vest on."

"Thanks, Mom." Tama sighed, relaxing. She settled in a seat at the counter and asked, "What do you mean, before I go? I was just going to stay home today and rest."

Miako stilled and silently mulled over the small blunder she had made. She was supposed to keep that detail under wraps. She tittered over her shoulder, "Did I say that? Of course you're staying in, I forgot. But just in case you…change your mind…" Miako pushed a plate of sliced tomatoes, vegetables and rice balls in front of her.

"Mom…"

"Eat up!" Miako gravitated toward a drying rack to put away clean dishes.

"Is something up, Mom?" Tama bit into a rice ball, "Was I asked to go somewhere?"

"No, no!"

Tama restrained a grin, cramming tomato slices in her mouth, "Are you throwing a surprise party or something?"

"No, you know your father doesn't like surprises or parties, and I'd have to invite him if we were celebrating you." Miako simpered over her shoulder, "Don't press me, my lips are sealed!" She turned her nose up, doing her best not to ruin anything.

So Tama asked no further questions, and did not find it so unusual that her mother insisted she change out of her shinobi attire and into something nice. Which she did. She sat on her living room sofa in a white top and floral shorts, unashamed of the track-marks on her bare legs, trying to work out what her mother was hiding, 'Maybe she and Dad did plan something for me? I know they're happy that I'm up and about again.'

She pulled her hair over her shoulder and proceeded to braid it, 'Maybe *Kaka-sensei, Kiba-kun,* and *Sakura-chan* are in on this? They left promptly before…I don't know. What's up with them? Or maybe—'
"Yo!" Sato poked his head in through the front door, "You home? Oh!" He spotted Tama on the sofa and grinned at her, "Looks like Mom gave you the memo."

"To get changed?" Tama continued braiding where she sat and grinned back at him.

He gave her a slow wink as he stood respectfully in the genkan in shoes, and accepted a kiss on the cheek from Miako as she greeted him. She turned to her daughter and ushered her over, "Okay! Now I don't have to watch what I say. Sato-kun will handle the rest."

"I suspected as much..." Tama gave her mother a small squeeze of a hug before tapping sandals on, "Will I...be back for dinner?"

"We will." Sato informed her, "We'll have stuff to tell your parents later."

"Ah." She smiled.

Miako saw them out merrily, and outside in the sunshine Tama was hoping she'd get a clear explanation.

"I'm a bit tired so I hope this isn't anything...strenuous." She let Sato tug her along carefully out of the front yard and down the road, "It was an easy mission, but—"

"We are totally gonna take it easy." Sato assured her, "We're just going to meet your family's realtor pal Masajuro-san. His office is pretty close, your dad said."

"My dad told you?" Tama was astounded, "What did you tell him?"

"I told him and your mom that we want to get married, and that we've been thinking about finding a place." Sato gave her hand a small high-five before he laced his fingers with hers, "And I actually didn't get reamed out! They looked legitimately surprised and then kinda happy. So let's check some places out that are close by, because your dad said so...and then tell them what we think later."

"They—? We—! Can we afford this side of the village?" She was blushing and also elated.

"Maybe we can't, but I say we just look at stuff and then set a goal. I was thinking about going for a promotion so I can make more money..." He added, "And my uncle said he wouldn't mind helping us buy a place. Since he's been such a deadbeat to me for so long, Kakashi said he ought to do something like that. He's kind of rich, so I don't feel guilty about taking him up on the offer."

"K-Kakashi-sensei knows?" Her embarrassment escalated, "He didn't say anything during our mission!"

"Well, he probably wanted you to bring it up." Sato chuckled at her, "You didn't?"

"I don't exactly broadcast things as fast and loud as you do." Tama pulled him in the correct direction when he nearly took an erroneous left, "This way!"

"It's not broadcasting, this is kind of a big deal and people will find out. You can tell them."

"So have you told—?"

"Almost everyone."

Tama held her face and took a deep breath. She had intended to take it slow and plan thoughtfully, but Sato was probably going to find a rooftop to stand on and crow the news for all to hear. As was his way.
She blushed just about the whole way to the realtor's office, greeted Masajuro-san, accepted his congratulations and small-talk, and then they set out again to inspect a few model homes up the block. On the way, Sato perked up and gave Tama's hand a squeeze to get her attention. She followed his gaze and spotted Kiba crossing a footbridge in the distance, near the back entrance of a small veterinary clinic his sister oversaw. He spotted them as well. Kiba stopped in his tracks and pinned them with a surprised stare.

Tama could not explain the peculiar feeling in her stomach. She gave her teammate a wave of acknowledgement before carrying on.

On the footbridge, Kiba muffled a groan. Well, wasn't today was great.

He had dropped off a supply parcel to Hana's secondary vet office and then laid eyes on Tama and her soon-to-be-husband. Not that he needed another reminder after Kakashi had dumped that fact on him before departing that morning. He returned the wave from Tama and Sato tepidly and then kept moving.

"I'm pretty sure I am almost over it." Kiba spoke sidelong to his ninzen, "Or, at least fine with Tama living her own life. I'm doing okay for myself aren't I, boy?"

Akamaru made a small chuff of confirmation.

"And I was lucky enough to meet Karui. It'd be nice to get another chance to talk to her."

The dog agreed again.

"I don't know…I'm just tired of this swirl of feelings— it's just—" Kiba motioned at himself, "I'm not even mad. Maybe my timing kind of sucks…and I definitely respect people in their own relationships and won't trifle with them…but I want someone to look at me like that. I'm eligible. Charming, on a good day. I know I could treat a significant other like a goddess if I had the chance."

Akamaru's soft whine seemed to recommend patience.

"Yeah, I guess. There's plenty of time." He sighed, "It's easier when I don't think about this junk."

Akamaru had stopped paying attention as they walked uptown and trotted over to a butcher's shop, sitting like a good boy beside the dried jerky stand. Kiba, as he often did, bought the treat for his dog as thanks for his participation on the mission. Akamaru chewed nosily as they kept moving.

Kiba did not feel like returning home just yet to be subjected to the high-energy ramblings of his mother, and the grumbling complaints of his grandfather. The family would be returning to court next week to seek damages against Nichiyo, since his father had lied and taken advantage of him, 'Among other things…' Now he also had a baby half-brother somewhere in the Tea Country, allegedly. Tsume had warned him and Hana not to go looking for the extramarital sibling they now had. It was not as if they were compelled to find and bond with this mysterious baby brother, so they had agreed to their mother's wish without a fuss.

On the northeast side of the village, on the way to the cherry blossom grove, Akamaru stopped inside the open doorway of a printing office. A few moments later, Fujita appeared and began patting the dog vigorously. He looked up and noticed Kiba, "Kiba-kun, did you need to print something for the Sensory or Sealing Corps? The office is closing in a few minutes."

"Nah, just walking around…" Kiba gave his young friend a fist bump when they united and carried on toward the grove.
"Did you return from a mission, then?"

"Yep." He folded his arms behind his head, "It was an easy one, and Tama was able to join our team again."

"That's great!" Fujita was chipper, "I have no other work to do…so I should probably go home and help mom with some things."

"Keeping busy?"

"Very. Now that I have a new big sister…and Great Elder Haburo has asked us to do so much…" Fujita let out a small, tired breath, "There's never a dull moment."

"Oh shoot that's right." Kiba remembered the circumstances, "Your parents adopted Tenten; I think Sakura told me that."

"Yes. I like her quite a lot, and mom and dad have been happy…though a bit more stressed." Fujita recalled, "Great Elder met with Onee-san and determined that she will not be likable enough to forge relationships with other clans."

"Uh…" Kiba gave him a confused look, "Is he even talking about, like, Tenten? Actually? She gets along with everyone."

"I know, but I don't think Great Elder saw that quality in her while he was trying to arrange a match for her."

"-shit— she just gets in and they try matching her up with a guy that fast?"

"Great Elder always does things like that. Dad said Great Elder made a mistake during the last Taketori meeting that offended a few parties…so he asked Neji-sama to consider courting Onee-san to settle things." Fujita frowned to himself, "It was odd that I had to sit in on that conference and approve it too. Great Grandfather looked worried that Onii-sama would not agree to it…but he quickly did."

"Bizarre. And newsflash: Neji was already dating her, I thought." Kiba stopped beneath a shady tree and leaned against the trunk, "Why is the Hyuga clan so damn weird about this stuff?"

Fujita gave a small, confounded shrug. He had no idea.

He considered the situation again, "Well, that's good then. She'll calm Neji's ass down."

Fujita stifled a laugh, "Not really. Neji-niisan has been serious about courtship and gets aggravated with other clansmen or guests who talk to Tenten-neesan for too long. Glaring at or interrupting them…I noticed that he has spent a lot of time with her at the estate. I think Great Elder asked them to get to know each other better…but they already seem to be the best of friends."

Kiba was amused by this, "You know, for a wise old elder…it sounds like he doesn't see much."

"He sees and hears what he wants to, Dad says."

"Pff, a lot of old guys are like that…" He observed, "It's kind of nice to have an older sister, isn't it?"

Fujita lit up, "It is."

"They come in handy…give us perspective we really need sometimes..." Kiba thought fondly of his own sister, "They tend to understand things in ways that brothers won't."
"That's true. I still miss Hikune a lot...but I feel better with Onee-san around. She spends time with me and is learning about the things I like." He added merrily, "And she told me that entering the Accelerated Exam in Sunagakure was a good idea even though I don't have a team to compete with."

"Whoa, you entered that?" Kiba raised his eyebrows, "I didn't think you could enter it as an individual."

"Single entries are allowed, but space was limited. I think the application window is closed now."

"You'll pass." Kiba affectionately patted the boy's head. "Well, depending on who you get matched up against if there's a knockout round."

"Sensei said there might be, so I'm preparing as best I can."

"You're not the only one entering that Exam, by the way." Kiba warned him, "Sakura-chan told me that Naruto is entering too."

Fujita patted Akamaru absent-mindedly as he considered the news.

"Yeah, you better hope you don't get matched against him. He cleaned Neji's clock at the last one." Kiba chuckled, "But hey, no pressure. You're going in this time knowing a bit more about what to expect."

Fujita released a rumbling sigh, feeling a bit more anxious about what awaited him at the next test. Kiba gave him a clap on the back and steered him westward through the grove, where he'd spotted Shikamaru and Chouji, "Look over there, let's make them buy us lunch out of sympathy. I'm still starving and you're shaking like a leaf, kid..."
Listen, for Hearts Have Conversations

Chapter Notes

Reader Beware: Salutations folks, most of you who I assume are of age and of a mature mental capacity while reading this fic. This chapter is categorically erotic character development. It includes buildup for the violent hysteria of the next chapter, and also unapologetic payoff for you shippers and curious readers. Intense and graphic sexy stuff is ahead, marked ### for your convenience, then inter-village camaraderie. Happy reading, nerdfriends.

Chapter Soundtrack: "We Can Be Ghosts Now" by Hiatus

In an outpost at the edge of the Wind Country, which was still technically within the Land of Rivers, Jiraiya told him, Naruto sat down to write a note for Gaara.

Hey, so are you sure that Haku is not participating in the Exam?

Am I supposed to bring anything, like a gift for the host or whatever?

Are Ero-sensei and I sharing a room in your house or do we each get our own? Is it a big house? You didn't say. I can't picture it and I think Ero-sensei is exaggerating the size to me.

Oh and also, are you feeding us? I've been subsisting off of bugs and tubers for months so I am kind of desperate for real food.

Naruto paused in his writing as he realized his message had taken on list form. Kosuke was sitting patiently beside him at the tavern table, waiting for his human pal to finish.

"Hinata-hime told me she spoke to you a few days ago." Kosuke noted, "Is this message for her, boss?"

"No, it's for Gaara. I'm going to send you ahead since Ero-sensei is slow and bitching about bone pain." Naruto informed him as he rolled up the scroll, "Thanks again, and don't dry out while you're crossing, Kosuke."

"I'll be careful boss!" The small toad gave a salute and then bounded out of the establishment.

Naruto then turned to Jiraiya, who was heaped onto a table while resting his head beside a bottle of sake, "Ready to go?"

"Do I look ready?"

"I can never tell anymore."

"No, I'm not. I am reluctant to leave shelter with plumbing and food. Crossing the desert ain't fun."

"It was your idea." Naruto reminded him.

"Yeah, but I'm really starting to feel my age today."
"Maybe, or it looks like you drank too much."

"It was half off a bottle with any meal purchase." Jiraiya burped.

Naruto snorted at him, "Use the bathroom or whatever and then get up you old fart. We're not going to make it if you just keep sitting there."

Naruto thought it rather sad that Jiraiya mustered the willpower to push up from the table and trudge toward the washroom, but he had taken the bottle of sake with him.

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Blowing eastward over the hills in the Land of Rivers, storm clouds crept into the Fire Country again. Cool air whirled against the summertime heat, and arcs of lightning skipped around the underbellies of thick rainclouds.

For over a week, Tenten had not been particularly fond of trying to sleep in her Main House bedroom at the Hyuga estate. Though Kayato had appointed it nicely, and Tenten had brought some of her personal belongings into the space, it was cramped, stuffy, and sweltering each night. She tried to avoid staying in it whenever possible while not taking missions. 'It makes me feel...like I'm still other. That I don't belong yet. There's always pressure bearing down on me...' Tenten had thought about it and expressed such feelings to Neji. He understood. He agreed that no one could ever convince him to reside in that meager hole in the wall.

"I'll try to get you something better." Neji told her that morning. They took tea on the porch, in plain view of some Branch members and Elders who did not disguise their watchful interest in what they considered a budding romance.

Apart from her miserable bedroom at the compound, Tenten could admit she quite liked living among her new clan. The Hyuga were personable toward her for the most part, and as for those that were not, she chose not to take their indifference personally. Quality time and meals with Hideyasu, Kayato, and Fujita were always enjoyable, and it bolstered her sense of belonging when at times it ebbed. And of course, Tenten felt rather privileged to see Neji about the house during off hours—at times in sleep clothes, or off to brush his teeth, or fresh from training with Lee and Wong Leung and in need of a bath. When he could, he devoted time to her without hesitation, even for things as trivial as lunch or lessons with Branch House children.

She smiled to herself. Though there had been hurdles to clear before reaching this point, Tenten would absolutely assert that it had been worth it. Even the acute stares of approval from clan elders, since Haburo still believed this arrangement was his idea, were comforting.

For today, no mission had been assigned to their team. Tenten had assisted Hideyasu with some menial tasks earlier in the day, and then later joined Lee and Neji for training. That afternoon, she decided to take some superfluous belongings from her room at the estate and return them to her flat. "It's just taking up space, and I need to breathe in there." She reasoned. As the sky grew overcast and training wrapped up, Neji helped her transport some of the things she could without.

Upon entering and flipping the light switch, she discovered her flat was already in desperate need of dusting. Tenten set a Shadow Clone to the task and asked Neji to unpack the boxes they brought over. She appeared to be thinking about other things she wanted to get done. He frowned as he watched Tenten leave the apartment without an explanation.

Since Neji was an astute soul, he turned to the clone and asked, "Why did she leave?"

"Oh!" The clone knew why Tenten had stepped out, "I wanted to get some things to cook. It's been
so long and they won't let me make anything at the estate. I'll be right back."

"You don't have to cook anything anymore," Neji supposed, "But you still want to."

The clone stared at his face for a moment, rosy-cheeked, and then turned back to its work without saying anything more. Neji did not pay any mind to the bashful replication as he extracted books and scrolls from a box. He was taken aback when he pulled out several picture frames as well, all of which had photos of Tenten's parents as the subject. "Why would she not want these with her?" Neji did not understand it. As far as he knew, Tenten had adored her parents and spoke fondly of them. Had Hideyasu and Kayato replaced them so suddenly in her heart?

Yet she had still chosen to remove these items from her room, so Neji replaced them at free spaces on shelves and table tops around the apartment to be displayed. He stopped for a moment to examine a jubilant shot of her mother and father, both younger-looking in the photograph. He could see that Tenten was the spitting image of her mother, though she had a bit of her father's stature and bone structure. Her mother appeared tiny even by petite standards. Her grin was mischievous and bright. Neji swiped a bit of dust from the glass with his thumb. Tenten's father was tall with far-seeing forest eyes, a kind face, and dark hair. Neji also noticed a jade ring on the man's finger, where his hand was resting on his wife's shoulder.

Neji set the frame down and returned to the last box to empty it. He'd seen Tenten wear such a ring from time to time. She still longed for her father.

A short time later, Tenten returned and found Neji boiling water for tea. Behind him on the far side of the room, Tenten caught her Shadow Clone giving her boyfriend the up-and-down while going over wood floors with a rag. Miffed, she dispelled the infatuated clone.

Without turning to look back at her Neji remarked, "That clone had more cleaning to do."

"This is good enough." She grumbled and set down a bag of various vegetables, pork, and quail eggs.

Neji was looking through a cabinet for a long while and struggling, "...I cannot read your tea containers." The labels were written in Hanzi.

Tenten lightened up a little, "You'll like the one furthest on the left. The strainer is in the pot."

Neji thanked her and went about making tea.

"Erg...can I just stay here tonight? Where there's space and air conditioning?" Tenten thought out loud as she went about washing vegetables and sprouts at the sink, "I just want...a me night. To be comfortable."

Neji tilted his head as if to shrug, "No one will know the difference between you avoiding the estate and you being occupied by a mission."

"Really?"

"Many do not know you still have a place of your own. It's more suspicious for those born within the Hyuga clan to not return for curfew." Neji pointed out, "Not that they care. Much can go beyond the notice of our elders."

"That is music to my ears." She set aside the produce to dry and then began cubing the pork with a sharp knife, "But you've never stayed out, have you Neji?"
"Never." Neji confirmed.

"I thought so. Can you boil some more water for these eggs?"

He set aside the steeping tea pot and did as she asked. While Neji wasn't looking, Tenten beamed at him. It was difficult containing her feelings today.

They prepared food for a while and discussed Hideyasu's offer to manage her flat's lease for the interim. Until there was any definitive event that bound her to the Hyuga estate permanently, she and Hideyasu agreed it made sense to keep her home should anything change. Neji felt this was a sensible course of action, but was touchy about Hideyasu's offer to pay for her.

"I mean, he doesn't have to, but he suggested it." Tenten was slightly embarrassed to talk finances, "It just takes some of the burden of rent off of me, because I'm working fewer hours at my shop when I have to do things at the Hyuga estate…"

"I know that." Neji's answer calmed her, "But I could absorb that expense for you. Hideyasu has done enough already."

Tenten was carefully slipping quail eggs into a boiling pot of water, and gave him baffled side-eye, "Uh, Neji…you're not responsible for me…yet. And he's my father now, so…I thought it was appropriate."

"I can be responsible for you." Neji had a resolute, serious look on his face.

She gulped, "But you're not. We…"

'Way to make that awkward…' Tenten chided herself as Neji strode off into the dining area to set things on the table. He seemed irked by her reluctance to accept his help. 'It's not that I don't want Neji to…look after me, or anything like that! I just don't want to take advantage. Neji shelled out a lot to pay for Lee and I before the tournament. Why does he get so ruffled when other people do things for me? I mean, sheesh! I could go back to being independent! I'm fine with that.'

The subject thankfully dropped over dinner and tea at the table, while they went over the events of the day and the schedule for tomorrow. Neji then inquired why she was removing photographs of her parents from her bedroom at the estate.

Tenten halted over a bite of tossed noodles and gave him a wary look. She swallowed a lump in her throat, then set her food down and admitted, "I don't really want to remove those photos, but it…might help for now."

Neji listened as he chewed.

"I can't sleep." She smiled sadly, "Especially when I look at them, it keeps me up all night thinking about them."

"Ah." That cleared up the matter for him, "You didn't tell me you weren't getting any rest."

"Transitions are always hard." Tenten said before her next bite. She did not comment on how Neji had eaten all of the quail eggs. She had a feeling he would enjoy them.

"You look a lot like your mother." Neji shared his earlier observation with no preamble whatsoever.

Tenten kept her composure while trying to navigate this new, testy topic, "I do look like her, I guess."
"You told me that she sang. She was famous."

Tenten chewed with misty eyes and nodded.

"But you are most like your father." Neji presumed.

She took a moment to stop eating and calm down. Truthfully, it would be cathartic to talk about them with Neji, who was genuinely inquisitive about her life and origin. Just as soon as she could get a grip and not dissolve into sniveling tears, Tenten would supply some answers.

Tenten took a deep, rattling breath, "I am like my dad. He taught me just about everything."

"I think I remember seeing him when I was small, around the village." Neji reached back into childhood memories, "He came to the Academy often."

"He did." She opened up a bit more to reminisce, "He was…always looking out for others. He was thoughtful…and he could be so philosophical; some of the things he said went way over my head at times…but…Mom used to say…” Tenten stopped to take a sip of tea and collect herself. Neji waited for her to complete the thought.

"Mom used to say…he grew up so lonely that it was hard for him to believe her when she said she loved him." Tenten gave a small shrug, "Dad was a little weird too. He used to talk about loving Mom since they attended the Academy, but she never noticed him and she was always off with other people and doing other things. So he occupied his time as much as he could to keep his mind off of it."

Neji had emptied his plate while listening to Tenten's recollections.

"He read and wrote a lot. He was very good at working with his hands, and I think…his experience with Tao Arts is what made learning Ninjutsu come so easily to him. He took many high-level missions from a young age, even though my grandpa begged him not to." Tenten clarified when Neji seemed inclined to ask, "My grandparents are dead. I was three, I think."

"Hmm." Neji poured her more tea.

"He just never liked himself. Dad always tried to get out of the way of other people, as if he was a burden, and above all he didn't want them to know that he was sad. I know it was hard for him coming to Leaf as a child…a lot of our family was killed on the way." Tenten sipped her drink, "I never noticed that was how he felt, when I was a kid. He seemed so happy and fun to me."

"Any parent would try to make themselves seem that way. That's what their child needs."

"Well, Mom made him happiest. I think that's why I saw the best side of Dad. That's how I remember him." She appeared lost in a memory, "As I get older…I think I've realized how much I'm actually like them. So…because they aren't here…it hurts to have questions I want to ask them."

Tenten sighed, "Hideyasu and Kayato are great, don't get me wrong. But not having my parents here…there are pieces of me that are missing that I don't understand. I'm always thinking about it."

"Then that makes two of us." Neji yielded. He motioned for Tenten to eat because her plate was mostly untouched. She obliged and listened to him for a change as Neji went on.

"I don't remember much of my father being joyful or carefree, save for a few times. I knew him during the days he struggled most." Neji recalled, "I think I made him happy."

"Of course you did!" Tenten nearly lost a noodle as she proclaimed it.
"I did." Neji supposed, "But he was overwhelmed by everything else. By being in the Branch, serving my uncle, our elders…and his inability to do as he wished."

Tenten's question was on the tip of her tongue, but she refrained and took bites of food instead. She only ever heard Neji speak about his father, but not his mother.

She finished her meal and stood to clean up, ushering Neji to sit down again when he moved to assist. She asked him to finish the tea. Things were peacefully quiet as Tenten scrubbed dishes at the sink, and after a time she finally worked up the nerve to ask over her shoulder, "Neji? Do you know anything about your mom?"

Neji watched her as she worked, "Not much."

"What happened to her?"

"She died while having me." Neji explained coolly.

Tenten shut the water off and set the dishes on a drying rack. She tried to minimize her sympathetic expression, because she sensed Neji would not appreciate it.

"It's alright." Neji assured her.

"Sorry, I did wonder about it."

"My father once told me she was an outstanding ninja. I did not understand how someone so strong could die while having a child…but that was a shameful thing to think. I was young and stupid, and thought it was worth resenting her for leaving my father alone." He confessed, "Now I know better. Though…beyond the few things my family and clansmen have told me…I know little about her life or who she was."

"So she married into the Hyuga clan?" Tenten returned to the table to wipe it down.

Neji gave her a slow, amused glance while he thought of something.

Tenten gave him a feisty What? glare.

"She did." Neji confirmed, "Father said that she was his teammate."

"Oh." Tenten said, standing and crossing back to the sink. She was feeling a spike of elation and embarrassment again. Maybe he didn't mean anything by that statement, although he probably did. While she wrung out a wash rag, Neji inclined his head toward a white board on the wall that Tenten used to keep track of appointments.

"You have something marked for today's date." Neji commented.

"What?" Tenten was astonished, and snapped her head towards the board, "I thought I-! Oh." Her face fell. Beside the day's date, scheduled for twenty minutes ago, she had drawn a small plum. That was how she indicated meetings with Yugao.

"I forgot all about her!" Tenten rapped her knuckles against her forehead, furious with herself, "I haven't been checking my schedule enough…and Yugao's probably still at the shop…"

"She is." Neji confirmed with his Byakugan, peering out of the building and down the street.

"Does she look mad?"
"I can't tell from here, although I doubt that woman is capable of being frustrated with you." He said airily while pouring more tea for himself.

"Well thanks for that." She sighed, "Do you mind if I go and fulfill her request quickly? It won't take long. I mean, you can go home if you want—"

"I will be here when you return." Neji affirmed.

"…right." Tenten took another fortifying breath, "Then, make yourself at home Neji."

Before Tenten sped out of the door Neji warned, "Take that umbrella." There was a parasol on a hook above the genkan. Without questioning what Neji had spied outside, Tenten snatched up the umbrella and shop keys and dashed out.

Neji found there was something underrated about being in a noiseless space alone, to be able to think without interruption. At the Hyuga house, someone was in his business every fifteen minutes, just about. That was simply how clan life was. He had wondered a few times how Tenten would adapt to it, but she seemed to be responding well to the social exchanges in the Hyuga clan.

He relaxed at the table and watched with his Blood Limit as Tenten exited the apartment building, sprinted down the street in a light drizzle, and then met Yugao outside of the weapon shop to apologize. All appeared to be forgiven quickly as Tenten unlocked and led her friend inside. He stopped watching after that.

Neji reveled in the quiet for a while before standing, crossing over to heat the water kettle again. Tenten was right. The tea was good. He could probably finish the canister all on his own if she let him. He meandered around the flat to indulge his curiosity and examine the mementos of Tenten’s life strewn about.

Potted bamboo stalks on a side table appeared to have been neglected for a while, but were surviving in spite of not being watered. Fine pottery sat on shelves here and there, yet the most prominent feature about the place was the abundance of books and scrolls. Undoubtedly, those had been accumulated by Tenten’s father, for she was not a frequent reader.

Neji stopped near a shelf and skimmed through a few volumes. There was a fair deal of poetry. Some strategy manuals for shinobi operations as well as Shogi…novels written in Hanzi and also in the common tongue. The amount of literature was staggering. Beside a well-worn cookbook on a shelf, Neji drew out a leather bound journal that was ruled and had been written in.

He set it down for a moment, supposing it was rude to look through personal things this way, but eventually Neji cracked the journal open again. Flipping through its pages, he discovered it was filled with entries cover to cover. Neji noticed that the start of the journal had much older writing, and appeared to be written by a younger, more frantic hand. The newest entries had the more refined scrawl of someone who had grown up. The first page even had lines of text written in poor Hanzi, and gave way to Nihongo characters thereafter.

*Father says I was named Chūn Ying, but everyone in the village will call me Takaharu. It is clean here and I like the smells. Father and I planted a window box today because mother died a year ago. We said a prayer for her. I learned about ninja dogs today when I tried to pet one, but I didn't know it would be offended. Father wants me to be respectful to everyone in Konohagakure, so that means everyone.*

Neji smirked to himself. Takaharu must have been a very young child, then.
Does the Hokage ever feel worried, having so many people to protect? It must be quite frightening. His face looks brave on the monument, but when I met him today Hokage-sama seemed tired and shaken. Things are hard now because of the war.

When the tea kettle began to steam, Neji shut the journal and set it down on the sofa. He crossed the room to prepare tea again. Against the windows of the flat, the soft drizzle of rain escalated into a harsh patter.

He considered what Tenten had shared with him; that she was at a loss about certain things without her parents around to explain. Neji suspected she could glean some valuable information from the old writings of her father, if she ever had the patience to sift through journal entries and the heaps of books all about the place. He tipped tea into a cup and dawdled around again. Out of pity, he watered the bamboo bunches.

On top of a cabinet, beside a humorous photograph of Lee while he’d been in the Academy (his braid and traditional clothing intact) was an odd device Neji was not familiar with. Beside it was a square case that had once housed a disc, with a note written from Sato: *I got a copy of this from the public records office and thought you’d like it!* Being the clever sort he was, Neji eventually gathered that it was a small, semi-modern stereo system. Such things were not allowed at the Hyuga estate, and neither were other ridiculously simple, staple things now common in households. After a few button prods, music began to sound.

It took a moment for him to recognize that he was hearing Tenten’s mother perform. Sato had likely happened upon the recording by chance, and then passed it on to Tenten. Neji hovered for a while, basking in the dulcet notes and harmonies, drinking tea and not thinking much. He tried to put a finger on what kind of stringed instrument was being played.

Sharp, cracking strikes snapped Neji out of his listening, and he noticed the abrupt change in weather beyond the window. Rain was freezing into hailstones—a nuisance of summer storms. Neji shut off the player and imagined Tenten was going to be in a less pleasant mood when she got home. In an effort to be thoughtful, he stopped in her bathroom to fill the tub with warm water. She would have done such a thing herself upon her return, as her preferred environment was a boiling hot spring as opposed to teeth-chattering cold.

He sat down to finish another pot of tea while keeping watch for her, observing as Tenten was concluding business with Yugao. By the look of it, Tenten had offered her umbrella to Yugao as the weather had worsened. The woman had a much longer route home across the village. Tenten sent her on her way, locked the shop, and then made a run for it. Predictably, she looked rather disgruntled on her way up the road. Neji followed her progress into the building and as she slogged up the steps to the third floor, completely drenched.

Tenten squelched into the door and stopped in the genkan—a very sorry sight.

She asked in a feeble voice, "Could you get me a—?"

Neji handed a dry towel to her.

"Oh." Her eyebrows shot up, "You are incredibly helpful for incidents like these."

"I might as well be."

"Thank you." Tenten patted herself down and kicked off her sandals.

"The bath is warm."
"No way." She was especially impressed, "You did that for me?"

Neji was not proud of himself, "It took minimal effort, and it wasn't hard to anticipate what you would want after that trek through a hailstorm."

When she patted his cheek her hand was cold, and Tenten scurried into the interior of the home and sealed herself in the washroom. She would be back up to temperature soon.

Neji hung the umbrella to dry and sat at the table again, sipping his beverage, hearing the sounds of tiny orbs thwacking against the building.

He could do more, he thought. Tenten always seemed surprised by his gestures. Really, most of it was inconsequential or basic provisions of care, and Neji didn't like how she did not yet expect things like that from him. Granted, he had not been the most accommodating person even a few years ago. Tenten had gotten to know that person very well. He puffed a strand of hair out of his face in annoyance, cursing how he'd dug a ditch for himself in terms of how people chose to rely on him. He had a much better gauge of how to attend to others and assess their needs, particularly in Tenten's case. He was tired of every minuscule _gasp_ that escaped her when he did something right.

After Haburo's strange but favorable sit-down persuading Neji to engage in a courtship with Tenten (he still wasn't sure how the seed of that idea had been sown in his great grandfather's head), he was taking the relationship very, very seriously. He already felt compelled to do things, to provide for Tenten even when she didn't ask him for anything. He wanted to know more about her life, even though she wasn't always keen to share details that pained her. Even instances of less significance, such as spotting her in the Main house or yards, accompanying her for training or missions, and all of the activities involving her that used to give him pleasure— that gratification was tenfold, now flooding his senses. Being around her was consuming and changing parts of him that had been dull or meaningless before.

Having a space away from the Hyuga clan put these emotions in perspective. Cooking seemed like such a mundane task, and one that was no longer required of Tenten, but her practical skills fascinated him. She spoke more freely here. She still enjoyed her smithing work, even though Neji was fairly sure she would never have to depend on her business again to make ends meet— not with him and the clan at her back.

Even when she didn't mean to, Tenten was luring him in. Along with everything else about her that beguiled him, Neji still had to contend with the physical attraction he had not acted on. For instance, she had just reappeared at the apartment; sodden, her clothes stuck to her revealingly, hair slipping free of its confines, her lips and cheeks flushed from the storm… If her mere existence was temptation for him, Neji conceded things were all the more difficult whenever she consciously flirted with him. Navigating this aspect had been tricky, and was now complicated by the drive to protect and provide. Neji wondered in what instance it would be fair to finally give in to the desire to touch her in ways that had so far been disallowed.

He exhaled a harsh breath and carried the emptied tea pot to the sink to be rinsed.

In time, all of this would feel more normal to her. After all, Tenten had rapidly consented to schemes and decisions to help him, and was still mentally catching up to the reality of the situation. She probably was not giving much thought to getting closer to him, or the things she had teased him about before the Exam's tournament. She still needed to adjust. She probably would not comprehend, for quite some time, the expectation that came with her position in the clan and his interest in her. Whether she knew it yet or not, she would plausibly never belong to another man. Hyuga Elders already knew how stubborn and/or steadfast Neji was in his decisions. They ought to feel quite certain that his consenting to court Tenten was a definite confirmation of a future with her. And
they’d be right. He was not that hard to predict, after all.

So there. Time would help things, Neji decided. He was being impatient. He was overeager and hot-blooded, and honestly had no experience with how to handle this appetite. His peers boasted about their affairs all of the time, but Neji noted that his friends did not provide much insight on how to resist and respect—not nearly as often as they indulged. Well. That was not to say he didn’t indulge on the rare occasion, but not the way they did.

He shut the tap off and braced his hands on the counter, feeling a bit tense. Was this the sort of thing he could bring up to her? It could be that she was interested, even if Tenten was occupied with a million other concerns at present. The clattering of hailstones was softening outside, but a roll of thunder tonitruated nearby.

It would be discourteous to cut his losses and leave the flat for the Hyuga estate without first telling Tenten. Though it’d be easier to avoid temptation that way, she’d think him rude if he didn’t say anything. To assess if she was nearly done bathing, Neji stole a glimpse of her with the Byakugan. And no, she looked to be in no hurry. For a moment he stopped looking at her, as if that sufficed, but he had briefly seen a detail that enticed him to look again and be sure he hadn’t imagined it. At first it seemed like Tenten had been reclined as if to nap, her head tilted to the side, eyes shut, damp hair loose and furling down over her shoulders.

She was chest-deep in bathwater, her arm reaching down between her thighs and fingers working in a circular motion. Tenten seemed utterly unaware of the space around her, or of the fact that anyone else was around. Her thoughts were far away.

Neji was engrossed for a full ten seconds before he came to his senses. He put an end to the voyeurism, wide-eyed and short of breath, startled by what he had seen. The implications made him reconsider his earlier belief that Tenten was not lusting in any way while she had a litany of other matters to think about. He crossed the room, tapped his shoes on in the genkan, and then Neji saw himself out. He stood in the hallway of the building for a moment, and genuinely did not know where to go from there.

Close by, he peered out of the fire escape window of the corridor and saw thunderheads rolling away from the village. It would be clear soon. He could leave and explain himself in the morning. Evidently, Tenten was enjoying her independence this evening and had forgotten that he was lingering.

Or he could just calm down for a few minutes. It wasn’t as if he had unintentionally seen things a hundred times more scandalous than that with the Byakugan, he reminded himself. And what he had seen, Neji conceded as he returned indoors, removed his shoes and took a seat at the table...what he had witnessed was not at all objectionable.

He had a few minutes more to wrestle with his thoughts before Tenten exited the washroom and called out, "You still here? Neji, get in there and clean up while it's still warm. Training got you a bit grimy today."

"I should go home." That was another idea.

Tenten went silent for a moment in the hallway attached to her bedroom before replying, "If you want to, yeah, that's fine. If the weather let up." She didn't sound averse to that suggestion. Neji could not get a read on her.

Right about then, even though the night sky was clearing and calming, Neji got it into his head that maybe it was preposterous trying to avoid this. Once she had retreated to her bedroom to change, he
made his way to the bathroom's cracked door, still hazy with vapor, and told her that it would be better to stay and he would take her up on the offer.

Ever nonchalant, Tenten called out again, "Sure, I'll get you something to change into!"

He shut the door, confused, then abducted a hair clip from the vanity counter. He piled his hair on top of his head before scrubbing and rinsing off. In the tub, Neji concluded that he had no idea what Tenten was thinking or what she wanted. One moment she was masturbating, the next she was merrily sending him home. Maybe he was not the most essential variable in this equation?

He submerged up to his neck to fight the chill in the room. For all of their complaints about the brutally hot summer days they'd had, the temperature was more fickle these evenings. He relaxed slightly. Just because he did not know what she wanted was no cause for panic. It could never be said that he was not superlatively respectful of boundaries. If she did wish for something, Tenten would most likely ask him.

Neji grew gradually more tranquil until he remembered what Tenten had been up to a short time before. He stood, drained the tub, dried off, and tried not to think about it. He was kept waiting for about ten minutes before it occurred to him that Tenten had forgotten about him again. She was dressed in pajamas and loitering in her room, he could see as he gazed through an adjoining wall. He wearyl regard his training attire folded atop a laundry basket, which was repellant and sullied. No. A change was definitely called for.

With a towel providing modesty from the waist down, Neji ventured down the hall to pop into Tenten's bedroom. He was disconcerted by the anguished expression on her face as she stood beside a chest of drawers. "She seemed fine before..." Neji took a step in, "Are you alright?"

She jumped in startlement before dropping several articles of silk from her hands. Tenten immediately scooped them up from the floor, "I am so sorry, Neji. It happened again...I'm just not thinking straight."

The concern on his face was shifting into something more serene, "It's alright—"

"...leaving you in there like an idiot— I found this right away, I think it may fit you. Though my dad was tall and broad-shouldered..." Tenten huffed at herself, holding up a black top, "I took one look at it and just started...remembering a lot."

"As I said, it's alright." Neji repeated, "Do as you like in your home."

Tenten fixed him with a contemplative stare. She crossed over to him and Neji was about to hold out a hand to accept the clothing, but he heard her muttering, "...do as I like..." She was heavily scrutinizing him, rethinking the original, boring plans she'd made for the evening. Neji watched her interestedly. He got the sense that whatever she wanted to do, he was going to go with it.

"I'm having a thought." Tenten announced.

"It appears you are."

"Let's hold off on this." She recommended, indicating this meant the clothing that she tossed onto a bureau to her left. That said to him very plainly that he was right about Tenten's ability to communicate her wants. He could not overstep bounds when Tenten kept drawing the line further and further back.

She asked, "Are you feeling sensitive or flighty?"
Weird question. "No."

"Are you doing anything later?"

"Nothing of note."

"So then stay here for a while," Tenten instructed, "And would you please…close your eyes?"

He took an extra moment to get a look at her, as if to commit her to his mind’s eye before complying. Neji was not exactly sure what she intended to do.

Meanwhile, it was as if Tenten had been served a dish on a silver platter and she reeled for a moment. Neji was being very agreeable. Well, maybe he had anticipated something of this nature, and Tenten also got the feeling that she was indeed free to do whatever she wanted. ‘And it’s about damn time…’ She had been bending over backwards for people, lately.

He felt her fingertips skim his arm and then draw away. By the sound of it, she’d taken slow steps over the wood floor to circle around him. Neji presumed this was a minor investigation of sorts as he felt another touch near the nape of his neck, hearing Tenten mumble as she discovered her hair clip on his head. She left it where it was. Tenten slipped her hands down his neck and shoulder blade, visiting scars from past battles. The newest imperfections to his skin had come from the Light-Wing Chidori, burns that had grazed his shoulder, ribcage and beneath his upper arm. His muscles tensed slightly at the tickling sensation.

"I saw that." Tenten reported.

Neji reminded her, "I'm not made of stone."

"Contrary to popular belief…" She agreed, "It looks like this one must've hurt."

"The worst pain, though the briefest."

He felt her lips against his skin, stopping over the first thoracic vertebra that created his blind spot. Neji suppressed another shudder when she muttered against his skin, "Better now."

Tenten's deft fingers slid down his spine, down to the tapered grooves and sinew of his lower back. She tugged once, twice, before Neji was fully aware of how she peeled away his towel. He might've scolded or opposed her on any another day, rather than remain still with his eyes dutifully closed. It was difficult to do. Her fingernails grazed over his hips and sides, exploring, while Neji stood without rebelling and mentally substantiated how he let her get away with it.

He was not at all ashamed of how he looked, and was partially reconciled with this new vulnerability. Visionless at the moment, Neji was not sure how much of his body Tenten had seen yet. Caresses still trailed mindlessly all over him and, inevitably, it would become more and more apparent that he was enjoying those attentions. It was not long before she had circled around him again, brushing her hands along the divot of his collar bone, then down his chest and stomach. Neji tried not to think about snatching her hands and pulling her close, tried not to think about how visibly erect he was by then. He assigned more effort to not producing the sounds that threatened to escape him. He endeavored not to do anything. Feeling Tenten's explorations as his livewire nerves rioted was more than enough in those moments. His talented brain could hardly grasp all of the input.

Oh. He was frowning. Neji was not wholly conscious of his expressions, or that his brow was furrowed with concentration— slitted eyes nearly opening out of desperation. Tenten pressed a hand over them while he was tempted to see something, anything, "Not yet…" Reacting to how she sealed his mouth with a giddy, amorous kiss, and that she was unbothered by how his hands flew up to the
sides of her face to hold her. All of his senses were intense: the taste and texture of her mouth, the smell of the rain still on her, the small, pleased sounds she was making...Not being in control was also surprisingly underrated, Neji found.

At some point her hands had migrated to his backside, copping a thorough feel while Neji's mouth quirked at the contact, sightless, listening to Tenten's commentary, "That...is just unreal. Hold on a second." She felt him up again for good measure. He grunted at her enthusiastic antics but did not bat her away.

"I didn't think you would be this patient." Tenten told him.

"I do not have many other virtues." He admitted, unable to see her smile.

"Sure you do. Sorry if I've been...too hands on." He was shaking his head at her and she grinned again, "I thought about...well. I'm fairly certain you've been able to look at me plenty, so I wanted my chance to look at you."

"Understandable. I would not have denied you the opportunity, even if you had asked me properly."

"Ah, I don't know. You seemed kind of— shy earlier?" Tenten had picked up on it.

One of her hands had drifted back up, and he had blindly located it with his own. Her face was still close enough to kiss, so he trailed his mouth along her jaw and cheek, confirming, "I was not sure what you wanted."

Tenten sighed as he pressed light kisses over her brow, "I could've been clearer, yeah. I didn't want to pressure you. You've been so great today, and just being around you was—" Neji had looped an arm around her back to pull her close, kissing her slowly. Tenten was mollified by the touch, her head tipping up to give in to the embrace, to him...then she flattened her palms on Neji's shoulders and pushed him back a step. He had an urge to blink at her indignantly, but she assured him, "Just a second." Neji heard soft rustling.

He could still feel her standing face to face with him, vaguely familiar with the sounds of her disrobing. It also sounded as though Tenten caught her foot while removing sleep pants, and that she was about to topple over while cursing softly. Neji reached without thinking for her— she'd caught herself before falling, of course, but his hand landed on her bare hip; he felt the smooth skin over bone there and how warm she was. She chuckled words of thanks and then enclosed his hand in both of hers, "Ah, almost wiped out..." Tenten fiddled with his captured hand, "Neji, you know you don't have to keep your eyes shut anymore."

His breathing was heavier, quicker. Tenten slid his fingertips over the smooth flesh of her flanks, the dip of her waist, past the convex curve of a breast, over her clavicle and up her neck to let it settle just beneath her chin. She rubbed her thumb over each of his knuckles. Neji told her, "If I see you I will act differently."

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"That's what I'm hoping for." The same hand she was toying with she guided down again through the valley of her chest and over her soft, impeccable stomach. His breath noticeably hitched, which made Tenten all the more glad to introduce him to her navel, descending past her belly button below to the downy, short hair along her mound, the tender lip there, the swell of her inner thigh. Tenten could see him fidgeting when she finally let Neji loose, his breathing much noisier and his shoulders taut. He drew her close again and called her, "Audacious."
"Thanks." Tenten kindly reiterated, "This is nothing you haven't seen before, come on."

Neji cracked an eye open at her. She had a cheeky smile plastered on her face, without a stitch of clothing on, her hair loose down her back in chestnut waves. Tenten nudged the arms he had wrapped around her, signaling some kind of forward progress, "You can keep staring if you want, but I'm going to keep doing what I was doing before."

She noticed his facial expression was the most animated she had ever seen it, accompanied by a full on man-stare as her hands vagrated over his chest and front. Neji gradually began to respond with less hesitation, returning touches, canting his head to kiss her properly. Chaste touches converted to caresses, and Tenten rejoiced in the heady feeling of being pressed into him. Slow, decadent kisses did not distract much from the severe erection prodding at her stomach. Tenten was puzzled over how to manage it, or which protocol would work best from that point on. She only knew as much as she'd heard from kunoichi peers, moreover, she did not believe the entirety of what she'd heard either. 'I am pretty sure those girls embellished a few things…'

She stole a downward peek, considering that she had not seen many at-attention penises in her life. Save for maybe one incident on an embarrassing guard detail mission she had taken as a Genin over two years ago, but, well, that and this were starkly different situations. Tenten chanced a touch, stroking gingerly over dark hair and the base of his length, frowning to herself because this did not exactly look like what had been described to her.

"So, I have a question." Tenten declared.

"Can it wait a moment?" Neji asked her.

"Sure, wuh-!" She held fast when he scooped her bottom-first, taking a few paces to the bed's edge to drop her on it.

Neji settled himself there as well, cradling his face expectantly in his palm as he gave her his attention, "What is your question?"

"This here," Tenten clarified while touching him, "I...hm. Is this a scar? I mean, I can admit I am ignorant and only know the sensational garbage Ino has spouted to educate me...but isn't there supposed to be a foreskin?"

"There was once." Neji was unruffled, stretching out on his back to relax, allowing her to touch and examine.

"Oh." She flopped over on her side, "Boys in this village get cut?"

He gave a slight shrug, "It isn't very common."

"Why do it?"

"Because infants cannot give or deny consent, parents think it's beneficial, and it is standard practice in my clan. Few other clans here have such a tradition." Neji explained.

"Huh. I think Sakura mentioned this once." Tenten's voice was pitchy, borderline anxious.

He took her hands and massaged acupressure points on her wrists to calm her. Neji was also consciously trying to relax.

"Then it doesn't hurt you, does it?"
"Not at all."

"I guess you can keep clean more easily." Tenten shifted sideways and overlapped herself with him, attentively tracing the grooves of his abdominal muscles with her fingers.

Neji vouched, "I have no basis for comparison, in that respect." It didn't matter much to him. He was cut and he had no issues with that. He judged by her nod of recognition that Tenten had no issue with it either. While getting comfortable, she felt him card fingers through her hair and stroke down her back contently. He trolled down her smooth curves, idling over her ass before slipping his hand upward again, repeating the motion.

Tenten deliberated over an odd truth that occurred to her during that sedate moment. For quite some time, there had been a kind of unspoken agreement that they would make love. While distractions and commitments had delayed the realization of it, for her part, Tenten noticed that she had been the more fervent, brazen instigator. Neji had been more reserved on the matter, undertaking steps to legitimize his bond with her and reach milestones. In other words, he was unexpectedly pure of both intention and body, in Tenten's opinion.

She also had been somewhat aware of his circumstances for, oh, a long time. He was in no position to rollick carelessly or anything of the sort. His clan and family would never stand for it, never mind that he was famously upright and not one to pursue carnal pleasures. So in some strange reversal of roles, Tenten realized, she had waited and acted as though it was Neji's honor that needed safeguarding. Often, it was the opposite in most situations; a young woman's purity was sacred. In her case, her honor was whatever she made of it and no one was around to judge her based on her choices.

Her thoughts could only endure in a trickle, overwhelmed by the blissful state of languid, indulgent touching. Tenten had only managed a few curious strokes along the ridges and veins of the length in her hands, studying it, then Neji stopped her. She moped when she was made to relocate her able hands.

"Tenten." He was not moved by her faux-tantrum, "That was overwhelming."

"Didn't it feel—?"

"It felt good. I wouldn't last." Neji explained, "Anywhere else, for now."

"Ah." She understood and got over it.

Her ministrations gravitated up again towards Neji's neck, his head tilted as to not jostle the fastener keeping his hair back. Tenten would have liked to have her hands full of his superb bottom again, but Neji had rolled out from under her grasp and onto his knees. He hovered over Tenten while she was reclined, watching her carefully. He lowered himself down, seeing her angle expectantly for a kiss which he refused to press to her lips. Neji brushed his mouth against everything else, down her chest and stomach, and fondly discovered her inner thighs—the sensitivity there made her tremble and whine.

He looked up at her with those full-moon eyes and it made Tenten gulp when he asked, "Show me what to do."

"Show you-? You don't need me to—" Her breath came in a hiss as he traveled north over her body again, lips skimming a nipple before tweaking it with his teeth. Neji continued watching her face and her writhing reactions as he experimented, sucked there for a long while.
This was a kind of motivation he had never been acquainted with, Neji conceded. Whenever he tried to achieve things for the sake of pride, for the sake of friends, for honor, duty, logic and other such cornerstones: he'd never known the insane spur of pleasure— of watching her feel it. All he would ever think about again was being the cause of Tenten's satisfaction. The way her back bent, how she bit her lip, raked her fingers down the back of his head and neck, wriggled under him, humming and mewling sweet sounds…Neji could exalt and obsess over every bit of it.

She did not care that faint marks and bruises had blossomed over her breasts and the rounds of her shoulders. Anywhere Neji set his mouth was ideal, and his hands were equally welcome as he searched her. He breathed the question again beside her ear, asking for a demonstration, "I want to know how it's done."

"…seems like you already know…" Tenten was biting back moans while he worked.

"I saw you touch yourself earlier."

"No, you didn't." She said, as she distinctly remembered doing that in private.

"I watched you, and I want to watch you again." Remnants of his former, classic arrogance lit his face, but Neji was also being sincere.

Tenten seized his chin, preventing him from mouthing her up in any other delightful ways, disapproving of what he'd done for all of two seconds, "Can't I even take a bath in peace?" He shook his head no. Perhaps she should have expected this behavior from a significant other whose gaze traveled through most physical obstructions. At any point she was ever naked or exposed, Tenten would henceforth assume Neji would be an alert observer.

She hesitated for a moment, because this was embarrassing even for an avid masturbator such as herself, 'I mean, do I really have to let him see?' But he already had. Tenten sighed and released Neji's face, then reached down haltingly toward her womanhood as she pegged him with a half-humiliated, half-desperate look.

It helped that Neji resumed kissing her and gave her some time to get into her routine. Timid, slow touches grew surer and more precise, her eyes fluttered shut, focusing on the pattern she preferred and pointedly paying no mind to Neji as he leaned back for a better view. As his fingertips slid over Tenten's chest passively, he watched. He might go wild watching this, he thought, intrigued and electrified. She used different pressures, spread herself with her fingers, avoided direct contact with a hooded bud that Neji had never seen before, but had heard about in conversations amongst his rabble-rouser friends. Tenten seemed to like when he pressed his hand against her stomach, warm and thoughtful, but she would not meet his gaze. It was a daunting position to be in that demanded more than just trust. He knew that. He'd known that when he'd asked her to try it.

Neji rested his forehead against hers, holding the back of her neck as he said, "Let me." She peeked at him from beneath her lashes, giving a head gesture of assent before brushing her lips along the juncture of his shoulder and chest. His hand slipped beneath hers to reenact the motions, unpracticed but still clever, listening to Tenten's murmurs. When Neji was not quite on point she gave him more guidance, conducting his hand just so. He was a quick study, as he was with most things. Before long, Tenten unabashedly ground into his touches, her dark eyes burning as she stared up at him with parted lips.

Her soft cries, her trembling and the slickness against his hand— it was an ordeal to stay on task. Navigating the new mental and emotional terrain between heavy, arresting kisses, and how her body was grazing against him most enticingly…Neji had to take a moment to press down onto her, nerves heightened and screaming at the touch of bedsheets and the smoothness of her legs and hips. Tenten
traced her nails behind his head and ears understandingly, encouraging, "Now's fine, if you want, Neji." She interrupted his busy, dedicated hand to arrange herself under him, "I...want to."

He was polite, "Not now." He would be perfectly happy to give her all of the attention.

"Yes, now." Tenten countered, "I just said I want to." She also wanted to direct his attention to how he was pressed into her, and that maybe denying what he was a single motion away from doing would probably not work. She struck the side of Neji's head with a gentle bap as she kissed him, and then gave his hips a coaxing tug. He slid into her easily, all at once, which Tenten did not seem all that fond of when she inhaled between her teeth and narrowed her eyes. Neji was only partially adhering to self-control, an elusive quality at the moment. He stopped himself from carelessly thrusting even though every muscle he had was poised to begin.

He was both muddled and concerned, trying to think straight when he asked her, "Am I hurting you?"

"Objectively, no." Tenten clarified as her hands roamed his back, "Can't call it ecstasy, but everything else feels good, so..."

Neji thought maybe cancelling the act altogether would make sense, but that suggestion only agitated her and Tenten gripped his bottom, simulating the motion needed. She smiled, shuddering when he moaned and shut his eyes, swept his mouth and tongue over her neck while rocking into her. The pace and the pressure weren't so bad, Tenten noted. But the thrill came from him, the sight and experience of his new mannerisms and being open with how he felt. His hands slid from her thighs up to her waist, then to her breasts, frantically descending in reverse order while she matched the rhythm of his strokes. Tenten's quiet, strangled sighs could have been pain or pleasure, or some mix of the two, but those sounds echoed in Neji's ears.

He reached above her head and laced his hand with hers; shred s of lucid thought occurring to him as he watched expressions of awe and desperation cross Tenten's face. This woman had once been a young, plucky kunoichi on his team who had been a constant companion, while also keeping him at arm's length. With time she was bolder, praising him in the days when his social accomplishments were comparatively pathetic, and criticizing him when he terrorized or pushed away others. All those looks of yearning, he remembered, or of her standing silently by— the things Tenten did that he hadn't understood. It was nearly a miracle that she had stayed and persevered for someone like him.

And oh, would it be shameful to admit that even then, when he'd been so hopeless, self-centered, and blind— that she had been a frame of reference for beauty, wit, strength, and all else that was to be admired. Even if Neji had not said it aloud then, had not reciprocated, had not thanked her, had not professed love or anything of the things that he ached to do now, she had always been entangled in his thoughts somehow.

His name escaped her lips in a growl as she cinched her legs around his waist. Then, Neji did not think about how things had been between them in the past, but only of how it was and would be. She felt so good that every pain and hardship he had ever known was swept from his mind. Tenten was aglow, something golden in her skin, hints of bronze in her hair. One hand conducted a survey of his neck, and the other scratched lines into his back as she claimed and tasted his mouth. Neji wondered if he might've felt her pulse racing, she was so tight, but there was too much to feel to try and be sure.

The rushing crescendo crept up his stomach and back, a feeling that made him gasp, that prickled everything into oversensitivity down to his fingertips, completely addling his head. There was just one singular moan, all that Neji had air for in his lungs. He pinned her flat as he fixed his mouth to Tenten's chest, above her heart, finishing hard inside of her in long, trembling twitches. He gave her
a soft nip again and Tenten made a breathy, astonished sound. It took a moment before either moved, and Neji evaluated her to make sure she was unscathed. Tenten was wincing, "You're kind of heavy." She gave him a respectful pat to show Neji how he'd heaped himself on top of her tiredly, and was slowly crushing her ribcage.

With a huffing, reluctant sound, Neji propped himself up on his elbows and lingered. He didn't really want to be outside of her, not yet. It was too spectacular a feeling, residual jitters racing up his spine, and being connected to Tenten seemed to transmit her own feelings and sensations to him in some unexplainable way. Neji tried appeasing her with lazy kisses, which she humored for a few seconds. Tenten pushed him off and rolled him onto his side, taking his face in her hands once again. She gave him a rapt stare.

It was about then Neji realized that sex seemed to have opposite effects on them; his coherence and consciousness declined, and Tenten's energy levels skyrocketed. She was wide-eyed and awake, grinning.

"That was different and also better than what I expected." She told him, and Neji did not resist when she rolled him over again. She rummaged near the headboard, tossed pillows on top of him, peeled back the blanket, and gave up when it was stuck under him. Neji heard her bounce up to her feet and out of the room. He blinked in a daze and watched Tenten set out into the far reaches of her flat, in the nude, for god only knew what reason. He found it jarring and annoying. He wanted her right where she'd stuffed pillows against him like placeholders. Afterglow cuddling was standard procedure, no? Was he wrong?

Naturally, he could not help but glare with the Byakugan and behold Tenten moving about and switching lights off. She was fast and efficient, but Neji did not see why she could not have sent a Shadow Clone to complete such a task. She returned to the dimmed room to see Neji sitting up in bed, covered in pillows, rebel strands of hair loose that framed his frowning face. Tenten tsked at his moodiness. While she was still standing, she snapped the blanket out from beneath him, like she had seen a zany server do with a tablecloth in a restaurant once. That of course made Neji even happier.

Tenten laughed and pushed him down, "What?"

"Stay here. Send a clone if you need to do something." He groused.

"Uh…I shouldn't make any more Shadow Clones today." Tenten disagreed.

"Why?" As far as Neji knew, her chakra reserves had not been overworked.

He twiddled with her hands as she sat on top of him, and she appeared quite triumphant. Tenten was embarrassed by the clone subject when he raised it again. Instead she asked him, "Phew, should I crack a window? It got warm."

"Tenten…"

"If I need to do something, I'll do it myself. I am not making any clones while you…are in this state." Tenten gestured at his magnificent nakedness, "They've been acting like idiots around you."

Judging by Neji's enlightened eye contact; Tenten determined that he finally got it. That she was not keen on creating any ardent clones that might want her to share her boyfriend. After a moment his surprised expression turned thoughtful, prompting her to give him a mild whack for smiling knowingly at her.

"Generally I like when you smile, but please stop." She complained.
"How am I supposed to stop?"

"I don't know— remember a time when you walked in on Gai-sensei in a changing room or tried eating the Curry of Life…” Tenten folded over and pressed her forehead to his chest, "Just please let me be enough."

Neji tipped her head up and told her, "You are enough.” Her lips curved up as she listened to him, "Forgive me, I thought you remembered how I disdain excess. I have an imagination, but I'm not a slave to it."

"Well," She pecked his chest, "I can't fault you for that."

To avoid smashing the hair clip on the back of his head, Neji removed it so he could lay flat under Tenten. She immediately reached up to play with his dark tresses and then sighed wistfully, "You know, part of the reason I tie my hair intricately and stick fancy baubles in it…” She lowered her voice and admitted, "Is because you have much nicer hair than mine."

Neji had his eyes shut, perfectly relaxed as he slid his hands along her body, "There's no need to be insecure about something so juvenile."

"When you say it like that it doesn't make me more secure, just so you know." Tenten snipped.

"Let me rephrase that." Neji tried again, "It's just hair."

"But yours…” She doubled over again to press her nose to his neck where, yes, he did still smell like shampoo. Even after a busy day.

"If it would not appall my relatives and elders, I would probably cut all of it off." Neji supposed, "But tradition is a stupid, sticky thing."

"Would you really?"

"I've had short hair before."

"Yeah, but that was— you were in the hospital and I think Tsunade-sama sewed you up with it, or something…”

"That's right. Maybe someday when I have fewer people to impress, I will keep it shorter." His thumbs made circling motions on either side of her belly button, "Though now I have your preferences to contend with."

Tenten was amazed by this. She didn't realize to what extent Neji's hairstyle was a non-factor to him. She had once thought Hyuga tradition and such mattered to him, or maybe he just liked how he looked. But nope. It was not a part of his identity, it turned out.

She informed him, "Bad news, I'm afraid. You're never going to have fewer people to impress, Neji. Not in the position you're in."

"What position am I in?" Neji was no fan of double entendre, but in the context of pillow talk he was.

"Ino calls this Girl-on-Top." Tenten clarified casually, "As I was saying, whether you cut your hair or not, either way you'll be handsome."

"You find me handsome." He had never really thought about how she perceived him before.
"I'm sure other people do too, but count me above the rest." Tenten was arranging strands of his hair in pleasing furls and shapes, "I mean, I can see beauty even in your scowls. Imagine what it's like for me looking at you while you smile or enjoy yourself."

"Heart-shattering."

She nodded, "In the good way."

"You are whatever the sky is made of at twilight and dawn…” Neji brushed the back of her hand against his lips, "Molded into a human form. You feel like the deepest, cleanest breath of air I ever took."

"Whoa." Tenten looked down at him, bewildered.

He raised a brow, "Was that inaccurate?"

"I don't know. I don't describe myself that way…and the romance in that was off the charts." She took a small breath, "I'm still processing."

"Indulge me. That was a sincere analysis."

"At what point did you become an authority figure on the sky and my splintering from it?"

"It took time." Neji divulged as he ran a pointer finger down the valley between her breasts, "Much discontent and brooding…observing the unknowable heavens. Cold nights and all that…"

"You were a difficult kid, weren't you?" Despite his seriousness, Tenten could not resist a wisecrack.

"I was one…and one who also knew that some things are beautiful even in a turbulent world. After meeting you I was much surer of it." He plucked up one of her hands again to kiss her fingers, "Shards of heaven are few." Neji scraped his teeth against her finger and she yipped in pain when he added, "And sharp."

"Right, so be sure to handle me with care." Tenten squeezed him in annoyance between the bracket of her legs. He had a slight biting tendency she had not been aware of. She elected to immediately forgive him when he sucked her not-so-injured finger, with quite the alluring look on his face. Neji was hard again and firmly pressed into her thigh and stomach. What timing. Tenten delighted in how forward he was, completely comfortable with trying to seduce and impress her. It definitely worked. Well, even when he didn't try that worked too.

'I think I should be tired, but I'm not. And I'm pretty sure Neji is tired, but he's rallying.' Tenten thought as she rubbed herself against his shaft, relishing the hiss that escaped him. She stroked her hand from base to head, slipping him against the supple wet lips of her opening. Neji was a sight after that, bending his back and bracing her hips, keeping narrowed eyes on her. If all she did was tease him for the rest of the night, he suspected he could still die happy.

Tenten continued rubbing against him as if it were a casual thing, an observer of his writhing and grunting. She inquisitively swirled a dewdrop of moisture that welled at his tip with her thumb. His hips bucked once under her touch and Tenten asked if he would please behave. Neji's chest rose and fell with quick breaths as she resumed her investigation. What an odd, captivating creature he was. Tenten sat back on his legs and traced her fingertips down, 'round the curve of his sac and the ridge there where she pressed gently. Strange that it seemed tighter and more compact in her hand than earlier, she thought, and Tenten may have tested further if not for Neji crying out for all of the building to hear and thrashing beneath her. She found that interesting so she did it again, but the next time he hollered he mixed in a reprimand.
"But I am almost positive you didn't dislike that." Tenten contended cheerfully.

His breaths were harsh and heavy when he spoke, "That…had nothing to do…with what I liked."

"Ah, so, you don't want your screaming to wake everyone who lives here? That's fair." She grinned down at him when he tried to give her a toss, but Tenten held fast to him, and it sort of turned into a mini-wrestling contest until Neji was smiling again because she was being ridiculous and amusing in spite of her torments. Then he laid prone again and thought to hell with it, he did not really want to object to anything Tenten did. And they seemed to be past the foreplay as it was, because Tenten had pushed down onto him until he was deep inside of her, completely and warmly encompassed, and he lolled his head to the side and groaned again.

Her face was scrunched up momentarily as she got situated, adjusting to the occupation. Tenten steadied herself by bracing her hands on his stomach, "Hey Neji, you're blushing. Your face is all—"

"Never mind my face."

"I can't help it. Remember when I said how good-looking you-?"

"Please," Neji jerked again and ground into her, "No matter what I look or sound like…please."

It was sexy when he asked nicely. Tenten distributed her weight evenly on her knees and then rose up a fraction, sliding down again, watching Neji struggle and vocalize as she began to move. This felt better, actually. More specifically, she thought, being able to set the pace and depth helped alleviate the new, stretching sensation that was less painful now and more pleasantly satisfying.

She hummed his name when he reached up to knead her breasts, nipples raised and alert to his touches. Neji tended to her sensitive places, keen to the wet tightness as she slid around him, and further aroused by how Tenten eventually resumed touching herself as she had earlier. The only directions she could choke out coherently were for Neji to "not stop what he was doing," and she seemed to be handling the rest. He would try his very best to meet her demands even though he was skeptical if he could last much longer.

It was a flood of toe-curling, tantalizing feelings that made Tenten slow down just a hair, hoping to savor her singing nerves. She felt every groove on him, each twitch and throb. Not much more was needed between Neji's attentions and her own stimulation, and Tenten bowed her head slightly with a low moan that heralded release. She got quieter and leaned back as she came, stealing breaths distractedly and gripping whichever part of Neji was steadiest. Witnessing something extraordinary, he was compelled to sit upright, holding Tenten and maintaining what he could in the embrace. No sooner had Neji moved in to kiss her, as he felt her rippling and contracting around him, Tenten abruptly took a fistful of his hair and pulled his head back. He didn't fight it. He shut his eyes as she kissed and sucked a pulse point on his neck, and he slid his hands down her back to her ass, muttering her name as if it were a tune that would forever repeat in his head.

She relished Neji's cry and squeezed herself a bit tighter, because she knew by his shuddering and the tensing of his neck that he was riding his own orgasm out, so briefly after hers. Tenten was courteous enough to let go of the silky locks in her hands and let Neji move freely. He rested his head on Tenten's shoulder for a moment. Spent, Neji secured his arms around her and then fell back onto the corner of a skewed pillow, slipping out of her in the process.

"I really did not think this through. It's my understanding that conception is not an instantaneous thing, but I had better hustle in the morning and make sure I did not seriously
mess up just now…' Tenten suspected at least one of her friends would be assigned to rounds at the clinic tomorrow, so she could plead for help then.

The rumbling, unclear sounds coming from Neji formed an inquiry: Was she alright? Not wishing to kill the mood with, "No, we're idiots. Do you mind if I run out to procure preventative measures?" Tenten said instead, "I am great." He made a pleased, affirmative noise in reply. Neji had turned to rest his chin above her head and wind himself around her. Tenten liked that, so she crammed a pillow under her neck and back to fit into the line of his body properly. She had a feeling that she asked something poignant like, "Did I feel more like twilight or dawn?"

But what she really said was, "…why…didn't we do that sooner…?"

Sleepily, Neji confessed that he had really wanted to. But disrespecting her was out of the question, even though she'd encouraged him to be intimate time and time again.

Tenten thought something else, but was asleep, and so it became a dream.

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Sometime late that night, Tenten's deep sleep was interrupted by a soft voice and a tap on her nose. She wandered back to consciousness and opened her eyes a sliver, not surprised to be face to face with Neji. Scratchy with sleep, she wondered, "Did you get any rest?"

"Yes." His voice was warm, like the rest of him.

Tenten gave him a hmm of approval before tucking down again, but Neji was drawing shapes on her skin and it kept her awake. She gave a less than enthusiastic grunt to that.

"Once more." Neji requested.

"No." She was happy to say it, "Sleep."

So he left it at that and Tenten rolled over, letting him spoon her fearsomely and she admitted that she liked how he rubbed himself against her backside, but she was definitely going to fall asleep again so goodnight. Neji kissed the back of her neck and behind her ears, listening to Tenten's hushed breathing. Then he slept and dreamt of a fire glowing in the night below a vault of stars.

When Tenten's eyes snapped open in a timely fashion the next morning, 6:00AM was scrawled in red on the bedside table's clock. She held still because she could feel Neji awake at her back, and it reminded her of pretending to be asleep on the journeys to and from the Marsh Country. She wondered if he had done the same, then.

"Hey," She rasped and reached her arm behind her to feel any bit of him, in this case his shoulder, "Neji?"

"Mm?"

"Did you ever…well, when we were on that godforsaken ship headed towards the Land of Marshes, and I bunked with you while Lee was sick…did you actually sleep?" Tenten went ahead and asked.

He stilled behind her, somewhat surprised by the question. Neji spread his hands flat on her stomach as he held her from behind, "I slept."

She pointed out, "You held me like this."
"I know I did. Though it was horrifically uncomfortable and the sleep was sub-par." Neji recalled, "And I may have acted in some moments, to seem asleep when I wasn't."

"Ah-ha." Tenten got to the bottom of it, "I think I knew you liked me then. Just then. It's kind of stupid…but for so long I felt convinced maybe I got on your nerves and challenged you too much. That you were fed up with me."

"What bizarre reasoning."

"But when we fought you were always extra mad at me. Forget Naruto or whoever was in your face at whatever time…"

"You were never the one I was angry at while we argued," Neji gave her a reassuring rub, "Let the records show. I was furious with myself for picking fights with you in the first place."

"Huh. Weird."

He didn't disagree.

"So…yeah, I was pretty sure you were into me while we were stuck on that boat. I even remember something you told me."

"What's that?"

"That I am top quality in every respect." She was grinning.

"The statement still holds up." Neji was kissing the backs of her shoulders, "Though you were late with that realization."

Tenten tried to disguise the fact that she was stunned; taken aback by the prospect that maybe he'd been attracted to her at any point before that. So she asked, "How late?"

"Moderately."

"What does-? No, I mean, give me a time frame."

"Why does it matter?"

Tenten pressed, "Work with me. Significant others are statistically proven to ask dumb things in pursuit of validation."

"If that's so…then…" He was thinking, "It depends."

Flabbergasted, "Depends on what?"

"What you want to know. If you want to know when I was fully aware of how I felt about you, then consider the time the Hokage wanted to break my neck in her office, when you were reassigned." Neji reminisced a bit, "If you want to know when I was only just becoming aware of how I felt, that was sometime during our mission to Katabami to deal with Kurosuki Raiga's gang."

Tenten listened in silence.

"Or you may want to know about how I had no idea that I cared for you, but in hindsight I can confirm I most certainly did." He offered, "Which was shortly after I met you and got to know you on our team. No one else was like you. You were distinguished although I had no way to explain it." Neji concluded, "So it depends upon what you want to know."
She had sunk into the sheets and mattress a bit more, shrinking as if to hide. That was the same length of time she could boast that she'd had eyes for him. Albeit they had achieved stages of affection and recognition at different intervals, but total runtime was about equal. Tenten felt Neji carding his fingers through her hair, but she was wound so tight it was as if her bones might break. She had asked and gotten her answer. Just because she could scarcely believe it was not his fault.

Tenten reeled inaudibly for about a minute more while Neji dillydallied beside her, then she about-faced and looked him dead in the eye, "Are you sorry that you were a jerk? If you liked me-! For that long— do you regret the garbage I had to put up with-?"

"Every waking moment," Neji confirmed, "I regret the things I did that hurt you."

She rested a closed fist against his chest, feeling frustration evaporate off of her. There. He had laid it plainly before her and now, instead of feeling shocked or upset, Tenten acknowledged that they had both been fortunate. They were here. And his kisses were feeling very good so she raised her head for a better angle and let him taste her. Neji's hand had also wandered down her chest and stomach, then explored the tender place below. Tenten halted his arm, "Hold on a minute."

Before he could try propositioning her again, Tenten sprang from her bed and out of the room. Neji plopped his head onto a pillow, choosing patience as he heard the creak of the bathroom door. Shortly after that a wail pierced the air. He sat bolt upright in fright.

In the restroom, Tenten had merely wished to relieve her bladder and then go about the day— just as soon as a burning, hellish pain made her shriek. She crumpled for a moment, holding onto the vanity's edge for dear life, 'Did I pee fire?' No. She discovered that, while whimpering and finishing up, she in fact had some degree of ripped skin. Down there.

Tenten heard a segment of Neji's unhelpful, concerned blathering on the other side of the door while she cleaned dried fluids from herself. She tried to negotiate moving around with a much more noticeable injury. Well, noticeable after the morning's first pee. The pain had worn off slightly. She asked him to please keep it down and relax, "It's okay, Neji. I'll be out in a minute." She washed her hands and brushed her teeth, then nearly crashed into him when she exited the bathroom.

Neji caught her by her shoulders, "What happened?"

"Oh, you know, just painful urination." She shrugged wearily, "Not the end of the world, but…I need to go to the health clinic."

As he looked at her, he was rapidly realizing the magnitude of recklessness they had engaged in. Tenten watched as his nostrils seemed to flare in slow motion while he drew breath.

"Take it easy." Tenten advised, "I will be fine. I just shouldn't wait." She kissed the shocked look off of Neji's face and then led him back to the bedroom, handing over the Hanfu she had meant to give him the night before, "Here. Get dressed, go home, and hold a spot for me at breakfast. I am starving."

"I should accompany you." He didn't really think about how that would look.

"Nah," Said Tenten as she pulled her clothes on, "I don't think you should. Sakura isn't going to be thrilled about this…and I don't want her to condemn the both of us."

Across town in an annex of Konoha Hospital, Tenten had asked around and then been pointed in Sakura's direction. She was not currently in the Women's Health Ward, but the secretary said she would page Sakura for her. Tenten thanked the lady at the desk and took a very careful seat in a
waiting area. Several minutes later, Sakura appeared (somewhat dressed down) and bid Tenten good morning with a wave. Then her expression crystalized as she immediately noted the absence of buns in Tenten's hair, which had instead been tied in pigtails. It alerted Sakura that something was amiss.

"Trauma Ward is that way." Sakura pointed with her thumb back over her shoulder, "But you don't look like you're bleeding or anything."

"Hi, Sakura."

She rested her hands on her hips and stood beside Tenten, "Hi. What'd you do?"

"Uh." Tenten smiled sheepishly, "I got a little hurt. I was careless."

"Is that so? Walk with me." Sakura sounded an awful lot like Tsunade sometimes, directing Tenten to a nearby patient room, "Give me the details please."

"Well I… have a nocturnal injury." Tenten announced.

Sakura quirked a brow at her as she shut the door, "Nocturnal?"

"You know. A… sex injury."

"… you're kidding me." She tried to frown but only dissolved into laughter, "What'd you-?"

Tenten clarified, "Look, it was my first time and I was pretty stupid about it. Poorly planned, I'll admit. I've been incredibly busy lately, so when spontaneity took over it's not like Neji was paying much attention either."

"Alright, alright. Just, go behind that screen for me and change into this," Sakura handed her a packaged hospital gown, "I'll fix you." Tenten did as instructed as Sakura went on, "External injury?"

"I think so. It hurt like hell when I peed."

"Yeah, that's more common than you'd think." Sakura sighed, "Did you use protection?"

"What's with the survey—"

"Don't start. As your medical caregiver, for the time being, I need you to cooperate." Sakura tapped a foot impatiently, "Answer the question."

"No. We didn't."

"Have you ever had other sexual partners?"

"No!" Tenten barked from behind the partition.

"Has Neji ever had other partners?"

"No, Sakura, he definitely hasn't." Tenten stomped around the screen in the flimsy gown and followed Sakura's pointing finger, then clambered up the seat and into stirrups, "I already know how idiotic it was."

"Then don't expect to hear the end of it from me." The pink haired woman adopted a motherly tone, "You can't take chances. Now more than ever you're in a precarious position with your clan, and you may not get a say whether or not you want to complete an unintended—"
"Sakura, I know—"

Sakura turned on a lamp and swiveled it, snapping gloves on before the examination. "Yeah, you know. Then act like it. I can't believe an older, more mature kunoichi who I look up to does dumb shit like this." On a rolling stool, Sakura moved in to take a closer look, "Ah. Right there. Can you raise your butt up a little?"

Humiliated but grateful, Tenten complied and Sakura evaluated her. The medic-nin sighed and asked if anything else was bothering her, "While I'm down here?"

"No." Tenten had folded her hands on her stomach and stared at the ceiling. The drudgery of such checkups straddled the line between boring and mortifying. Then came a knock at the door.

"Sa-ku-ra." It was Ino's voice, and she sounded way too upbeat and awake this morning.

"I'm with Tenten." Sakura called in response.

"Oh!" Ino took that as an invitation to waltz in, which it wasn't, "Good morning, ladies! What's… what the-? Did you switch primary physicians or-?"

"No, I'm with her as in treating her." Sakura grumbled, "Do you mind?"

"Sakura, I was looking for you since we were going to start that double-blind trial, but Shizune-san took over and told me you were paged somewhere." Ino crossed her arms and nonchalantly looked between Tenten's legs, "Rough mission?"

Tenten was no longer embarrassed, simply resigning herself to the scrutiny and clinical takes of her medically inclined friends. She was upfront about it, "Not a mission. Just sex."

"Well that's preferable." Ino conceded, "Huh! Looks like you had a bit too much fun."

"Not really. It all felt pretty normal."

"Except for the part where you were stupid." Sakura reiterated as she pressed a healing hand to the offending wound, "Ripped perineum. This will be just a minute or two."

"If you claim it was normal activity how did you rip that?" Ino was perplexed.

"I don't know. Apparently I don't know anything because I'm stupid." Tenten defended.

"We all do something ill-advised, at some point." Ino offered a rare token of consolation, "And you know what, Tenten? Good for you! It took Neji a while before he pounced."

"It did. I'm happy though. It feels like a…scream-it-from-mountaintops kind of happy." Tenten reported sunnily, "Even if the aftermath stung a little."

"Normal sex wouldn't have done that to you, though. Did you try any weird positions? You're more likely to injure something that way."

"No…no, it was only beginner-level stuff, I'd say." Tenten maintained, "Nothing adventurous."

"Of course not. And in that case, if you kept it basic then you probably tore just because he was big." Ino assessed, unaffected by both Tenten and Sakura's flustered retorts.

"Hey, do me a favor and do not talk about any of that stuff while I'm down here." Sakura complained.
"Gosh, you girls just can't handle frank talk. Sakura, you don't have to think about how you were the second person in the last ten hours to get close to Tenten's—"

Sakura trilled for Ino to shut her mouth and hurled a box of gloves at her with a free hand. Tenten laid in the seat, extremely abashed, "You know what? I'll keep the injury. I'm just gonna go…"

"Hold it, we're nearly done." Sakura tried to reel things in again, "Sorry. Ino has a way with words in situations like this, and there's a time and a place for that talk," She turned and added over her shoulder, "And it's not in an examination room."

"I just wanted to congratulate her." Ino protested weakly.

Tenten chirped, "Thanks, but can you do just say something without squeebing Sakura out? I kind of need her help."

"That's not easy for me to do, but I can give it a shot."

Sakura decided to put her friend to work, "Ino, would you mind grabbing me a patient file and day-after medication? That's just outside in the cabinet on the left."

"Sure. Levonorgestrel tablet, right?"

"Yup. Pink and orange box, about eye-level on the shelf."

Ino set off with those directions and Tenten breathed a sigh of relief.

"She gets less obnoxious when she has something to do." Sakura observed, adding, "When did you last have your period?"

"Over a week ago-?" Tenten estimated.

"Alright. That's cutting it real close to an unsafe time, so be smarter from now on. Ino's getting a medication you should take right away that prevents fertilization. If for any reason it makes you vomit by mid-morning, let someone know or send for me. Though I'm pretty sure it'll work without making you sick." Sakura explained, done with the healing process, "You're all set. Let me just take some notes."

"You're going to keep a file on me?" Tenten slipped out of the seat and moved to the divider to change. She felt much better, save for a slight, residual ache from last night's happenings.

"A few temporary notes, until I can get your health file from the other office. I want to show it to Tsunade-shishou so she can approve a prescription for you. I don't have authorization to do that yet." Sakura pulled the gloves off and tossed them in a waste bin.

While dressing Tenten asked, "A prescription for—?"

"Birth control." Sakura deadpanned, "Unless you have other plans, I assume you want to concentrate on a shinobi career for the time being."

"No, you hit the nail on the head right there."

Ino returned and handed over a folder to Sakura, and then reached around the partition to gift Tenten with a box, "Here you go! Take that with a meal. Congrats again."

"Thanks…"
About an hour later, Tsunade read the file that Sakura had slipped onto her desk. She looked up slowly with an unamused expression and Sakura could only shrug at her.

"All I have to say is good grief." The Hokage sniffed. She approved a blank prescription with the monthly shot Sakura had recommended, and then handed it back to her apprentice, "Go drop that off for me, Sakura. Thank you for intercepting silly visits that I no longer have patience for."

"Just doing my duty, Shishou."

"Come back in a little while, I'm having a brief chat with some Tide diplomats next."

Sakura confirmed she would before leaving the office. She greeted the gaggle of Tide Village representatives who passed her in the hallway. Then the group moseyed on in to boisterously hail the Hokage, at least in Inari's case. Most of his companions were older, quieter, and tuckered out after traveling from Hidden Sand the day before.

"Good morning," Tsunade managed, because she was still running off of the last vestiges of caffeine in her system, "Hello, Inari and Tazuna, it's good to see you." She spotted Menma with a more mature ninja beside him, and two polished middle-aged women who she supposed were the deal-makers, "And hello friends from the Tide Village. How was your visit to Sand?"

"Dry." Tazuna offered, "Saw some old friends of mine out there too. Had a drink with a bridge builder named Mara…ate the Kazekage's food. It was alright."

Inari gave his assessment, "It's awesome! Kind of bigger than our city at home. But like grandpa says, I don't think I could live without a beach being close by."

"What kind of Tide ninja would you be if you strayed from where the tides are?" Tsunade smiled slightly at the boy, who had a Nawaki-like vibe to him, "Were any deals struck?"

"Yep." Said Tazuna, "Wanna give her a summary, Umeka?" He turned to the suited woman beside him.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Hokage-sama. Honda Umeka; director of Trade Administration in Shiogakure." She stepped forward and handed over a card, which Tsunade accepted quizzically, "Hidden Sand's village council and trade commission accepted our offer of 315 million Ryo over the next three years to import shinobi equipment, weaponry, artisans, and technology. We also concluded deals to export fish, fruit, produce, grain, oilseeds, milk, sugar, textiles, and other crops to Hidden Sand for preferential duty rates. I hope we can expand what Tide has to offer with the Hidden Leaf Village as well."

"You have my attention." Tsunade accepted a small booklet as well, glimmering with photos and smiling faces of Tide inhabitants, "You seem to be doing very well for yourselves. It's remarkable how quickly your village recovered after years of oppression."

"We never thought we would get to where we are now." Umeka agreed, "And we are thankful for our prosperity. We hope to share it with the friends we've made."

"Very good, Honda-san. Can I put our Trade Commissioner in touch with you? I'm not up to date on our current needs and deficits, but I am sure he will be eager to start a conversation." The Hokage handed back that contact info, to Umeka's delight. She and her trade office companion, Masaki, promised they would collaborate soon.

"In addition to all of that frilly stuff," Tazuna tacked on, "Maybe we might set up an exchange of labor, of sorts. We recently tested Tide's Sensory Corps and found it's lacking, to put it nicely. If
you'd be willing to lend any expertise for training, Tide can make it worth your while monetarily. And we'd shine your shoes twice if you'd be willing to assist with Sealing Corps training." He exchanged a weary look with Menma, "Sand did a great job establishing our Sealing Corps, and we even had a defected Mist Sealing veteran in charge of it."

"How could that possibly go wrong?" Tsunade wondered.

"Well make no mistake, he was an upstanding gent," Tazuna defended the Sealing Commissioner, "He just happened to be 96 years old and he died last week. Right before our cadets could finish tests to be promoted to analysts…so now we have a bunch of disorganized greenhorns who aren't confident enough to say: We can protect the village."

"Troubling." Tsunade concurred, lacing her hands under her chin.

"Let me know if that's doable." Tazuna requested.

"I will find that out for you. I'm overdue for a talk with our Sealing Corps head as it is." Tsunade leaned back in her chair and scanned her eyes across the line of Tide visitors, "Tazuna, Inari, Menma, Umeka, and Masaki…" She rapped a red nail on her desktop, "And who are you?"

The man released a small sigh, as if he had been trying to blend into the background.

"Tsunade-sama, please let us introduce Utakata to you." Menma spoke up, "He has been with us for quite some time, and was a former Mist ninja. He is an Academy tutor and one of the co-chairs of our Jounin Council."

"Ah, I've heard about you before." Tsunade wore a tiny, sly smile, "Not the most social fellow, but who could blame you? It's heartening to see so many Mist vagrants making a home for themselves somewhere peaceful."

"He's alright, I guess." Tazuna sort of vouched for their transplant ninja, "Quite the foodie, I must say. He's reviewed every restaurant in the Tide Village already. He's not that great with kids, but he's gotten better. I noticed that he recently got a girlfriend too and she's a looker."

"Do you mind?" Utakata hissed out of the corner of his mouth.

"I am trying to make you seem more appealing to the Hokage, but you're a tough sell." Tazuna snapped back.

"He's nice enough." Umeka vouched and Masaki tepidly supported the claim.

"Why do you guys have to make it sound like he's a jerk? He's cool! He saved Menma and Matsuri during the attack, and he's got this Bubble-Blowing jutsu that no one else uses. Well, like, he's got a million jutsu, he knows his stuff." Inari contributed.

"Thank you, Inari," Menma then suggested, "Why don't we let Utakata-san speak for himself? Earlier he said that he wished to speak with the Hokage."

"Oh." Inari quieted down.

Tsunade turned her gaze expectantly back to Utakata as he was given the floor. He seemed to relax a little and took a few steps closer.

He started off with, "I am the jinchuriki of the Six-Tails."
Tsunade was unperturbed, "I know."

"Because Gaara-sama told you?" Utakata supposed.

"He did. He was very pleased to meet you. I am confident he did not share that information with anyone else." Tsunade assured him, "We know better than that."

"The Kazekage told me that you can be trusted. That unlike leaders I've known in the past, you won't use others—you won't use a jinchuriki as a weapon, or against his or her will." Utakata had intense orange eyes, fixing them on Tsunade, "Gaara-sama told me that you care for and believe in the Nine-Tails' jinchuriki. That he has friends and is appreciated here."

Not fully aware of such sensitive details, Tazuna exchanged frazzled glances with Menma and Inari. Umeka and Masaki did not even appear to fully understand what the shinobi in the room were talking about.

"I love this village's jinchuriki. I'm not afraid to say that." Tsunade replied evenly, "If you want to judge whether or not the Leaf Village can be depended upon…because I expect Hidden Mist has let you down…you need to determine that for yourself. My words only count for so much."

"I trust the Kazekage."

"And well you should. He is a good man." She agreed, "Wiser than many twice his age."

"Would you care for the welfare of other jinchuriki? Those who do not belong to your village?" He asked, "If they came here seeking shelter from violence, hatred, or abuse—if their home was no longer their home? Would you accept them? If their power was a danger to themselves and those around them? Or if they feared for their lives because the Akatsuki chases them endlessly, no matter where they go?"

Tsunade smiled at him. She understood him a bit better.

Utakata trailed off and tried to figure out what her reactions meant.

"I already have. My Sensei, the late Third Hokage, has also done so and with great care." She tipped her hand to point at him, "So are you, as one of this fellowship of open-minded shinobi—are you prepared to do your part? Will you and the Tide Village stand with us against the Akatsuki and the terror they spread?"

He was stock still for a long breath, cogs whirring in his head in an effort to make sure he wasn't being lied to again. That this cause was not a farce or distraction, and that the Hokage was not paying him lip service as so many in his life had done. The corner of Utakata's mouth twitched up, resisting a relieved smile. He got a strong impression that she was the genuine article. Hidden Leaf could be an ally after all.

Inari whispered from behind him, "I think we totally should say yes."

Tazuna gave the boy a nudge, "Shh!"

Menma restrained a chuckle and then moved to stand beside Utakata, who glanced at him curiously and then recognized it as a gesture of solidarity. Inari got the hint and then joined the bunch, the shortest ninja among them, but he too bowed to the Hokage with respect when Utakata and Menma did so.

"Guess I've got no choice but to agree too if these blockheads have to make a decision like that."
Tazuna grumbled, cocking a hand on his hip, "Then let's just say your enemies are our enemies now. But if we're gonna be buddies, please feel free to help us get into top shape."

"Certainly. I intend to." Tsunade soothed any doubt, "I'm glad we agree on this matter. Out of respect for the risk you are taking on; know that I will forward any intelligence regarding the Akatsuki's position, activity, and known members to your security advisors and Jounin Council. I will ask Gaara to do the same."

"Thank you, Hokage-sama." Utakata had warmed up to her.

While the Hokage was being pleasant and tittering things like *oh, not at all!* Her office door *whooshed* open again and a twenty-something-year-old Sarutobi ninja bustled in with a half-shouted announcement before he silenced himself and slinked backwards out the door again. He had not expected such a large party to be in Tsunade's office, but she ushered him in, "Banri, get in here! They were just leaving."

The Tide Village group said their farewells and saw themselves out. Sarutobi Banri gave them acknowledging nods of his head before rushing towards Tsunade and sinking to one knee in formality, "Hokage-sama—"

"Oh please don't let this be bad news." She prayed out loud, alone with the young man. He was a Leaf Village Sealing Corps clerk, and anything involving the Sealing Corps tended to be a serious matter.

"I don't believe so, but it is urgent." Banri prefaced it before he said, "Netsuke-sama needs a private audience with you as soon as possible, my lady."

"Netsuke?" Her eyes nearly crossed at the name-drop of the Sarutobi clan's leader, "So this isn't related to the Sealing Corps?"

"No, Tsunade-sama. This is a request made on behalf of the Sarutobi clan. Netsuke-sama did not share with me what he wished to discuss, but…” Banri rose to stand and lowered his voice, "He said I should tell you that the Sandaime would have wanted you to know about it."

She exhaled a rattling sigh, realizing she had stood up as the tension of the announcement hit her. Tsunade dropped into her seat again and began rummaging around her drawers for a liquid cure. She flicked her hand at him to signal haste, "Return to him immediately. I will meet Netsuke at my residence as soon as I am able, just to avoid any busybody ears in this building. I have a few more things to attend to."

"Yes, my lady!" Banri departed to carry the message.

"Why did I overbook myself today?" Tsunade wondered miserably. She had about six more appointments, not counting the brief lesson she wanted to go over with Sakura. Some cutbacks were going to have to be made, because she did not like the gut feeling that accompanied an alarm being raised by the Sarutobi clan.

Tsunade slumped over dejectedly when she found that the bottle in her drawer was empty.

At the exact same time, far away in the Wind Country, Gaara was also folded over onto his office desk. It was going to be a short, ten-minute power nap. Shukaku had promised to wake him to get on with the hectic day.

Even while trying to sleep his brain raced. Luckily, it was thinking about mostly good things. Such
as how the new deals with the Tide Village were going to catapult Hidden Sand into a new age of abundance. The village was already flourishing, thanks to thoughtful and committed management since he had been sworn in as a village leader. Gaara wouldn't take full credit for it. The accomplishment belonged just as much to his brother and sister, Baki, the elders, the hard-working everymen and merchants, the students, the harried Chunin and Jounin who had returned to their senses after Rasā's conspirator regime and collusion with Orochimaru. Only by forging ahead together had they gotten anywhere.

Somewhere in his head Shukaku whispered for Gaara to roll over a bit, because he was drooling on a chart he had just worked on for thirty minutes, You'll mess it up.

Gaara turned over, and the thought floated back to him, remembering how he'd been concentrating on finalizing the list of entrants for the Accelerated Chunin Exam. Soon he would hold meetings with stage proctors and administrators about guidelines and how to run it.

A brief vision of Sakura danced behind his eyelids. There was a distinct feeling of flirtation and romance, but she seemed tired, as if she'd had a busy workday too. He dreamed of her asking politely to use his hammock on the roof for a nap. Yes, but only if he joined her. But that thought vanished, because something much louder and livelier shook everything up in his mind.

Naruto had practically stormed the Sand Village—stormed his life, and so very loudly. He seemed identical to his younger, hyperactive self. Gaara was aware that this dream-version of his friend was probably not accurate anymore, but it was what he remembered. No, it could not have been current because Haku was there too, being pleasant and attentive—qualities he really did not possess in spades these days. At least in Gaara's opinion.

"Gaara."

Now he was dreaming of someone talking to him. What did he have to do to get some peace and quiet?

**Gaara, wake up. Your sister's here.**

He peeked his eyes open and raised his head from where it was tucked on his folded arms. Gaara regarded Temari blearily, as she had just returned from a three-day reconnaissance assignment near the Land of Water. She was still dressed in dark stealth colors. She gave his head an affectionate, sisterly pat, "You okay?"

"Recharging." Gaara sat up and yawned.

"You need it." Temari lowered herself slowly onto a cushy armchair on the opposite side of the desk, "Ahh…I'm glad I'm home now. I need a bath. And wine. Do you want to debrief now or keep napping?"

"Debrief." Gaara chose, still mostly splayed over his desk, "What was it like down there?"

"Essentially all went as planned. Kasuga, Muta, and I met with the informant in the Tide Village, the one you put in a reward-ad for. I couldn't believe he wasn't a turncoat or snitch, since he came from Hidden Mist…but Tazuna told me it's normal for Tide ninja who came from Mist to be trustworthy. It's like they're starting over completely." She slouched back and put her feet up on a coffee table, "So anyway, the guy's name was Reijiro and he's a recent Mist defector. Wants to buy a house in Tide so he said sure, he'd help us track anyone in the Land of Water because he knows it pretty well. I talked to him for a while before we paid him. He was a Sensor-type just like Muta, and there was some great interface between them while we searched."
"How did you start?" Gaara asked.

"With rumors. Most of them were tips of where Momochi Zabuza may have been, but they were all eight months stale or older, which wasn't helpful. We took a roundabout route through some southern islands that were remote and cleared of drug cartels. Those hideouts were all empty…we went to some active gang hubs after that on larger islands," Temari stretched her arms above her head and cracked her back, "But you guessed it: not much there either."

Gaara rolled a paperweight back and forth over papers, "When did the trail get warmer?"

"When I made a suggestion." She smiled, "Reijiiro was convinced for a while that we were looking for a rogue, but by that he meant the rogue he knows. Which is from Hidden Mist. They're cutthroats and scoundrels. He was picturing Momochi Zabuza. Then I corrected him and asked where would we go if we were looking for a humanitarian, or someone who uses medical jutsu? Because that's what Haku does." Temari went on, "Then he got a better idea of how to narrow it down. We went to a place called Moji that used to have a University. He said that sometimes human-rights groups did work there because it's gotten so bad. Know what I found out?" She looked smugly at her brother.

"What?" He was listening intently.

"A few people recognized Haku's description. There weren't any specific leads about where he went or what kind of work he did. But a businessman named Gomo said we should try going north. Hell, north it was. And you told me that Haku is friends with an old merchant named Hiroshi, so we tried asking old people if they had any contact with either of them." She snapped her fingers, "That's when…some shipping depot workers in a harbor told us: Oh, you want Nanakusa. That's the next island over. There are young medic-nin training there, and they serve the senior citizen community." Temari smiled victoriously, "And you know the other attraction of that island? Hiroshi's tea shop. Word got around."

"So he's there." Gaara said, sitting up and shaking off sleep.

"He's there." Temari nodded, "Or at least based there. We would have taken a boat over to check, but we nearly ran straight into a Mist patrol that scared the hell out of Reijiiro. We retreated when he said that Terumi-psycho would have melted us instantly if he caught us." She recalled, "So I want to go back prepared. Two Sensor-types…give me Muta if he's available. He's good. And I need ninja who are quick and discreet."

Gaara headed her off before she could ask for a veteran kunoichi, "You can't have Zeriko. She's in the Lightning Country."

"Shit." Temari bit her thumbnail.

"Kankuro would be ill-suited."

"I love him, but he'd be ill-suited." Temari agreed, "And you need to stay here…"

"Yes. And I won't send Matsuri."

"No, no, she needs more time to train." His sister sighed, "Well, just put together a team that can hold its own against a Swordsman of Mist."

"It seems I scattered that team on assignments for the time being. I didn't think you would find Haku so fast." Gaara apologized, "Do you want to wait until I recall more veterans?"

"Why? He might leave the island, and veteran jounin will bitch if you send them out again for back-
"What am I paying them for?" Gaara sniffed.

"I don't want to wait. Give me the best team that's available to head out tomorrow. I'll manage." Temari decided.

He gave her a measured, contemplative look before nodding, "Alright."

"Thanks. Did anything interesting happen while I was gone?" She changed the subject.

"Apart from Tide Village deal ratification and watching the council salivate for that money?" Gaara rolled his eyes up to remember any noteworthy events, "Exam planning. I did laundry."

"Phew. No wonder you're so tired." She grinned at his annoyed face.

"Don't patronize me. Do you know how hard it is cleaning a house after a full day's work?"

"Uh, hello? Let's just get a maid. You don't have to be so uptight about how things are done at home."

"We're not rich."

"No, but the three of us make enough to afford a housekeeper." Temari planted her hands on the desk and leaned over, "You're just stubborn."

"One of my finer qualities." He handed her an empty lunchbox he had eaten out of, "Please take that home. I'll wash it later."

"Oh my god. Don't ever complain to me again." She laughed at him and spun on her heel. By the time Temari was out of the office, Gaara felt nauseous. It did not feel quite right to send his sister on this assignment without the proper pieces on the chess board. He wanted to call her back and renege on the decision; make her wait for more experienced, veteran Jounin to accompany her on this retrieval operation.

She would get miffed at him again. Temari was itching to go, thrilled that her leads had delivered them to a concrete endpoint. She wanted to strike while the iron was hot. That was just how she was. To avoid her razor-toothed impatience and ire, Gaara would give her the team she asked for, when she asked for it.

But it didn't feel right.
It was a chore trying to integrate Kurenai into the Sarutobi clan whenever she grew uncomfortable and dug her heels in. For cripes' sake, Asuma thought, the woman wanted to marry him. But the clan's estate made her feel antsy and off-balance, the animals freely roaming the property also bothered her, she had a different level of hygiene than his clansmen, and she had a knack for finding small things to nit-pick.

She said she wanted to stay in their tiny, woeful condominium and live out the rest of their days there. He was thinking maybe compromise was necessary, because it was a shitty place to live even though it was affordable. "Very well." He got her to nod her head at compromise.

But they were on their way again to his brother Netsuke's house, located centrally on the sprawling, verdant property of the Sarutobi clan, upon which many houses and even a park had been built. They'd been there before many times, usually to get drunk and play cards. However, it was only noon and they were taking a bit of a meandering walk that sunny day, just to look around. Kurenai was fine with that.

While rounding the bend in the lane that would lead to his brother's house, Asuma stopped for a moment to light a cigarette. He watched as Kurenai leveled her attention on an orchard across the street.

"That smells good." She said absently.

"Oranges." He said, and then she repeated it as if she'd thought of the answer herself. He smiled and followed her as she curiously crossed the street.

"It's not as developed here." Kurenai pointed out, "Not like the last block."

"This area usually stays reserved for gardening projects and the orchards we keep." Asuma walked around the fold of trees and blossoms, arriving at a pebbled walk, "I don't know what'll happen to it now."

"Why not?" Her eyes were sharp and attentive.

"The old folks that tended this plot moved away to a tropical island earlier this year, and the bank's trying to sell their house." He pointed to it, nestled between garden boxes overgrown with flowers, and paralleled by orange blossoms on its opposite side. Asuma exhaled a line of smoke, "Kakima gave up trying to maintain the plants here. I don't know what my brother wants to do about it."

Kurenai was frowning and thinking. Asuma stood back and observed as she carefully approached the home, which was a respectable size and of traditional style. Moss and vines had crept up onto the porch. The windows were dirty. Mother-of-pearl wind chimes hung suspended from a corner beam, swaying in the breeze. He did not object when she let herself inside without a word, entering through the unlocked door to take a look around. Kurenai had a cat-like fickleness when it came to decisions, so Asuma felt it was best to let her analyze and explore as much as she wished. He stood outside and smoked.
He glimpsed her at a second floor window as she was investigating the top level of the house. About ten minutes later, Kurenai returned and stopped beside him.

"It's filthy." She said.

"Banks don't clean as well as they should. They're not the best homeowners."

"I like everything about it." Kurenai told him, "I won't need much convincing, Asuma."

"You sure about that?" He smiled at her and raised his brows.

"It isn't surrounded by neighbors, your brother lives nearby, and I can garden here." She listed the positives, "That's why you picked it and made us come this way."

"That's why." Smoke rose in tendrils from his nostrils.

"Are there animals?"

"They show up from time to time." Asuma held the crook of his arm out for her to take, which she did, and they kept walking, "I can keep critters away if that's what you want."

"They'll eat my plants."

"They can try. There are ways around that."

"It needs to be cleaned, but it's in good condition. I suppose it does outshine the place we have now." She conceded.

"Yeah, it beats the hell out of the closet in that cramped little building we've been putting up with." Asuma agreed, "So if we call this a solid compromise, I'll work out the details."

"How much—?"

He lifted the cigarette from his lips, emphasizing, "Let me work on the details."

Her face was slate-serious, protesting.

"It's about as much as Kakashi's place was." Asuma yielded.

"That isn't cheap."

"It's not. And maybe Netsuke already put something down on it and called it a gift from our Dad." He informed her, "I know how you enjoy contributing, so why don't you furnish it? We can't bring the junk we have there."

"No, I suppose we can't."

While walking, he extended his hand to her and they shook on it.

Then they came to Netsuke's sprawling, Main House home, removed their shoes, and stepped up onto the engawa. Kurenai took a seat in the sitting room while Asuma extinguished his cigarette outside. By the time he ventured in to join Kurenai at the table, Kakima came bumbling through. She had been expecting them and set a variety of unhealthy snacks down on the table while greeting them, "Kurenai, Asuma. Early as usual, you great inconveniences…lunch isn't ready yet."

"I gave you plenty of buffer time. I even took her to see the house." Asuma squared eyes with his
feisty, informal sister-in-law.

"Oh? And the verdict?" She turned to Kurenai.

"It's suitable."

"Hoo! Have I ever heard you use that adjective before? Hot damn." Kakima rose up in great amusement, "Just a second, Netsuke said he was grabbing something." She bustled out to retrieve whatever nice-smelling fish was grilling.

Lunch was served despite Netsuke's absence, and Konohamaru showed up as soon as he smelled the wafting aromas of food. He greeted his aunt and uncle respectfully when he joined them.

"Do you have a mission?" Kakima asked her son, "If you're going to complain to me about why I did not support you signing up for the Accelerated Chunin Exam, then I'd better see you working harder to prove me wrong."

"This afternoon, Mom, jeez."

"You need better role models." She pointed out nonchalantly, "Better diet. You should join my yoga class."

"No, Mom."

"Resist all you like, but I didn't become a Jounin through bursts of training in–between a sedentary lifestyle." Kakima grinned at him, "If you showed up for class, I'd even be willing to teach you a new jutsu afterwards."

"Really?"

"Yeah, really."

Kurenai and Asuma watched the exchange while chewing.

Konohamaru groused over his lunch, "But not one of those crappy low-level jutsu again, right? You always do that to me."

"How are you talking to me now, young man? See, that's what always gets your Dad annoyed. That attitude. That's why he said he would not lift a finger to train you until you become a Chunin. Until you cool it." Kakima reminded him.

"He said that to punish me. Dad never changes his mind."

"True, he doesn't really change his mind for whiners. Anyway, you were asking for it with that last argument you had with him." She twirled chopsticks between her fingers, "I may be crazy, but I don't give him attitude. That's why Dad likes me so much."

"That's gotta be it…" Konohamaru muttered under his breath.

Kakima skillfully snapped a small scoop of nattō at her son and the soybeans plopped and stuck to his forehead. He scowled at her.

"I'm a beautiful goddess and he worships me." She reminded Konohamaru dangerously.

Kurenai was in a very good mood and actually smiling. She quite enjoyed these lunches.
As penance for his muttering and mild defiance, Kakima set Konohamaru to work cleaning up the table after lunch. Asuma asked if they were going to save a serving for his brother, but Kakima insisted that he didn't much care for eating and when he wanted to eat he would scrounge around containers in the refrigerator. Asuma was amazed at the lap of luxury Netsuke lived in thanks to his marriage.

A few minutes after the table had been cleared, Netsuke showed up and set a box down on it, "You didn't save me anything?"

"You don't like eating, remember?"

"That is not in fact true, even when I'm late."

"Then don't be late." Kakima smiled like a knife.

Konohamaru didn't say it, but he did think that his mother absolutely gave his father attitude. She just got away with it.

Netsuke sighed and opened the box, greeting his little brother and Kurenai, "Thank you for dropping by today. Did you see the house?"

"We did." Kurenai confirmed warmly.

"Good. Please buy it soon. It desperately needs proper upkeep." Netsuke went on, "Kurenai, I have something for you."

Her eyes widened a fraction as he extracted a velvet tray of jewelry and other keepsakes from the box, and handed it off to her. Kakima and Asuma watched Kurenai intensely as she examined the heirlooms.

"Some of our father's personal items are in here too, which I'll be keeping." Netsuke clarified, "But those belonged to our mother, Biwako. Seems a shame such pretty things haven't been in use for so long."

Kakima added, "That's your Thanks for coming around! Gift." She was chuckling like mad.

While Kurenai blanched at the incredibly generous gesture, Asuma reassured her, "My Mom would have wanted to pass these things down to you, if she'd been able to meet you."

She shut her eyes and exhaled, overwhelmed, "Thank you. I'm sorry I've troubled all of you for so long."

"It's no trouble. There is sense in taking your time with things. " Netsuke observed, "Both of you please feel free to relax here, if you like. Kakima and I have a meeting we need to get to." He handed the box off to his wife to carry, "Do you mind if we go and you see yourselves out later?"

"I know where the door is, Bro." Asuma reminded him.

"Save your sass." Netsuke smirked at him, "We'll be going then."

"Hey, Mom, Dad?" Konohamaru stood in the egress of the sitting room and kitchen, "Will you be gone for long?"

"We may be assigned a mission, if the Hokage or Black Ops need us this weekend." Netsuke estimated, "I don't think we would be gone longer than three days, if that's the case. Otherwise we'll
be home tonight and waiting for you to return."

Konohamaru's smile fluttered at the sentiment. It was always hard to watch them go.

Kakima sauntered up to her boy and kissed his cheek, snatching the end of his scarf and tickling his chin with it, "Cheer up, my leaf. Who better to protect the village than your Mom and Dad? We always hurry home to you."

"I know."

"Do well on your mission." She said.

"I will."

"Protect your team." Netsuke added gravely.

Then they left. Konohamaru slumped down onto a cushion again at the table, noticing the finery that had been given to Kurenai, "Is that Grandma's stuff?"

"It was." Kurenai confirmed.

"I never got to meet Grandma." Konohamaru mumbled.

"She was fun." Asuma recalled of his mother, "She had a photographic memory. Very talented and learned as a shinobi. She would have spoiled you rotten."

"Yeah, and I really miss Gramps..." He settled an elbow on the low table and propped his head up on his hand, "So Auntie Kurenai, are you excited to join the Sarutobi clan?"

"I wouldn't say excited. I feel very calm." She was sipping a cup of tea.

"How can you not be excited?" Konohamaru had thought that impending weddings were exciting to all women.

"Please don't mistake my lack of excitement as a lack of appreciation or happiness. I am incredibly happy." Kurenai laughed softly at him, "I have been with your uncle for a very long time. I like to be sure of things."

"Huh. Well that's alright." He agreed, "What do you like about the Sarutobi clan?"

"Hmm." She thought on it, "The flowers all over this property. And Asuma."

"That's it? What about the monkeys or comedy night? Everyone loves that stuff!" Konohamaru was incredulous.

Asuma was merely a spectator of the amusing small-talk between future aunt and future nephew.

"No, Konohamaru, I can't say that I am fond of those other things. Though I may learn to be." She imagined.

While he tittered in disbelief, she poked his round cheek with her pinky finger, "You know, I have a student who you could definitely get along with. I should bring Sato by when he's free."

Today there was a sale on honey. Beekeepers in Nanakusa were having a lucrative summer this year.
Haku turned the jar over in his hand, impressed with the color and clarity. Hiroshi had sent him shopping at the main street's market to pick up things for the tea shop in bulk. After that, he would probably plan with Zabuza this afternoon about where to begin looking for Hozuki Mangetsu's burial site. He might even consider practicing with the spare needle sword that Zabuza had spoken of. If Migawari clamored for his help with patients later, he would do that instead.

He asked a salesman at a table if he could have two cases of honey, and the man nodded chipperly before packaging the goods. 'I haven't had a moment to rest and think, lately…' Haku thought to himself, 'Everyone needs something. At least Zabuza has been more considerate of people, this week.' He also noticed that the strange, non-platonic behavior of the swordsman had disappeared completely. Haku was not sure if Zabuza would ever make a pass at him again, though for now it felt as if the steeled man was utterly disinterested. He hoped to keep it that way.

While paying the honey salesmen, Haku felt a strange twinge. It was almost like a prick at the back of his neck, undetectable and faint. He swatted his skin, wondering if a mosquito had taken a liking to him. There was nothing.

"Hm." Haku glanced around and saw only the high noon hustle of the town around him.

With impressive strength, he carried two large bulk containers of honey jars up a block to Hiroshi's tea shop. He set the delicacy down in the back kitchen and Hiroshi thanked him, "Haku, thank you so much. All I need now are those fruits— the peaches and berries near the end of the market. I'll be making daifuku with them."

"That's a favorite of mine." Haku perked up, "You can get started, Hiroshi-san. I won't be long."

"Sure. How much help can I expect? Do you have training today?"

"I think I will, but I'll confirm that for you." He hurried out again onto the central avenue, passing through the busy stands and tents of the market.

It was a cooler summer day. Cumulus clouds rolled like perfect cotton balls across a blue sky, and the air smelled delicious. Haku would bet that Tomo's children were playing near the creek, supervised of course. Raiga and Ranmaru had gone to the beach together. Migawari would be napping in his house, more than likely. Haku passed by the old medic-nin's building and came to a stop in front of the fruit stand. The old lady greeted him while he examined the produce and gathered desirables into a basket.

His ears perked up to the crunching sound of boots halting on the gravel of the road. Haku looked to his left and saw three Sand shinobi. Swallowing in alarm, he looked to his right, surrounded on that side by another Sand ninja, and beside him was Temari. She looked utterly unimpressed.

"Ah." Haku rolled his eyes forward again to the old woman and handed her money, "Madam, can I ask a favor?"

"Certainly." Her face wrinkled more when she smiled.

"These fruits are for Hiroshi-san, at the tea shop just up the road. Would you please have someone bring this to him?"

"I will, dear. Is something the matter?"

"Not at all. I'm just being arrested by these nice Sand ninja." Haku assured her, "There's no need for fuss. They're peaceful."
"Oh I see, well that's fine. You ought to be on your best behavior next time, young man." She lifted the basket and toddled up the way toward some children who looked strong and bored enough to complete the task for her.

Haku took a breath and turned back to Temari, slightly anxious, "Hello, Temari..."

"Gaara's been patient with you." She reminded him.

"Very patient." He agreed.

"That's over now." Temari updated him, "Don't ask how we found you here, it was a complicated process. Don't ask to do any last minute packing or farewells either. I don't have orders to let you do that."

"Then I won't." Haku saw no reason to protest.

He felt one of the three Sand ninja behind him push him forward, closer to the team captain. Temari turned to one of her subordinates, "Muta." With that cue, Muta stepped forward and gestured for Haku to approach. He had restraints in hand. Haku crossed his hands behind his back and calmly let Muta get to it.

One of the Sand ninja near the fruit stand was surprised, "I thought this fellow was dangerous, Temari-taicho."

"Not to us, he isn't." Temari explained, "To us he's a friend. To Gaara, he's even more important than that. We have to get him back to Suna safely. So remember the rendezvous points we marked just in case—"

Several things happened as Muta shrieked in terror and dropped the metal restraints before they could fold around Haku's wrists. He and Haku watched as the Sand ninja that Temari was speaking to was bisected in a spray of red, splattering them, and his torso toppled off of his bottom half and to the ground. Haku had only shreds of terrified thought race through his head: Muta must have been a Sensor ninja, but Zabuza had suppressed his chakra for the ambush.

"I thought Kori was keeping watch for this bastard!" A Sand Jounin spat as he dove laterally, avoiding the returning arc of Zabuza's sword.

"—he killed Kori! I can't feel him." Muta reported on their sentry, "He just killed…Mitsuie too…" He was frozen by the killing intent and the foul death of his friend just in front of him.

Haku decided to keep his hands free, warding Muta and Temari back with a gesture, "You can still arrest me! I just have to stop him." He had senbon steadied between his knuckles when he strafed sideways along market stands, trying to get a clear shot at Zabuza as Temari's other two subordinates darted around him. Even more troubling was that, no sooner had one needle successfully stuck into Zabuza's arm as he hurled a ninja named Tokumaru back…Temari slipped in and tranged her metal fan against Zabuza's sword.

His heart was in a freefall inside of his body as panic took root. Haku lunged toward the fight, but Water Clones that been lying in wait at the edge of an alleyway shattered apart a stand with Water techniques, slicing into Tokumaru's face as he rolled away. Haku and the other Sand ninja were bowled over by the barrage, scrambling to avoid the follow up strikes of the Water Clones chasing them. Haku's only recommendation to his new companion was, "Parry them!" Which the ninja managed with a summoned spear, kicking away one clone and then hacking into the other with a spear-tip. As the clone splashed apart, Haku molded it into ice, and he fired icicle shards at another
clone that was looming over the defenseless Tokumaru on the ground.

The Sand ninja let out an anxious breath, "Shit. What's your name again?"

"Haku." The two had raced over to the fallen Sand ninja, and Haku set to work healing him, "Who are you?"

"Hisauji."

"Hisauji, I don't know if Temari and your teammate Muta can deal with Zabuza. If he was this willing to ambush your entire team, it means he is confident he can defeat you." Haku explained while healing Tokumaru's head, "You should take him as soon as he is well enough to stand and retreat. I'll stop Zabuza."

"Kid, if something happens to you the Kazekage is going to be mighty pissed." Hisauji informed him, "We already lost Kori and Mitsuie, which is just—I can't even think of that right now. I'm not going anywhere until you and Temari-taicho have got that fucker on his back begging for mercy."

Tragically, Haku spotted what was most definitely a Shadow Clone of Zabuza's. It was casually positioned beside a wheelbarrow and strategically producing Water Clones near a decorative pond to keep the Sand team separated. If only to level the odds, Haku frantically created several Shadow Clones of his own, and sent them to intercept the onslaught that would have surely killed the Chunin Sensor named Muta.

Temari sliced Zabuza's Shadow Clone in half with her fan, concentrating on moving counter to the nukenin's wild dashes and swings. His sword could hardly come close to cleaving her. It was a vain effort on his part as her Wind nature deflected each attack.

"We don't want anything to do with you." Temari announced archly, "You don't need to step in for Haku. This is a matter that the Kazekage is willing to intervene on, so it's best if you back off before I leave you in pieces."

"He ain't the Kazekage's to take." Zabuza warned her, "He belongs to me now."

She did not like the sound of that, not in the least. It was helpful when one of Haku's Shadow Clones made it past the small mob of Zabuza's making, attacking Zabuza without an ounce of restraint. Zabuza whirled and cut into the clone's head, but his blade stuck. The Shadow Clone had been infused with Haku's Ice Release chakra. Temari spun herself with a windmill kick for momentum, opening her fan to three moons for an incredible blasting gust. The strength of her jutsu had reduced the iced-over clone to diamond dust, and forced Zabuza to abandon his sword to avoid the deadly technique.

A Water Clone's sword swipe snipped a few hairs from her pigtails, and Temari dropped quickly to avoid another attack. She kicked and swept the clone's legs out from under it, freeing a kunai from her sash and plunging it into the clone's head. While it dissolved into a puddle, she heard Muta's scream as he fell forward, impaled from behind by something thin and sharp. A second Shadow Clone of Zabuza's was carrying a needle sword, and he pulled back on a cable to retrieve the weapon, plucking it out of Muta's back. Temari chased off the hateful replication with a rush of wind, and kneeled at Muta's side.

"Can you get up?"

"Yeah, I think he missed. He's not so good with that weapon." Muta put pressure on his wound, "Captain… I don't want to die here."
"Me neither." She confessed worriedly, "Wave over one of Haku's clones. He can heal you."

"He and Hisauji are too busy protecting Tokumaru—"

"Wave him over! Haku knows I want you safe." She barked, speeding off again, "Keep sensing for other clones!"

The sounds of townspeople scattering and fleeing had long since quieted. All of the market had taken shelter on the far side of Nanakusa to avoid the ninja squabble. Temari took to the air to avoid a crashing wave of water that rose up from the creek adjacent to the town. The assault washed away many untethered booths on the street, and it had also given Haku unintended ammunition. He began to attack Water Clones more quickly, cannibalizing them, creating more ice, and then turned to give chase to Zabuza's Shadow Clone that was harrying Temari's subordinates.

With a swing of her fan, Temari blew apart the attempted conjuring of mist Zabuza had wanted to use for cover. He had regained the Seversword while she was distracted by Muta's injury, and he held it steady in his hands as he watched her with a calculating stare. Temari wasted no time in summoning her weasel, Kamatari, and held back as the spinning creature moved faster than the naked eye could spot. Kamatari rather handily cut Zabuza into chunks with his scythe.

She realized there was a nagging, aching pain quickly spreading throughout her body, in all likelihood her adversary's doing. She was also stuck in a repetitive vision of Kamatari cutting Zabuza apart, 'Shit, this is Genjutsu!' Temari dispelled the illusion and willed herself to turn, launching a gust of wind where she predicted she would be attacked from the rear. That staved Zabuza off if only for a moment. Knowing she would be vulnerable as the pain worsened, whatever it was, Temari bolted towards Haku as he did battle with the needle-wielding Shadow Clone. Muta and Hisauji appeared to be indisposed.

Haku let the clone wrap the needle blade's cable around his arm, and he pulled back to anchor himself as the replication took aim at him. In cooperative fashion, Temari cut apart the last Shadow Clone with her fan's gust before she dropped like a stone, striking the dirt face-first. Horrified, Haku turned around to make a break towards her, only to see Zabuza's Seversword had been pitched and was spinning through the air towards him. Haku plunged into an ice mirror below his feet to avoid it, exiting in a frozen patch of alleyway between two buildings.

Temari pushed herself up onto her hands and knees, panting, and beheld as Zabuza extended his hand. The Seversword obediently returned to him and when he caught it the kunoichi supposed that, as rumors purported of Mist's Swordsmen, such weapons were anything but ordinary. She coughed and flecked blood onto the pavement between her wobbling arms, 'What is going on? I don't think...I can stand...'

"It takes a while before Drain kicks in, but I've learned how this sword calls to blood." Zabuza clued her in as he stalked close, hovering Kubikiri Bōchō above her brow, "I could let you bleed out. That'd serve you right for daring to set one foot outside of that fucking desert of yours." He rested the blade's edge against her hitai-ate to mock her, "Ask nicely and I'll end it fast for you."

Temari raised her head in challenge, barely able to see as blood began to stream quickly from the corners of her eyes, nose, ears, lips, and fingernail beds. Her blood had never felt so thin, nor had she ever felt the rush of barbed wire along her insides that raked and destroyed, a technique cast by the giant, vile sword the man held. Her fingertips slid along the frame of her fan, wishing she would find the strength to lift it while she bled uncontrollably.

"Suffer, then." He advised coldly. Zabuza stood there and watched her, interested in the potency of the new technique he'd used. When his eyes strayed to where Muta, Hisauji, and Tokumaru were
slumped over and regrouping, he had half a mind to chop their arms off and let them wallow. That was until Temari spoke up in a soft sputter, her teeth stained red.

"What a lonely, unhappy man!" A cough muffled her laugh, "You probably don't know what... you'd do without him." She was referring to his desire to keep Haku.

Incensed by the remark, Zabuza raised his sword up for a chopping blow, then Haku careened into him with an exhausted, desperate tackle that toppled Zabuza over. Rather than try to wrestle the Seversword away from Zabuza, which likely would not have worked out, Haku turned 'round on his knees and stretched himself over Temari. He felt her convulsing while he held her, trying to hide her from sight as Zabuza got a hold of Haku's tunic and tried to pry him off of the kunoichi he was shielding.

"What in the ever loving fuck are you doing?" Zabuza snarled, "They're trying to capture you, you imbecile."

"I won't let you do this— I won't let you hurt anyone else." Haku had pressed healing hands to Temari's face as she struggled to stay lucid, "Zabuza, I'm begging you... please let her go unharmed. Let all of them go."

"Let 'em go so they can tell the motherfucking Kazekage what happened, so he can hunt me down next?" The man could hardly believe the stupidity of the request, "They're all fucking dead. These are problems, and dumbass ninja to boot. If you hadn't gotten in my way, I'd be burying the lot of them right now— starting with this prideful witch of theirs."

"You won't." Haku had pressed Temari flat to his chest to avoid the curve of the Seversword Zabuza had aligned with her neck.

Fed up, Zabuza snapped, "Why do you care if this bitch lives or dies—?"

"-she's my girlfriend—!"

Between their roaring and flagging negotiations, Temari weakly pointed out to Zabuza, "He's exaggerating. I broke up with him a while ago."

"Fucking fuck." Zabuza stabbed his sword into the ground and grabbed Haku by his ponytail, pulling his head back to look the boy in the eye, "You are a menace to all progress and sanity. You think you get to pull this shit? You don't. Let go or I'll kill you with her."

Haku held on to Temari and tucked his head down. He readily accepted the possibility.

Furious, Zabuza tossed Haku's hair and stepped back. He momentarily weighed the cost of writing off Haku and the training investment that had gone into the insufferable young man, and then realized that Haku's goodness and dedication could be used against him. Now was an opportune time to do so.

"I'll kill them first." Zabuza offered, watching Haku tense as he laid a hand on his sword hilt and turned toward the Sand ninja who had slung Tokumaru's arms over their shoulders, "Or you can do as I say."

"They can fight." Temari reminded Haku, "Don't let him—"

"Whatever you want." Haku agreed.

She sunk her nails into the skin of his chest, "He's going to use you."
Zabuza opportunistically extracted another deal out of Haku, "You want me to let them go? Fine. They agree to not send any Sand idiots to this island or the surrounding area. That's the first requirement for me to not use their limbs for crab-pot bait."

Haku acquiesced, "They won't."

"Good. If they squeal, I send the two of you in a jar to the Kazekage with my regards."

Zabuza asked Temari's subordinates if they heard that loud and clear, indeed they had, but they still did not trust him as far as they could throw him. With her last bit of strength, Temari ordered the team to collect Kori and Mitsuie, and then wait for her at their first rendezvous point (which happened to be the Tide Village). Knowing better than to protest, the Sand shinobi did as instructed and then withdrew.

"Well then," Zabuza sounded pleased, "You work for me until I say otherwise."

"Fucking kill him." Temari hissed, "He's a lowlife, Haku. Don't believe anything he says."

"You're not just going to help me overthrow Hidden Mist, Haku," The swordsman informed him, "You're going to deal the final blow to the Mizukage. When there's discontent and questions, you are the fall guy for that. Understood? Akatsuki or no, that honor's yours. I've got an image to maintain, you said."

Temari could feel harsh breathing as Haku considered what was said. She felt his lips pressed to the top of her head, and felt his helplessness and resolve clash.

"I'll do it." Haku conceded, "Leave all of them alone, unharmed."

"I have your word." Zabuza pulled his sword out of the damp earth and then stalked off, staying somewhere out of sight where he would watch them to make sure they were not going to call for help or initiate a double-cross.

Temari only had the strength to mutter about what an unbelievable fool he was, unable to stand and curling into herself. Her eyes had shut and her fan slipped from her hand. Haku was not certain how Zabuza had gotten her to bleed without touching her, and neither was he certain of how to stop it. He only had the energy for one more Shadow Clone, which he sent (with Temari's fan in hand) ahead to warn Migawari of a critical patient coming in. Shaking, Haku lifted Temari up and crossed the deserted, damaged road back to the health clinic.

Migawari had risen from a nap, fighting off grogginess once he had received the bunshin's message. He met Haku near the entrance and sucked wind in shock, "What the hell happened?"

"Zabuza tried to kill her and her team." Haku amended as they moved, "I think he is killing her still."

"All this blood? Where are her wounds?" Migawari pushed open a treatment room door and snapped a light on.

"He didn't touch her. Could he have used a jutsu through the Seversword?" Haku was trying to make heads or tails of it as he laid Temari down on a table, her head lolling as she was fully unconscious.

"If he did…" Migawari pulled the woman's headband off and pressed a skilled palm to her head, getting a read on what type of injury she'd sustained, "We may be out of luck, Haku. Those weapons aren't natural and do terrible things to people."
Haku stripped Temari's bloodied jacket off and also felt around with his eyes shut, trying to dive in with a System Survey jutsu to find a cause of trauma.

"This is recurring on the inside. Feel that?" The old medic grunted, "If she had any wounds, she'd be dead by now. Organs are intact…no internal breaks or injuries…but there's something in there. A chakra."

"Tell me what to do." Haku insisted.

"We keep up with it." Migawari pressed several wads of gauze to the woman's face and other sites of bleeding, "Got that Yin Seal on your head yet, kid?"

"I do, but I have barely any chakra stored in it." Haku lamented, "I can't use it."

"You've got a world-class case of bad timing. Who is this Sand ninja, if you don't mind my asking?" Migawari was curious, "You're so worried I thought you just about wet yourself."

"She's...she was..." He lowered his head in shame, sliding his hands along Temari's skin where he felt a roiling, injurious presence wherever he tried to heal, "She's the Kazekage's sister."

"Oof. We might be in trouble here. You are a friend of the Kazekage, isn't that right?"

"Best friends."

"Well maybe not anymore, if we can't get her to thicken up and respond. I'm gonna try to find some coagulants and another agent I've used with some success." Migawari directed him, "Watch that bleeding and follow that ripping chakra in there. Suppress it. I don't know how long it'll linger."

He hurried out and Haku stood over Temari, his breathing ragged, still shaking from head to foot. It was somewhat reassuring when his Shadow Clone stepped in and made an attempt to suppress the drain with its own healing jutsu. It frowned while it concentrated.

To some extent, Haku realized, the Sand team had been poorly prepared. Either they had underestimated how Zabuza would react to their presence, or the ninja comprising the team had less experience than what was necessary. How could Gaara have allowed such a thing? Haku shook his head. No, how dare he judge them. They had probably located him recently and wanted to act quickly. Teams were not easily arranged on short notice. He couldn't criticize the squad trying to recover him since two men had lost their lives, and the remainder of the team nearly had. All because he was wasting time on a selfish, abhorrent nukenin who, it seemed to Haku now more than ever, would never be socially rehabilitated. He was a killer. He had not helped Haku in his search. He only took.

It was his fault. That was a plain fact. Of course Gaara had not accepted Haku's answer— that he would not be attending the Exam in Hidden Sand. Naturally, Gaara would want to retrieve Haku and tie up other inconsistencies, and probably still help him search for the Yuki clan. Haku had been content to stay with the friends he'd made in Nanakusa, but it came at the expense of those who were waiting for him at home.

Pua brushed against his leg and snapped him out of his thoughts. His throat was tight, "Oh…girl, I need you to deliver a message to a Sand team heading west." The rabbit sat up on her hind legs and sniffed at him in the affirmative. Haku's Shadow Clone stopped its work to write out an update for the Sand team that was in retreat. He included an apology, that he was doing his best to heal Temari, and when she was well enough he would send her to the Tide Village to be retrieved. Adding for them to wait and please not do anything reckless, as his armistice with Zabuza was fragile at best. He
would jeopardize everything if he tried to escape to Suna now. The clone slipped that parchment into the rabbit's harness and then she raced off.

When Haku resumed work, Migawari returned and administered a small dose of an antifibrinolytic to Temari. He peeled back the soaked gauze and pressed fresh cotton against affected orifices. "Keep at it, Haku. Let's see if this helps." The old man flattened a sealing tag to Temari's sternum and held a hand seal, "We want what's inside her to forget what its job is...sometimes certain jutsu or weapons continue acting without direction from the user of the technique. There are ways to dull it, so to speak."

The Shadow Clone eventually dissolved, and Haku took a rest after a while as Migawari's intervention appeared to be working. Both he and Haku were smeared with blood.

"Heck." Migawari dropped onto a stool, exhausted, "I don't know if this is over with. Her vitals look okay."

"Thank you." Haku said softly.

"Oh you'll thank me alright. You'll be cooking me dinner for a week." He insisted, "Not to mention the fact that all Zabuza has to do is waltz in here while we are plumb out of strength...and finish the job."

"Don't say that." Haku pushed off of the wall to stand upright again, "I made a deal with him. He won't go back on it."

"How can you be so sure? I looked out the window and it's a bloody disaster outside." Migawari griped, "Damn lunatic, that one. Sure, Hidden Mist has issues and can use a proper coup...but I'm thinking he's not the one we want doing it."

Haku began scrubbing his hands and arms at the sink, and Migawari tiredly elected to do the same.

"You okay, Haku?" The old man asked.

"I don't think so." His shoulders were slumped, "I may never be."

"Hang in there. I'll see if I can find Ranmaru and his stooge. I ought to help reorder things outside and coax frightened townsfolk back out into the open. Should talk to Hiroshi too..." Migawari patted his back, "Stay here and make this lady comfortable. Clean her up on the second floor, where I have those spare rooms. Just be careful with her and line the bed up there in case she bleeds a bit more."

"I will." Haku nodded and watched him go before slipping Temari into his arms, carrying her through the silent corridor and up the stairs. She was feather-light and pale. Blonde hair was matted to the sides of her face, stuck to tear-stains of blood. Her breathing was slow.

Cobwebs were disturbed by the footfalls and motion of an occupant, on the level of Migawari's home that had not had renters in a long while. Haku entered the washroom and managed to keep Temari tucked in one arm while running hot water at the tub.

He whispered soft assurances while undoing her red sash and unclasping her top, "I'm sorry for everything. I'll do anything for you. Keep breathing. I can get you away from here." He tested water temperature with one hand and then resumed stripping her bloodied clothing off, spying blood trails along her chest, down her navel, and between her legs. Haku shut his eyes for a moment, accepting the nature of what had happened to her and what he needed to do to help her. He twisted the tap off when the tub filled, then pulled off her underclothes and settled her in the water.

Typically, it was frowned upon to put anything dirty or unrinsed in a tub this side of the world. Haku
would bleach the bathroom if he had to, some other time. He needed a place to keep Temari still while he ran a cloth over the red trails marring her skin. He cautiously sprayed down her hair while holding her upright, snatching product bottles from a tile ledge to use for a lather. It took quite a time to get Temari back to some semblance of health. Haku painstakingly wiped off each of her fingers and the rounds of her ears, folding her over to reach her back, down her legs, and every bit of skin that had suffered. Once she was clean, he wrapped her in as many towels that were within reach. Then he did as Migawari said and rummaged through a linen closet, finding medical liners and sheets, dusting off a bed to prepare it.

It also occurred to him that the only available clothing around were the simple, masculine garments in the closet and room's drawer. The top and bottom he picked looked huge on Temari's frame, but once dressed she would keep warm and Haku tucked a blanket around her once she was settled down on a mattress. He took a deep breath and composed himself. She would be alright for now. He on the other hand was still a mess, so he kept the washroom's door open to watch the room vigilantly while he stripped, unclipped weapon holsters, and washed off. Haku was not truly confident that Zabuza would not reappear to end things.

He sat on a bathing stool and stared, tense, frightened, cleaning himself automatically. Afterward Haku tied his damp hair back and dressed in what he could find in the drawer. Maybe he ought to concern himself with what was going on outside, and how best to help the people who had fled the madness, 'I can't. I need to stay with her.' In the noiseless attic apartment, Haku kept the lights off and sat beside Temari where she lay. She was still, her hair fanned out over a pillow, and Haku balanced her hand in his palm and occasionally pressed her wrist with his finger to check for a pulse. It was there each time. As the day dragged on and the light outside faded beyond the window, he dabbed at Temari's small nosebleed with a cloth and pressed a healing hand to her head again. Whatever technique had been at work on her was still trying to function, in spite of healing and suppression.

Her eyes fluttered but did not open, and he held his breath.

"Temari," Haku leaned down as he spoke, "Please say something if you can hear me."

"Nnnmm." Her eyelids squeezed together and her voice was pained, "Don't let him."

"Zabuza is gone. For the time being." He assured her.

"He'll use you." She repeated weakly, "We both need to get out of here."

"We wouldn't survive if we tried." Haku supposed, "And I don't know what he would do to the people of this town if he believed it could get my attention or dissuade me."

Temari croaked, "You need to make better friends."

"I have great friends. I just don't think he's one of them." He admitted.

She peered up at him, shifting slightly under the blanket, "Where are we?"

"Migawari's house. He's a medic-nin tutor I've studied under, and he helped me stabilize you." Haku explained, "Zabuza used a jutsu that I have never seen before. I can only describe it as...a freakish, persistent technique designed to expire the one it affects from blood loss."

"So that's why everything smells like iron." She battered her lips, "Get me some water?"

Haku rose to fill a glass carafe on the bureau with water, the returned to help her sip it. As he helped her sit up, he told Temari, "I will never forgive him for this. He'll pay."
Temari paused in her parched gulping to say, "Try not to plot while we're still at a huge disadvantage, alright?" She took another sip and asked, "Where is my team?"

"They went ahead to the rendezvous point you established, and I believe they took your teammates' bodies with them." Haku recalled, "I am so sorry. They didn't have to die."

"No, they didn't." She handed back the glass, "I should have waited like Gaara said. They weren't ready to deal with a Swordsman."

Temari settled back down and Haku traced a healing light over her face, neck and chest. When he asked, she confirmed that something still hurt all over. The suppression tag that Migawari had stuck to her had since been removed after becoming inert, and Haku could see it had not completely tamped out the Drain. She stared up at the ceiling for a while, her eyes vibrating with thoughts about her squad, the failure of the mission, what her brothers would think, what would happen to Haku…

She shut her eyes and sighed at his touches, "That feels nice."

"I should hope so. It's all I can do to hold back pain or bleeding, for now."

"Well, thanks for fixing me and…I'm sorry that I made things worse."

"Zabuza made things worse. I appreciate that you came to find me." He corrected her.

"I thought I didn't want to, for so long…” She said fuzzily, "But I did and that's why it was scary.” She added, "I'm dizzy."

"You lost blood. I should set up a transfusion." Haku ceased his healing work and rubbed his thumbs over her arms, "Get some rest for now."

Temari grunted compliantly and drifted off when he set out to find a hook-up and type-O blood downstairs in the office to transfuse. He came back and was apprehensive about breaking her skin with a needle, but it posed no issue when he did so. Not long after that, Hiroshi and Migawari appeared at the doorway of the bedroom.

Hiroshi whispered in concern, "Is she alright? Are you alright, Haku?"

"We'll be fine.” He turned to his friends with a sigh, "I hate to put you through this."

"Nonsense. It was very clear who decided to raise hell today." Migawari dismissed the apology, "I had a witness from a fruit stand say you were going quietly when you were arrested. Kudos."

"I would have had no idea where you'd gone, though it would've been a more peaceful departure," Hiroshi supposed as he approached the bed, "Migawari-san told me this is Gaara-kun's sister."

"Yes, she is. I'm going to protect her until she is well enough to get away and reunite with her team." Haku further advised, "And I want you to stay near Ranmaru. He's the only person here besides Migawari-san that we can trust."

Migawari was examining Temari and checking the transfusion setup while Hiroshi confessed, "I'll try to convince Ranmaru to stay when he gets back later. Zabuza is already haunting my shop."

"Already?" Haku growled under his breath.

"He is. I suppose he wants to keep you in check, somehow. It'd only be the second time this month my life has been threatened." Hiroshi shrugged, "But I can keep him docile with liquor. Maybe some
Haku perked up at the suggestion, "You could. Is he eating everything we've stocked?"

"Just about. He must be troubled by this whole debacle."

"And you have a top shelf of whisky and sake?" Haku confirmed.

"Still do."

"Give all of it to him." Haku demanded, "I'll pay you back for it."

Migawari looked over his shoulder, "You want that demon drunk?"

"Only when Ranmaru is around to keep you safe, Hiroshi-san." Haku explained, "I don't think Zabuza would lash out if he starts drinking. He hasn't done so in the past. I just need him preoccupied."

"I'm willing to do that." Hiroshi was sheepish, "And I'll send you the tab later."

"Thank you."

"So, what's her name?" Hiroshi was interested in the snoozing woman, "She's lovely."

"Temari of the Sand."

Migawari made a scoffing sound when Haku said it.

Haku sniffed, "What?"

"You speak her name as if you're in love with her." The old medic had noticed, "This scenario is pretty obvious to me; why she showed up in the first place, why you're trying to keep her safe…"

"We aren't like that anymore." Haku defended, "I hope she's moved on to saner, more dependable companions."

Hiroshi only smiled to himself and chuckled, "Do ask her and find that out. I'm surprised she had the guts to come here knowing the Demon of the Hidden Mist was lingering." He gave them a wave before exiting and descending the stairs.

"Young people." Migawari muttered as he hobbled around the room dusting with a fiber duster, trapping cobwebs, "Love, pff." He turned around and pointed the duster at Haku on the foot of the bed, "Don't lie."

"What are you talking about?" Haku raised his eyebrows.

"You looked possessed when you came into my office with her. Like the world would end if she kicked it." Migawari notified him, "Maybe it would if the Kazekage could get his hands on you, but in the emotional sense, I can see you are not over this woman." He cracked the bedroom window to shake out the cleaning tool and added, "I would know. My daughter played a game like this—unwilling to fess up to the fact that she was still enamored of the man she tried to move on from. I could see it plain as day. Even when she argued with me and denied it, she drove herself crazy while pretending and hiding."

Haku watched his tutor with a weakened, honest expression.
"So I said: Sarincha, put your money where your mouth is. Take a new job in Kaido, far away from Hidden Grass, and I promise you that if you're really done with that shithead then you'll take to it like a duck to water." Migawari threw his hands up over his head, "Then he proposed to her. Well fuck, I said. They got married and she took the job, and now I've got a son-in-law. Anyo writes to me pretty often, which makes it hard to dislike him."

While Migawari grumbled and stomped around, reminiscing, Haku pressed his mouth in a line and tried not to laugh. He got the gist of what his friend was trying to articulate.

"I'll bring some food up. Stay here with her." Migawari offered. Haku thanked him before he left. Worn out, he curled up on his side and dozed for who knew how long, until the smell of a tray of food on the bureau woke him. Haku sat up and regarded Temari who was still and asleep, seeing that color had returned to her skin. In another hour he would take her off the transfusion.

He took the tray and sidled over to her, feeling that it was a crime to wake her. Haku gave her a light shake and asked if she wanted to eat.

"Buh." Temari's hand flopped tiredly against his knee while he leaned over her.

Haku suggested, "Maybe later?"

"I smell chestnuts." Her voice was hoarse.

"Can you sit up?"

She struggled for a moment before wriggling up and sagging against the headboard. Her eyes scanned the tray, "Soup?"

"Mushroom soup."

"I like vegetable better." She was too weak to lift a spoon so she let him feed her. In-between spoonfuls Haku helped himself to a chestnut or two, which ticked Temari off, "Don't eat 'em all. Those are my favorite."

"I'm sorry, here." He held one out for her to bite, "Can't you get these at home?"

"We hardly ever find sweet things in Suna. I guess these must grow on this island." Temari crunched on the treat. Haku raised a cloth again to dab at a spot of blood rolling down her ear.

"I don't suppose it would be appropriate for me to ask how everyone is doing?" Haku ventured, "I would like to find that out for myself, but I have no idea what happens after this."

"You can ask." She opened her mouth for more soup, then went on, "You're a prisoner now, so you either die, or he dies, and then you can come to the mainland to be with civilized people."

"There are some good people here." Haku defended.

"Then they'd want what's best for you."

"I guess they would."

"Why are you even staying here? He may have taught you jutsu or helped you in your search, but Zabuza seems like the type of person you can't stand." Temari was perceptive.

Haku verified her suspicion, "You're right. I can't stand him. He's tormented me and many others. I've learned a lot from Zabuza, but I don't really believe he's capable of change. And he hasn't helped
me \textit{at all} with looking for the Yuki clan. That's what we agreed to in the first place."

"Sounds like he makes up the rules as he goes." Temari opened her mouth again like a baby bird.

"He has." Haku continued to spoon up the soup, "I kept hoping that...he has a chance at making things better in Hidden Mist. At helping all of the people here. But I think I wanted to stay...because I started believing I could do it better."

"Maybe." She shrugged with her face, "You are far more likable."

"It's stupid. I hardly know anything about the ninja or abilities of these lands, the history and strife..." He sighed and provided her with another chestnut, "What could I do that he couldn't?"

"Care." Temari said flatly.

"That won't be enough to save people."

"No, it won't. You'll need help, and probably not his help. Gaara's, Naruto's, Sand and Leaf, and even the Tide Village would consider—"

"It seems unlikely to me that stable, established villages would dive into potential feuds or war to reclaim Hidden Mist just because I asked them politely." Haku handed her the counterpoint, "The only benefit is that they may be able to install a leader who is favorable to them, or who would entertain the idea of an alliance. It's probable that even that wouldn't work."

"You've got to be more optimistic than that." Temari accepted one last bite of soup.

"I think I'm forgetting how."

"\textit{If} the Akatsuki is there, running things in secret," Temari imagined, "We both know that isn't something you want to deal with on your own. So if you don't trust that Zabuza can actually do something about it, or if Sand and Leaf might hesitate to step in when you need them— convince the friends you've made here to act." She added, "Then come home."

"It might be easier to just give up and go home."

"Zabuza will make that difficult."

"I'll find a way to deal with him." Haku exhaled harshly, letting Temari have one last chestnut.

"You had better. He thinks he \textit{owns} you. Like you're a piece of property, or a swordsman like him, or whatever psycho things he's got in his head." Temari observed, "If you go on like this, it seems that he wants to use you up— and he will. Let you take the blame or take on risk he might've been saddled with. You're just the means to his end."

"I know that." He gathered items back onto the tray and walked over to the bureau to set it down, "I really am sorry about all of this, Temari. I wish it were easier to figure out. I don't know if I should run away and not act on evidence of the Akatsuki being in Mist, or if I should try to impede them and help people while I'm here. What's going to help the most people?"

"You keep asking that..." She shut her eyes and let her head loll, "When was the last time you thought about yourself? Not just your clan...or your friends...you."

Haku smiled wearily, "I don't." He looked in the mirror on the wall to spot her and asked, "Should I try that—?" Haku blanched as he watched blood run freshly down Temari's face. He spun around
and closed the gap as she keened over in pain, "Temari-!"

She had gritted her teeth, restraining a screech. She held out her arm to reveal her injection site was discolored and swelling, and in all of a moment Haku had switched off the device, removed the line, and pressed a healing hand to her arm. Temari tried not to thrash or scream as red tears rolled down her cheeks. "I'm sorry—" He said as he pressed his free hand to her chest, feeling around for the drain or what remained of it, "I'm sorry!" Haku straddled her legs and gave it his best effort, healing and suppressing what he could. He was still winded from fighting and helping her earlier.

After a while she grew calmer, but she did not have the willpower to resist sinking into a pillow and blooding it. Haku had gotten the ravaging chakra inside of her under control again, but it left him raw and enraged. He said nothing as he patted blood from Temari's face and ears with a rag, hushing her apologies about making a mess. He fetched a damp cloth to clean her up so she could be comfortable.

"How do you feel?" He asked.

"No pain right now. I just want to sleep." She told him.

"I'm going to send Migawari to check you." He settled her down again, "Rest."

Then he stopped at a chest of drawers before leaving the room and picked up the holsters of weapons he had removed. He would need them. Haku moved down the stairs while fastening belts and clips, and then met Migawari near the front of the office. The man instantly noticed new blood stains on Haku's borrowed clothing. "She alright?" The medic asked.

"The technique is fading, but even in bursts it does damage. Will you please look after Temari for a while?" Haku requested with a steely glint in his eyes.

"Sure."

"Thank you, Migawari-san."

"It's getting late...don't do anything I wouldn't." Migawari tried to impart some rationality, as he sensed that Haku had been nudged past the brink.

"I promise I'll be back soon." With that, he was out the door and in the dark of night.

The cool air gave no relief to the boiling in his veins. Damn patience, optimism, forgiveness and tolerance. Zabuza had never been worth those things. He'd never been worth the air Haku expended in conversations trying to get through to the brute. He crossed the street and kept to a single concrete walkway, entering silently through a back entrance of Hiroshi's tea shop. Haku was meticulous about keeping his presence concealed, and stole a glimpse round the doorway of the kitchen to spot Zabuza predictably indulging at a table littered with bottles. Hiroshi had done as he asked. The dining room even had a sour smell to it, some mix of sweat and booze. Hiroshi and Ranmaru ignored the beast drinking in the corner as they cleaned up.

Haku retreated without a sound and exited, scaling a rain spout of the building up to the roof. The main street at the front of the shop had a single lamppost. At the back, only shadows stretched over stone and shingles. Haku crouched there and waited. Time trickled by and his rage did not wane. He waited until Ranmaru left the shop to return to the small space he and Raiga occupied at the far end of Nanakusa. Until the front door was locked, irrespective of Zabuza lounging about, and Hiroshi shut off the lights and retired to his home upstairs for the night. The back door was unlocked, and before midnight, inevitably, Zabuza stumbled out of that exit. Unarmed.
It took every ounce of concentration Haku had not to give away his position, or flare noticeably with chakra or killing intent. He crept along the stone masonry of the roof, eyes sharp, and at the edge waited for Zabuza to pass beneath him on an isolated passageway. He would not use senbon because he wanted to feel the life leave the man he jumped down on, slamming down onto Zabuza's back as he dropped. Haku spun a curved knife in his palm and jabbed with precision, snarling when Zabuza caught his wrist while sputtering in shock. They grappled and rolled across pavers, and Haku used an array of tricks that might slow a drunken but thoughtful assassin.

He kneed the man in the groin, twisted Zabuza's hand back, and nearly had a clean stab to the ribs before the swordsman somersaulted backwards. Haku fell off of him and slashed again, cutting a line across Zabuza's chin while he tried to rise and flee. Zabuza fell flat onto his back but kicked Haku down before he could leap again. Within arm's reach, Haku batted over a plastic spackling drum that had collected rainwater, and spilled its contents onto the walkway. With a thought and a twinge of chakra, Haku froze the pavement under Zabuza's feet. No force was necessary since the man's sense of balance was about nonexistent. He slipped sideways and struck the alley's wall, took a knife to the stomach and a fist to the jaw. Zabuza went down again.

Then Haku was on top of him, battering Zabuza's face with such ferocity that the skin of his knuckles shredded off. Zabuza had some cleverness left in those desperate moments, snatching another knife from the holster at Haku's back and intending to defend himself with it. Haku was faster, and he sprang over the swordsman like a stoat and bent his arm back until there was a snap, and the weapon dropped from Zabuza's hand. Haku picked it up and rammed it with great satisfaction into the space between ribs at his back. He kicked Zabuza's knees and watched him fall forward, trying to brace himself with a working arm. Haku stomped on his functioning hand to pin it, seized the back of Zabuza's head without a word, and began smashing it repeatedly into the stones of the walkway.

Shortly after that Zabuza stopped moving. Haku dropped him, sucking in deep breaths as he stood back and glared at what was left of the selfish man. His arm was bent at an odd angle, knives stuck in him like pins, and blood ballooned in a puddle around his face on the ground. He would die from his wounds.

'Good.' Haku thought. He dusted himself off and left the scene, headed to the west side of Nanakusa and up into the flat they used for a hideout. He sloughed off blood again in the shower and dressed in his own clothes. After that, Haku returned to Migawari's residence. All the while, a witness had seen the attack on the man in the alley. A local market worker approached the body timidly.

Migawari's snoring was audible from his first-floor bedroom. Haku limply climbed the steps to the next floor and found Temari safely asleep. He moved to take the food tray sitting forgotten on the dresser, and startled at the sight of himself in the wall mirror. His nerves were still lit with a fight or flight response. Just then, he was a stranger to himself. Haku could see in that reflection a person who could kill comfortably and be satisfied. Someone who made foolish decisions that could cost the lives of the people he loved. He had no regrets about what he'd done to Zabuza. Haku could admit he was willing to kill anyone who threatened his precious people. He wasn't as upstart and righteous as he had once been.

He lifted the tray and went downstairs to the kitchen, thinking morbidly of how he'd forgotten to use the Crow Summoning scroll for "mop procedure," as Zabuza had shown him. Yet he didn't care enough to go back and dispose of the corpse.

'Zabuza used me and extracted promises from me— he wanted to rape me as a form of payment. He
was a miserable pig.' Haku reasoned. He had done what he had to.

He rinsed dishes and realized the choice had been final. Now there was one less, well-informed rebel to stand against the group holding Hidden Mist hostage. He did not really know where to go from there, or who to contact to build any momentum against the Akatsuki's control in the Land of Water. He sighed tiredly, 'Let that be tomorrow's problem.'

Haku scaled the stairs, drew the curtains of the room, and then stretched out in the free space of the bed. He took a clean pillow for himself and tried to relax. Haku's eyes steadied on Temari before he reached and flattened his hand on her chest, searching for any residual murmurings from the technique that had harmed her. He felt none. He kept his hand there as his eyelids grew heavy.

The next thing he knew it was morning, and a sliver of light crept through the drapes at the window. Haku cracked an eye open and saw that Temari was out of bed, carefully toweling herself dry in the bathroom with the door ajar. Near as soon as he'd seen her naked again, he shut his eyes. He'd seen too much already. He heard her footfalls over the floor, and then her riffling in a bureau drawer as she searched for clean clothes. She sighed and dressed, then returned to the bed.

With his eyes closed Haku asked, "Are you feeling alright?"

"I'm better than I was." Temari assessed.

He looked at her and felt his heart constrict. She appeared defeated as she sat cross-legged on a blanket. She asked, "Will he be back?"

"I don't know. I think I killed him." Haku told her.

Her brows shot up, "You think you did?"

"I didn't stay to see his last breath."

"Yeesh. If you killed Momochi Zabuza you should've collected his head to turn it in for the reward." Temari considered it a rookie mistake, "But I guess you should find out before I try to go anywhere."

"I want to go with you." Haku said, "I'm prepared to apologize— to confront any humiliation or punishment that I deserve. I never should have done any of this. I never get any closer to what I've set out to do."

"Are you sure you didn't?" She wasn't convinced.

"Based on the few things I've learned, the Yuki clan sounds like a headache I may not want. It has produced a dangerous nukenin who killed the clan's leader, and now they cower from the world and live secretively. Even if I knew more about them, would my opinion honestly change?" Haku hardly saw the point of it.

"You can still love and appreciate people who have flaws."

"They won't have any idea who I am."

"But those who get to know you are usually glad they did." Temari reminded him, "You think my family was without its blemishes? I know it's weird, but I was able to love and hate my father at the same time. He treated me well while he treated others like vermin. It's not a perfect comparison, but who is to say you wouldn't be cherished by these flawed people who share your blood? There's only way to know for sure."
Haku rolled onto his back and considered it.

"I'm tired." Temari eased herself down again, "Will my team be able to meet me in Tide, if I make a run for it?"

"They will, and I hope they passed a message along to Gaara. Although I have no idea what he'll do in this situation."

From the doorway of the room Migawari cleared his throat, and Haku sat up to see the man beckoning him over. He left the bed and joined the medic-nin in the hall, listening as the old man asked in a low voice, "By any chance did you try to kill Zabuza last night?"

"I did." Haku confessed.

"Well he's in my front office and he's not dead." Migawari clarified for him, "He doesn't seem happy either. I asked him: What's eating you? And he said he'd kill me if I didn't fix his arm and some puncture wounds...so I did, then he told me to tell you that he doesn't suffer traitors."

"Oh." Haku was dismayed to hear it.

"I'd say you do a hell of a job improving our safety, young man." Migawari employed some sarcasm while clapping his shoulder.

"Can he move? Do you think he—?"

"I don't think he's going to murder everyone here, but he looks put out." Migawari motioned for Haku to deposit some blood-soiled sheets and clothes in a hamper, "A Sikh neighbor of mine took pity on him last night and brought him to me. Great man, really, and I don't know if he knew who Zabuza was, but I just thought I'd let you know that I'm gonna try to appease him with breakfast. We'll see how he feels after that."

"Alright. I'm sorry about this, Migawari-san."

"Me too. Enjoy your time up here because it may be the last hour you spend breathing." He departed with the hamper in hand and went downstairs.

Haku shut the door behind him, feeling a swirl of fear and self-loathing ransack his insides. He had made things worse. He'd gone back on an agreement and tried to kill Zabuza, and was now faced with Zabuza alive and unwell and understandably displeased. He crossed the room to the bed and sat down beside it on the floor, devastated. Temari rolled over and frowned at him, "What?"

"I hate myself." Haku reported in truth, "I'm useless. Impulsive. I make things worse."

"Hmm." She blinked at him as she curled up at the mattress' edge and observed his emotions.

He took a moment to swallow and fight the moisture in his eyes. Haku reached up and gently stroked her hairline while telling her, "There are mornings when I watch the sun rise over the ocean, and I like to tell myself that you're seeing it too on the horizon in the desert."

Temari conceded, "I do see it, sometimes."

"I want to make sure that you get home safely. Zabuza is here and I don't think he'll let me do anything without a fight." He illuminated their circumstances, "Don't waste any more of your time on the likes of me. You have a family and a legacy to carry on. I can only ruin everything."
"Don't tell me what to do." She quipped.

"Did I ever tell you that I was born on a farm in the Land of Water? I watched my mother die before I killed my father in self-defense. I think now I understand...all this time, I've been delaying the inevitable since that day." Haku shared his realization out loud, "I always cling to others. Try to further their causes and success, because I can't advocate for myself. Most of my life I tried to hide the fact that I am worthless murderer...so how could I ever have thought myself superior to Zabuza, who had much of the same experience I did?"

He added wistfully, "I want things of my own: a place to live, friends, and a family." His hand tightened into a fist against the bed, "But I should expect to destroy those things with my carelessness —"

Temari patted her finger to his lips, "Shut the fuck up."

Haku stared at her.

She went on, "Phew, you're exhausting. Like a carousel of self-flagellation."

The description startled him enough to make him laugh.

"It's time to get over the fact that you're not perfect or pure— that you had a shitty start and that you still screw things up." Temari advised him, "Many people can say the same and claim to be happy."

Her fingertips migrated along the side of his face, across his forehead, sliding along his eyebrows and back down again.

"Come on, even from my short encounter with him, I could tell with certainty that you're unlike Zabuza." She soothed him, "Your similarities aren't proof of identical guilt, or whatever. I don't think he has a capacity for compassion the way you do. Has he ever gone out of his way for others?"

"I don't think so." Haku yielded.

"There you go." Temari yawned.

It felt good to sit there and say nothing, counting how many times she blinked her teal eyes.

"I think...even if you hate yourself..." Temari postulated, "Selflessness and compassion for others will take you far enough to make the choice."

"Choice?" He rested his chin on the edge of the bed while he listened.

She elaborated, "The choice to forgive yourself. In my case, I feared and ostracized Gaara when we were children— when he needed support the most. I lived with the guilt after my father claimed he was dead...and it didn't feel any better when I found Gaara alive. I was disgusted with how I'd left things. Of what I didn't do for him." Temari poked the bouncy, healthy skin of Haku's cheek and said, "Had I not gotten over and accepted the mistreatment of my brother, we never would have moved on."

Haku had shut his eyes to focus on her voice. He sighed and relished her hand carding through his hair, lightly coursing over his scalp. Thinking about how Zabuza would likely make an authentic attempt to flay him downstairs was far from his mind.

"So, to describe how things are going in Suna...since you asked..." She decided to recap, "Things at home are amazing. The village is prospering, Gaara knows what he's doing, Kankuro keeps us sane,
Matsuri is growing up fast...everything is great because everyone is actually putting sweat equity into progress. Unlike my father's regime, where everything was a shortcut or a desperate move... It's kind of a charmed life, nowadays."

"Hmm." Haku smiled with his eyes shut.

"Though it's not without its ups and downs," Temari traced a fingernail down from his widow's peak and along the bridge of his nose, "I've dated a few men in Hidden Sand. The results were mixed. One strong contender had an extra tooth that— how do I say this? Jutted out crooked from his gums...and eventually I couldn't stand the sight of him even though he had a great sense of humor."

Haku opened his eyes and teased her, "Your loss. He'll find someone less superficial."

"Pfft." Her touches roamed down Haku's neck and shoulder, as far as his shirt collar allowed, "Then there was this handsome guy who pretended for two whole weeks that he was respectful and smart...and then I discovered him outside of a shopping center giving a public rant about women and minorities ruining everything in Sand." Haku seemed to not be entertained by the recollection, but she continued, "Maybe he was embarrassed? He was very sensitive about me outranking him as a shinobi...so I think that inspired his insecure breakdown."

"Unfortunate." Haku supplied a word.

"I kicked him off of the storage container he was pontificating on." She sucked in a delighted breath as if she was reliving the moment, "That felt great. Felt even better when he got lost, that fucking tool."

"I might've said the same thing." He said with a slight, competitive edge to his voice.

She summed up, "Everyone who was interested in me has been a jerk."

"That string of bad luck can't last." Haku forecasted.

"All of them made you look better."

"I'm flattered." He really was.

"So how has your luck been dating-wise?" Temari asked.

"Well," Haku took a moment to compose his answer, "About the same, which is to say, no one came along. Most of my time is occupied by children or the elderly. Zabuza once tricked me into visiting a whore house, which was shocking and repugnant and I bought nothing there." He added candidly, "Most kunoichi I've encountered have tried to kill me, and in terms of excitement, the most exciting thing had to be when I nearly died behind a dumpster across the street. You see, romance just hasn't been in the cards."

"Damn." She said.

"I wasn't really looking, to tell the truth."

"Then...what do you think of a sometimes superficial, formerly promiscuous, Jounin-level kunoichi who really just wants a guy who would fight to the death to protect her brother, put others before himself, and love her even when she's difficult?" Temari inquired.

After a slow blink Haku confessed, "That's my ideal."
She didn't say anything coy or witty— Temari leaned forward just as he did to savor the warmth of his mouth, and it was a kiss that made her want to whine and rub her legs together. How long had she waited for that? It was more arousing than it should have been. She turned her face away from him and listened to his rough breaths, feeling an insane urge to cackle like a madwoman. Haku kissed her again when she turned back to him. Oh, she thought, this was better than the last time.

He held her face and announced, "You need to get out of here."

"You have a botched assassination victim downstairs who's unhappy he's been double-crossed. And I don't think I can move much…maybe I can fly at my slowest speed." Temari guesstimated, "Any suggestions?"

"I distract him."

"Uh huh. Where's the part where you suggest something?" She pressed.

"I did. Leave through this bedroom window, and five rooftops down is the flat Zabuza and I stay in. Go there and take my clothes." Haku told her, "They'll be more reasonable for travel. Ah. And take his weapons, as many as you can. Top shelf beside the sofa."

She kissed him again in thanks.

"Take anything else you need, then go." He rested his forehead against her hand, "I'm sorry about what happened. I want to join you."

"For now that isn't going to work." Temari rationalized, "Besides, I see the sense in you helping out down here and looking for your clan. I bet you're closer than you think. It'd be stupid to throw the towel in before you get a definite answer."

"Not completely stupid…"

"Try it. And feed correspondence back to Sand so we can have eyes and ears out here. Now that we know where to find you, we can send you backup whenever you request it." She pushed herself up with a stiff, traumatized body, "Ugh…I don't know how I'm going to pull this off."

Haku wondered, "Do you think you might bleed again?"

"No, the feeling's gone. I felt something inside ripping me for a while, but it stopped." She rose gracelessly to her feet, "Thanks again for saving my life."

He stood as well, "Not at all. Please sugarcoat this report when you get home."

"Heaps of sugar." She lifted her fan from where it was leaned on the bedside table, "I lost two men on this mission…and Gaara isn't going to be thrilled that my intervention just indentured you to a complete piece of shit. If he had more time on his hands, Gaara would probably wage war for you."

"I don't recommend it." Haku said as he unlatched the window and swung it open, "Stay safe."

Temari had a content look on her face, as if the parting would only be temporary. She was out a moment later. Haku promptly crossed the room and went downstairs, turning right and entering Migawari's household proper where he and Zabuza were seated at a table and eating. Haku dropped into a seat across from Zabuza. The meal froze and went silent.

"You're making this monumentally awkward." Migawari hissed.
"Am I?" He regarded Zabuza, aware that he had been healed, though his face was still dotted with blue bruises and broken blood vessels beside his eyes.

Zabuza watched him while eating a mouthful of egg and rice.

"I was hoping you wouldn't bother anyone else." Haku sniped boldly.

"Bother, as in, draw breath in their presence?" Zabuza said before taking a gulp of milk, "Fuck you."

Migawari told him to restrain his potty mouth and eat more food. Everyone had had a rough night.

"I'd understand your aggravation more if you hadn't killed two Sand ninja," Haku expressed as he added rolled omelets and vegetables onto a plate, "But you did. That's why I tried to kill you."

"You don't get upset when I go after anyone else."

"I do. Yesterday it was personal. I won't let you get away with hurting my friends and allies."

"Still mad that I bled your girlfriend?" Zabuza launched a jibe back at him.

Haku chewed and fixed an irate stare on the man, thinking he'd try his luck again and see if Zabuza stayed dead.

Migawari interjected, "We were able to suppress the jutsu you used, although I'm not exactly sure what it was."

"Drain can only affect one target at a time, and the last fool I used it on didn't survive." Zabuza acknowledged the veteran medic-nin with a tilt of his soup bowl, "So good for you, you old bale of grass. You did something I didn't think was possible."

"I know my stuff." Migawari pushed his spectacles up his nose again.

"The Kazekage won't tolerate what you did." Haku reminded the swordsman.

"Like I give a shit. I already know he's not coming here to save you or he would've done it already."

He was largely unconcerned, "You're not going anywhere."

"And if I do?" Haku suggested boldly.

"Go." Zabuza leaned forward over the table, "Then I kill this guy here. Then fatass tea-man. The kid and Thunderbrain, and all of the children in this town." Scowling, he finished his milk, "Shortchange me. Do it."

Haku shook his head while he poured tea, "You're despicable."

"You want me to be more like you—to give a damn about these losers or anyone suffering because of Mist? Well that's kind of hard to do when you preach that and then try to kill me." Zabuza bared his teeth, "Who's despicable here?"

"Please don't threaten the man who served you breakfast." Migawari snarked angrily.

"Shove it, Miga."

"I only took your advice." Haku smiled darkly at Zabuza, "To be more like you."

"Didn't think you had the balls to do it. Actually, I just didn't think you had literal balls."
"Should I try again? The next time I won't let anyone come to your rescue."

"Maybe I'll bleed that blonde chick like an animal again." Zabuza suggested.

Haku stood up, unable to contain the bolts of wrath and violence surging up from a secluded corner of his spirit. The feelings crackled off of him. Migawari cleared some place settings and shuffled out of the room.

"Don't talk about her." Haku warned.

Zabuza was indifferent to his display, "Or what? You'll dump that soup on me? Since you've got a button that big that can be pushed, build up a thicker skin."

"You don't get to threaten the people I love no matter how thick my skin is."

"Apparently you don't remember the line of work I'm in." He finished another bite, "If your love were paper currency, I'd blow my nose with it. That's what good it does me. Bellyache and cry all you want. Hope you had your chance to fuck her yesterday, because now you're—" Zabuza honestly didn't expect his hand to be pulled up when he was swiftly tossed over the table in a Judo-like flip. He landed on tatami mats that cracked under the impact, and before he could tell Haku to eat shit, he was hurtled through the glass of a closed window with chakra-fueled strength.

In the kitchen, Migawari squawked about the damage being done to his house. "These confounded arguments and swordsmen! The two of you—!

" He peered around the corner to see Haku had already dove outside after Zabuza.

The tumbling Taijutsu brawl was inelegant, sprawling over a grassy lawn, scattering a wood pile, circling a storage shed. Zabuza took a knife to the back again, the second time in a span of eight hours, and then realized maybe he needed to learn to censor himself. Haku wasn't taking shit anymore, and he was just a bit too quick to be blocked or evaded. It turned out he had made a monster of his apprentice.

He did manage to entangle Haku in a proper arm-lock, and then smashed his knee into the boy's face. While he reeled, Zabuza landed a ferocious roundhouse kick that sent Haku streaking through a fence like a comet. He pulled the knife from his flank even though it wasn't a great idea, and used the blood to summon from a tool scroll. Zabuza procured the faux needle sword as he rushed at Haku.

Haku pushed himself to his feet, wheezing, and used one last kunai to parry Zabuza's swipes. The needle jabbed him twice in the shoulder, and then Haku dodged when Zabuza pitched it, maneuvering it with the cable attached to its hilt. That was the type of weapon Zabuza had told him he wanted Haku to inherit— wanted him to use to kill the Mizukage.

The day was dry and Zabuza had forced him away from sources of water. It would take a greater expenditure of energy and concentration to condense water for jutsu, which Haku could not spare as he rolled and flipped away from the rapid-fire thrusts of the needle sword. Then he realized Zabuza was gradually positioning himself closer to their hideout. His attacks were warding Haku off.

"I bet you tried to let her get out of here," Zabuza rightly surmised, "But I don't think she's in decent enough shape to outrun me." When he made a break for their lodging, Haku raced after him with a cry.

Thankfully, Haku discovered as they took the fight indoors again that the apartment was noticeably missing items and Temari was long gone. Zabuza snapped the cable's length around Haku's shoulders and arms in loops, designing to impale or confine him before chasing after the Sand
kunoichi. But Haku saw that Temari left the sink's faucet running, whether purposeful or not, and he was able to harness that water to shoot several ice projectiles into Zabuza's front before barreling into him. They put cracks and depressions in the plaster wall with their tousling. Zabuza shimmied to freedom through the open window behind him, and Haku followed as he slipped free of the cable.

They struck the dusty ground beside the main avenue outside, hacking and panting, and Haku sprang up first and was able to kick the hilt of the needle sword from Zabuza's hand. He held fast to a segment of metal cable, but Haku had taken up the blade and pointed it at Zabuza's head.

"Let go," Haku taunted, "I thought you wanted me to have this."

Zabuza raised his free hand towards the flat's window, and Kubikiri Bōchō soared out with a spin and gleamed in the sunlight when he caught it. Then he released the cable and stood up.

"You," Zabuza gestured at him with the Seversword, "Keep that."

Haku was flummoxed.

"You did pretty good. You're not a complete waste."

"Sorry…I'm not sure what you're talking about anymore..." He was trying to catch his breath.

"You're a wretched spoilsport and bleeding heart." Zabuza assessed, "But you have the stuff of a swordsman, I can't deny that."

Haku wound up the cable into the hilt and found that the blade was rather flimsy; the tang of the needle was damaged and the wire's spindle was crooked from overuse. He frowned at Zabuza and tried to comprehend it, "That wasn't...a test, was it?"

"It was an argument that I converted into a test." He acknowledged, putting pressure on his bleeding back.

"So you are willingly arming me?" It was hard for Haku to believe.

"You can keep that with my expectation that you won't attack me, and in exchange for assurance that I won't hunt your girlfriend or kill townspeople." Zabuza lowered the Seversword and began the slow walk back to Migawari's house, "Call it a deal, or we can finish this here."

"I think Nanakusa has seen enough violence." Haku agreed, still mildly suspicious, "I have your word that you won't hurt anyone?"

"I don't know. Is the caliber of my word comparative to yours? Because you made me a promise and then immediately broke it." Zabuza hissed, "I'm not going to cop out even when you're insufferable and pissing me off."

Haku lowered his weapon and also moved in the direction of the health office, "Fine. But I'm still skeptical about most of this."

"Maybe you should be, dumbass." Zabuza gruffed, "I'd ask you to fix my back, but you'll probably just stab it again."

"Trust doesn't come cheap, does it?" Haku's observation was barbed.

Then, Migawari bustled out of his front door, down the steps and marched up to them. "My. House-!" He pushed their swords out of his way and yanked the pair back toward the brick building,
"Worthless, dim-witted bastards. Smashing my floor and window! Clean it up and fix it you idiots," They didn't resist as Migawari dragged them and muttered, "Eating my food, sleeping in my beds, making a—" He stopped when he saw blood soaking Zabuza's shirt and pants.

"You. Get to work." Migawari growled at Haku, chucking him in through the entrance.

"You're not bleeding all over my house, troglodyte." The old medic groused, sealing up the wound with green light, "You're tough, eh? In charge of everyone? If you kill us who the hell will feed you?" He slapped the broad side of the Seversword, "Put this shit away."

Zabuza was not at all in a fighting mood anymore, "Quit yammering at me—"

After healing the brute's injury, Migawari gave the sore spot a good smack and pushed him through the doorway.

Tsunade sat in a nicely upholstered armchair in her home, frowning at a monkey on the windowsill.

"This was supposed to be a relaxing evening for me." The Hokage mused, "Then Netsuke calls for an urgent meeting. If you're here it means that he must be on his way." She gestured with a bottle of sake before setting in on a side table, "Do you speak?"

A silver langur sat on the ledge and blinked its watery eyes at her. Its facial markings looked like glasses, and a blue bandana was tied around its neck.

"I don't suppose you do." Tsunade observed, "Not all of you do." She sat back and took sips from a cup.

After a few minutes the monkey clambered down from the window and across the floor. Tsunade's eye twitched when it hopped up to take a seat on the back of the sofa across from her. Netsuke and Kakima arrived a moment later, appearing in a synchronized flash of the Body Flicker.

"You're in plain clothes today." She motioned for them to sit down.

"Yes, but we still stopped by ANBU headquarters. We have news." Netsuke turned to the langur, "Moritoki, shut the window." The monkey strutted awkwardly on its hind legs and pulled the sash down. Tsunade was unnerved when she watched the monkey lock the window with little gray fingers.

Kakima set down an oak box on a coffee table before the Hokage and slid its lid free, "This box contains the final musings of the Sandaime."

Tsunade's eyes were bright as she gave them her attention.

"I found it in a closet within my home among some clutter we were removing, and I wanted to share it with you, Tsunade-sama." Netsuke informed her, pulling out an old, tattered scroll and a journal. He held up the scroll, "Classified reports to corroborate what you're about to see." He held up the journal, "My father's concerns, many of which are still relevant." Netsuke handed both to Tsunade and then took a seat beside Kakima. They were willing to let the Hokage thumb through it and get her bearings.

Nothing seemed out of the ordinary at first. Much of the report recapped older, more secretive operations that had taken place during the Third Ninja War. Each had been signed off on by an ANBU commander or Hiruzen himself. Tsunade unwound the scroll and set it on her lap, stopping to take some time with the worn out journal instead. It's very first entries only predated Hiruzen's
retirement by a short time, and the segued into the power vacuum left by Minato's unexpected death.

The turmoil on our councils, or in my village as it rebuilds, cannot compare to what is pillaging my heart. Tsunade read the words with a pang of sympathy, noting the aftermath of the Kyuubi's attack.

Biwako is dead. I could hardly conceive of it as I held her in my arms. She was cold and her loyal student, Taji, was dead beside her. With fewer days ahead of us, I grieve the precious years I've lost with my wife. Years that we won't spend doting on grandchildren together, as I'd hoped. I know that this was a violent death, indicated by her injuries. She and her apprentice were killed as they oversaw Uzumaki Kushina's private childbirth. This sort of interference is what permitted the Nine-Tailed Fox to escape Kushina's seal, and was not due to any shortcoming in Sealing work on Namikaze Minato's part. I believe this was intentional, and they were chosen as targets specifically.

My greatest regret is relaxing at home instead of standing by as a guard that night. Biwako, Taji, Minato, and Kushina did not have to die. I could have prevented it, and would have been better prepared to subdue the Kyuubi. I could have advised for more caution. Until our investigations yield fruit on who is truly behind this attack, I will be tormented by their faces in my dreams.

Rattled, Tsunade released a breath she had been holding and then took a swig of sake. She flipped a few pages ahead to see where it would land her.

Konohamaru will be turning four years old this December. He is a feisty scamp who delights in pulling down wall scrolls and picture frames all through the house. I gave one of Biwako's scarves to him because it is much cooler this time of year. That boy may never take it off.

Incidentally, I must admit that I am pleased with Jiraiya's actions today. For the most part. He returned to the village with one escaped Uzumaki Naruto, who I had sent out a search party for. He had wandered off and befriended other waifish children in a nearby trading town, and Jiraiya took it upon himself to deliver them to Hidden Leaf. One child is a refugee of the Water Country, who, according to my student, possesses a rare Kekkei Genkai. He seems very bright for his age, and he will excel in the Academy. Jiraiya also delivered to me the Fourth Kazekage's missing child, the jinchuriki for the One-Tail. He is not in the best of health, therefore I do not feel inclined to return this child to Hidden Sand. For the time being, I will follow patrol reports and make improvements to this boy's seal. I stand convinced that companionship will help these youngsters thrive. With agreement from my advisors, and Jiraiya, I have elected to keep them together as supervised wards of the village.

Netsuke interrupted Tsunade's leisurely reading, "Hokage-sama, please turn to the page I've marked."

She glanced at the man before turning over to a red tab in the journal, more recent than other entries.

I should have foreseen the demise of Team Hikki, for it may have been my doing.

Tsunade looked up again and asked Netsuke, "Team Hikki was an ANBU squad?"

"Yes, my lady."

"Headed by whom?"

"Takaharu was the captain of that team." Netsuke recalled.

Tsunade did not feel at ease with that context, but read on anyway:

Today, Team Ro performed a recovery search after Team Hikki was four days overdue. Every member of Team Hikki was confirmed dead, and it was discovered that Takaharu and Chinatsu, his
spouse and teammate, were purposefully divided from their subordinates while traveling north to investigate threats made against the Hōrai Bridge and its surrounding communities.

After being engaged by a rogue group via separate attacks, both halves of Team Hikki were defeated. A cursory investigation strongly suggests they were executed by the nukenin Dintei Bihokokuni and his supporters. I know that this level of coincidence does not exist. With Takaharu's retirement from my ANBU force merely days at hand, and his acceptance of a new position imminent, I expect Bihokokuni received tips from someone within Hidden Leaf to track and kill him.

I do not have comprehensive evidence at this time, but I believe that Shimura Danzo sold Takaharu's anonymity to Bihokokuni as part of an exchange. Two weeks ago, I had asked Takaharu to accept a position as the new director of the Root Foundation, with support from the village council and our advisors. I was heartened by his willingness to succeed Danzo as the Chief of our Root ANBU units, remembering that he was reluctant to accept candidacy for the position of Fourth Hokage.

I had hoped this arrangement would eliminate any corruption or unsanctioned activity occurring in Root Black Ops. Danzo had been very supportive of the change during my discussions with him. Now I am convinced he orchestrated this murder to maintain his position, but for what reason I cannot be sure. Does Danzo resent my defeat of him after all of these years? That I selected younger, more able shinobi to succeed me as Yondaime? Or was it this administrative shift that Takaharu was a part of? I do not know, but I hope I will in the near future.

Tsunade had absorbed Hiruzen's distress as she took in the text. She leaned back in her seat and covered her mouth. Her teacher had never shared a word of this with anyone, had he? Not even Jiraiya?

Netsuke offered more context, "When I read that passage, it was difficult to tell if my father had shared this suspicion with anyone. No members of the council were aware of this investigation or the outlandish circumstances when I broached the subject. I summoned Monkey King Enma in the hope that he might verify any portion of this, and he believed that my father's fears were accurate and well-founded." He concluded, "For years, my father's trust in Danzo eroded until this point. His undermining seems blatant, according to this."

"And though it looks bad, the Sandaime seemed to be closer to the proof he needed, just before the Invasion that disrupted the Chunin Exam a few years ago. The supplementary report in that scroll has record of some of the conversations they had." Kakima added, glancing sidelong to her husband, "But, while we're discussing Danzo's possible support of Dintei Bi…we should tell you about intel that came in through ANBU headquarters forty minutes ago. We just finished that briefing."

"I don't think I'm going to want to hear this either." Tsunade predicted.

"While approaching the northwest border between the Lands of Fire and Stone…our escort guarding Sasagainu Huo on his return to Iwagakure was intercepted." Netsuke announced, "My subordinates confirmed three casualties to our Leaf squadron, and two casualties on the team from Iwa that agreed to meet with us. Oku Sekieima, the Iwa Jounin that was also being extradited, sustained critical injuries but was successfully returned to Hidden Rock. We have two tracking teams cooperating with an Iwa squadron to locate these attackers." He stated finally, "We are reasonably sure that Bi's faction is responsible for this interference."

"Of course it is." She tossed the journal down on the coffee table, fuming, "And how did they know where our meeting point would be? Insider intelligence. That butcher still has links to our village."

Kakima crossed her legs and took Moritoki into her lap, "It could be that Danzo gave that group the head's up. Not that we can prove it…and it is very troubling to see a servant of Bi's return to his side
"He's too dangerous to be walking free…Huo…" Tsunade lifted her sake cup again, "However…I may need you both to look into something for me. I was lulled into a false sense of security before this Exam…because Danzo expressed wariness about Sasagainu Huo. But Sarutobi-sensei's journal suggests to me that concern was merely an act. And…I may have the evidence that the Sandaime didn't." She locked eyes with Netsuke, "One of Bi's servants, Dintei Yasuya, was killed in the Toi Mine by Leaf ninja earlier this year. That mission report confirms a Root agent was in contact with Yasuya, by order of Root's Director."

"Ah, they're all related, aren't they?" Kakima was making sense of the details, "Dintei is the cadet family of the Sasagainu."

Netsuke clarified for her, "They were before they deposed the Main Line, due to Bi's frustrations with being an outsider. He was born into the cadet family, with all of the abilities of the main family."

"He seems very good at getting rid of people." Kakima rubbed Moritoki's cheeks.

"It's been his specialty for decades." Netsuke confirmed.

"And we have one survivor of the Main Line left in our village," Tsunade tacked on, "So please understand why I need you to focus on this group, for the time being. I want eyes on Danzo. I want discretion. I'm tired of my villagers dying because Bi considers it his sport."

"Can you secure testimonies from the participants of the Toi Mine mission?" Netsuke asked, "The council will need to hear those accounts when you decide to bring justice against Danzo."

Tsunade sighed, "I'll need the extradition report from Ibiki as soon as possible, since it would be fitting to cite this incident as well."

"Understood. I will keep tabs on our tracking cells to see if they can recover our escaped prisoner…" Netsuke pushed himself up from the couch, "But I don't think that's likely."

Kakima returned the journal and report scroll to the oak box, "Keep these, Tsunade-sama. We hope you'll find these reflections useful."

"Thank you…" She had her chin rested on her knuckles as she leaned on the arm of her chair, "Netsuke?"

"Yes, my lady?"

"Should I involve any of my Jounin in this investigation?"

"Only those who have A-level clearances or higher." He recommended, "And among them, only those you trust the most. Danzo may be responsible for far more in this village than we yet realize. Any who scrutinize him may imperil themselves."

The couple left with their silver monkey the way they had come. Tsunade finished her last bit of sake before rising sluggishly from her seat, fitting the cover back onto the box. She would be lucky if she got a wink of sleep tonight. The news and possibilities were so unsettling, Tsunade suspected she would think twice before ever shutting her eyes again. Vigilance and initiative would be paramount.

She walked the box over to a writing desk and dropped it brusquely, annoyed when it knocked a Jounin Evaluation schedule off of a corkboard's pin. Tsunade hung up the schedule again tiredly.
Soon, some of her new Chunin were going to try their luck in Jounin trials, since she had accepted their recommendations.

And they too would be subject to this madness.

It was a good place to meet for a change—a courtyard replete with peonies and bushels of white flowers that Obito couldn't recognize. He seamlessly slipped into his Tobi act, and Obito automatically began to pick blooms to weave into a flower crown. He crouched down in the hedge line like a perfect, bumbling fool, humming to himself as members of the Akatsuki congregated in the abandoned stone ruins of the temple.

From his position in the fronds, Obito regarded one of the first people who had arrived at the designated meeting point. Uchiha Itachi was off to his right, tucked against a lilac tree. His partner Kisame was seated on crumbling steps above them, tapping his fingers along the wrapped scales of his sword.

'He probably likes how that tree smells.' Obito supposed. He had watched Itachi make a bee-line for it when he had entered the yard.

Beyond that, he couldn't claim to know much of anything about Itachi. Obito was aware that he had been a prodigy among the Uchiha clan and the gem of his village. According to Jiraiya, he had also been a fond older brother. With such a bright future ahead of him, why had Itachi defected from Konohagakure to join a criminal organization? 'I just don't understand it...' He frowned in thought behind his mask, 'Jiraiya was vague when I asked about those two hellions...Itachi and Sasuke. I know there were tensions and competitive spirits in the Uchiha clan, but why leave home for a miserable life out here?'

Obito extended his finger to assist a ladybug clambering up from a leaf, 'I think that...maybe... Jiraiya didn't explain everything.' It left a pit in his stomach. Another shoe had to drop, and soon. The Akatsuki had become mobile again and were prepared to seal Biju from captured jinchuriki. 'If I am going into this operation blind with no background on Itachi, of all people...I won't last unless I start to figure this out. I'll need to know what his angle is...'

A hooded spy of Sasori's scurried through an archway to anonymously deliver information to the puppet master secluded in a corner, and then the informant quickly departed. After what felt like an age, all of the members of the Akatsuki had assembled.

Deidara was about to suggest making the demolishment of the ruined temple more complete, but Sasori spoke over him directly to the group's leader, "The Kazekage is strengthening defenses around Hidden Sand. It is rife with protection for an upcoming Exam."

"He was not our initial target." Pein stood at the center of the garden and confirmed, "But in due time he will lower his defenses again. You and Deidara shall be the ones to take him."

Deidara's annoyance at Sasori subsided with that update.

"There has been a great deal of activity in the south amongst the Lands of Wind, Wave, and Water." Pein informed the group, "Jinchuriki wish to band together."

"Can't blame them when they know what's coming for them..." Kisame smiled gleefully.

Pein shared a look with Konan beside him, as if both had derived the answer to this possible coalition of jinchuriki. He went on, "I want searches for the Eight and Two Tails conducted, as their age and experience will guide younger sacrifices to organize. The Seven and Nine Tails will be
found easily. Konan will assign you your targets."

"Not you?" Deidara was curious.

"I will be dealing with a troublesome target personally. This will be the first extraction of several to come." Pein informed them, "After we adjourn, I am leaving for the Tide Village."

Chapter End Notes

Hope you liked that, my dudes, or at least had rampant thought provoked in your brains. Now I am off to drink wine for a while and listen to more twenty one pilots.

Chapter 46- The Wind's Shadow

Bonus Soundtrack: "Fairly Local" by twenty one pilots
When Jiraiya woke him with a sharp shake in the middle of the night, Naruto unclogged his throat with a gurgling sound and sat up drowsily. They had settled down in sleeping bags under an acacia tree—the last tall plant visible against the sparse horizon of desert.

"Here you go..." Jiraiya crammed a biscuit in his student's teeth and patted his cheek, "Open those eyes, young Sage, we have a desert-crossing to start."

Naruto chewed sleepily as he slipped out of the bed roll, folding it up, "Ero-sensei...don't you see there are stars out still?"

"Technically, there are always stars in the sky. Sunlight scatters in the atmosphere during the day and reduces their visibility...eh," He lightly slapped Naruto's cheek again as he nodded off over his travel bag, "What I'm trying to say is, no excuses. Wake up. We want to stay cool while we cross."

"Yeah, yeah." Naruto brushed him off with a yawn and pulled the bag over his shoulder.

"It's gonna be hot as balls." Jiraiya began marching ahead of the youngster, "You'll thank me later, Naruto."

"How are you so awake right now?"

"Determination. And I also took a bite out of a knuckle of ginger, so that zing helped."

Naruto made a face at him.


"Got any more of that?"

"No. Just some biscuits, water, a few boxed meals..." The man began to pick up the pace as Naruto fell in step beside him, "And if you're really starving by tomorrow you can kill a hare for yourself and eat that."

"I'm not gonna kill a bunny-!"

"They're not bunnies, desert hares are jerks. Not cute."

"Oh. But still, I'm not so inclined to kill living things now after, you know, becoming one with Nature." Naruto made a case for it, "I'll fast instead."

Jiraiya laughed in disbelief. They had sped up to a full-fledged run, skimming over bonafide sand flats. "Kid," Jiraiya told him, "I finished that training too, and I still know that a meal is a meal. Respecting nature isn't about denying death. It's about recognizing and asserting yourself in the duality of the universe. Life matters because death accompanies it."

Naruto huffed, "Thanks for the early morning philosophy. I'll decide later if I'm hungry."

The southernmost reaches of the Land of Wind were a vast sprawl of dunes and flats, punctuated by rock formations. Though he didn't say so, Naruto was mildly impressed by the terrain. The sky seemed huge. The field of view appeared as though it had expanded with no features to interrupt it.
As sunrise hastened and dimmed the stars, Naruto accepted another biscuit as they kept moving. The desert's chill was abating. He felt it was extremely necessary to point out each sighting of life as they moved along.

"Look at that mouse hop!" And, "That little owl's sitting on a cactus!"

"If you really want your mind blown," Jiraiya advised, "Use Sage Mode and feel the energy of the creatures underground as it heats up out here. There's all kinds of stuff."

So of course Naruto had to try it and he admitted he was sort of amazed. It was not at all as lifeless as he would've expected.

He marveled at the desert's hidden abundance for a few minutes as they pushed ahead, and then let his Sage chakra wear off. Naruto retreated into his thoughts as Jiraiya picked out a route to Suna from memory. 'Hinata said hello to me yesterday… but she kind of kept it short.' He frowned to himself, 'It sounded like she wanted to tell me something, but she was shy and distracted.' Naruto twitched his nose. Maybe he had said or done something to offend her after all. Or maybe she was nervous about his imminent homecoming?

'I don't get it! I know we can't be equally enthusiastic all of the time— but I was excited to hear from her and she was just…' Naruto admitted to himself that she seemed distant, if a bit flighty. Granted, Hinata had explained that her elders had observed her training bout with Neji outside of the Main House that morning. Perhaps the residual judgment weighed on her?

"I can hear you grinding your teeth." Jiraiya said sidelong to his student.

Naruto unclenched his jaw, "Oh."

"Relax." Jiraiya soothed.

"Sorry."

"What's bugging you?"

Naruto vaulted over an exposed peak of igneous rock and then said, "It's probably nothing…"

"That's what I used to say when I was a kid and Orochimaru went missing for days on end." Jiraiya gruffed.

"Jeez! It's not that bad, at least I don't think so." Naruto defended, "Hinata didn't seem like herself when she said hi to me, yesterday."

"She's got a lot going on in her life." Jiraiya supposed, "And it'll get a heck of a lot busier when you're home whimpering like a puppy around her."

"Yeah, I know that."

"Remember, she's still going to be occupied by her clan and responsibilities. She'll always have a lot on her plate." His teacher went on, "You've been smothered with attention and affection from her pretty much since you entered the Academy. As you get older, the both of you will realize that time starts to slip by faster and your priorities shuffle like crazy. It's a learning process."

Naruto wanted to roam into the hypothetical explanation, "What if she doesn't-?"

"Naruto, that girl loves you. You don't have to doubt it."
He released a sigh tinged with tension.

Jiraiya gave him a slanted smile, "It's never going to be as bad as your imagination spins it."

"I just want to know if anything's on her mind. Usually when Hinata's stressed out, she'll talk to me."

"Then the next time she drops in, ask her. If she doesn't want to get into it with you then try to respect that. If she does, listen carefully." Jiraiya suggested.

Naruto was obliged to take such advice. He and Jiraiya carried on for a distance as the morning sun rose, and Jiraiya eventually halted, "Oh shit, hold on." He measured along his outstretched arm, squinting, drawing an angle from the sun's position, "We veered off to the east a bit, whoops. That explains why we didn't see that crag I was looking for…"

"Get your head together, Ero-sensei."

Jiraiya shushed him and set out again with their course corrected. By noon, hawks and buzzards drifted by on thermal updrafts in the sky, and dry heat had stymied the quick pace Naruto and Jiraiya had started out with. They trudged tiredly for a while. Naruto gave thanks for the lightweight clothing he was wearing. He stripped off his sage cloak and wrapped it like a turban to cover his head. His face and scalp had been baking.

"Not a bad idea." Jiraiya decided as he pulled off his outer vest, fastening it over his brow.

"Why the hell does anyone want to live out here?" Naruto rasped.

"It's a wise choice defense-wise." Jiraiya shielded his eyes and peered out on the horizon, "No one really bothers trying to invade the Sand Village, have you noticed? It's a major pain in the ass."

"I'll say."

"Should've bought some sunscreen before we crossed the border."

"We could roll in some mud." Naruto suggested.

"That would imply there's water around here somewhere, and I've got to tell ya…" Jiraiya panted, "You'll probably find buried treasure first."

"Could we buy water with it?" Naruto quipped.

"Nope. The rations we brought with us— don't waste a drop."

Jiraiya was pleased when he located an anticipated landmark. A shaved face of sedimentary rock provided a merciful stretch of shade. He and Naruto rushed into the shelter and sat down, wolfing down boxed lunches and trying not to consume too much water.

"I wish Gaara could come out here to get us." Naruto tipped his head back against the wall of stone behind him.

"This is a formative experience. You have to make this crossing on your own in the future for missions, and he knows that."

"Yeah, but what if you keel over from heat stroke or a heart attack while we're out here?" Naruto speculated jokingly.

Jiraiya declared, "Gaara has always been comfortable with taking risks and jeopardizing my life."
Naruto chuckled at the truism and then put away rubbish and containers in his bag. As Jiraiya rose to stand he added, "I'm tougher than I look. I have my complaints, but this isn't really so bad."

For the rest of the day their pace was halved, and the end-of-summer sun beat down relentlessly. Jiraiya asked a few times for breaks, particularly when there was shade available. They ate their remaining meals even as the sun set. By nightfall, they had set up their bedrolls beside a small campfire as the temperature dropped. Jiraiya summoned a small mustard-colored toad that kept watch for them beside a nettle of sagebrush. Naruto stared up at the stars to let his mind begin to go blank, and then there came a soft yelp from Jiraiya on the other side of the flickering flames.

"What is it, Ero-sensei?" Naruto sat up and noticed a scorpion of curious size perched on Jiraiya's chest as the man laid flat on his back.

With good half-asleep reflexes, Jiraiya swiped the critter off and it scampered sideways to avoid the fire. Naruto could have sworn he heard a whispering sound, and he leaned down to regard the arachnid.

Jiraiya sighed shakily to calm down, "Guess that's par for the course, out here…waking up to find something crawling on you."

"I think it said something." Naruto observed.

"It's a bug."

"I don't think they're technically bugs—"

"Don't parse details with me, just go to sleep!"

Naruto leaned down and turned his ear toward the creature, "Come again?"

In a small voice the scorpion repeated, "Suna."

"Yeah!" Naruto laughed, glad to see his hunch was right, "You're one of Gaara's little dudes aren't you?"

"Gaara-sama said…to keep watch." The scorpion explained. Its human speech was not well-developed.

Jiraiya sat up again because he was surprised that Naruto had spotted a Summon animal quicker than he had.

"Would you tell Gaara we're nearly there? He's expecting us." Naruto requested.

The scorpion said nothing more before scuttling off, presumably to deliver the message.

Jiraiya gave Naruto a grunt of commendation for his perceptiveness and then rolled over to sleep. The next morning, Jiraiya's toad had sidled up beside Naruto after the fire had died out in the night. Naruto awoke with a yawn and dismissed the faithful sentry before nudging his teacher.

Jiraiya sat up and began shaking sand out of his long, white ponytail. Naruto snickered.

"This stuff gets everywhere. I tasted it my food last night too." Jiraiya grumbled.

They buried the remnants of the campfire, packed up, and set out at a brisk pace while the air was still cool. All that remained were their water rations, and by mid-day those had been depleted as well.
Bathroom breaks in the desert were an odd experience, Naruto decided. Either companion merely had to turn their back and keep a distance, but it was strange being in a wide expanse of desert in which, truly, neither could tell if they were being watched or not.

The early afternoon was not as hot as the day before, at least Jiraiya didn’t think so. He and Naruto had not wrapped their heads up for protection, though perhaps they should have. A single, fat cloud drifted overhead in the sky.

Naruto narrowed his eyes as he looked ahead, "Is that another landmark?" There was a dark feature on the horizon.

"Yeah, it's called Sunagakure." Jiraiya snarked.

"Whoa-! Really?"

"Yep, that's the stone plateau that the village is carved into. That is— if I'm not going blind and insane." He turned his empty canteen over and prospected for a single drop of water, "We're on course so that should be it. Or it's a mirage. So don't—" Jiraiya's face fell as his student had already taken off in a full sprint. It was still quite a distance, not that it mattered in the least to Naruto. With a guttural sound, Jiraiya pushed himself as well, trying to incentivize such exertion in the heat, *There will be beautiful women and cold drinks there-!*

Jiraiya was not sure how much time passed, but he made it three-quarters of the way before plopping down on his backside and groaning. He admired the strength and gumption of his pupil, no two ways about it; he just missed the days when youth was on his side. He rested for a while and then noticed a vulture behind him, creeping curiously towards him on its awkward, taloned feet.

"Beat it, shoo." Jiraiya waved it off tiredly. All that did was make it stop and sit beside him.

"Well, I find this telling." The man mused out loud, "Might as well wait and see if I bite it, you ugly buzzard. I know time's not on my side anymore." Jiraiya tossed a handful of sand at it, "But dammit I have a lot to do! So much to write. Kids to whip into shape. Women to immortalize in my work…"

The vulture spooked and took off when a vaguely yellow flash appeared beside Jiraiya. He glanced up in stupefaction at Naruto.

Naruto wore a look of concern that was mostly amusement.

"How'd you do that?" Jiraiya asked.

"I marked your travel bag yesterday, in case something like this happened." Naruto grinned at him.

"Oh." Jiraiya was rather delighted by his thoughtfulness, and took Naruto's hand as the boy helped him to his feet, "Thanks, kiddo. I didn't mean to fall behind-!" He felt a bit queasy as Naruto teleported a second time, holding fast to his companion-cargo, and transported him to the gate of the Hidden Sand Village. Jiraiya bent for a moment and placed his hands on his knees, "-heh! Herp—!" He restrained the urge to hurl and then slowly stood upright.

Naruto plucked his anchoring knife from the ground and apologized, "Ero-sensei, sorry— I just made it here and thought I should bring you over."

"Much appreciated." Jiraiya settled himself and kept walking, "I was a prospective lunch back there."

"Are you-?"
"I'm fine." Jiraiya insisted, "I just need a long drink of water and some air conditioning."

It took a good deal of patience and maturity for Naruto to proceed at a respectable pace alongside Jiraiya. His head snapped around wildly as they passed through the intake ravine of the gate, and it led them into the bustle and noise of the city. Like a good sport, Naruto stopped in the first convenience store they could find and bought his teacher a bottle of water to guzzle. Jiraiya perked up after that, touring down the main avenue and scanning over the crowds that weaved between dusty buildings.

"This place seems a lot more crowded than I remember." Jiraiya muttered.

"So where can we find Gaara?" Naruto was beaming, almost twitchy with excitement.

"Well I'd wager his ass is trapped in an office chair in the Administrative Building which is…" Jiraiya spun in a small circle, "Give me a second. Er…" Jiraiya rubbed his chin and noodled on it, "All this development and remodeling is throwing me off."

Naruto prepared a hand sign, thinking he ought to send a deluge of Shadow Clones to track down his dear friend, but Jiraiya batted at his hands.

"Cool it, kid. Don't get trigger happy with jutsu here, remember: you're a guest in Suna." The man advised as he traipsed along, "This way. I'm decently sure we take this road to the end and then hang a right…"

Near the end of the street, Naruto sidetracked for some rainbow shave ice and nipped it as they continued on. Jiraiya had passed on the treat. They hit a roadblock of people congregated near stalls selling goods from the Tide Village. Jiraiya shoved Sand citizens out of his way as politely as possible, "Good grief! Since when do these people have money to spend? That line wraps around the friggin' block."

"Wanna take a—?"

"No, I need oxygen. I'm getting claustrophobic." Jiraiya toddled along to the other side of the plaza, where foot traffic had thinned, "Phew. I'm surprised no one's recognized me yet. I had my pen handy for book signings."

Naruto mocked him from over his cup of ice, "Maybe they don't sell your trash novels here?"

Jiraiya puffed his cheeks and rounded on the whelp, trying to smack the ice treat and mash it in Naruto's face. They scuffled like juveniles for a moment until Jiraiya stilled and stared down the avenue. When Naruto did not notice anything amiss right away, Jiraiya swiveled him around to look. They spotted Gaara who was completely oblivious to them, his face wracked with worry. He rushed into the front entrance of Suna's hospital.

"That doesn't bode well." Jiraiya observed.

Naruto tipped the last dregs of shave ice into his mouth before tossing the cup into a waste bin. He led the way as they backtracked to the hospital and slipped through the automatic doors. Further into the lobby, Gaara had concluded a check-in at the secretary's desk before moving down a hallway on the left. Naruto was about to give chase like a hunting dog, but Jiraiya held his arm back for a moment, "I just want you to think for a second about why Gaara is distressed and in a hospital."

Naruto wilted at the thought, "Will do."

"This may not be good. I mean, he'll be glad we're here, but it may make this a shitty meeting. Just
saying." Jiraiya sighed and released him, "Go find him."

It was not so simple a task as it took Naruto about fifteen seconds to realize a set of double doors in
the annex could only be opened by pushing a button on the wall. By then, he'd completely lost sight
of Gaara, but he took a moment to breathe and collect himself. He gathered Natural Energy while
unconcerned doctors flitted around in the ward, and nurses traveled briskly between monitors and
rooms.

In Sage Mode, Naruto easily detected his friend climbing up a stairwell to the next floor, sensing the
density of Gaara's chakra. He held back the grin that kept tugging at his mouth, knowing that the
circumstances of their reunion would probably not be good. Naruto slipped into an empty patient
room, pushed up the window’s sash, and leaped up the building's exterior. It was quicker than stairs.

He scaled a concrete terrace and slid open a door, dusting his hands off. Naruto shook some of the
sand from his short cloak. Just then, Gaara exited the stairwell on the far end of the corridor and
paused. He may have thought it a hallucination at first. Gaara gave his eyes a hard blink. Naruto was
still shaking his clothes out somewhat inconsiderately, shedding the desert's residue onto the tile
floor. He looked up like he had been caught red-handed by Gaara, several meters down the hallway.

Naruto laughed in spite of himself, and then tried to swallow the reaction because Gaara had been
upset downstairs and still appeared to be. 'Shit! I can't be an asshole. I need to be considerate! Keep
it together-'! He cleared his throat and covered half of the distance towards the stairwell, sheepish, "I
know this probably isn't the best time or place…but, uh…"

Naruto had only just blinked when he missed Gaara close the gap, wrapping both of his arms around
Naruto's shoulders. The startled feeling dissipated almost immediately and Naruto returned the
squeeze, elated.

A phlegmy sound came from Gaara's throat. He stood back to compose himself after the hug, "This
isn't a bad time or place, Naruto."

"But you look freaked out! I saw you run in here and I thought…” Naruto indicated with a wary
face, "Something bad happened."

"Something did." Gaara confirmed, proceeding a few doors forward, "Though Haku salvaged what
he could."

Naruto lit up with unfettered joy as he followed along, "Are you telling me that Haku's-?"

"He isn't here. I wish." Gaara stopped to tell Naruto sincerely, "I'm glad you are."

The turbulent swirl of euphoria and disappointment was giving Naruto whiplash. When he followed
Gaara into the recovery room, he had a better understanding of what was wrong. Temari was sitting
in bed with two monitor hookups, bad-mouthing a nurse who was in no mood to be argued with.

"I've recovered already. I was fine by the time I got to Tide, and I made it here on my own power."
Temari sniffed, "Get this junk off of me."

The nurse tried to expound upon policy about observations and physician's recommendations, but
Temari ignored it completely when she saw her younger brother walk in.

"Thank God. Gaara, tell them to discharge me. I've had it." She paused to blink at a much taller,
leaner Naruto beside her brother, "Holy shit."

Naruto started off with, "Hi! What happened to you?"
"Momochi Zabuza." The nurse flinched at the name and Temari snickered, "You should see what he limped off with."

"I don't think his injuries were of your making, going off of the report Hisauji gave me." Gaara crossed his arms and waited for Temari's explanation.

She only gave him, "It didn't go as planned."

"You tried to get Haku back?" Naruto gathered.

Temari sighed and then gave the nurse a scornful look as he exited the room.

"I…couldn't. I just made it worse." Temari admitted in a low voice. Naruto plopped down into a visitor's chair to process the bad news while Gaara elected to stand and brood.

"Two of my subordinates were killed when Zabuza ambushed us. Haku was very polite while we arrested him." She reclined into her pillows to recount the events, "He even tried to save my team, and I don't think Hisauji, Tokumaru, or Muta would've survived if he hadn't been there."

"Nor you." Gaara's rebuttal was clipped.

"You gave me the clearance to go."

"You demanded clearance."

"You can tell me NO when it's a mission." Temari reminded him, "Don't make this completely my fault."

"When I don't humor your requests, you become incredibly difficult, bordering on subversive. And I'd be lying if I said I didn't want to execute that retrieval as soon as you found him." Gaara admitted, "But as a team captain, you were responsible for that mission and the loss of Kori and Mitsuie. You could have waited and surveyed the town first. You could have done any number of things."

"I know." Temari agreed tensely.

"Now he's lost to us. Haku is a hostage of a nukenin in the truest sense of that phrase. If he tries to leave, innocent people on that island pay the price. If I send reinforcements, there will also be consequences." The Kazekage listed the repercussions.

Her hands fisted on the beds sheet crinkled on her lap.

"Is there anything else I need to know?" Gaara was glad to see her alive, but still deeply troubled.

Temari noted Naruto sitting with a pensive expression, trying to spin the scenario through his head. She gave a dry laugh when Gaara asked if he and Naruto should personally go to Nanakusa, "You think that would work any better?"

"We would not be nearly as careless or vulnerable." Gaara retorted.

"You're fucking jinchuriki." Temari hissed, "You want to cross country borders while the Akatsuki are out there? With or without an escort? Don't preach to me about taking risks."

He gave her a dangerous look before Temari went on, "Besides, the Exam is coming up. You're required to observe proceedings and head the panels. Naruto is participating." She reminded him, "Hidden Sand is going to be majorly occupied with heightened security and re-worked mission schedules. So who do we send out there to get Haku? A team from Hidden Leaf? How are you
going to explain this to the Hokage?"

"Enough." Gaara snapped.

Silence hung in the room until Naruto asked the woman, "Are you okay?"

"Thank you for asking." Temari said as she shot Gaara a see what you forgot to say? look, "I'm fine now. Every orifice on my body bled uncontrollably after Momochi used some weird jutsu with that sword. Haku held him off and then saved my life." She added, "And yeah, it hurt like hell. I'm lucky I made it."

Naruto astutely asked, "Is he okay?"

"For a while he wasn't, but I tried to encourage him before I got out of there." Temari told him, "He can still make the best of things, for now. He has good friends there who also helped me." She threw in another jibe at her brother, "By the way, when you see him—Haku—he's breathtaking. As in, more beautiful than anyone alive, well-groomed or whatever you call it…and he's got way more muscle tone than Gaara."

Gaara said nothing and kept his expression flat, but Naruto chuckled at the observation, "Really? Well he's not leading a life of luxury. He probably fights way more often than we do…"

"He did try to kill Zabuza." Temari recalled, "But he fucked up. That's why I left in a hurry."

"Like…he didn't really kill him?" Naruto verified.

"Yeah. Someone took pity on that asshole dying on the street and brought him into the health office, so he survived. And Zabuza was pissed off."

Gaara rolled his eyes.

"We can learn from that." Naruto assessed sunnily.

"Right. Make sure the job is done." Temari agreed.

"What if Haku is dead as a result of Zabuza's retaliation?" Gaara pressed.

Temari got defensive again, "Do you want me to go and check? Send his rabbit back with a message and find out, Gaara. Stop trying to guilt trip me. I know you're mad."

"You were responsible—"

"I know."

Naruto tried to break it up, "Guys, you need to-!"

"This was too personal. I never should have sent you." Gaara decided.

"You trusted me with this. The only reason you know anything about where he was, was because I got it done." Temari countered.

Naruto's eyes bounced between the feuding siblings.

"It's his fault too. Haku caused undue risk to all of us by attempting something this stupid—"

"You don't get to call him stupid because he wants to know where he comes from." Temari snarled,
"You always had that luxury. You had a family, a name, a village! Don't shit on him because he hoped others like him were out there. And while he's at it, he's saving people's lives and sending you intel on activity in the Land of Water."

Gaara was pacing a bit, frustrated by her points, "He still shouldn't have enlisted the help of a rogue ninja."

"Like he had any other clues to start with-?"

"You—" Gaara's temper careened off a ledge, "Put him ahead of things that are far more important; things I rely on you for here. You need to stop thinking about him and communicating with him—"

"Or what?" Temari's anger was laced with laughter.

Naruto was wide-eyed in the corner.

"Or I'll kill him myself, because I know he'll be your demise someday and he's too selfish to forget you and let you live your life." Gaara finally let on to his ulterior motive for some kind of resolution. That he did not approve of Haku's love for her.

"Live my-? I already tried that." Temari barked,"You can't tell us how to feel— have you been so fucking perfect?"

"He's a liability at this point—"

"He's your friend and you love him."

"He is and I do." Gaara confirmed harshly, "But you shouldn't."

Temari plucked hook-up lines from her arms and tossed them aside, ignoring the alarm pings of the monitor. She pushed herself to her feet to stare Gaara in the face, "So you've got a problem with that?"

"He's become too much trouble for you. You need to stay away."

She was grimacing. It was then Temari understood the fulcrum of Gaara's irritation with Haku. She retorted calmly, "You don't get to tell me what I do or who I do."

Naruto fought through a fog of shock and amazement to cover his ears with his hands. This was too much. He wasn't sure if he ought to stop it, because the argument was probably some necessary form of communication between Gaara and his sister.

"Not him." Gaara stuck to his resolve.

"Even if Dad had demanded that, I still wouldn't give a half of two shits." Temari informed him, "It drives you nuts. He was your friend first, but then he picked me and that hits a bit too close to home. Everything is fine with Haku as long as your sister isn't involved."

"I could not have said that any better myself." Gaara agreed through clenched teeth.

"He's already seen me naked." She flung taunts at him, "He fed me and cared for me when I was too weak to move. He slept beside me with that angelic look on his face—" Temari concluded, "What I still don't get is: why can't you abide by the person you trust who treats me that well and goes that far for me?"

Before Gaara could come up with a slipshod answer, Jiraiya ambled into the room. He greeted the
three youngsters with, "I heard shouting so I assumed it was you."

Gaara instantly deflated. Temari was wobbling on her feet, lightheaded, but her brother thankfully got off of his high horse and helped her back into bed. They mumbled apologies at each other.

"Ero-sensei! Crap, I should've gone downstairs to get you." Naruto had forgotten about him.

"It's alright, I can find my own way." Jiraiya walked over to Gaara and clapped his hand on the young man's shoulder, "Don't you look riled up?"

Gaara sighed but accepted a fond pat on the head, "It's good to see you, Sensei."

"So..." Jiraiya scanned his eyes over to Temari, who he knew was Gaara's sister although they had never been introduced, "Seems like something went down."

"I couldn't get Haku back." Temari gave the short answer.

"Huh." Jiraiya quirked his mouth, then he turned to Gaara and Naruto, "Why don't you two head outside and catch up? I've got some questions for..." He was sheepish, "What was your name again, miss?"

"Temari." She exhaled tiredly.

"Temari." Jiraiya logged the name away in a rusty memory bank, "Tell me about your mission."

Gaara tried to intervene, "I can—"

Jiraiya stopped him, "Not now. You need to cool off. Go with Naruto and I'll meet you at your house. I'm going to need a nap after the trip we had."

As the young men obediently left the room, Jiraiya dragged a visitor's seat to the bedside and plopped down into it.

Gaara decided that he didn't want to exit in front of hospital-dwellers while half manic, so he took the door of the balcony that Naruto had come in from. Naruto followed a few paces behind him, descending down sills and ledges until they landed near a loading dock behind the building.

Sighing heavily, Gaara leaned against the wall and shut his eyes. On the far side of the concrete pitch, laborers were moving supplies off of pallets. They continued making a racket and shouting orders at each other while Naruto stood beside his friend in silence. He watched Gaara's face and puzzled over what to do. How could he lighten the mood? How were they supposed to reconcile themselves with Haku's captivity?

Ever the hardy soul, Naruto had witnessed Gaara's scandalous tiff with his sister and managed to shrug it off. Both had made valid points. Naruto felt mature enough to digest the barbs he had seen them launch at each other, 'Hopefully they won't fight like that all of the time while I'm here...'

When Gaara cracked an eye open and flicked it over to Naruto, he was surprised by the smile on his friend's face.

"I know this is like a tense moment, or something, but I just can't—" Naruto batted at his whiskered cheek as if to ward away the happy expression, "Nope. I can't be upset. Even after all of that."

Gaara swallowed a small laugh and relaxed a bit, shaking his head.
"We'll figure it out, Gaara." Naruto offered succinct reassurance.

"I've told myself that for over a year." Gaara admitted, "But I haven't figured it out."

"Well, I wasn't around to help you strategize." Naruto shrugged a shoulder to show off his Sage cloak, "Sages are wise. I'll brainstorm with you."

Gaara was tempted to mock his good friend in jest as he readily would have in the past, but he opted not to as Naruto gave his arm an encouraging nudge. Something about him felt noticeably different. Maybe it was a psychological effect; that Naruto's return and upbeat mood acted like a contagion and lifted his spirit. But it was more than that, Gaara thought. It felt like life itself radiated off of him.

Whatever it was, Gaara appreciated the odd phenomenon.

The Kazekage took another deep breath and then formed a hand sign to create a Shadow Clone. Gaara sent it eastbound in the direction of the administrative building. Then he began to lead Naruto through a series of back alleys where shade was plentiful, mentioning, "You look sunburnt, Naruto."

"I heal quick! My skin will clear up by tonight." He was still buoyant as he kept up with Gaara, "What'd you make that clone for?"

"To get work done at the office. Normally, I attend to my duties in person, but today…” Gaara was rubbing at a tense knot in his neck, "I would rather go home and rest."

Naruto was curious, "Clones can do that kind of work?"

"With practice, they can focus on it. I don't recommend it. Shadow Clones are not as reliable if an emergency arises. Some of my Jounin are also offended when they have to speak to a clone of my making as a surrogate. They prefer an audience with the real me." Gaara supposed, "It's a proprietary thing."

"Guess it is, otherwise you'd always have a clone do the work for ya, right?"

"I would." Gaara seemed calmer when he leapt up to the roof of a brick building on their right, and Naruto followed as Gaara explained, "The first report that came in from the Tide Village late last night…confirmed two deaths on Temari's team, three serious injuries, and that my sister was a captive." Gaara shared a bit of his mindset, "You can understand what my stress levels have been like today."

"I might be able to empathize." Naruto wagered.

While crossing rooftops toward a large, multi-story house straight ahead, Naruto noticed some of Suna's Academy students being chaperoned down on the street below. He goggled at the sight of their fresh, babyish faces.

"Look at 'em, Gaara! Are those new students?"

"They just passed their entrance exams—"

Naruto was hooting in delight, "That's cute how they all walk in a line! Where are they going?"

"At the end of this block is the Shirogane clan's puppet museum and workshop. It's for a class trip." Gaara was amused by Naruto's thrilled, fawning exclamations. Perhaps Naruto's extended stay within the human-less Toad Valley made the sight of children a novelty again.

They touched down before entering what Naruto called a "whopper" of a residence. When entering,
Gaara flicked his hand at his friend to sift the sand from Naruto's clothing and travel bag, and then willed it outside. They removed their shoes before moving into the living area.

"So this is...your family's house?" Naruto wanted to make sure they had not wandered into a rich stranger's abode.

"It's been passed down for generations. More people used to live here in the past." Gaara slipped the strap of Naruto's bag from his shoulder and set it aside near a staircase, "You can put this away shortly." He pointed out a sectional in a sitting area, "Rest for now. Do you want water?"

"I'm okay, but I guess I should drink some anyway."

"One of my messengers told me you were faring well in the desert." Gaara said as he ventured into the kitchen for refreshments, "Though the crossing was harder on Sensei."

"He really did his best." Naruto sunk into sofa cushions and leaned back, groaning in relief. He stared up at tall ceilings as a thought occurred to him, "Hey, Gaara?"

An affirmative sound came from the kitchen.

"You said your sister was a captive...but did she say how she got away?"

When Gaara returned with a contemplative frown on his face (because he had not asked Temari that) he handed a glass of water to Naruto before he also took a seat.

Naruto went on, "I don't remember much...about Zabuza...but if she was hurt, I don't see how she got out of there without—"

"Haku must have fought him, then." Gaara tried to imagine the scenario, "More than once."

Naruto was slurping the water, thirstier than he thought he was.

"That's why, at the moment, we have no idea if Haku is severely injured or in good health. If he came to an agreement with...or killed Momochi..." Gaara ran through the options, "We need to reach out to him again."

"Ero-sensei will probably have a suggestion, when he gets here."

"If I didn't have the exam to think about, I would be on my way to that island right this moment." Gaara's fingers raked an anxious pattern over the sofa cushion.

"Can the Kazekage actually leave his village without, you know, an entourage or retainers?"

"It's customary for village leaders to be accompanied. Not that I don't disregard customs when I need to..." He leaned back and shut his eyes, "Though this is no time to be foolish enough to travel alone...or think that I have the correct ninja at my disposal for a follow-up retrieval."

"Well I could—"

"No." Gaara interrupted him, "I know better than to take such a risk."

Naruto suggested they change the subject. He wanted to appreciate the fact that they were sitting around doing nothing together once again. Gaara consented and then informed Naruto that, yes, he could put his feet up on the coffee table to relax because everyone else around here did it.

That reminded Naruto, "Hey, is your brother around?"
"I sent Kankuro on a mission. He was the one who sent me Muta's communication about Temari's capture." Gaara recalled, "Kankuro was also shocked that he didn't need to go looking for Temari—she flew to Tide on her own. I still have him working on a training module, down there. Hidden Leaf is also assisting with a Tide Sealing Corps program."

"How long will it be before those guys can actually handle things on their own?" Naruto wondered.

"It takes time. We forget that our ancestors were constantly asking for the help of other clans and warriors, just to survive in ancient times. Shiogakure's position as a new village is not so different from that."

"Huh, you've got a point there."

Splaying sideways, Gaara stretched out on the couch to get comfortable. He hugged a throw pillow and pointed out to Naruto, "You completed Sage Training."

"Yep. It definitely broadened my horizons." Naruto finished his drink before he too flopped over on the other section of the sofa, "You should go to the Toad Valley, Gaara. Not to bust your ass training though, just for a vacation or something. It's awesome there."

"I might just do that, whenever I can finally take a vacation." Gaara agreed, "I don't think I have any desire to become a Sage."

"The food isn't the best or the worst there."

"So I've heard."

"Yeah. I'll ask Ma or Pa to hold onto this anchor knife in the valley when you want to go, then I can get you there with Hiraishin." Naruto formulated the most practical method of transportation, "The jungle road takes too long, and we can't reverse-summon you there without a contract…"

Gaara tilted his head back to look at his friend, "Anchor knife?"

"This is the only one I have that's got a jutsu-formula attached to it. When I get home I should probably have more of them made." He slipped the kunai from a holster on his belt, "Or maybe I could stick my formula on other stuff."

With an upside-down view, Gaara glimpsed the unusual kunai that his friend had held up. It was of an older, less practical design. He went out on a limb as he assessed, "That belonged to your father."

"Yeah. That's why Ero-sensei gave it to me." Naruto sighed and put the knife away.

"Hm." Gaara had shut his eyes and stuffed the pillow beneath his chin.

It occurred to Naruto that he had never really discussed his newfound parentage in depth with Gaara. Certainly Gaara had read about it in one of the last letters Naruto had sent him, but back then he had no comment on the matter.

After decompressing and lazing about for a while, Gaara spoke up, "It seems a shame…"

Naruto cracked a tired eye open to listen.

"That my terrible father lived as long as he did…and yours, a good man, died." Gaara concluded, "I think it's unfair."

"There's nothing we can do about it."
"Even so, it will still bother me."

"Don't let it bother ya. Ero-sensei told me plenty about my mom and dad...and I feel fine with most of it now." Naruto was a bit sentimental about it, "And if things didn't happen the way they did, I don't know if I would've met you or Haku otherwise. So don't regret it."

A dry chuckle escaped Gaara, impressed by Naruto's perspective on the matter. Indeed, his friend had come back a Sage.

That same hour, down south in the Tide Village, Utakata was mildly amused as the young Tide genin named Inari caught up with him outside of the administrative building. Utakata wasn't very popular with children since he'd had a prickly disposition upon arrival, but this particular boy had taken a liking to him.

"Heya Utakata, looks like you're back from a mission—" Inari was being nosy, "What'd they make you do? Did Grandpa ask the council to send you for super-secret stuff? Did you-?"

"It was a routine inspection of cargo vessels, some of which have illegal goods coming from and going to the Land of Water." Utakata fed him the honest, boring truth, "I only beat up three thugs."

"Only three?"

"Not every mission has to be sensational. Count yourself lucky when the stakes aren't high." He gave the rim of Inari's hat a tug, "You know when you wear this that no one can see your hitai-ate, don't you?"

"Yeah, I know..." The boy pulled it off, "It just reminds me of my dad. I should get used to not wearing it every day."

"Hat or no, he is with you." Utakata reminded him. He fiddled with his bubble-blowing pipe as he walked, wondering at his newfound benevolence and social grace while Inari chirped in the affirmative and recalled fond memories out loud.

This place had transformed him; most notably in a literal sense. Utakata glanced down at his outfit, having swapped out his preferred yukata in exchange for dark fatigues and Shiogakure's vibrant, blue Jounin vest. He even sported the Tide Village's headband, an accoutrement he had forsaken since he'd run away from Kirigakure as a teenager.

More surprising than the physical changes were his now frequent mingling with Tide Villagers—a hodge-podge of social classes, ninja, runaways, and businesspeople, all of whom had readily accepted him as one of their own. Strange types were welcome so long as they bore no ill-will, and Tide inhabitants had a sixth sense regarding newcomers who were phony or malicious these days. Unwelcome types were frequently chased out.

His reserved, guarded tendencies had declined in favor of laying down roots in a new and safe home. Utakata much preferred this lifestyle to being on the run.

Inari had gotten his attention again by mentioning, "Yeah, anyways, I saw your girlfriend at the Academy today when I stopped by. She is so nice. She's been tutoring students in Water Style all day, but I thought you said she's only working part time?"

"She's supposed to be working part-time."

"Why? Hotaru-chan told me you guys need to save up money for something."
"We do, but she doesn't need to push herself so hard." Utakata explained, "She just arrived."

"Yeah, I was wondering! What took her so long? She only got here like couple of months ago, but you've been together for a long time. That's weird."

The man clarified, "Two years. I asked Hotaru not to come here right away so that she wouldn't garner too much attention. A portion of her clan has been stalking her, and past confrontations with those outlaws gave us grief. That's how we met."

"She's got family issues?"

"She did. I eliminated a few of her relatives who meant to do her harm, before coming here." Utakata turned off of the main street, Inari keeping up as they approached shinobi training offices, "I believe we can live here without worrying about the Magaki Group."

"Good. The students like her way more than you as a tutor, just sayin'." Inari poked some fun, "Oh, and Menma told me a bunch of Leaf and Sand ninja are back in town!"

"For training. The Sealing Corps' director passed away and the cadets were not prepared to handle things without his leadership."

A valid question from Inari, "Who'll be the new director?"

A heavy sigh answered, "I have no idea. This village is still rather disorganized."

Inari folded his arms behind his head as they proceeded down a road lined with flower boxes, "Maybe a little. Do you think we'll ever have a Kage help run things?"

Utakata gave him an incredulous look, "What? Here? No."

"But, like, I heard some people talking about voting for a Namikage! Someone strong like you or that Saizō guy—you could hold that job down! Then we could join summits and stuff and look way tougher…"

"That's ridiculous." Utakata disagreed, "This village still lacks a steady foundation and an adequate number of experienced shinobi. You certainly won't see me vying for that position, if the council were silly enough to create it."

"How can you be so uninspired?" Inari hissed childishly. He wanted the dream to become reality, yet Utakata did not share the vision.

"Let me tell you something, you starry-eyed novice—" Utakata warned him sternly, "Don't ever think that a village will be more prosperous just because it possesses a Kage, or think that a village can't succeed because it doesn't have one. Many villages have councils or pseudo-figureheads and that's enough. And look to the Mist Village for an example," Utakata went on, "It has had four Mizukages and the village remains in shambles. Prosperity does not correlate with a powerful ninja holding office."

Inari gave his time-worn companion an annoyed look before conceding, "You're definitely right about that." Then he muttered, "But I still want one, it'd be cool. The Star Village has a Hoshikage and she was awesome."

"Inari, that's a ceremonial title. Hoshigakure isn't invited to Kage Summits."

"Maybe this year it'll be different!"
Utakata resisted a small smile, "Petition for it, if you feel that strongly. Tide, Star, Waterfall, Grass, Dream, and others haven't been represented thus far. Maybe they need to hold their own meetings?"

Jolted by the suggestion, Inari playfully punched his friend in the arm and left the training district to campaign for the idea.

Utakata passed the gate for the Sealing Corps' building and received a nod from a guard. He helped himself to tea and honey at a refreshment table, and then poked his face into the open door of an auditorium. Apart from many Tide Village greenhorns, the only ninja present that Utakata recognized was Kankuro of the Sand Village. They had gotten along rather well nearly two weeks ago over dinner. Beside Kankuro was a turban-wearing Sand kunoichi with a large sealing scroll.

Discreetly, Utakata caught Kankuro's eye and beckoned him over, then he spoke with the puppet user outside of the lecture hall, "Hello again. Who are all of these people?"

"The bunch at the front, see them? All from Hidden Leaf." Kankuro spoke softly, "Hi, by the way. Let's see if I remember their names…the Leaf Sealing commissioner who's speaking now, that's Shimura Mochinaga. He brought two Sealing analysts with him from Leaf and they're good. Putting Tide cadets through their paces now…” He pointed to the middle-aged Leaf kunoichi, "That's Sarutobi Hosoka, and that—" Kankuro pointed to a man correcting a Tide cadet, "Is Wada Agoro."

Utakata took a sip of his tea, "How disgruntled they all look…"

"Well, they want to train these up-and-coming Sealing experts the way they would in Leaf, but Tide newbies lack the confidence and discipline. It'll be a bumpy ride." Kankuro shook his head, "The Sand training program did hold their hands a lot. I guess that didn't do much good when it came time for cadets to pass practicals."

"Who is that?" Utakata meant the Sand kunoichi.

"That's Maki." Kankuro informed him, "She's our new Sealing Commissioner."

"She's young to be a commissioner." Utakata noted her appearance and pretty face.

"Pff, not so young anymore. She's your age—" Kankuro stopped himself when he saw Utakata's eyes widen in offense.

"Are you saying I'm not young?" The man grumbled, "I'm not even thirty yet."

"Your file said twenty-six—" Kankuro felt like rolling with the joke and antagonizing him because Utakata's reaction was entertaining.

"-well don't say it aloud—"

"If you feel so young there's no reason to be ashamed of the number, is there?" He lightly elbowed Utakata's flak jacket, "Why so uptight all of the time?"

"I'll send you back to the Kazekage stuffed inside that puppet you're carrying on your back." Utakata warned quietly.

"Man, you can't take a joke-!" Kankuro snickered, "Utakata, I work with fossils in my village, that's how ancient most of our veteran ninja are. Don't sweat age as long as your skin still has elasticity. That's the way we see it at home."

"By that line of reasoning, I suppose I should have no complaints." Utakata emptied his cup in a
gulp, "I'm only sensitive because I am older than Hotaru."

Kankuro vaguely remembered the name, "Isn't that your—?"

"Yes."

"Yeah, you mentioned her during your visit." He nodded as he remembered, "What, she's about…
twenty—?"

Utakata shook his head.

Kankuro was momentarily appalled, "Younger? Holy shit."

"Nineteen isn't much difference." Utakata defended, "She's a thoughtful, down-to-earth adult."

"I can say I am just barely that."

Kankuro felt enlightened, "But it sounds like you're a lucky guy."

The men hushed up when Maki approached them, "Shimura-sama just asked us to leave. We're
distracting the cadets…" She brushed past Kankuro and Utakata, "Why don't we go to the annex and
see how the Sensory Corps is doing? A Leaf Sensory Specialist is supposed to be visiting too."

They migrated westward through the building, even though Kankuro was under the impression the
Sensory Corps in Shiogakure was in decent shape. The look on Utakata's face suggested to him that
Tide sensors in fact also needed work. When they passed through the archway and glimpsed into a
conference room, a gaggle of Tide ninja animatedly invited the visitors in. A handsome Leaf ninja
with long blonde hair sat in the center of a ring of Tide sensor-ninja.

"Ah, so this is him." The Leaf ninja got a look at Utakata, "Don't fret. This sensory team was telling
me what it's like to feel your chakra. You are very distinct."

"I prefer if you refrain from discussing…my chakra…so openly." Utakata advised.

"It's alright. All of this is kept in confidentiality. We're focusing on density distinctions and what to
do in the rare event two or more chakras we sense feel identical to us. Oh." He gave a small bow of
greeting from where he sat, "I'm Yamanaka Inoshishi, Sensory specialist of Konohagakure; you've
probably heard of our leader, Inoichi."

"Yeah, we may have heard about you guys." Kankuro was pleasant, "Kankuro of the Sand. This is
Suna's Sealing Commissioner, Maki." When Kankuro introduced his companion, she gave an
acknowledging nod and smile.

Inoshishi was heartened when the jinchuriki introduced himself, a bit more relaxed, "And I am Awa
Utakata."

"Very pleased to meet you." Inoshishi was genuinely affable.

"Your lesson appears to be going better than the lecture for the Sealing cadets." Maki pointed out,
"They looked miserable in there." The comment earned a titter of laughter from the Sensors.

"Well, Leaf's Sealing Corps can be…very rigid." Inoshishi rubbed his nose as he searched for a
description, "I don't think we've ever seen new recruits with so little practical experience or without
backgrounds in their specializations."

"That's because Leaf is spoiled with talent." Kankuro teased.

"Quite an accurate diagnosis, actually." Inoshishi agreed, "Utakata-san, do you know Reijiro? He
just joined Tide's Sensory Corps recently, after leaving Hidden Mist.”

Utakata scanned his eyes over a twiggy, dark-haired man at a desk who quailed under his gaze. Kankuro gave an acknowledgment that Temari had even worked with him, not long ago.

"I, uh…” Reijiro shrunk in his seat, "…was probably still in the Academy while you were in Kirigakure, Utakata-sama…"

"I think I do remember you." Utakata rested his hand on his hip, "Bragging to your classmates that you could take me in a fight."

The Tide sensory group had another laugh at Reijiro's expense, but the recent inductee snapped back at them, reminding his new friends of the stupid shit they claimed on a daily basis. Of course he had no desire to fight Utakata; he’d been a dumb kid then. Inoshishi sort of lost control of the class after that, and Tide ninja chatted amongst themselves and even pestered Kankuro and Maki with curious questions.

Some of the sensors that were familiar with Utakata turned to him, complaining about another popular Mist-defector who now lived in the Tide Village. The grievance was with the other Jounin council co-chair, Kiriyama Saizō, and that today he was getting married on the beach and he had not invited anyone from the Sensory and Sealing Corps to attend. The group had taken offense to the exclusion now that they had gotten to know each other so well.

"Yeah, it stinks that he only invited other Mist transplants like him, but not any of us." One fellow groused, "I'm surprised he didn't invite you, Utakata-san."

"I was invited." Utakata made sure they knew it, so he could listen to their groans of frustration.

Utakata continued to scold the easygoing, epicurean group, "If I were in his place, I wouldn't have invited any of you whiners either. I seriously doubt Saizō could afford to feed so many gluttons."

They weren't even mad at the observation. The group laughed until Inoshishi was able to rein them in again to resume the lesson. Maki suggested they visit the Jounin Council building to see if any other needs of Tide's standard forces weren't being met, but Utakata said he would only join them halfway across town. He had just gotten off of a mission and had shopping to do.

"That's fine." Kankuro led the way out of the building and back onto the colorful esplanade, "I don't suppose you heard about my sister's team passing through here?"

"Who didn't? They were a bloody mess." Utakata remarked, "What were they doing?"

"They were supposed to retrieve a friend of the Kazekage's from an island in the Land of Water, but Momochi Zabuza threw a monkey wrench into that assignment. It's a long story…but Temari nearly didn't make it out of there." He recapped.

"They should not tread carelessly around Swordsmen of Mist."

Kankuro was a bit tense, "If Momochi ever turns up around here…"

"No need for you or the Kazekage to worry," Utakata assured him, "Zabuza would meet a swift end if he crossed me in this village."

They parted at the market with pleasantries, and while the Sand ninja continued on Utakata idled around food stands to look for deals. He handled most of the shopping. Since Hotaru had begun to work in the Tide Village, she often got too caught up in teaching or making acquaintances. She did
her best to adhere to the times she quoted him, but she was almost never home early enough to cook anything.

Utakata bought trout fillets that looked appealing, and a basketful of vegetables that had been grown locally. Around that time, a lazy, squeaky, masculine voice in the back of his mind asked him, *Isn't that the beer you like over there?*

'It is.' Utakata smiled to himself as he walked past a display of alcohol, ignoring it.

*Get some! This market is dirt cheap. How long has it been since you lived this easy?*

'Well won't be having that today, Saiken. You can get a buzz some other time.'

*Sure, I've got an idea then. We should go back to the shop that sells those make-you-high lollipops and sweets, and you can get something next door for your lady too like a milk-tea or whatever.*

'Sorry, no treats. If Hotaru can't indulge then I won't either.'

*She won't care!* Saiken protested.

'Knock it off, you crybaby slug.'

*Watch how you're talking to me, bubblehead!*

It was friendly banter, as it often was. Eventually the Biju he hosted settled down and accepted that a healthy dinner would be served that night. Utakata only heard the occasional whine as he bought paper goods.

After that, he crossed town to the oldest part of the village, where shady trees stood tall in rows beside spacious houses. He liked that the area was less crowded than the newer, more developed parts of the Tide Village. It was only a short distance away from the docks on the lagoon. Hotaru sometimes cast a fishing pole out there on quiet mornings. Just a bit further of a walk, sandwiched between the beach and forest was where Tazuna still lived with his daughter and Inari. Utakata could hear the boy's dog barking in the distance.

Utakata crossed a grassy yard overgrown with clover and violets, then unlocked the front door of a rental cottage. Before going inside, he noticed an osprey soaring triumphantly up from the lagoon with a fish clenched in its talons. He entered and shut the door, but pulled up the blinds of the sitting room's window so he could watch the hawk land and dine on its prey in the front yard. Utakata went from room to room putting away items, pulled his vest and fatigues off in the bedroom, and redressed in the yukata he preferred lazing about in.

Afternoon light shone through the windows and brightened the place. Utakata didn't realize he was smiling to himself. He was only vaguely aware that he was not scrounging around for food like he used to, searching for shelter or settling beneath a lean-to or tree for the night. There was no longer any pressure to flee pursuers from Mist on a near daily basis, fight against rogues and criminals who saw him only for bounties on his head. The pain of being away from the home he once knew, and of being unable to trust anyone he came across had abated. Though Utakata was uncertain how he'd gotten so lucky, he had finally run to the right place, *And with the right person…'*

Saiken muttered at him to remember to refill on soap-mixture before he forgot, *Don't want to be caught unaware and unable to use jutsu…*
'It wouldn't be the end of the world. I have you.'

**Yeah, but I can't do it all! You're our first line of defense.**

He did as instructed and refilled containers of liquid he kept on hand for missions. For the rest of the afternoon, Utakata toiled making a stock for soup and other delicacies for an evening meal. While waiting on a pot to simmer, he sat at a table beside a small window that overlooked the side yard and lagoon. Utakata jotted recollections down on a pad regarding the last place he had eaten, as he now had a proclivity for reviewing eateries and was a popular food critic. Oh, how civilized life had changed him! His days of running through the wilderness felt so far away.

**Hey make sure you mention how that place serves desserts too…** Saiken reminded him of features he missed. His Biju was also very enthusiastic about flavor and food. Utakata sometimes wondered if he should credit Saiken as a collaborator for reviews.

The sun sank lower in the sky, the soup came together, the trout fillets roasted, and the cries of seagulls out over the water quieted. Crickets began to replace the sea's music. He finished writing and, with all food prepared and covered, decided to relax on a lounger with a whimsical shibori print on it. Hotaru had bought the chair, citing that she appreciated its 'personality.'

**She's gonna be home late again. Just eat.**

'I'm going to wait.'

**Utakata, that girl is always making you wait. Why not have some wine before she gets back? See, then she won't be missing out.**

'As thanks for the patience she has had with me, this is the least I can do.'

**She's supposed to be working fewer hours.**

'I know.'

**Remember when she used to want you to teach her jutsu, and that she followed you around and bugged you? Only you could be her teacher! Now she's the one off teaching little guppies. It's coming full circle, my friend.**

'She wanted to learn how to better defend herself from those in the Tsuchigumo clan that betrayed her. It wasn't that she personally wanted to learn anything from me.'

**Oh yes she did.**

Red-faced, Utakata thought, 'Shut up.'

**Ha! Just kiddin'. She loves you a lot which I find impressive. Only your mom and Shishou cared about you before this, so after them I thought it was all going downhill.**

'Whenever you're ready you can stop having an opinion, Saiken.'

**You need my opinions— you even write them down!**

'I listen to you because for so long you were the only one listening to me. You're important to me. But please…don't bring up embarrassing subjects.'
Nothin' to be embarrassed about!

'You apparently don't know how to be embarrassed, Saiken.'

I think that's a good thing, though. The slug sighed. It sure is nice here. Comfy bed, and a whole house to yourself with the little lady. Comfy chair…hey, how about that wine now?

'I told you already, no.'

Why is it that when she can't have something you make a point to not have it either-?

The door creaked open and Hotaru hustled inside, stepping out of her shoes in one practiced motion. She nearly slid on the waxed wood floor, bending fast in a bow of apology, "I'm sorry! You wouldn't believe how crazy the classes got."

'It's fine." Utakata blinked when she rushed over to him, reaching to hold his cheeks in her hands. She seemed teary and her shoulders tense. Even while anxious she was a pretty woman—light, sandy hair and deep green eyes.

"You're not mad?" Hotaru double-checked.

"No." Utakata confirmed again with his face scrunched.

Hotaru exhaled roughly and released him, setting her day bag down. She motioned for him to relocate to the table when she moved still-warm dishes and the soup pot. She was taking deep breaths to calm down.

"Gosh, I am just out of control with these emotions lately." She shook her head to try and snap out of it, "I promise I won't be out that late again. Today was rough, even for overtime pay at the Academy."

Taking a seat across from her, Utakata said as he lifted chopsticks, "I really don't think you should be working at all."

"We need the money. All that traveling was fine while we were broke, but staying in one place adds up." Hotaru ladled soup into bowls while eyeing the other dishes on the table hungrily. She was grateful that Utakata added morsels to her plate first.

"It is more expensive to live here, but I'll be paid better for missions." He tried reasoning his way through the minor disagreement, "And you don't have much control over class capacities and how long student training will take. If you like to do it, I understand. But you need to tell the administrator."

"Tell him what?" Hotaru spoke through a mouthful of delicious, flaky trout.

"That you'll be taking leave within the next month."

"I'm sure I can go another two months without getting tired."

"Let a doctor tell you whether or not that's possible."

"Fuh." Hotaru was in a better mood while eating, "Fine, then. But what if the administrator fires me? I'm worried I won't get my position back."

"Then they don't deserve you."
"Utakata, I'm serious! I really like working for the Academy."

"If they have no employee protection policies, then I don't see the point in you working there."

She would not relent, "Well I do, so maybe I'll ask Tazuna-san if he can put a word in for me when I go back."

The debate went on and on in circles until dinner was finished. Utakata fussed when she tried to clean up, and took over the more intensive tasks. He let Hotaru run along to rinse off and bathe, and worked while Saiken offered commentary on his personal life that he didn't need, once again.

When night cloaked the world outdoors, Utakata locked the place up and drew the window shades. He retired to the bedroom and rolled onto the mattress with a yawn. He would probably be asleep by the time Hotaru was done with her bath. Saiken joked that he was really an old man at heart.

Utakata stared over at the room's desk, where Hotaru's collage of newspaper clippings and photos of goofy Tide Village inhabitants was still an incomplete piece. She was proud of his published contributions to newsletters and daily papers. She snipped out his articles to save them, even though Utakata thought it a frivolous pastime. Hotaru explained that it was just a joyful reminder of how much their lives had improved. After a time, his eyes drifted shut, but he hovered on the edge of consciousness— aware of sounds and motion in the room.

Hotaru had pulled on her pajamas and clambered into bed, trying not to disturb him at first. She tested him with a whisper to see if he was still awake.

"Sorry that I didn't ask you about your day..." She said quietly.

"We had other things to discuss." Utakata croaked a reply without opening his eyes.

"Want to tell me about your mission?" Hotaru had sidled up next to him, adjusting her pillows.

"It was rather boring. Lots of boat shipments. There were not as many criminals as we expected trying to pull a fast one on inspectors."

"Because you were there."

"Or they were just slacking off. They weren't afraid of me initially." 

"You got home on time, I bet. Did you get to see anyone today?" Hotaru wondered.

"Sabakuno Kankuro and Suna's Sealing Commissioner were in town. I met some Leaf ninja too…" He paused for a wide yawn, "Spoke to them. Saizō's wedding was today."

"That was today?" She chirped.

"Did you want to go?" He opened his eyes to get a read on her.

"I kind of wanted you to introduce me to your friends from Mist." She mumbled.

"Well," Utakata was amused, "We weren't friends when we lived in Kirigakure, though we are now. I didn't know it was important to you."

"I guess it isn't really. I'm just trying to meet more people in the village."

"I will introduce you to them as soon as our paths cross again." Utakata snaked his arms around her waist, "It will probably be a more memorable meeting, since Saizō won't be distracted by festivities.
He may taunt me about not being married though.

"We'll get around to it." She tucked her hands under her chin, beaming, "There's just been so much to think about, lately."

"Yes. We need to keep our priorities straight. On that note…” He rubbed the small of her back and asked, "Will you stop procrastinating a doctor's visit? You need an appointment."

"I couldn't get one this week." Hotaru provided a lame excuse with a small smile.

"You never bothered scheduling it." Utakata pointed out.

"I know, I know. I just got nervous when I walked into the office the other day…so I walked back out." She admitted sheepishly.

"Hotaru," Utakata pulled her into his front, "You can't quit like that. I need to know how to take care of you now that we're expecting a child. You need to be informed too."

She was nodding and poking the bare skin of his shoulder, uncovered by his robe.

"I'll go with you in the morning." He brushed his lips against her forehead, "To talk to someone. If they can see you right away, I'll stay if you want me to. If it's busy, we'll find something else to do."

"That would make it easier." Hotaru agreed with a sigh.

"You have nothing to worry about." Utakata told her.

She tucked her face against his neck, breathing in his scent, "I know. I've just had a bad feeling since yesterday."

"Oh?" His voice was pleasantly scratchy, "About what?"

"I can't put my finger on it. We should stay away from the beach. I think we should also ask the Sensory Corps to be more vigilant. Something's just not right." Hotaru tried to make sense of her suspicions.

Utakata raised a brow at her, but he would not dismiss her intuition, "I'll pass that along."

"Thanks. It could be nothing, you know."

"Let's hope it is."

She relaxed and told him, "I'm not trying to worry you, Utakata."

"Do I," He paused to yawn, "...look worried?"

"What's with all of this lettuce?" Naruto demanded an explanation.

Gaara shifted Naruto to the side, away from plates of food that needed preparing. He took over the work at the table, cutting marinated short ribs into small slices, "It's for ssambap."

"What the heck is that?"

"A Joseon dish. It's popular in Hidden Sand now." Gaara clacked a measuring cup in front of his friend, "Fill that with water for the rice."
"I just got here and you're putting me to work…" Naruto did as instructed, smiling because he really didn't mind.

"If you intend to eat here, you'll help." Gaara informed him, "It's different with my brother and sister around. They're better at this."

Naruto added water to the rice cooker and flipped the switch, which was about the only job his friend thought he could handle. That—and mixing together a dipping sauce in a bowl. Though Gaara claimed his siblings were more learned in cooking, Naruto was still quite impressed by his skills.

By the time the meat was grilled and the rice was done, Jiraiya had turned up. He stood in the egress of the kitchen to admire the sight of his two students being homebodies, "This is precious."

Naruto was sloppily setting the table, "You could've helped, Ero-sensei."

"No way, I had to take that bath. It restored me to a pristine shine." Jiraiya merrily seated himself while Naruto made a face at him, "Cool it. It's great seeing Gaara domesticate you, kid. You've become a shaggy beast and you need to learn how to hold a house down."

"Not why I'm here; but okay."

Gaara set a tray of grilled meat slices and lettuce on the table. When Jiraiya also asked him what in the heck this stuff was, Gaara gave him the same answer he gave Naruto. Recipes in his family were eclectic and sourced from many regions. Gaara thanked Naruto for his assistance when rice was scooped into bowls.

"Hey, don't you have any sake in this palace of yours?" Jiraiya wondered.

"No." Gaara dashed the thought.

"Don't speak to your master like that." He raised his chin impatiently, "Obviously you do. Your sister told me she needed a drink when she gets out of the hospital tomorrow."

"That doesn't mean you're entitled to the wine here. All of it belongs to Temari, anyway." Gaara dismissed it, "You might be my master, but I'm the Kazekage."

Sitting down, Naruto's delighted hooooooo approved of the comeback, which only irritated Jiraiya. It had yet to sink in for Naruto that his friend was in fact a village leader. Things felt rather commonplace in their current environment. Jiraiya grumbled and accepted a cup of tea instead.

The phrase Itadakimasu had only just left Naruto's lips as he crammed a lettuce wrap into his mouth. It was overstuffed with meat and rice, but no wayward bits of food escaped his maw. Each human-diet meal since leaving the Toad Valley had been a joyful experience.

"So," Jiraiya said as he picked up meat slices with chopsticks, "I've had a thought about what to do for Haku. Speaking to Temari cleared a few things up for me."

Gaara was slightly mystified, "Like what?"

"Well, based on what your sister told me, Haku is being treated like a prisoner and plaything by Momochi Zabuza." Jiraiya stuffed a lettuce wrap and concluded, "Since Haku can't get that gorilla to give him the baseline of respect he deserves, and believe me, Haku's written to me saying that he's tried…" He took a bite, "I'll just talk to Momochi."
"…?" Naruto's mouth was full, but the dumbfounded look on his face was a recognizable response. Gaara wrapped a piece of lettuce so tight that its contents spilled out the sides, "…Sensei."

"Yeah?"

"Momochi Zabuza isn't the kind of person you can just talk to." Gaara provided a reality check.

"In the traditional sense, no, he's not." Jiraiya agreed, "But there's some utility in sending me. I'm flexible. I can negotiate or sneak up on someone in Sage Mode to rough 'em up. You two stay here to concentrate on the Exam, and I'll see what I can do for Haku."

"But why even bother reasoning with him?" Naruto downed his food while gesticulating dubiously.

"Because even shitheads have a part to play, sometimes. Might as well try to direct that bastard's bad temper and energy into something useful. You know, like actually figuring out Hidden Mist's situation. That's a boon to us." Jiraiya expounded on the idea, "I doubt Momochi is used to taking orders from a supervisor…it's been a long time since he's done that. But that'll be healthy for him—it could keep his sorry ass alive if the Mist Rebellion decides to off him because he's too wild. I've gotten rowdy spies under control in the past. It's worked out great."

"You want to make him one of your spies?" Gaara highly disapproved, "…he tried to kill my sister. He killed two of my ninja."

"Gaara, he tried to kill pretty much all of you at one point or another. I do genuinely regret that harm came to your people, make no mistake." The man reminded him, "But a bit of psychology can work wonders. Leave it to me. Oh, and he wouldn't be my lackey…" Jiraiya cleared that up, "He'd be Haku's."

Naruto lost an entire wrap in a saucer of dipping paste, shocked again, "You lost me, Perv."

"There's an attachment there that can be leveraged. Inexplicable as it may be, Temari told me about it. It seems to be one-sided, so…" Jiraiya smirked, "Let me just talk to that asshole and see what can be done. We could get valuable intel or cooperation out of this, or at least get Haku out of there if that's what he wants."

Gaara sniffed, "Of course that's what he wants."

"Right." Jiraiya sighed, "Now I'm going to ban this topic of discussion for a while, at least until I'm ready to set out south for crisis intervention."

"Are you gonna give it a few days? You're still kind of beat." Naruto observed.

"Yeah." Jiraiya was chewing, "I want to do at least one book signing before I mop up another one of my kids' messes."

"Sounds like a plan." Naruto was somewhat relieved, though Gaara seemed to be google-eyed and tense after the discussion. "Is there anything you can tell me about the exam, Gaara?" He wanted to snap his friend out of it.

After a few deep breaths, Gaara wound down again, "There are a few things I can share ahead of time that won't give you an unfair advantage."

Naruto was all ears.
"There weren't many Genin enrolling from Konoha at all. Including you, there were three in total. The third enrollment may be called into question because it lacked the correct application permissions. I'll look into that in the morning. Rosters are finalized by the end of the week." Gaara explained, "If the third Leaf enrollee is disqualified, you'll be given a single-entrant replacement. That individual may come from any village."

"Isn't that kind of…?" Naruto shrugged it off, "Actually, that doesn't bother me."

"It shouldn't. Most participants in this exam will be strangers to each other. Few complete teams entered. With that in mind, teamwork will still matter…but adaptation and critical thinking are more important. Ad hoc solutions will be necessary to complete tasks." Gaara informed him, "There are no formal 'stages.' A series of simultaneous objectives will be assigned to all teams to test them and their capabilities."

Jiraiya was chuckling. Some unique, fresh hell was probably in store for unsuspecting trainees.

"Alright. I'm pretty sure I can handle anything that exam dishes out." Naruto was feeling good about it.

"My only advice to you is: don't let your teammates drag you down, if they aren't equipped to pass." Gaara offered, "Individual assessments are required for an exam like this, since some teams will be unfamiliar with each other. Your points and evaluation do not ride on those accompanying you."

"Good advice." Jiraiya agreed, "Don't let wimps hang onto your coattails, Naruto. If you take pity on them and try to support them so they can pass…that doesn't help them when they're Chunin that can't handle the missions they're assigned."

"Come on, I know that." He swirled meat in the dipping sauce.

With the conclusion of dinner, Jiraiya was kind enough to take part in the clean-up. Gaara showed them to their rooms afterward, and then Jiraiya patted the boys on their heads before retiring to sleep. Gaara directed Naruto to the bathroom, "Clean up here. I'll leave your bag in the room beside mine."

Left in solitude within the wide, tiled room, Naruto gladly stripped off his grainy clothing. His scuffed-up skin, complete with a lopsided farmer's tan, was a sight to behold in the vanity mirror, 'Jeez…I didn't know I looked this rough…' Bathing tools and a stool had been neatly tucked aside after Jiraiya had used them earlier. Naruto rinsed himself as the tub filled, finally starting to feel a bit of weariness. It had been a while since he had traveled cross country with Jiraiya, or had to think about how he socialized in the setting of a ninja village. His brain was rapidly recalibrating.

'Yeah. Come to think of it, it's been a while since I've worked on a team…' Naruto lathered his hair while thinking about the Accelerated Exam's requirements. 'Something about simultaneous tasks…points…I'm gonna guess we'll be tested out in the desert.' Which he could live with. 'And I won't know the people on my team very well at all. If they really do start dragging me down…' He arrived at a key question, 'What am I supposed to do? Would I lose points for abandoning them? Or for trying to drag them along? What if they're brand new rookies who have no idea what a promotional Exam is like?'

Naruto rinsed himself and sighed. Maybe an evaluator's explanation on the day of the test would clear up that last concern. Surely the orchestrators of the Exam had kept in mind that unacquainted teams would pose a challenge. He stepped into the tub and hoped that there was some kind of unorthodox system in place; that maybe the test was an exercise in cooperating with the ninja of other villages as well as one's own team. 'That'd make sense, since Gaara likes to arrange alliances when he can. We prefer it when other villages aren't hostile…'
He leaned back in the water but did not fully relax. There was a tingle that travelled from his head down to his fingertips, and then an involuntary jerk of his arm created a large splash of water. Naruto realized he was hearing Hinata's screech of embarrassment in his head.

"Hinata!" He kept his voice down, "It's alright! Don't leave. I won't look or anything." Naruto wanted to placate her before she terminated the jutsu's link, "Just finishing up a bath, I can get out and dress if—"

Her voice came again in a warble, _No, it's fine…_

He sat, angling himself comfortably to stare only at cupboard on the wall stocked with soaps and other bottled luxuries. He might've laughed at his girlfriend's timidity on any other occasion, but Naruto felt as if Hinata were a butterfly on the loose lately. When he had left the Toad Valley, she had been evasive on that visit. Startling or embarrassing her further would not be conducive to having productive talk.

Naruto kept his voice down, knowing that Gaara could probably overhear him next door talking to himself, "I know it's only been about, what? Five days now? But I've missed you. How have you been?"

_I am well! I'm sorry that I've been so busy, Naruto-kun. Kurenai-sensei asked us to help her pack belongings because she will be moving to a new home soon once she is married. And missions have—_

"Married-?!"

To Asuma-sensei.

"Whoa." Naruto had not been aware of that.

_Missions take up a lot more of my time than they used to…and I sat to observe a Village Council meeting for the first time, when my father brought me along. Neji-niisan will do that sometimes too._

"Huh. Was it boring?"

_I think others found it boring, but everything was so new to me I was able to listen and pay attention._ Hinata added in summation, _Everyone is doing well…and if I knew exactly when you would be home, I would be counting down the days on my calendar!_

Naruto chuckled, "Hah! You'd do that for me?" His face dropped slightly as he recalled how she had acted distantly when she had last contacted him, "Hey, Hinata…is there anything that you want to tell me?"

—! _Tell you?_ Her nervous reaction carried into his body, making Naruto's fingers curl along the edge of the tub.

"Yeah." He muttered, "It's just…I felt like you didn't want to tell me much the week before. I miss you and I could be totally wrong about this…but I just want to know that nothing's wrong, or that you're not mad at me?"

_I'm not mad at you at all._ Hinata quickly offered that assurance, pulling herself together, _Nothing is wrong, Naruto. I've been distracted…_ She halted the train of thought.

She wanted to bring up Kurama, the seal, the things Kurama told her, and talk about what she supposed Kurama _was_…but Naruto had drawn himself into a ball in the water, feeling her residual
nervousness. Though she spoke to calm him, neither of them truly felt that way.

*Please don't worry.* She tried again, *There is nothing to worry about, Naruto. I feel like I've learned so much lately, and it's a lot to take in. I have many questions.* Hinata bolstered him with: *We can talk about anything we want to when you are home. Anything at all!*

Naruto stretched out again and took a breath, *"There is a lot I want to tell you…"

*We can have snacks and talk all night!*

"You want to see me stuff my face with junk? Because that's the first thing I need to buy and eat when I get home." Naruto warned.

*I've had delicious ramen lately, and the restaurant owner and I talked about you. He can't wait to have you back, Naruto."

"—you're eating ramen?"

*With Chouji-kun and Tama-chan, sometimes.* Hinata confirmed.

"I didn't have any fear of missing out until just now." He folded his hands on his chest, smiling, "We have a lot of dates to go on…maaaajor catching up to do."

Her voice was fluttery, *I know.*

Naruto nearly got hung up on the thought of kissing her, carding his fingers through her hair and stroking the skin of her slender neck. He shuddered and warded the thought away.

*Naruto-kun?*

"Yeah?"

*I am not exactly sure where you are right now. It feels like…"

"Oh! This is Gaara's house." He could hear her delighted stammering in his head, *"I was kind of gross after crossing the desert so he made me wash up. Ero-sensei went to bed already."

*Gaara-kun and Haku-kun must be so happy to see you!* Hinata's voice reached new, squeaky heights.

Naruto's facial muscles froze in an unconvincing smile, *"Yeah. They are. I think…"* He cleared his throat a little, *"I'm the most excited."

*Hee hee! I can't wait to talk to them again. It's been too long.* Hinata added, *When will the Accelerated Exam start, Naruto-kun?"

"The day after tomorrow…uh…at least that's what I remember the invitation saying."

*Is Haku-kun participating?*

"Nah…he's kind of…busy with something else." He phrased it feebly.

*Oh. Her silence was thoughtful before she went on, I don't know if there will be other Leaf applicants who will join you."

"Me neither. Gaara told me there were only two others, and one of them may be disqualified already."
Something about paperwork…” Naruto relaxed a bit more, "Even if I have to meet new people and work with them, it'll be fine. I've done that sort of thing before."

*That's good! I'm confident you will pass.*

"Thanks."

*But really, what I want most of all…* Hinata had subconsciously arranged his hands to fidget, pointer-fingers aligned *is for you to be home. I'm trying to be patient, but I catch myself daydreaming about it all of the time.*

"Yeah?" Naruto shut his eyes while smiling.

*I keep thinking about you visiting me at my house, like you used to. While I gardened or spent time with my family…*I liked how you would surprise me sometimes. A small sigh sounded in his head,* When I know you're home I'll rush through my routines and team obligations a little."

"I might do that too." He admitted, "I might…bug you, every day."

*N-No— I mean! You won't bother me. I want to see you every day, Naruto.*

"Good, because it's going to be hard for me to keep my distance." Mischievousness inched into his grin, "I might squeeze you a little when I hug you."

*I would like tha—*

"Sneak up on you from behind, sometimes…"

She promised sweetly,* If I notice, I'll pretend I didn't.*

"Maybe I could get away with holding your hand while we walk around town?"

*I don't see why anyone should object to that!*

"Some people don't like me."

*I don't care what they think.* Hinata asserted.

"Phew." Naruto's smile stretched a bit more, "I guess we shouldn't care. Though I won't…kiss you in front of anyone."

—! Her bashfulness was evident.

"So…" His voice was a touch lower, "It's not going to be like it was when I left, you know."

*What isn't?*

"Kissing."

*Oh.* She inadvertently made him gulp.

"I'll probably…be closer to you— be more greedy." Naruto supposed, "Maybe not so shy and innocent."

*I…I…* Hinata composed herself *don't mind that.*

"Well, why don't you tell me what you'd like?" He adopted a rakish, flirtatious tone, "I'm definitely
going to kiss you when I get back, Hinata…but how do you want me to do it?"

A stir of commotion in the bathwater revealed that Hinata's tendency to fidget was manifest. She clamored nonsensically in Naruto's head for a few seconds. Then she went quiet.

Naruto apologized in case that had been a step too far, "Sorry…I didn't say that to embarrass you."

*It's alright…if you…really want to know…* Hinata raised his hand up and poked Naruto's face with a fingertip, *Kiss me here.*

"Just on the cheek? That's kid stuff."

*There's nothing wrong with that.*

"Is that what you *really* want?" He asked.

…*not really.*

"Then where?"

She tapped his lips and Naruto grinned again, feeling vindicated.

*I want…many kisses, Naruto-kun.*

"For you, I have an endless supply."

*Not just my mouth…* She worked up some courage, *Would you…kiss here too?* Hinata prodded his shoulder.

The idea still seemed within bounds, at least he thought so. Naruto concurred, "I sure will."

Then his hand traveled laterally and rested on his neck, *And here.*

A fluttering sensation stirred in his stomach, a heat that was both coy and hungry rising up to color his face. Naruto agreed slowly, "…and there. I will."

Hinata did nothing more after that. She didn't have to. His mind had already wandered ahead to other conclusions, anticipating what she would want. It was thrilling for all of a moment before Naruto had to lean back and cross his arm over his eyes, trying to calm down. How many times would he have to cope with the embarrassment of his girlfriend being completely aware of how turned on he was?

...*I'll…* There was a satisfied, rascally edge to Hinata's voice, *Go home now.*

He replied in a short breath, "Yeah, maybe…"

*I promise I will talk to you again in a few days, Naruto-kun.*

"Okay, that's fine. Uh…" Naruto cleared his throat softly, "Should I be apologizing for…anything…just now?"

*Never.* Her answer was bold.

Then, just as suddenly as she has appeared to him, Hinata departed. Naruto wondered at the speed with which she had gone from being timid about encountering him in a bathtub…to teasing him and maybe even approving of the compromising position she had him in. Naruto took several deep breaths and tried to relax, *I have no idea how I'm supposed to…keep my cool around her when I get*
home.' He slumped down in the water, 'Just when I think I'm clever and sexy, Hinata schools me…!'

Before his imagination could meander again, Naruto rose up from the tub and drained it. He dried off while grumbling to himself, trying to reason with a boner that really needed to quit it. Eventually, the excitement subsided and he ventured down the hall to his guest room, rummaging for sleep clothes in his travel bag. Naruto dressed and then fetched a toothbrush. He hung his towel to dry in the washroom and brushed his teeth, still tangled in thought, 'It's alright. It's awesome seeing Hinata go beyond that shy side of hers—not that I minded it! She was still cute! But I like every side of her. I can't wait to…learn more about her.'

Good grief was he easily aroused. Frustrated, Naruto spat and rinsed in the bathroom sink and shook himself from head to toe like a dog, trying to get a grip. It was too risky to think about her even for a few seconds. He was wired to respond to even the barest hints of his girlfriend. It was going to be challenging seeing Hinata on a daily basis without making a fool of himself. Naruto calmed down again and examined his reflection in the mirror, 'Oh. I put my shirt on inside out.' He pulled it off, corrected it, and slipped it back on, I'm losing my damn mind.'

He arrived in Gaara's room unceremoniously, and was confused by the sight of his friend bent over a writing desk. "You're not still working, are you?" Naruto wondered.

"Technically, no." Gaara spoke over his shoulder, "I'm just making note of what my sister told me today. And Sensei's plan. In the event all of this…spirals out of control…I need to keep my facts straight if I am asked to explain it to the Hokage."

"Oh." Naruto understood.

"Tsunade-sama would not only be displeased with my lying about Haku…but that you and Sensei were complicit in it as well." He finished scribbling on a notebook page and leaned back in his desk chair with a sigh, "It's in our best interest that we make things right."

"Well, it's kind of tricky trying to figure out how to do that." Naruto sat crossed-legged on a nearby bed, "Ero-sensei wants to see what he can do for Haku, so…we just need to focus on the Exam for now. After that, we'll go over what we've learned and see how we're supposed to react."

"What if it meant you could not return to Hidden Leaf right away? If we had to respond quickly to help Haku?" Gaara pushed up from his seat and shut off a desk lamp.

Quietly Naruto admitted, "That…wouldn't be great…but I'd—"

"You've been away from home long enough, Naruto."

The room grew heavy with silence as the fact hung there, and that both understood it would be highly impractical of Naruto to travel to another nation for a reason not yet disclosed to the Hokage. He keened over with a groan, mashing his face onto a folded throw blanket. He wanted to help Haku. He also wanted to go home and begin streamlining his life again.

Gaara fiddled around the room putting books away on shelves and laying out clothing for the morning over an armchair in the corner. "Naruto," He said, "Don't feel guilty about it."

"I can't just—!"

"I am the one who let Haku go in the first place." Gaara reminded him, "Therefore, I need to do something about this.

"What kind of a friend am I if I'm not helping you guys? No matter who's responsible
for what?" Naruto flattened out on his back lengthwise.

Gaara assured him, "You're still a good friend. You just need to accept there are things you must prioritize. As I have."

"Huh."

In the opposite direction, Gaara settled down on the bedspread parallel to Naruto, studying the cracks of the ceiling. He shut his eyes after a while and folded his hands on his chest. He was dealing with the stress better than he had earlier, Naruto noticed.

"So...you haven't actually told anyone else about this situation, have you?" Naruto was curious.

"No, I haven't. I dislike having to lie to Sakura every time she asks about Haku." Gaara admitted.

"Same here. When Hinata asked me about him before, I didn't like fibbing..."

Gaara cracked an eye open, "What?"

"Oh. I...talked to Hinata." Naruto explained haltingly, "...while in your bathtub."

Gaara swiveled his head to glower at his discourteous guest.

"Come on, she surprises me every time she uses her jutsu and overlaps with my consciousness. Don't get mad at me." Naruto defended, "We have to talk a lot! It keeps us updated. Keeps the romance alive..."

"Don't keep romance alive in my bathroom."

"Chill out. You're just jealous you don't have a radio-brain communication method to talk to Sakura every day." Naruto teased.

"I am, actually."

"It's weird."

"It must be." Gaara empathized, "I watched Hinata use your jutsu in the Tournament."

"Yeah, I didn't really think that one through..." Naruto conceded, "I just want to put in the extra effort before I go home because...I didn't get to speak or write to Hinata for a while. I almost died in the Toad Valley and I was—"

Gaara held up a hand to pause the narrative, "You nearly died?"

"Well, I nearly became a toad statue permanently." Naruto amended.

"How?"

"If someone absorbs too much Natural Energy without mixing it properly with their own chakra, it's possible to that they'll petrify into a toad statue." Naruto folded his arms under his head, "There are a lot of risks involved with Senjutsu training, and I thought I was being careful enough."

Gaara seemed mildly alarmed, "You didn't tell me you could have died doing that."

"I'm fine." Naruto pointed out.
"If something happened to you…"

"There'd be nothing anyone could do about it. Ero-sensei, Ma and Pa told me their hands were pretty much tied when I turned to stone." Naruto recalled, "But they said…the Fox saved me."

Shifting sideways to pay better attention to the odd tale, Gaara blinked, impressed, "So you've made progress?"

"With what?"

"Getting to know your Tailed Beast."

"No."

"That is something that you need to do." Gaara insisted.

A dry reply, "Things seem to be okay as they are."

"I hope that soon you'll see the sense in establishing something better than okay." Gaara was sincere, "That's what you both need. I trust Shukaku with my life."

"You have got to be kidding me. That thing nearly wrecked Konoha—!"

"He's not a thing, Naruto."

Naruto blew an irritated raspberry, "I don't get it. How can you change your minds and become friends just like that? How do you know the One-Tail isn't going to kill everyone you know and love?"

"He won't." Gaara said simply.

"That doesn't help me understand any better."

"I can't be the one to make you understand. You need to find your own way to understand each other." He consoled Naruto, "You can. Open yourself up. Be willing to get hurt again, even if it's frightening. Be willing to listen."

"I…"

"Sakura listened to me, when I told her." Gaara added.

Shocked, Naruto sat up slightly when he heard the news, "You told her you're a jinchuriki?"

"I did. She wasn't afraid or upset at all. Although…Sakura had an unusually broad education on Biju and their origins, so that certainly helped." Gaara recalled, "She said that introducing me to her parents was more nerve-wracking, by far."

"She kind of always was gutsy." Naruto was nodding to himself.

"I like her parents."

"Do ya? I heard they can be a little overbearing."

"They can. We still get along."

"That's good!" Naruto was thrilled with the news, "So, you're kind of set up then! Covering your
bases in case—"

"I want to spend my life with her." Gaara's interruption was heartfelt.

Naruto hushed up and stared at him. His friend definitely meant it.

"When I'm not occupied by official tasks or things that need my attention, I've been modeling my future and anticipating how I'll retire from being Kazekage." Gaara filled him in.

After a few beats of confusion, Naruto picked his ear with a pinky finger as if he had misheard, "I'm sorry, what was that?"

"If I can, I would like to retire from my position as Kazekage in the next few years. It could take longer to get things settled." Gaara made it clear as day for his friend, "While I am honored by this responsibility, it's helped me realize what I actually want to do. I would rather marry Sakura and raise our children in the Leaf Village."

He barely made it through the statement before Naruto was sitting upright and beating the faux-chinchilla fur throw with a fist because he could hardly contain his emotions. His face said he was troubled by Gaara's choice to forsake a Kage position (a sore spot for Naruto,) but his laughter indicated that he approved of Gaara's intentions. It reminded Naruto that his friend was a leader. Gaara was the wind's shadow. And he wouldn't always be.

"That's— you want to—!" Naruto lifted the folded blanket and cheerfully walloped Gaara in the head with it, "…holy shit. You're gonna do that for real? Did you talk to her about all of that-!

"I did."

Naruto continued beating him happily, "So she's cool with all of that— and you'll be in Leaf! You'll probably have an army of grumpy kids with cute chubby cheeks, and I could be their uncle and—"

"I've only been able to negotiate 1.5 children so far, due to Sakura's stubbornness. I'll round that up to 2."

"—crap and you've gotta get married, so you'll have to take missions again and make money obviously—" Naruto was grinning, "So you can still be on a team with me and Haku, if you wanted!"

"It's possible. High-level missions may require us to join different squads or complete solo assignments." Gaara shielded his face when he got tired of being smacked with a blanket, "I may answer to you someday when you are Hokage."

Naruto ceased the beating to consider it, "Whoa. I never thought of that."

"I'll try not to tell you how to do your job," Gaara quipped. For that, Naruto gave him a final face-slam.

Eventually, Naruto tilted over while chuckling uncontrollably. He still remembered the days in which Gaara had been too hesitant to reveal his true feelings or be close to others. To hear from his friend that he wanted love and family, which they had never been lucky enough to enjoy as children, was a precious, momentous thing. Naruto thought of Haku, who had also expressed his wish for a simple life. Their dreams echoed one another.

Gaara fussed at pillows to prop his head up with. He was tired but also interested in talking, at least until Naruto gave up and retired next door to sleep.
"That's awesome." Naruto concluded.

"Let's see if I can make it happen. There will be obstacles, like Haku's safety, for example. The Akatsuki and inter-village squabbles won't make anything easier." Gaara listed some hindrances.

"You don't have to deal with all of that on your own." Naruto assured him, "And…uh…are you sure you'd want to leave Hidden Sand?"

"Reasonably sure, not completely sure. Much of my family's history is here. And Temari and Kankuro will probably stay."

Naruto added, "It's just something to think about. I wonder if Sakura-chan would be alright with moving to Suna…?"

"She offered. I don't think it's right to take her away from her family and friends. I also doubt Tsunade-sama would appreciate it. She has come to depend on Sakura for many things…" Gaara's head sank back into a goose-down pillow, "It doesn't matter what I have to do or give up…I just want her."

"Hmm." Naruto gave his friend a suspicious look.

Gaara reclaimed his throw blanket, wrapping himself in it as if he were ssambap.

"You haven't outright told me yet, but I think I already know…" Naruto mumbled.

"Know what?"

"You've had sex."

Gaara held quite a poker face before confirming it, "I have."

"Like, a lot?"

"Only a few times. Sometimes I get carried away thinking about it, though." Gaara stared at the ceiling again, "I think maybe Sakura gets as distracted as I do."

"Probably." Naruto laid there for a while thinking and then said, "It's strange. I remember how much you liked her when we were younger…and you never did anything. Never said anything. You were shy, kind of like Hinata was."

He didn't notice Gaara puffing his cheeks slightly in protest, disagreeing.

"I mean, the only time you spoke up was usually when you were steaming mad, remember?" Naruto snickered, "Then you yelled at whoever ticked you off: Me, Haku, Sakura, Sato… anyone."

"I make a point not to do that anymore."

"Except when your sister pisses you off." Naruto dug at him.

"Drop it." Gaara sniffed.

"Fine, but then…how did you figure out, you know…that you were going to do it?" Naruto dared ask the controversial question, "Did you plan it? Or did you ask Sakura?"

Gaara recalled, "Actually, she planned it."
Wide-eyed, Naruto gave his friend a flustered look.

"The timing was…well. I didn't expect it. I just wanted to be honest with her about being a jinchuriki. I had no idea that she wanted to…" Gaara stopped, realizing he hadn't given the milestone in his relationship much thought, "I didn't think she wanted me that way."

"Wow." Naruto was likewise stumped, "Guess it helps that she just outright told you."

"It was acute clarification."

"I have no idea what I'm supposed to do about Hinata." The words tumbled out before Naruto could stop himself from oversharing. He slapped his forehead slightly when Gaara redirected his attention on the new subject.

"What do you mean, what you're supposed to do?"

"She…I think…it's not subtle anymore." Naruto chipped off some words, embarrassed, "I think we…know. We talk about the future and…flirt…all the time."

"You've corrupted her with your bad influence." Gaara smirked.

"No. I know perfectly well Hinata doesn't have to do anything for me, and I reminded her of that. But that's…beside the point now." He inhaled deeply before going on, "Hinata wants to…and I just don't know…what it's going to be like living at home— doing everything by the book, if there even is such a thing. Like, how am I going to avoid making her dad and clan hate me? Are we even allowed to date? I can't figure out how I'm going to stand next to her and not go crazy, just ask Ero-sensei, I've—"

A pillow clobbered Naruto in the face.

"You'll learn." Gaara said flatly, "If you care, you'll take the time to learn and respect her and her traditions. And if she wants to be intimate and you decide to go for it, that really won't change much."

"It won't?"

"It won't if you're cautious. I imagine Hinata will be, going off of the fact that Sakura is one of her closest friends. They discuss things just as we do."

"Huh. You're right."

"If you have questions I will do my best to answer them." Gaara offered.

"I've gotten graphic details from Ero-sensei's books, but I might need to sift reality from fiction based on what I read." Naruto was hugging the pillow at that point.

Gaara agreed, "You might."

"Hey, do you think Haku—?" Naruto got a second, more painful pillow to the face, "Ow! What the hell is the matter with you?"

"Don't bring him up." Gaara growled.

"I wasn't bringing him up in the current context." Naruto informed him, "You are hair-trigger, ya jerk."
"Hmf."

"I was just going to ask if you think Haku would want to stay in Leaf if you end up living there. But maybe that's not a good idea. Not until you are over this petty shit." Naruto prognosticated, "If your sister stays in Sand he probably will too."

"Naruto, this isn't up for discussion." Gaara hissed.

"I think it should be. You need to talk about it to emotionally unconstipate yourself." He shifted on his stomach and crushed the offending pillows beneath him, "Here's a fact: Haku told me he wants to have a family. He doesn't want a high position or grandeur—he never cared about that stuff." Naruto went on, "So take that how you will. It's why he doesn't give a crap about these Exams, because the way he sees it—he can take an Exam whenever. But I'm confused about why you're mad that he cares about your sister. Haku would probably do anything for her. I think that makes him trustworthy."

"There are times when I need convincing that Haku is in fact still good and trustworthy." Gaara admitted, "And most of the time, I am unbothered by the fact that he and Temari return each other's affections…" He reluctantly explained himself, "I regret letting him go when we set out for Suna. That is what frustrates me."

"Just that?"

"I thought I was doing what a friend should by letting Haku search for his clan, but I didn't have much time to think it through." He exhaled roughly, "Shortly after that, Suna was searching for candidates and then nominated me to be Kazekage. Nothing about that process was simple or enjoyable. It was chaotic. If Haku had been there with me, I think of how different the transition would have been. Even now, having his support and guidance could significantly help things."

Naruto stewed over those details and listened to Gaara's summation.

"There is no talking Temari out of her pursuits, and if she wants him, Haku has no resistances when it comes to her. I may not like it, but I know I can't trifle with what they have." Gaara wrenched his pillows out from beneath Naruto to return them to their original spaces, "Yet I see how this dangerous waste of time and the distance between us can jeopardize everything. Sensei is even obligated to intervene, at his own peril. We need Jiraiya now more than ever, as adults. I don't want to risk losing him and Haku."

"I get that." Naruto nodded, "Though could you…try not to take your worries out on everyone? Your sister's safe now. And Ero-sensei knows what he's doing. If we take this piece by piece it's not so bad. We're smarter than we used to be."

With a small grunt, Gaara conceded to his point.

"If you're not going to cry and have a nervous breakdown, I'm off to sleep." Naruto gave his friend's arm a slap, "We've got to be up bright and early for tomorrow!"

By morning, the Leaf guests were fed and dressed, providing Gaara with joking commentary as they observed him go about his typical rounds as Kazekage in the village.

"See that statue gallery in there?" Jiraiya pointed out seated figures through the window of the council building. Naruto glimpsed inside with an impish smile.

"You know those councilors are alive." Gaara said archly.
"You can hardly tell." Naruto was restraining a flood of teasing that could get him walloped.

"I forgot how crumbly and old the elders are in this village." Jiraiya muttered, "We can be impressed that they've outlasted many of their peers in other villages, but I bet it inhibits progressive policy in Suna."

"Why don't you go soften their stances on inter-village policy and public programs? I could use an advocate." Gaara held the building's door open. He was surprised when Jiraiya decided to make himself useful and went in to schmooze Sand elders.

"Think they'll listen to him?" Naruto wondered as they walked away.

"I have no idea."

"What now? Can I shadow you while you finish the rest of your duties?"

"You can, but I need to stop at the hospital to bring Temari home. She's been discharged."

With that, Naruto accompanied him to keep peace between the two Sand siblings on the journey back to the mansion. It was pleasantly surprising to find that Gaara was not as irritated as he'd been the day before, and Temari had re-examined her role in the disaster while making apologies. Naruto beamed at their brief hug outside of the house. The sentiments did not last due to a turban-wearing Chunin jogging up to Gaara with a stricken look on his face.

Gaara turned to the subordinate, "Are you alright, Enoru?"

"Kazekage-sama, I know this will sound unusual, but I was on my way to the communications tower when I noticed a carrier pigeon get killed by one of our returning hawks. It wasn't well trained so I apologize…I didn't know a message was coming in for Gama-sennin." He caught his breath, holding out a hand with a scroll flecked red at the edges from the pigeon's accidental demise.

"I don't think he was expecting any correspondence. The Hokage sends things to him via messenger hawk." Gaara accepted the message and unrolled it. He dismissed Enoru.

"Who sends something by pigeon?" Temari was leaning against the doorframe as she and Naruto waited for Gaara's assessment.

"I don't know this person." Gaara said as he scanned the end.

"Let me see it." Naruto pulled the parchment flat when Gaara gave it to him. He trolled his eyes over the panicked, messy scrawl on paper to the signed name, "Obito!"

Gaara and Temari gave him puzzled looks.

"He's—!" Shoulders taught, Naruto froze and realized it would be difficult to explain, "He's…uh…" Naruto rolled up the scroll. "He's one of Ero-sensei's spies…and used to live in Konoha."

"You've met?" Gaara asked.

"Yeah, he's got a really cute kid!"

Mercifully, Jiraiya was marching up the street, visibly annoyed that Sand's counselors had not warmly welcomed his intrusion. He joined the gaggle at the front of the house and could not say a word before Naruto shoved a message in his face, "-eh! What're you-?"

"Ero-sensei, I think something's wrong! I didn't read it all." Naruto stuffed the scroll in his master's
hand, "Obito sent this with some country bumpkin messenger bird!"

Jiraiya’s eyes stretched to the size of saucers, alarmed. He hastily read the correspondence.

*Jiraiya-sama,*

*I'm sorry about the arrival of this message— I am in transit at the moment with few means of communication in the Land of Rivers. Immediately after the Akatsuki's most recent meeting, I left to hurry ahead to the Land of Waves. Any day now, the leader of the Akatsuki known as "Pein" will be making his way there personally to capture the Six-Tails jinchuriki. I don't believe I can stop him… but I will do everything in my power to the help the people of the Tide Village and warn them of what's coming.*

Jiraiya looked up to rub the corners of his eyes, unnerved. The sound of his pupils' inquiries was garbled and drowned out as he continued on.

*I haven't been able to reach out to Rin. The outpost here only had one carrier pigeon. Please tell her I'm sorry. I had every intention of going home to her and Yuma. She won't be pleased that I'm running late. Well, to tell the truth I don't know what will happen. I haven't been doing well recently. I think it started months ago, I'm not sure— but for the last eight weeks solid, I've been hallucinating. I don't know how to describe it exactly. At first I thought it was my imagination or an illness…but I suspect something is wrong with my Sharingan.*

*These delusions can make it hard to fight properly. If I don't come back, please make sure Rin and Yuma get to the Leaf Village as quickly as possible. With things as they are now, I want them somewhere safe. Our home is not as secure as it used to be.*

Naruto's voice came in clear, disrupting, "What's he traveling for? Going south—?"

"Shut it, kid, this is a report on the Akatsuki!" Jiraiya hissed.

*Please request reinforcements to be sent to the Tide Village. We don't have much time at all. Keep your students safe, as the Akatsuki has agreed to study and attack targets assigned to them, including the Kazekage and Naruto. Both of Kumogakure's jinchuriki and the Seven-Tails jinchuriki will also be surveilled. I fear they may already have sunk their claws into the Four and Three-Tails, but I have no definitive confirmation.*

*If you can, find me in the Land of Waves. Take care.*

*Obito*

A great, dampening lethargy seemed to sweep over Jiraiya, making him stand with eyes unseeing as he stared down a long avenue into the heart of Sunagakure. He didn't even notice Gaara pluck the scroll from his hand, concerned about its contents. Naruto patted his master's back, trying to snap him out of his funk.

"If he doesn't have anything witty to say," Temari assessed, "Then things have gone to shit already."

Naruto shared a brainwave with her, "You are exactly right. I don't think I've ever seen him like this." He gave Jiraiya a small shake, "Ero-sensei? What happened?"

"…I'm just…taking a second." Jiraiya rested his hands on his hips, gave his back a stretch, and groaned, "*Fuck me sideways…there may be no fixing this…*"

Gaara closed the space of their circle halfway through reading the message, jutting his chin up
accusingly, "**Why** does this spy of yours complain about complications with *his* Sharingan?"

Temari and Naruto gasped, and were then bulldozed indoors as Jiraiya spread his arms and pushed the three youngsters into the house. The door creaked shut behind him as they shuffled in, listening to Jiraiya's justification through gritted teeth, "Gaara. *Don't* utter dangerous words in public spaces. This is a **fucking mess.** There's not enough time to explain a fraction of what's going on here."

"Then I need your cheat notes version of it," Gaara demanded, "Or Tsunade-sama will be hearing of this."

Jiraiya gave his insubordinate student's earlobe a yank as a penalty, "You *want* to kill me? Tsunade can't hear about this until she is seated and liquored up. Stone cold sober and she'd pop my head off like a beer cap…" He held his forehead and shifted from foot to foot, "How far is the Tide Village from here? Can I get there in less than a day at top speed? How about an elite squad of yours?"

Gaara had batted Jiraiya's hand away and rubbed his sore ear. He finished reading the message and then returned it to Naruto, where Temari read it over his shoulder.

"You'll need a day and a quarter, at minimum. And you can't move that fast." Gaara estimated, "My best available team now probably won't arrive before two days' time, but it will have to do." He made a hand sign to create a Shadow Clone, which promptly set out to summon Sand ninja. Gaara added to Jiraiya, "I'll have them ready for you as soon as I can, and I'm sending a warning to the Hokage…without one alarming detail." He crossed his arms.

"Uchiha Obito," Jiraiya began, "Is a one-eyed teddy bear of a human being who lives with his family in a northern mountain pass in the Land of Earth. He's been getting me intel on the Akatsuki for years."

Gaara was back on a steed comprised of pure skepticism, "He's trustworthy?"

Temari tacked on, "How is there another Uchiha *living*?"

"I'll tell you, but the both of you **guarantee** this information does not get to another living soul, understood?" Jiraiya pointed a finger in each of their faces, "He was never around for the Uchiha massacre. He's been considered KIA because his team believed he died on a mission in the last war. Obito was a crippled amnesiac used for labor and henchman work by early Akatsuki members. I found him after I dragged Naruto, Gaara, and Haku back to Hidden Leaf when they were little snot-nosed brats. We agreed to work with each other to get info to Leaf."

"A cripple with one eye." Gaara, now half-believing the explanation, could not see utility in such as individual.

"Yep, Obito gets around just fine. Until now he did, at any rate." Jiraiya disclosed off-handedly, "His other Sharingan eye is with Kakashi."

That nearly blew the collective brain matter out of Gaara and Temari's heads, while Naruto just nodded understandingly. Since he was previously made aware of such sensitive information he could keep some composure. Jiraiya was making his way up the stairs to retrieve his travel bag and other necessities.

Naruto filled the silence with the Sand siblings as they stood in a daze in the living room.

"We can't help." Naruto wilted at the thought, "This Akatsuki guy…sounds like bad news."
"I should go to the office…write to every contact I have," Gaara supposed.

"Gaara…didn't you say you know the jinchuriki in the Tide Village?" Naruto recalled.

"Utakata." Gaara confirmed, "Kankuro, Temari, and I have gotten to know him. Even in so little time, he's become a friend to many in Shiogakure."

"How are we supposed to divide up Jounin assigned to supervise portions of the Exam tomorrow? It's at least three days contracted work, and 122 foreign Genin will be here." Temari tugged on one of her pigtail in frustration, "We don't have the manpower to deal with the Akatsuki right now, Gaara. We have to keep our teams here."

"I know that." He took a deep breath.

"Then Baa-chan is going to have to send teams from Leaf." Naruto's solution sounded simple enough.

"I don't know if she can do that with enough speed." Gaara motioned for them to follow as Jiraiya descended the stairs and exited through the front door, "It may take days for a response from Konoha. That's assuming she has cells ready that can deal with S-ranked criminals. She's already kept me in a loop regarding the movements of Dintei Bi's faction, Orochimaru, and emerging intrigue within Hidden Leaf— though it was kept vague."

"She'll do what she can." Naruto insisted.

"None of us doubt that, Naruto." Gaara agreed, "It's just that…the Akatsuki picked an ideal time in which other villages are occupied."

"There have to be snitches in our villages, then…slipping information to the Akatsuki." Temari gathered as they followed behind Jiraiya to the administrative building, "They waited for Sand's Exam and Leaf's committing of platoons to track other criminals."

Gaara was bristling, "It's time I find such turncoats and stamp them out."

Obito was nervous as hell.

It had been two full days and nights of running south, with hardly any breaks. He was exhausted, hungry, and feeling incredibly vulnerable without a mask. He'd taken it off to be less conspicuous while passing through the Land of Rivers and a portion of the Land of Fire. At the coast, he finally stopped in a seaside gift shop to buy snacks and power bars.

The cashier gave him a strange look, "There's a café about a kilometer from here, you know. Just across the Great Naruto Bridge."

"Thanks, I need to…eat now." Obito plopped down on an oversized beach cooler. He crammed food in his mouth and wished other customers would pop into the store to make things less awkward. The cashier blatantly stared at Obito's scarred face.

"I just ran a marathon and you looking at me like that makes me self-conscious." Obito barked moodily, "I know I'm overdue for some cosmetic work, alright?"

"Sorry! I didn't mean to—"
Obito waved it off and chewed.

"So…" The teenaged store attendant leaned on the counter, "Was it a charity run? Sometimes they organize those in the Tide Village."

"Not exactly." Obito was glancing around at racks of beach wear and clothing, "Hey…what do people like to wear in Shiogakure? I'm headed there now."

"Oh! Well we just got a lot of new t-shirts and tanks in. I see people buy our jackets a lot. They're pretty soft. That blue section over there is what villagers gravitate to." The kid perked up, smelling a sale, "You interested?"

"Yeah." Obito rubbed his chin while stuffing the last of a granola bar in his mouth, "What's that?"

"A wetsuit."

"I like it. Give me that sweatshirt there." He pointed the boy towards the blue jackets on the wall. It wasn't that he was genuinely interested in any beach shop nonsense, but rather Obito wanted to look as unrecognizable as possible. If he crossed the Akatsuki again, he didn't want to blow Tobi's identity.

In a twist, the boy offered a discount and talked Obito into not just the sweatshirt, but knock-off Tide Village fatigues (on sale), silicone gel bracelets, unnecessary layering tank tops, and even sunscreen. Obito stood at the counter and wondered why he was shelling out so many notes again. Rin would have his head. Before paying, he noticed recreational swimming goggles on a display. He smiled at the sight of it.

"Going swimming after the race?" The shop keeper sure hoped so.

Obito lifted an orange-tinted pair of goggles and tested the band around his head, amused that they fit. He handed over the money, "I'll take these too."

After that, to the shop keeper's eternal confusion, Obito went to the changing room and shed his dark, muddy clothing for the colorful, nonsensical get up he had just bought. He slung a travel bag on his back, stuffed his dirty clothing into it, and saluted the teenager as he strode out.

'I hope I look like the cringiest tourist there ever was.' Obito thought to himself. He feared that maybe such a move was still Tobi-like, but the Akatsuki didn't know him well enough to detect it.

He took off in a swift run, slightly bolstered by the junk he'd eaten. At the entrance of the Great Naruto Bridge, he realized he would be dodging herds of tourists and beach-goers. Obito kept up the pace and avoided them, 'I can't believe this bridge is named after Naruto…and all of these people are here daily! Do they even know who Naruto is?' He expected at least Tide Villagers would know. He also had to think about what his next move was, 'I know I need to warn the administrators and Jounin in Tide as soon as possible…but I really need to let Rin know what's going on.'

After the crossing onto the island, Obito noticed fortified barracks with ninja coming and going. Behind it was a communication center, where trained osprey and seagulls were entrusted with messages by their handlers. Obito hung a right and decided to try his luck with sending a scroll north, 'This doesn't look as ramshackle as that pigeon coop I went to…' Past a picnic area and wooden gate, he arrived at a front desk where a kunoichi with a Tide headband was seated. She got one look at Obito and immediately judged him.

"Need directions?" She asked while examining her fingernails.
"No, thanks. I need to send a message." Obito said politely.

"Citizens and visitors send their correspondence at the post office, or express center where couriers can fulfill requests." The kunoichi droned in boredom, "231 Main Street on the left."

"I can't send my message with a courier, it needs to be a messenger hawk that knows how to reach the Land of Earth." Obito explained, "My town, Shincha, is very small. It's ninja related business, so I'm in the right place."

"It is?" She quirked a brow at him, "You're a ninja?"

"Yeah." He was getting impatient.

"You're not a Tide ninja…"

"Obviously not. I'm a Leaf ninja."

"You just said you live in Shincha…?"

"I do."

"Well your outfit is ridiculous and you have no headband." The girl said dismissively, "Quit pulling my leg! Get out of here before I call a supervisor."

"I don't have time for you to hassle me about how I look. I'm here to protect your village from the Akatsuki!" Obito dropped his hands on the counter with a thump, "So get your supervisor or whatever! I need someone to—!"

"Is there a problem over here?" A boy poked his face around the corner, frowning. He was a Genin.

"Inari! Get this bozo out of here! He says he's a ninja but he's just some nut trying to use the messenger hawk system." The girl complained.

Inari strolled inside with his hands in his pockets, giving Obito the up and down, "Wow.

"Please don't waste my time." Obito took a breath to relax, "I need to send a message and then speak to someone in charge. I have a warning about the Akatsuki."

"The Akatsuki?" Inari at least had a clue, "He's talking about the Akatsuki and you're trying to kick him out? That's serious!" He motioned to Obito with a hand, "You're a ninja right? Follow me. I'll help you send your message."

"Thanks." Obito gratefully followed the boy to the interior of the building, "Are Tide ninja aware of the threat level the Akatsuki poses? Even villages of your size should be mindful."

"They're all still learning and getting the memos." Inari snarked as he climbed the stairs, "My grandpa is the leader of the village for now, so the top brass knows what's up! A lot of my friends are Jounin, so you can talk to them after this." He pushed a door open and Obito stepped into an aviary, "I'll get you a pen and paper. What was your name again?"

"Obito." He shook the boy's outstretched hand, "I work for the Toad Sage."

Inari grinned, "No wa-aaaaay!"

"Way."
"So! Hidden Leaf!" Inari laughed, "I've got friends there." He handed over the implements as Obito bent over a writing table and tapped out a message for his family.

"By any chance is one of your friends the namesake of the great bridge of this island?" Obito teased.

"Yeah actually!"

"I thought so." He smiled a little, "I also know Naruto."

"Hm! Small world."
In the morning, Naruto woke to a quiet house. He discovered a note from Gaara on the kitchen table:

*Eat. I had to get up early to coordinate with Exam proctors. Report to the village gate by 8:00AM and take your number tag with you. You will see me later. — Gaara*

"Hmm." Naruto lifted up a lanyard with the number seven on its plastic tag, "I guess this is how I'm going to get matched with teammates today…"

He riffled around cabinets and the refrigerator to whip up a half-decent bowl of ramen garnished with vegetables. Naruto ate sleepily, cleaned up, and then dressed in his room, snapping weapon clips on beneath his red sage cloak. He tied his Leaf headband with pride.

'Ero-sensei left in a hurry yesterday with the Sand squad Gaara put together…and I think Gaara and his sister still can't believe what that message said…' Naruto remembered they had looked stupefied for the entire day, though they had agreed not to repeat the secret they'd learned.

There seemed to be a buzz around the Sand Village as Naruto zipped over rooftops, watching villagers scurry below. Store fronts opened in the dim light, tents were raised up in rows to prepare for market sales…no Academy-age or younger children to be seen. *It's still too early…*

It was a rather nice place, Naruto thought to himself. Sunagakure had a sensible layout of streets, tucked in the sheltering cliff of a plateau for defense and shade. He noticed that many of the buildings were older than those found in the Leaf Village. Fewer internal attacks and ambushes had likely spared the city's infrastructure. Newer looking buildings peppered the landscape here and there, shiny and sophisticated, as if designed by artists. Scents of food and cooking oils wafted up from restaurants as the day got underway.

To satisfy his innate, boundless curiosity, Naruto scaled the tall perimeter wall of the village to stand at its top. The view of the vast desert was a cheap thrill, warming his blood. *I thought the Toad Valley had a view…but this is a tough one to beat.* He smiled, *This is it! It's been a while since I worked in a group or took an Exam. I can't be too big for my britches. For all I know Gaara designed something to really grind me down…*

He peeked over the ledge of the gargantuan wall, seeing the gradual accumulation of Exam contestants below at the gate. Naruto palmed his anchor-kunai, spun it once 'round his finger and then let it fly— sinking into the wood scaffolding beside the gate. He flashed there without a single soul noticing.

Naruto extracted the knife before hopping down to the ground, turning his head left and right to get an eyeful of the gathering. It was a young, soft-spoken group, if he could make a first impression of them. With a few more steps, Naruto understood that Sand Chunin in turbans were lined up with numbered signs held in their hands. He strode over to a kunoichi waving the number seven, who seemed pleased to see him.

"Ah! My first applicant." She brightened at the sight of him, "Name?"
"Morning! Uzumaki Naruto."

"Yes, you're on Team Seven for today." The kunoichi nodded as she glanced over the names on the back of her card, "We'll get started once everyone is here."

Naruto nodded, trying to ward off some of the excitement that would make him twitchy. "Look at this! There are a lot of teams from Hidden Sand. I think that's a Cloud team over there..." There was no sign of Gaara, though a few Jounin were manning the security checkpoint. The crowd grew denser and louder as the hour of commencement approached. Naruto let himself doze on his feet a little. Then a voice came from behind him, "Oh! Naruto!"

Naruto wiped a spit bubble from his lip and turned around, beholding a young man a few finger lengths shorter than him. He was pale with dark hair pulled into a short ponytail, and had unmistakable white eyes. A number seven lanyard was hanging around the boy's neck.

"Hey there! Do I... know you?" Naruto was a bit more alert, able to recognize a Hyuga from leagues away.

"I'm Fujita! I've never had the chance to talk to you, though it feels like I have because of Hinata-sama's stories." Fujita twiddled his hands in the wide sleeves of his airy, black-and-white tunic, "Neji-sama and Hinata-sama are my second cousins."

"Shoot! You're that little kid—! Well. You're not little or a kid, that was a while ago..." Naruto rubbed the back of his head, "Yeah, I remember. Nice to meet you finally! I'm lucky you're on my team."

"I would say that I'm the lucky one." Fujita disagreed smilingly.

"I heard that a third Leaf applicant might have gotten disqualified." Naruto shared a bit of gossip. 

"Where did you hear that?"

"From Gaara. I have best-friend-privileges so he gave me the heads up about a couple of things."

Fujita tapped his chin, "That's helpful. Then we can expect someone else will fill our third slot."

With that comment it was time to begin, and the assembled teams faced a raised platform near the gate where Gaara had appeared, surveying the Exam participants. Naruto felt a droplet of sweat on the back of his neck, 'Wait a second... what if our third teammate doesn't show up? Will we be disqualified? Crap.'

Gaara began an introduction, "Welcome to Sunagakure. I am the Fifth Kazekage, Gaara. All of you are—" He trailed off, frowning at a gangly, androgynous teen running from row to row checking team numbers. Gaara waited for the late addition to settle in with Team Seven's group.

It was a girl, at least Naruto thought so. Her orange eyes were striking against olive skin, sea foam hair chin-length and jagged... with a wide grin on her face. "Hiya! This is our team? My name is—!

"Shh!" The Chunin attendant silenced the newcomer. "The Kazekage is speaking. You're late."

The kunoichi beside them pouted and complied. Her headband indicated she was from Hidden Waterfall.

Naruto exchanged a glance with Fujita, communicating their questions with eyebrow wags.
Gaara's comments continued, "All of you are here to be evaluated for the chance to achieve Chunin rank. Some of you will be amateurs, and others will be experienced. What all of you can count on is that if you are promoted...you will be accountable for greater responsibilities and missions of terrible difficulty. Prepare yourselves. In this day and age, there are enemies that now threaten all ninja villages collectively." He did not shy away from the red-hot topic, "The Akatsuki is an organization that seeks to harness the chakra of Tailed-Beasts to oppress and destroy any ninja village that stands against them. Every single one of you is at risk. There will be no avoiding the confrontation to come." Gaara provided some reassurance, "Let this day serve as a reminder that we can all cooperate. We can fight together and defend our homes. As comrades."

The message sunk in for Naruto especially, and the corners of his mouth tugged into a grin.

"Some of you are standing with teammates that you've always known...and others will be depending on shinobi they have never met before. You all stand a chance in this Exam." The Kazekage explained, "Listen to one another and pool your strengths. Your aptitude will be judged carefully in a series of tasks you must complete over the next three days. Each task will be issued in subsequent clues that can be discovered in the desert. If for any reason you are unable to continue, each team will be outfitted with a device that can call a Chunin proctor to escort you back to Suna."

The Sand kunoichi with the number seven sign handed Naruto a small transponder with a covered switch. He squirreled it away as Gaara concluded his remarks.

"You will also receive a sealed envelope that can only be opened once the Exam has begun." Gaara went on as the Chunin attendants also handed that item over, "If any of you feel unprepared to spend the next few days in the desert, inform your Chunin monitor now."

No one among the crowd of young ninja quailed at the challenge before them. Gaara only gave the Chunin attendants a nod, signaling them to leave their assigned teams and approach the scaffolding. 45 teams of three stood for an awkward beat, hushed and unsupervised, and gradually realized that a huge dome of desert sand was closing in around them.

As startled teams were corralled into the sandy enclosure, Gaara only imparted the words, "The Exam starts now." Naruto noticed a few seconds sooner than others that several, concealed canisters of knockout gas were billowing a plume into the covered dome. *This is a weird way to roll things out...* Naruto thought to himself.

Then he was unconscious.

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Time and space swirled in darkness until Naruto detected a hand slapping his face. Not in the friendliest or gentlest way either...

"Hey, hey...stop." Half-blind, Naruto swatted the hand off. He tried to sit up with a groan.

"Sorry! You and the cute boy have been sleeping for a while." The kunoichi sat back and apologized, "I woke up in no time! I'm too antsy for naps."

"Uh...yeah." Naruto shook off the grogginess and glanced around, surprised by the dimness of the space surrounding them, "Are we still under Gaara's sand dome?"

"Nope! This is a cave. Musty...smells like we're underground." The girl reported.

"Alright." Naruto reached over to shake Fujita back to the woken realm, "Hey kid! We've got to get started. I think we were moved to a new location for the Exam."
"I like that they made it a surprise!" The Waterfall kunoichi chirped.

Naruto regarded her curiously as he rested a hand on Fujita's shoulder, helping him sit up. The Hyuga boy blinked his eyes, disoriented. He shook sand out of his hair and then retied his ponytail, "We were…put to sleep?"

"Yeah, and now we're underground. Seems like something Gaara would pull…" Naruto smiled at the notion and helped Fujita to his feet, "Next we should—"

There was a scraping sound followed by the fizzing ignition of a lit flare stick. Naruto and Fujita turned around to look at the kunoichi, taken aback.

"Where did you get that?" Naruto asked.

"In this bag! It was here when I woke up, waiting for our team, I guess." She held up a black, cross-body satchel, "I opened the envelope too, but couldn't read the paper inside it— it was dark. So I lit this thing for a bit of light."

"Is that…the only flare we have?" Fujita inquired.

"Yeah." The girl said cheerfully.

"We could be down here for a while." Naruto advised, "Try not to use our resources or do stuff without checking with us first."

"Oh." She understood, and only then did a hint of contriteness flicker on the kunoichi's face, "Sorry about that…I get ahead of things sometimes."

"It's okay." Fujita smiled reassuringly, "Let me read that, Miss. What's your name?"

"I'm Fū!" The kunoichi puffed her flat chest when she handed the parchment over, "You guys are Leaf ninja! Takigakure's leader Shibuki-sama talks about friends from Leaf a lot! I'm psyched."

"I remember hearing about Waterfall," Naruto slipped into his friendliest social mode, "This is a good team match! Uzumaki Naruto." He accepted Fū's handshake with a firm grip.

"Ah, I'm Hyuga Fujita." The younger boy shook Fū's hand too and winced at her strength.

"Great to meet you! Also, we're got food, water, and blankets in here…that kind of stuff." She handed the satchel to Naruto, "You don't mind carrying it do you? I'm already loaded down." Fū gestured with a thumb to the red, cylindrical duffle bag slung on her back.

"What's all that?"

Fū patted her gear bag, "Just travel supplies, shuriken, and scales."

Naruto exchanged another look with Fujita when he glanced up from reviewing the envelope's contents.

"Scale powder." Fū clarified, "From my wings! For jutsu."

Right about then Fujita was prepared to sign off on a crazy applicant affidavit if there were any to certify, but Naruto swiftly changed the subject and asked about what he was reading.

"This appears to be instructions for our first task…which is to escape this cavern, and on the surface we must locate a box. Only one box per team, is underlined…it will be covered with reflectors and
very noticeable.” Fujita reported, “We should also be judicious with our ration bag. It has to last us for three days.”

Naruto dusted his hands, “No problem! Let’s get out of this cave while we still have that flare going.”

Fū enthusiastically gave the lit stick a twirl in her hand as they set out into a narrow, rock-walled passageway. Fujita politely requested she cease doing so. Accidentally extinguishing the tool would leave them flailing around in the dark. While marching single file, Naruto assured his fellow Leaf ninja, “Don’t worry if it gets dark. I can feel the way out of here. As long as something is alive above us, I can track it.”

“Something alive?” Fujita, third in line, was intrigued.

“I can feel the chakra of living things when I’m in Sage Mode.” Naruto explained from the center.

In front of them, Fū was happily twirling the flare again, and only picked up on the conversation when Fujita inhaled in shock.

“Sage—? You mean—! Senjutsu.” Fujita stamped his feet, thrilled, “Naruto, you trained in Senjutsu? I didn’t hear about that!”

Not wanting to gloat, but still a bit fat-headed about it, Naruto confirmed, “I trained on Mount Myoboku, just like Ero-sennin! It was intense.”

Fū asked over her shoulder as the way narrowed further, “What’s Senjutsu?”

“It’s a type of jutsu used by shinobi that can absorb and mix Natural Energy with their own chakra.” Naruto abbreviated the concept, “Once someone masters it they can do pretty cool stuff.”

Fujita tittered admiringly over the feat, while Fū commended the idea of sharing with nature. The procession nearly ground to a halt when they had to shimmy sideways through a crevice, and then pick their way up a tall slope of loose rock. At the top, Fū leapt down the sheer drop without fear, landing lightly and illuminating the wider cave mouth below.

“She’s not very cautious, is she?” Fujita muttered.

“That was kind of a thoughtless jump…” Naruto agreed in a low voice. As they found their footing along the ledge, the two made a more calculated descent. Naruto thought out loud, “But she did say she has wings.”

Fujita had taken a glimpse with his Kekkei Genkai to verify, “I don’t see any.”

“I’ve seen Star ninja make their wings out of chakra. Maybe she can use a jutsu like that?” Naruto supposed.

“…she just seems a little odd to me.” Fujita whispered as they continued on, Fū far at the front picking the way around stalagmites.

Naruto saw the bright side of it, “She’s still nice, though. I appreciate it when people aren’t hostile.”

“Oh yes, Fū is nice.” Fujita concurred, “As far as we can tell. Let’s see how we feel after we travel together for a few days.”

“Hm.” Naruto noted to himself that the young Hyuga lad was an astute observer, like most of his kin. Ahead, there was a bit of a ruckus and they noticed that Fū had dropped the flare on the cave floor,
where it burned underfoot. She was grunting and wrestling something in the creeping dark. A large scorpion claw had hooked Fū’s red duffle and was pulling back on it, trying to drag her into a burrow.

Fū railed at it in protest, reaching back to punch its eyes, "Mister Scorpion knock it off! Stealing is rude!"

Naruto rushed ahead while Fujita needed a moment to gasp, astonished by the rare sight. In close quarters, it was amusing to hear Fū’s scolding of the creature while she tried to pry it off without violence.

"Hold on, this is one of Gaara's scorpions." Naruto employed a bit of strength to wrench the scorpion's arm away, while Fū resisted and slipped her satchel free, "I know he wants to challenge us down here, but I'm not eager to hurt the animals that Gaara can summon. They have feelings, you know?"

The scorpion retreated into its burrow while Fū dusted off her skirt and picked up the flare again. "I didn't come here to hurt feelings!" She announced. She blinked in startled as Naruto went down, his feet tripped out from under him as another, larger scorpion approached from the rear. It got a hold of him and began to scuttle backwards, ignoring its captive’s clamoring. Fujita was already on the case. With a lunge, he pelted the scorpion with Gentle Fist strikes that passed through its exoskeleton. Though the creature staggered, it still tried to line Naruto up neatly between its pincers, swinging its tail-stinger down and narrowly missing his head.

Fū cupped her mouth to shout from a distance, "I bet it just wants the food in that bag!"

Naruto wheezed back, "—could ya give it a whack for me-?"

"You said they have feelings!"

"Even jerks have feelings—!"

There was the sharp *zing* sound of a blade overhead, where Fujita had cut off the scorpion's hooked stinger. The wounded scorpion squealed and scuttled off into the dark. Panting, Fujita wiped off the dagger and sheathed it on his belt again. Naruto hopped to his feet and dusted himself off.

"Phew, thanks! Too bad you had to hurt it." Naruto was appreciative.

"Better it got hurt than you." Fujita reasoned before he rounded on Fū, who was still at the egress of the cavern mouth, "Why didn't you help Naruto?"

"I was helping! I suggested that the ration ba—"

"You *help* by taking action, not by shouting directions." Fujita marched on, motioning for her to follow, "If you waste even a moment it can mean disaster for a team."

"I'm sorry…! Uh. What's your name again?"

"Fujita." He rumbled.

Fū nodded, "Got it. I won't forget, Fujita, promise. I'm just not used to acting fast because my teammates from Waterfall are always faster than me. Super overprotective. It's annoying."

"Coddling doesn't help anyone on a team learn." Fujita looked back to Naruto as they picked up the pace, "Right, Naruto?"
"Nope. Doesn't help." He agreed and caught up with them, scaling another vertical patchwork of stone overhangs and boulders. Naruto managed to keep the waning flare in hand as he climbed and asked, "Fū, did you just say you have teammates?"

"Well, they're a team I'm assigned to, but they're not the same rank as me. They're like babysitters." Fū explained, "Shibuki-sama worries about me straying too far from the village."

A few stones trickled down from Fujita's foothold before he took a leap up, reaching one of the tallest accessible spots in the cavern. Fū and Naruto followed his lead. Slivers of light revealed gaps in the cave ceiling, and possible exits. He extended a hand to help Fū, who seemed delighted by the gesture. She hadn't needed the help, but was hoisted onto the plateau anyway. When Fujita did the same for Naruto, Fū assisted, and the two nearly lifted and launched Naruto clear across the standing ledge, "Whoa! You got me."

"So why is your village overprotective of you?" Fujita asked as they proceeded along the ledge, approaching wider cavern gaps.

"They don't want to lose me. I'm the jinchuriki of my village." Fū shared the fact casually.

The flare slipped from Naruto's hand, bounced over the precipice, and then tumbled down into the dark chasm below. In shock, he had nearly laughed nervously in response to the announcement. With sunlight shining down from ceiling vents, the loss of their flare was no setback. Somehow, they kept walking and it was Fujita who commented on the matter.

"You're a jinchuriki?" The boy furrowed his brow inquisitively, "Those are ninja whose villages seal and entrust Tailed Beasts to."

"Yup!"

"Are jinchuriki always so young?" Fujita was curious.

"I don't know. Everyone grows old! Though Chōmei was sealed into me when I was little girl…" Fū tapped her chin, "We've had a lot of time to get to know each other."

"Chōmei." Fujita repeated.

"Yes! The Seven-Tails. He shares his wings with me."

"Oh."

Noting the awkward silence behind them, Fū turned around to behold Naruto's quiet reaction. He was deep in thought.

"In Konoha," Fujita shared an anecdote, "The identity of our jinchuriki is not common knowledge. Before I was born, the Nine-Tailed fox escaped its seal and destroyed a large portion of our village. Many people still live in fear of that experience…and associate bad things with our jinchuriki." He raised a finger and added, "My dad says that's garbage."

"Your jinchuriki is garbage?"

"Huh-? No! What's garbage is that people would treat a jinchuriki poorly when they dedicate their lives to the defense of their homes!" Fujita puffed up a little, "Dad's right. I may not know much because I wasn't there, but I don't feel that way at all. I don't fear or hate someone who's blameless. That's ridiculous!" He sighed, "I'd like nothing more than to be a friend to jinchuriki."
Both Fū and Naruto halted, and Fujita stutter-stepped in between them. It was Fū who seized Fujita's hands in her own, beaming ecstatically, "I've been looking for friends for so long!"

"Oh—!"

"I never get to go anywhere or meet anyone new." Fū was nose-to-nose with the young man, "Please be my friend."

"I…" Fujita turned his face aside for a bit of space, rosy-cheeked, "Of course!"

Fū whooped excitedly while crushing Fujita in a brief bear hug, and then raised her hand for a high five. Fujita was preoccupied catching his breath, so Naruto reached up as to not leave the kunoichi hanging. The high-five echoed in the cavern. She tried to understand why Naruto was laughing softly.

"I understand how you feel." His voice was rough with memories, "I really do."

Grinning, Fū took a step back to get a look at Naruto, sensing a deeper meaning in his admission. She rested a hand on her hip, "Friends?"

"Friends. Let's get to know each other. I know some people who you can also be friends with…" Naruto offered, "But first we need to get out of here…and we just ran out of space."

They had come to the end of the topmost ledge.

"We lost our flare too." Fujita noticed.

Naruto rubbed the back of his neck, "Sorry about that…"

"It's alright…the largest opening in this cave ceiling— just over there— it looks precarious." Fujita observed the feature with his Byakugan, "I believe it's a sink hole. That may be difficult to climb out of—!"

Fū seized Fujita from behind, wrapping her arms around his trunk, and took off. As the pair fluttered through open air and up into the daylight of the gaping sinkhole, Naruto did a double take. Fū most certainly did have iridescent green, insect-like wings sprout from her lower back. Several pairs of them. Fujita's frightened hollering echoed 'round the cave's walls, shrinking over the distance when they made their escape.

"Whew. Okay." Naruto rolled his shoulders, readied his anchor knife, and then launched himself against the nearest expanse of rock wall. He attached himself with chakra for a few moments, getting closer to have a clear shot at the sinkhole. With a flick, the kunai soared free of the sandy opening above and was followed by a flash of movement. Before the knife could plummet to the desert ground, Naruto caught it again and landed on a bent knee. He looked over to see Fujita collapsed, sitting on his bottom with a dazed look on his face.

Fū was crouched beside the boy, speaking softly, "Sorry…I thought I gave you enough warning."

"You did…I just…didn't believe it at first." Fujita cleared his throat, "Thank you."

"No problem! Hey—" She turned to Naruto, "How did you make it out so easily?"

"I used one of my jutsu." Naruto held up the anchor kunai before stowing it.

"Does that knife do something?" Fū stood and cupped her chin, trying to figure it out.
"It just has a formula on it that I can teleport to." Naruto did not want to go into the specifics, "Fujita, can you stand? We've got to get rolling."

"Yeah." He dusted himself off, adjusting to the sunny landscape while keeping his eyes squinted, "Naruto, Fū, look for something shiny on the horizon. The next step is to find that box with reflectors on it."

"That has the next clue." Fū nodded. She shielded her eyes and swiveled 180 degrees on her feet, "Tch. Can't see doodles from down here..." She expressed her Bijū's wings again and took off vertically, scoping out the terrain from high above.

Down below, Naruto was chuckling to his Leaf Village companion, "She's going to come in mighty handy!"

"Yes. I didn't expect her to be so outgoing...or adaptable." Fujita admitted.

Fū called down to them, "Over there on that big hill!" She pointed out a southerly route, "Follow me!" She zipped while in flight, dastardly quick, and Naruto tightened the ration bag's strap on his shoulder before following in a sprint. Fujita kept up while they ran beneath Fū's shadow on the ground. The morning had given way to afternoon, and the desert's heat was cut by a merciful breeze that swept and rearranged a wall of sand dunes.

Once at the top, Naruto and Fujita came to a stop beside Fū as she landed, gawking at the view of the sea just down the hill, "Ahhh! It's hurting my eyes it's so shiny! Like Chōmei's dust!" She hopped up and down, "Have you ever seen the southern sea before? I haven't. Let's swim!"

"No, let's get our next clue." Fujita course-corrected her enthusiasm, "Once the Exam is over, come back here to swim if you want."

"Ohh...maybe I'll do that."

Between them the reflector box sat half-buried, but Naruto dislodged its lid with one hand before drawing out its contents, "Huh."

"What is it, Naruto?" Fujita was eager.

"Sandwiches." Naruto announced, drawing out an armful before handing them out, "There's a notecard in here too, hold on..." He lifted the flashcard to read its message, "This is not a clue. It's lunch. Our clue is...underwater." Naruto frowned and read on, "Each team must collect a message in a bottle anchored to the sea bottom. It says here it's pretty shallow and just off the beach."

Ignoring the food, Fujita was already scanning beneath waves crashing against the shore, "I'll look for it."

"See if there any traps down there too." Naruto advised, "There's a warning that this area is moderately dangerous."

"Moderately." Fujita repeated in amusement.

"This sandwich is moderately gross." Fū spoke while chewing, "It melted a little in the wrapper."

"It's hot out. I hope they made these this morning." Naruto gave his sandwich a sniff, "Eh...I think I'll pass."

Fū extended her hand, "Give it here." Naruto handed it over and she stuffed the extra, questionable
hoagie in her red duffle. He knew few girls so undaunted by potentially spoiled food. He took a seat and motioned for Fujita to come over, intending to eat any passable food from within their given rations.

After wolfing down the last of the roll, Fū asked, "Hey Fujita, did you spot it?"

"I think so. Do you see that stone arch over there? A few meters away from it are some coral and raised rocks….I am pretty sure I saw it below that." He reported, "If the currents are strong we should be careful. We can get crushed against any of those formations, or dragged to the bottom by a downwelling current."

"Downwelling?" Naruto chomped on an unpackaged rice ball.

"The continental shelf is extremely close. Not even a short paddle from the target…and Dad told me stories of divers here and south of the Land of Fire who go diving for shellfish…" Fujita swept his hand to indicate the long stretch of the drop-off, "Random currents can pull someone straight down to the ocean's bottom without warning. Even shinobi can die that way, if they don't know how to deal with it."

"Hm." Fū nodded along as she listened, "Right…so who's the best swimmer here?"

"Um…" Fujita turned to Naruto.

"I can't say I'm the best, but I swim." Naruto vouched, "I can go."

"I'm just worried you'll have difficulty spotting the bottle." Fujita was also eating a rice ball, "Maybe I should tag along near the surface and point it out to you?"

"That could work."

"While you two make a plan, I'm going over yonder to use the bathroom." Fū pointed out the stone jetty and archway.

They acknowledged her parting and went back to eating lunch.

"What if you do get stuck in a current?" Fujita was predicting the possible threats of a moderately dangerous zone.

"Then I'm a little screwed." Naruto smiled, "But I've got our team's emergency beacon. I don't think we'll need to use it. And I could just leave this with you, if something goes wrong down there." He offered Fujita his anchor kunai.

"Thank you, Naruto, but I don't see how this helps me save your life if you drown." Fujita turned it over in his hands.

"If you have it, you don't need to save my life. I'll save my own life," Naruto corrected him. He peeked into the ration bag longingly. His appetite was still fiery, but it wouldn't be prudent to eat anything more. Naruto pulled the drawstrings of the bag shut and slipped it off.

"You'll…save yourself?" Fujita was confused.

"Here, let me show you." Naruto stood and crossed along the top of the dune. He only gave Fujita a brief *thumbs up* before he instantly relocated, in a flash that was nearly undetectable to the eye. Fujita blinked and noticed that Naruto had plucked the anchor knife from his hand, "I could probably stick my Hiraishin formula on that big rock bridge in the water, just to save you the trouble. I thought
about you and Fū having your hands full if another team shows up after the same thing we are.”

"Then we'll…" He gave his head a shake, "Naruto…I think I've seen Hinata-sama use that jutsu."

"She kind of…did." Naruto scratched his cheek, "I let her borrow it."

Fujita was google-eyed with excitement, "Can you let me borrow it?"

"No, no…I mean Hinata has an ability she can use through her Byakugan to connect with people." He tried to let Fujita down gently, "Unless you can do the same, that's the only way I've ever seen someone use another person's chakra or share jutsu."

"Oh." Fujita shared a mutually bummed out look with Naruto. There was a splash somewhere in the distance.

"Don't tell me—" Naruto craned his neck to look over his shoulder, "She did." There was a bubble ring rising where the kunoichi had dove into the water.

"Fū!" Rushing down the hill, Fujita kept watch of her movements underwater with the Byakugan, "She's going for it— I said we have to be careful out here! She heard me say that!"

"She did—"

"How can she be so reckless—?"

"Fujita, jinchuriki can handle themselves pretty well." Naruto tried to quell the hissy fit his companion was about to pitch, "Even when they mess up!"

As they raced along the slope of the jetty, then clambering up the rock archway, Fujita protested the idea, "How do you know that?"

With a small smile, Naruto came to a stop beside the boy and patted his back, "I know a few personally."

From that height, the breeze whipped Fujita's hair wildly as he stared at Naruto's face. He would not go so far as to question Naruto's experience, but he was particularly concerned about Fū's disregard for strategy, no matter how skilled she was. A relenting grunt escaped him as he crouched down and peered into the churning alcove below with the Byakugan.

"Fū…is close to it." Fujita reported, astonished, "I guess those wings help for swimming too…"

Naruto crossed his arms, slightly smug, "Told ya."

A perturbed sigh, "…she just reached the bottle."

"And no rough currents?"

"Not that I can see."

"Then don't worry so much! Our group is pretty capable." Naruto soothed, "We'll watch to make sure she comes back up—"

Fujita had jumped from the edge of the rock crossing, to Naruto's great surprise. He peered over the ledge as a tumultuous crashing of water kicked up in the cove below. The 4 meter wide, gaping mouth of a gargantuan conger eel had all but encompassed Fū on her frantic flight up and out of the water. It was then Naruto heard her half-horrified, half-amused screaming as she raced by in flight,
passing him on the bridge. He sucked wind at the sight of Fujita colliding with the broad side of the eel's head, driving his dagger into the milky white eye of the fish.

Bending and furling, the wounded eel fell back into the water with a splash...but had taken Fujita in with it. Both Naruto and Fū had noticed this crisis in a moment of alarm, but it was Naruto who pointed at Fū to call the next shot, "Stay up here. Like we discussed! I'll get him."

"But I—!"

"Stay and don't lose that bottle!" He leapt in after leaving his anchor knife stuck in the top of the archway. While spinning the start of the Rasengan in his palm, Naruto took a breath before the plunge. He got lucky— landing squarely on the charging eel's forehead and *pancaking* it flat against the sea shelf floor with the whirling sphere of chakra. It had spared Fujita from being swallowed whole.

Fujita may have been slightly disoriented while tumbling underwater, still oriented face-down. Naruto seized the boy's wrist and *flashed* out of the lapping waters. He sputtered and coughed after being transported back to the top of the rock formation. After vomiting up a bit of sea water, Fujita was right as rain. He stood and immediately shared his gratitude, "—thank you, Naruto!"

"Just breathe, kid, it's okay." Naruto collected his anchor knife and ushered his teammate forward, back toward the beach.

While stumbling along, Fujita wrung out his tunic and lamented, "I lost my tantō..."

"In that thing's eye." Naruto was mildly impressed.

"Tenten-neesan made that for me." His frown was the pinnacle of disappointment.

"Oh she—" Naruto recalled some of the arrangements in the Hyuga clan that Hinata had spoken about, "She'll probably make you another, no problem!"

"I guess if she isn't busy..." Fujita kicked a rock as they scaled the beach dune, and then his eyes locked on Fū at the top, "Fū! Why didn't you listen to us? We had a plan."

"I got it though." She held up the bottle innocently, her voice nectar-sweet.

"That was impulsive." Naruto had to call a spade a spade, "Don't do that again. Next time, it could force all of us to quit this Exam if something goes wrong."

"Right." Fū bowed her head in regret and handed the bottle to Naruto.

The stopper was stuck so he smashed the glass on a stone and pulled the rolled parchment free. He let Fujita and Fū huddle in to read the next clue with him:

*Survive the next two nights in the desert. Teams that fail to do so will be disqualified from future tasks in the Accelerated Exam.*

*For each team's final challenge on the third day, they are advised to head north until they locate a Jounin attendant of the Sand Village. They will be stationed in various locations throughout the desert. Each Jounin carries one small bell that must be acquired by the team and presented to monitors at the village gate. Doing so will conclude Exam challenges, and allow the successful team to go before a panel for a final evaluation. Jounin carrying bells will not make concessions or exceptions for any team. The deadline for retrieving a bell is the evening of the fourth day. All Genin teams who fail to acquire a bell in this timeframe will be ejected from the Exam.*
"Well." Naruto handed the paper off to Fū, "He's recycling the Bell Test."

"The what?" Fujita had never heard of it.

"Some sensei in Hidden Leaf challenge their students this way— trying to wrestle a bell away from a Jounin." Naruto explained, "My team had to do it. I think Sakura-chan's team had to do it too…"

"Easy!" Fū laughed as she stuffed the message in her bag.

"It's really not." Naruto cautioned.

"Just one little bell? Come on! It's not like we have to take down a Jounin like our lives depend on it." She reasoned.

Fujita disagreed, "But I doubt that a Sand Jounin will make it easy for any Genin team. We might have to go after a Jounin with everything we've got."

Fū ground her fist into her palm, merrily daydreaming about what that would look like.

"Okay, maybe not everything we've got." Naruto amended, "Because that's just going to be too much."

They set out on a northerly route away from the coast.

"So then our best bet is adhering to a decent strategy." Fujita supposed.

"I promise I'll adhere!" Fū was preemptively cooperating.

"You'd better." Fujita snickered. He was no longer upset by her rash dive for the bottle. Though he wouldn't admit it out loud, he'd had fun coming to her rescue and going wild.

The long trek into the heart of the desert prompted Naruto to wear his Sage cloak like a turban again. Fū was frustrated that she did not have an extra garment to do the same. Fujita stripped off his tunic into an undershirt during the heat of the day, and he let Fū wrap herself in it as if it were a headscarf.

"Phew! This makes me miss home a little." Fū whined, "We've got the best pools and waterfalls. Even a park for the little kids…"

"I'd like to go someday. Cooling off today would be especially nice..." Fujita was fanning himself with a container lid from a spent lunch.

"You should totally visit! I could show you our cabins and otters and where we have water-balloon fights!" Her enthusiasm put some pep in her step.

"Water balloon fights?" Naruto was intrigued. An itch from his former prankster days had flared up.

"Yeah! We have big water balloon fights against Shibuki-sama sometimes, like— we'll ambush him and other teams when they come home from missions."

"Heh heh!" Fujita was amused.

"One time I joked that I filled up a balloon with The Hero's Water and Shibuki-sama got really mad at me…" Fū tapped her chin as she remembered that scolding.

"We're going to need to go on a vacation to your village." Naruto determined, "I'd love to bring Hinata along."
"You should bring Hinata-sama, Naruto! She would appreciate that." Fujita wholly approved.

Naruto did not want to comment on how he and Hinata could do anything, even something as mundane as shoe-shining, and still have the time of their lives so long as it meant spending time together.

Water reserves were beginning to wane by the end of the day, and so the team elected to refrain from drinking until daytime tomorrow. Naruto navigated the way to an outcrop he had slept beneath with Jiraiya on their initial journey, and they set up camp beneath the stone overhang. They collected dried tumbleweeds and bramble to start a fire with. About five whole minutes were wasted while Fujita taught Fū how to get a spark with flint and magnesium pieces, as starting fires was not her thing. He handed off the strips to her and she whooped when she managed it. Fujita commended her effort.

Naruto handed two boxed meals to his teammates and made no move to eat anything.

"Aren't you hungry?" Fū asked as she dug in.

"A little." Naruto smiled, "We need to watch these rations. We'll have pretty much nothing to eat on the third day, so I'll pass this time."

"Naruto, you really shouldn't do that." Fujita was crestfallen, "Have some of mine!"

"It's okay. I'll...go find a desert hare or something." Naruto volunteered to hunt as Jiraiya had suggested, though he was no fan of the idea.

"What's a hare?" Fū wondered as she chewed.

"A rabbit. Sort of." Fujita informed her.

"We don't see a lot of rabbits where I live." She turned to ask Fujita, "Hey...do you want that dumpling?"

"You can—"

She'd already snatched a dumpling from Fujita's box. Fū then directed Naruto, "How about this! Use a sandwich as a lure, if you want to catch some wild animals."

"I don't think they eat sandwiches." Naruto watched the dwindling sunset on the horizon, "Especially not melty sandwiches."

"No self-respecting desert animal would pass up random food! It'll definitely work." Fū asserted.

If only to humorously prove a point, Naruto accepted the sad sandwich from Fū's bag and then set out with it, laying a snare beneath the gooey lump on the far side of a dune. He laid in wait for what felt like hours, but according to Fujita he had only been gone 25 minutes. Bizarrely, he ended up trapping a large ground squirrel. Naruto could hardly believe the result. He quickly put the creature out of its misery and returned to camp with it.

"That sandwich was the MVP." Fū clapped as Naruto settled down to skin the animal.

"I can't believe that worked..." Fujita was aghast.

"Me neither." Naruto was chuckling. He had traded spoiled food for something much fresher. Fū paid close attention to how Naruto prepared the game, although he prefaced the lesson with the fact
that it had been a while since he'd needed to catch his own food. He set up the skinned squirrel on rocks over the fire to roast.

"That smells good! I'm hungry again." Fū grumbled.

Naruto politely reminded her to eat her food more slowly next time to savor it. He made short work of the squirrel after it was cooked. The group hunkered down for the night when full dark fell, stoking the fire before getting cozy beside it. Naruto used the ration bag as an uncomfortable pillow, and could hear Fū excitedly whispering things to Fujita beside her before falling asleep.

By morning, the fire pit had burned down to cinders and the first rays of sun did not disturb the sleeping team. As temperatures slowly climbed again, Naruto woke first and shook his teammates awake to begin the next leg of the journey. Fujita rose without complaint, but he had to forcibly hoist Fū to her feet by pulling her up by her bag's straps. They set out sleepily.

"How do you suppose we were transported to that cave so quickly?" Fujita mused aloud as the morning wore on.

"Gaara can probably move a lot of people at once with his sand." Naruto supposed, "I'll ask him for the trick when we get back. I want to know."

"Oh!" Fū exclaimed in surprise, "He's your very best friend."

Naruto turned and fixed the kunoichi with a bamboozled stare.

"Sorry, I'm getting to know you better— so it's easier to read you guys." Fū apologized, "Chōmei lets me read other people's thoughts and feelings sometimes when I get close to them."

Fujita, surprised by the admission, was fit to spin himself into the ground like a top, embarrassed by some of the things he'd thought earlier about being around a cute girl.

"Well yeah, Gaara is one of my best friends." Naruto confirmed, "Can you...really read my mind?"

"It's still foggy. I pick up only recent stuff or on the surface stuff. It's never crystal clear unless I'm asleep...and I'll usually forget what I learn when I'm sleeping!" Fū laughed, "The Kazekage is cool! He cooks."

"Yeah!" Naruto was laughing too.

"He has a girlfriend! He's a jinchuriki!" Fū went on.

Right about there, Naruto asked her to quit oversharing but the damage had been done.

"The Kazekage is a jinchuriki!" Fujita exclaimed, "So that's what you meant, Naruto. I wasn't exactly sure."

"Yep, though that's not the sort of thing you talk casually about, alright?" Naruto advised him, "Not many people outside of Hidden Sand know that. It doesn't matter that much...but some people are prejudiced...and also the Akatsuki are searching for jinchuriki to extract the Tailed Beasts from their bodies."

"That's what...Gaara-sama was talking about before the start of the Exam." Fujita recalled, "Naruto...what happens if a Tailed Beast is removed from a jinchuriki?"

The group pressed forward under harsh sunlight for a while in silence. At length Naruto answered
uneasily, "I think that most jinchūrīki die…when that happens to them. Having that much chakra ripped out of your body…destroys your system, I'm pretty sure. It's not survivable."

Anxious, Fū wrapped her arms around her stomach while thinking about the consequences. Fujita noticed her reaction and spoke softly to her, "Don't worry, Fū …we’ll look after each other. No one here is going to tolerate the Akatsuki coming after any of our friends."

"Thank you." She smiled at the reassurance, "Shibuki-sama is always telling me to be cautious…but Mama said you can never prepare for everything. We've got to walk the line between careful and carefree all our lives."

"We won't let them win." Naruto vowed, "We won't let them hurt villagers or jinchūrīki. Whatever the Akatsuki is trying to do…I'll stop them."

Colorful expressions crossed Fujita and Fū's faces after hearing such a declaration. It was heartening.

At mid-day, they took sparse sips of water. The teammates split one of the few last boxed meals three ways, in the hope of having a bit more food until the final challenge was complete. After a few hours, Fū tried her hand at cutting down a prickly cactus, and saved a few paddles of the plant in her bag. She was fairly certain they were edible.

"They probably won't taste good." Fujita was skeptical of the selection.

"You've got to learn how to eat things that taste bad!" Fū marched alongside Fujita, "It's way better than having an empty stomach."

"Then we agree to disagree."

"Don't you like to eat, Fujita?"

"Not really. My favorite food is cherries." He divulged, "But eating too much takes the joy out of it. So I only indulge sometimes."

"Eating builds a greater appreciation of the sport, as does flying!" Fū reported, "If you're not an avid eater, want to try flying?"

"I don't really—"

Naruto heard the two goofballs behind him wrestle and argue, and did not bother turning around to witness Fū taking off with Fujita clamped in her arms. The boy's ruckus died down as they fluttered up and up into the sky overhead.

'I remember when I used to be ultra-hyper and enthusiastic about everything.' Naruto reflected on how much of the rampant energy of his youth had been harnessed for critical thinking and studying jutsu. 'Fū might be...permanently energetic.'

Fujita's cries could be heard from up above.

"Heh." Naruto chuckled to himself, "Someone's gotta deal with it...might as well be the kid!"

A few minutes later, it sounded as if Fujita had adjusted and even marginally enjoyed the flight. He and Fū touched down with news to relay to Naruto.

"We saw another Genin team in the distance!" Fū reported, "Want to chase 'em?"

"No." Naruto replied calmly, "We don't need to chase them. We've got everything we need. No one
will have bells until tomorrow, when we start taking them from Jounin."

"But we could take any extra water or food they have." Fū suggested.

"They probably won't have extra anything." Fujita supposed.

"He's right. There's nothing worth ambushing another team for right now." Naruto instructed, "We keep going north until we find shelter, then we'll take a rest."

Later, Fujita wondered if Naruto wanted to try flying around with Fū, but he passed on the offer. He would be a heavier, more cumbersome passenger. They came upon a small canyon of stone and slipped into the shade of the rocky recess. The group had cut off more cactus paddles along the way, and by a majority vote decided to cook the cactus over a fire later. The stress of having less water to consume was weighing on them.

Evening swaddled the desert, and the group roasted cactus paddled over a fire after shaving the needlepoints off, eating strips of the plant.

"It tastes like green beans." Naruto assessed.

Fujita had no qualms with the flavor, "It's not bad."

"Want to catch another squirrel? Maybe they like cactus?" Fū was still peckish.

"You can if you want. I think we should try to take it easy now and rest for tomorrow." After eating, Naruto stretched out on his back.

Fū set out to lure potential prey animals into a trap of her own, but an hour of sitting still was a test of her patience. She gave up and returned to camp, falling gracelessly to her rear beside her teammates with an aggravated *huff*. Fujita had saved one last cooked cactus paddle for her. With a soft gasp, Fū took his hands in her own before accepting the snack, staring Fujita in the eyes, "You are wonderful."

Flustered, Fujita tried to ride out a few frantic moments of heart palpitations while they locked gazes, unable to say anything. Fū went ahead and stuffed her face with food again. She imagined that the reason why she always wanted to eat was because flying required more physical exertion, and she metabolized like crazy.

"Maybe." Fujita peeped.

The group slept huddled around the fire as night drained the desert of warmth. Fujita dreamt of green landscapes again, moving around the forest with ease the way Fū could. It felt as though he was reliving the same moment repeatedly— chasing his big brother into an open space, and watching a hail of weaponry stick Hikune to death. He had only heard fragments of how his brother had died, but his imagination brought the tragedy to life in his mind. Each attempted rescue and death was visually different, if only for a few minor details. But every time, Fujita lamented his ineptitude, railing and screaming as his brother vanished over and over again in pain.

He bolted upright, chest heaving, startled back to consciousness by the emotional whiplash of his dreams. Fujita dabbed at the corners of his eyes before hearing a soft whimper. Close by, Fū was sitting up as fat tears rolled down her cheeks.

"Are you alright?" He whispered.

Fū shook her head. She ran the back of her hand beneath her eyes.
"...what's the matter? I hope I didn't wake you." Fujita spoke quietly, intent on not disturbing Naruto as he snored on the far side of the fire.

Fū cleared her throat before explaining, "I kept watching him die…"

"Who?"

"Your big brother. I was sharing your dream and it was fun at first, being in that big forest…But he just kept dying in horrible ways and you kept screaming..." Fū sniffled, "That was hard to get through. I wanted to wake up."

Fujita was wildly astonished. He sat there with a wide, pearly gaze, trying to make sense of how she had visited his dream and experienced some of his anguish. He did not know whether to thank her or apologize to her.

"—do you— need a hug?" Fū hiccupped.

"I, uh…" He frowned a little, "Maybe I don't."

"But you're thinking about indulging." Fū relayed her superficial scan of his brain, "Bring it in, cute boy—" She reached out her arms and wrapped him in a tight embrace, relaxing after the night scare.

Fujita was perplexed again, "...did you say cute?"

"Yup! Ahh, I needed a hug too. I feel better now." Fū pulled away and rolled over, "Goodnight! Please have nice dreams. It stinks when you don't."

Startled, Fujita sat and tried to make sense of the exchange, but exhaustion was beckoning again. He settled down and had a slightly better rest for the remainder of the night.

Before dawn, as a sliver of light crept below the horizon, Naruto woke up and stood to stretch. He noticed Fū and Fujita curled up into fish-hook shapes, the tops of their heads nearly touched while they snoozed. He felt a warm, protective feeling for the two. Naruto tottered away from camp and into open space beyond the canyon walls, taking some time to relieve himself while yawning sleepily. His mouth felt dry. He didn't want to take a drink of water until his teammates had their sips first.

'I'll let them sleep in. We've got one more day to go before we're in the bell-zone, I'm guessing.' Naruto thought to himself. He scaled a stone outcrop to its flat top; above the shelf that housed the campsite where his teammates slept. He'd let them get some more rest. Naruto sat and crossed his legs, taking slow, deep breaths in the hope of meditating a little. Part of him wished that Hinata would drop in to say hello. He was probably too jumbled from the Exam to hold a meaningful conversation, but any hint of her presence lifted his spirit.

The peace and quiet lasted a while before the skittering of rocks caught his attention. Fū had fluttered up from the ravine's shelter, stretching luxuriantly a few paces away from him. She toddled over to sit beside him, "Want to see the sun rise? We've got a good view out here."

"I like to watch it," Naruto confirmed, "You don't want to sleep more?"

"Nah. I'm good. Fujita had whacky dreams all night and I couldn't unstick myself from them." She rubbed her temples with her fingertips, "He dreams so loud."

Naruto chortled at the observation.
"I know you didn't want me to say too much, so I'm trying not to read your thoughts or blab about what I see and feel." Fū explained, "This is the first time I've ever gotten to meet new people outside of Waterfall and get to know them." She leaned back on her arms, reminiscing, "A few years back, my village was under attack and I was amped up to jump in and protect everyone…but Shibuki-sama locked me in a cellar and told me to stay put. He was worried that I'd be used as leverage or hurt. Ever since then, I keep trying to get more involved. I'm Waterfall's jinchuriki, so it's kind of my job to keep everyone safe. I just wish they would let me."

"But another way you protect them is by not recklessly endangering yourself." Naruto reminded her, "You don't need to jump into every situation, especially when your leader tells you not to."

"He always tells me not to."

"Then he must care a lot about you." He smiled at the sentiment, thinking of how Tsunade looked after him.

"Your Hokage loves you a lot." Fū sighed, "That's so nice…she definitely won't let the Akatsuki hurt you."

Naruto braced himself for the invasive thought reading, "I know she won't. I should still do my part…whatever she and Gaara need me to do, I will."

"You've been a jinchuriki since you were a baby, wow!" Fū was surprised, "Woops. Chōmei's digging a bit. He says you have the Nine-Tailed Fox!" She muttered under her breath, "Quit being a busybody, Chōmei, at least let him talk to me a little!"

"It's okay." Naruto shook his head, keeping calm, "That's right. I just didn't want you saying that in front of Fujita."

"I won't." Fū assured him, "Hmm…so people in your village are mean to you? Or they were. I feel this heaviness." She patted her chest, "Fujita said the Fox attacked your village once and that's why everyone is so scared."

"That's the long and short of it." Naruto crossed an arm over his knee and propped his chin up with a hand, "I wouldn't change a thing, if I could…but it was hard sometimes."

"That really sucks! In the past, Chōmei protected my village from enemy forces, and ever since my people say that he represents the good fortune of Takigakure." Fū imparted some background to her fellow jinchuriki, "He's my lucky number seven."

"You're making me a little jealous, you know."

"At least you got out to live a little and see the world." She blew strands of hair from her face, "You've made lots of friends, traveled, become a Sage, got a girlfriend…and kicked a lot of butt. I haven't done that."

"That's mostly why I wouldn't change things." Naruto conceded.

"Your girlfriend is pretty and she looks kind of like Fujita…"

"They're related."

Fū bit her lip, "You're, like, cra-aaazy about her! You need to go back to your village and chill out."

"Do you mind…not skimming so much? Can you shut it off?" Naruto wondered in embarrassment.
"Yeah, sure, hold on." Fū slapped her cheeks and muttered to herself again. Then she announced, "There we go. So. I'd like a girlfriend or boyfriend someday, but everyone I've met so far just hasn't been fun enough. They don't want to try any of the things I like, or we don't have much in common. Chōmei will read their minds a lot and tell me that they're not interested in the same way I am, which cuts things short a lot."

"Huh…so you're lucky, but not in every way." Naruto observed, "I was lucky too."

"Heck yeah, you were."

"I almost didn't realize how lucky I was to have Hinata." He tipped his head back and considered it.

"When you get caught up in missions and everything else, it's easy not to notice what's…" Fū held a hand up in front of her face, "Right in front of you. But I know for sure that's not my situation. I thought about maybe dressing girlier or not hitting the buffet at home so hard…"

"Whatever you do, don't change for anyone." Naruto shot down her flaky idea, "Be yourself."

"That's what Chōmei keeps telling me." Fū was bolstered by the claim.

It was somewhat discouraging for Naruto to hear accounts from other jinchuriki who could communicate freely and peaceably with their Biju. First it had been the old man with the Four-Tails, then Gaara, and now Fū, who communicated well with their Tailed-Beasts. Naruto had once believed he was on the verge of a breakthrough, before Jiraiya's injury. These days he felt lost when it came to reestablishing a dialogue with the Kyuubi.

"How do you…talk to him…and not fight?" Naruto wondered, "Why trust each other?"

"Well," Fū tapped her mouth and thought it over, "Chōmei is just naturally nice. That definitely helps. I've been so lonely since I was a kid, only ever seeing the same few people all of my life…I talked to Chōmei a lot and he became the friend I needed. I wanted to be his friend too. I know what it's like to feel trapped, like you can't make your own decisions…"

Naruto's shoulders were slumped, "The Fox doesn't ever want to understand how I feel, or be a friend to me—" He felt Fū press her palm to his forehead, a gesture that seemed to instantly transport Naruto to the wide, dank space where he would go to communicate with Kurama…except that it was a vast and expanded environment of thought that had other occupants. He noticed Fū standing on one of the Seven-Tail's bent wings, or were they tails? Whatever it was, the creature looked like an armored Hercules beetle.

"Hey there!" Fū greeted him from her perch, "I hope you don't mind that I opened a channel."

Naruto pattered around the space, shocked, "How are you doing this?"

"Chōmei's really good at synchronizing people's thoughts! When we hold still, anyway."

Following Fū's explanation, the giant insect concurred, You betcha!

Naruto's mouth was hanging open. It was then he had a heightened awareness of the Kyuubi behind him. He looked over his shoulder to see the same imprisoning bars that had always been there. The Fox stirred behind them and pressed his face to the cage door, alert to the unusual commotion. He looked out-of-place while Chōmei sat merry and unbound with Fū.

Chōmei… Kurama's voice was soft rumble of a greeting.
What's good furry brother—? The towering insect was outgoing much in the way Fū was.

Kurama wasted no time making demands, *You're free. Show me how to be free, unfettered by this seal!*

*Nah, man!* Chōmei and Fū shook their heads in the negative simultaneously, *Only you can set yourself free.*

Kurama head-butted the bars in frustration, *How do I do that?*

*By being nice!* Chōmei suggested blithely, *It's just your luck that you got a nice container. Try being friends.*

The Fox stared blankly in response, completely dejected by the proposition.

*Never was your strong suit, eh?* Chōmei gathered.

Naruto raised a finger to chime in, "I've made that request before, but it didn't get far. Would it really be…" He looked back at the Nine-Tails, "That unbearable?"

*Be quiet.* The Fox grumbled.

"Excuse me, Fluffy Fox, but there's no reason for you to be upset with Naruto or for you to mistrust him." Fū bent her arms and rested them on her hips like a heroine, "We can read his heart and thoughts! Naruto truly wants to understand you better."

*I've heard that before from other jinchuriki of mine…* Kurama growled skeptically, *And they never mean it. They always change their minds.*

*How unusual!* Chōmei noticed something while prodding around in the Fox's thoughts, *You've been feeling a lot of love recently, Kurama. That's good. Gentle and calm…keep it up! It's healthy for you.*

Naruto was astounded when he faced his Tailed-Beast, "You can love people?"

*All of you—!* The Fox bellowed, *Shut. Up. I want to be left alone!*

Jolted from the shared space of collective consciousness, Naruto was cradling his achy head and watching the sunrise again. He glanced over to Fū beside him as she deliberated on the encounter.

"Oof, he's a grumpy one." She concluded with a small shudder.

"Tell me about it."

"He'll come around." Fū predicted as she stood and brushed sand from her skirt.

"But will he?" Naruto heaved himself to his feet, "And what was all of that about him feeling affection? Or…why would he feel like that when he can't stand me? He hates everything."

"It's just because the Fox feels love for the same reason you do." Fū's explanation was unhelpfully cryptic. She fluttered down into the shade of the ravine to fetch Fujita.

Naruto paced the canyon top for a minute, trying to make sense of what he'd learned. It could be that he was at a slight disadvantage in some sense, having to deal with a cantankerous Tailed-Beast.
Chōmei's attitude seemed too good to be true, and yet Fū's success was proof of their harmonious relationship. *But why? Why would the Fox feel anything good if he tried to kill Ero-sensei, or tell me I'm worthless trash, or try to wreck the Toad Valley?* It was mind boggling, *Why does the Fox feel love…just because I do? That's not how this works!*

He raked a hand through his hair, inhaling slowly with his eyes shut. *For the same reason I do…* When Naruto followed that thought to its logical end, he recalled his insatiable pining for Hinata, his reactions to her visits, and so forth. Surely that wasn't it?

"Naruto!"

He heard his teammates calling to him. Naruto skipped down into the ravine and found both Fujita and Fū fretting over the water container they had been sharing.

"We're out." Fujita reported, "We need to find water."

"No surprise there..." Naruto lifted the ration bag and slung it onto his back after stuffing the canteen inside of it.

"How about I take a look around and you two wait?" Fū suggested, "Or we can start digging—!"

"Hold on, let's stick to something more practical." Naruto settled down to sit again, "I'll meditate for a bit to use Sage Mode, and then feel around for living things out here. My guess is—the denser the Natural Energy is, the more likely we are to find water around the life it's coming from."

Fujita was enthralled, "Yes! Do you need some space?"

"Just a bit of quiet, if you don't mind." Naruto settled his hands on his knees, exhaling slowly. He shut his eyes and tuned out trivial distractions. Purely for courtesy, Fū and Fujita had exited the canyon's shelter.

The warm *rush* of Natural Energy fused successfully with his chakra, and after a short time Naruto stood up and brushed sand from his pants. The environment was deceptively active. *Let's see...well there's a team or two to the south of us...* Naruto scratched his head while feeling around, calculating, *Sunagakure is that way. We're not that far from it now. Hmm. Water. I dunno. There are plenty of those ground squirrels and snakes all over the place...* He shut his eyes to concentrate, *Something brighter...more alive...'*

Naruto hurried out of the shady shelter and motioned for his teammates to join him, "I think...I can feel something good."

Fū bobbed her head, "Uh huh. What's good? Is it edible or drinkable?"

"No...I mean there are a bunch of teams gathered." Naruto smiled, "In one spot. I can feel their chakra. Seems like there might be plants and animals there too."

"An oasis?" Fujita presumed.

"Maybe! I think it's worth a shot. It'll be a bit of a hike there...but we won't be good for much if we don't have anything left to drink." Naruto pointed the way enthusiastically, "Let's move it!"

The cooler temperature was forgiving as they made haste in the direction Naruto had established. He explained to his team that in a few minutes, Sage Mode would wear off. If they needed to reestablish the course, he could use it again. He also posited that they would likely be close enough for Fujita to spot their desired location with the Byakugan.
On the way, the sky was tinged with lavender as the sun rose. Naruto moved a faster, stirred by the heavenly hue and the feelings that came with it; as if Hinata were cheering him on from home.

"There." Fujita narrowed his eyes, pulling the group east as he took the lead, "There are other teams ahead. And some trees."

"That screams water almost as loud as my village does!" Fū lifted off the ground with excitement. She tucked her wings away before her team slowed to approach the oasis.

A spring had welled up into a pond of remarkable size, turquoise-blue, tucked against a tall sand dune overshadowing hardy trees and shrubs. Upon arrival, Naruto watched another team set out back into the desert, as if fortified to start the next task. Two other teams were loitering around in the shade of palms. Naruto was about to draw out the canteen to unscrew and refill it like a civilized being, but Fujita and Fū dropped to their knees ahead of him, lapping up cool water face-first. Naruto shook his head at their antics. Fujita snapped his head up for a break, and a string of water whipped off the end of his ponytail and splashed Naruto in the face. It reprogrammed him. 'Oh yeah. I am super dehydrated right now.'

Naruto bent down and submerged his entire head into the spring. Fū was laughing as she shucked off her red duffle and rolled into the water to float around. Fujita took that as his cue to pick up their discarded thermos and refill it. From behind them, a team of amateur Sand Genin snarked, "Are you guys idiots? You're going to spoil that water for everyone else!"

Fujita ignored the comment and Fū had missed it completely. Naruto raised his head and gleefully shook droplets from his hair and face, "Ahh!"

"Hey morons! Can you hear us?" One of the Sand youngsters repeated.

"Fujita, is he talking to our team?" Naruto lightly nudged Fujita with his elbow.

"I think so. The idea that we might foul this spring is complete nonsense, but they insist that's what we're doing." Fujita brought Naruto up to speed, taking a gentlemanly sip of water from the thermos cap.

Naruto sat and stretched his arms, turning to regard the rude Sand team, "Hey! Have you guys lived in the desert all of your lives?"

"Yeah." A kunoichi grumbled.

"And is this the first promotional Exam you've ever participated in?" Naruto shouted over to them.

"Yeah…?"

Naruto pointed an accusing finger at them, "Then no one cares about your opinions, ya babies!"

Fujita sputtered over the canteen, amused by Naruto's countercharge, while Fū cackled in delight from the pond behind him. The Genin team from the Land of Moon, a bit older and wiser, watched from their place in the shade. One of the Sand Genin sprang to his feet and marched up to Naruto, who was still relaxing on the bank of the spring.

"You should care." The boy ground out from between his teeth, "Or I'll teach you the value of water out here by lighting you on fire."

"Light me on fire?" Naruto raised a brow, leaning back to fold his arms behind his head.
"With my Blood Limit." The boy puffed his chest. His teammates fidgeted uneasily from their spot on a log.

Naruto had a single, raspberry-blowing laugh before he sealed his lips and stopped. 'That is some big talk coming from a greenhorn…'

"Do you really want to laugh at the Shakuton?" The boy hissed, conjuring up a floating orb of flame from thin air.

"No, your attitude is funny." Naruto twirled a kunai around his finger, "You don't want to fight us, no matter what kind of Kekkei Genkai you have."

"You're better off saving your strength for other important tasks, like the Bell Test." Fujita reminded the Genin.

Fū chimed in from the background, "Want to be friends?"

"No! Are you stupid?" The boy was bristling, "You're competitors! There won't be enough bells for everyone to pass. We should trim down rival teams."

"Kid, let me give you a clue, since the Bell Test was originally from my village." Naruto shut his eyes contently, "Worrying about if other people are going to pass or not doesn't help. The trick is working together."

Such a sentiment did not fly with the aggressive participant, and he swung his fist, fiery hot, at Fujita's head since he was nearest. Fujita easily ducked the swing and poked 16 chakra points along the boy's arm, all without rising to his feet. The attacker balked at how his chakra had been diverted, and staggered backwards. Naruto cracked an eye open at the offender, "You didn't just try to smack Fujita, right?"

"Don't worry about it, Naruto." Fujita waved it off and fitted the lid back onto the thermos.

"Hey." Naruto sniffed impatiently at the Shakuton-user, "Say you're sorry."

The Sand Genin was ready to lunge again, "He messed with my chakra points! All of you can go to hell—!"

The anchor kunai whizzed past the boy's face, and Naruto relocated behind him, kicking the aggressor's legs out from under him. He face-planted while drawing out a fistful of shuriken from a leg holster, though he didn't get to do much with the projectiles. Naruto whistled a tune as he shoved the child into the pond with his foot. Fujita sighed wearily, standing up to relocate to some shade.

"Quit splashing so much!" Fū chided the floundering Genin in the pond.

The Sand Genin righted himself, snapping shuriken off of a wire with force, but his target was gone again in a flash. With the same kunai-trick, Naruto had reappeared behind the boy and, with a degree of severity, round-kicked him across the clearing and into his Sand teammates seated on a log. The three toppled over with grunts of pain. Naruto stood on the water's surface and looked down as Fū floated by. She raised her hand for a high-five again.

Understandably, the Sand team scampered away from the oasis after that. The Moon team was howling with laughter from their seats on the periphery, "Guess we found out who the real morons are!"

Naruto shrugged at them and then returned to Fujita to divide up the last boxed meal of their rations.
Fū clambered out of the pond and gave herself a shake, still dripping wet when she accepted a few morsels of food. She hovered on her feet while eating, "Good thing you didn't beat them up too bad…or they'd go crying to your Kazekage friend."

"His name is Gaara." Naruto reminded her.

"Oh yeah."

"That was a rare Kekkei Genkai, though." Fujita conceded, "I thought it had died off in the Wind Country, for the most part."

Naruto crunched on a mouthful of pickled carrots and zucchini, noting, "What good did it do him?"

"No more good than a flute-player on a deer hunt." Fū reckoned.

Fujita just stared at her in fascination. "How does your brain work?" He asked in all seriousness.

"Electrical impulses." She frowned at him and he frowned back, "Right? Isn't that how bodies work?"

"He's just amazed by your creativity." Naruto helped her out.

"Oh." Delighted, Fū smiled again and sat down beside him, "You eating that, Fujita?"

He crammed the last of the shumai in his mouth. She nodded to him, "Good, you've learned."

When gasps of surprise came from the Moon team, Naruto followed their eyeline up to the cloudless sky: three Genin in flight were descending on transparent, violet wings. Naruto sprang from his seat in shock, "Star ninja!"

Fū and Fujita chorused in a question, "Star ninja?"

The Star team landed beside the spring and had come amply prepared. Each Genin had their own canteen for water, hastily filling up at the pond's edge. Naruto jogged over to the group, recognizing them, "Long time no see!"

Sumaru lit up at the sight of him, "Naruto!" He stood and shook his friend's outstretched hand, "I saw you at Suna's gates and tried to get your attention! You didn't see us."

"I didn't?" Naruto scratched his cheek sheepishly, "Sorry about that!"

Hokuto and Mizura also greeted Naruto, though Mizura admitted that he did not know him all that well, "I was sick for most of the time you were in Hoshigakure, Naruto-san, but I'm doing a lot better now thanks to Sakura-san and the Hokage."

Naruto was thrilled to hear that. Out of curiosity, both Fujita and Fū approached to learn more about these Star ninja that Naruto already seemed to be acquainted with.

"Hey team! This is Sumaru," Naruto introduced Sumaru, who bowed in greetings, "Hokuto," The kunoichi mirrored the gesture, "And…" Naruto couldn't quite remember Mizura's name, but the boy gladly introduced himself. Naruto went on to introduce his teammates, "And these are my temporary teammates for the Exam: Fujita; he's from the Hyuga clan in Hidden Leaf," Naruto gestured to his companions, "And Fū from Hidden Waterfall."

"A pleasure." Sumaru nodded to them.
Fū took lilting steps around the Star bunch, cupping her chin and scrutinizing their backs. She said off-handedly to Hokuto, "I'm just checking to see where you put them."

"Put what?" The Star kunoichi asked.

"Your wings."

"They're made of chakra. Our wings dissipate when we stop using our techniques." Sumaru enlightened her.

Fū nodded and gave them a _carry on_ hand gesture, muttering to Naruto as she shuffled behind him, "I shouldn't show them, right?"

He took that to mean that Fū would like to show off her wings, but was also aware it might startle others, "Maybe not."

In the short time Naruto got caught up with Sumaru and his companions, the Moon team vacated the oasis. The Leaf and Star teams sat huddled in the stretching shadows of palms. It came as no surprise to Naruto when Sumaru explained his team's decision to wait for Mizura's full recovery, and skip Konoha's Chunin Exam. It was fortuitous that Natsuhi, the Hoshikage, had learned first-hand from Gaara that Suna would host its own Exam soon after.

"That gave me extra time to practice shape manipulation and finally learn how to fly." Mizura recounted, "I won't continue my training near the star…but I'll have plenty of other ways to develop my jutsu."

Hokuto and Sumaru were both straight-backed and beaming at their teammate, who they had once feared would forever trail behind them in terms of skill.

Hokuto handed out packaged biscuits to everyone seated, which Fujita politely declined.

"It's alright. These weren't part of our rations." Hokuto assured him, "They're just Sumaru's guilty pleasure. He's got a million of them in his saddle bag."

Sumaru cleared his throat in annoyance.

"Thanks!" Naruto was happy to accept charity now that his team was officially out of food.

"So maybe I missed something…" Fū motioned with her cookie, "But how does one _train near a star_? I've been told that I need to catch up on idiomatic expressions and all that, but I don't quite get how—"

"No, no, it's figurative. We use the term _star_ to refer to the fragment of stone that still radiates ancient chakra." Sumaru corrected, "I ought to have explained that…"

"I was wondering as well." Fujita seconded the notion.

"How would you know the difference between ancient or…recent chakra?" Fū was still processing.

"All chakra originally came from one source." Hokuto passed along a bit of history, "When it escaped from the princess of the Otsutsuki clan and her _shinju_, and scattered from the possession of her sons, chakra entered the world to be harnessed by humans."

"Our star might be a piece of the former _shinju_, the original vessel of chakra." Sumaru fished another biscuit from his hip pouch, "Tailed-Beasts are also thought to be manifestations of ancient chakra,
"born of the Sage of Six Paths."

"Ho ho!" Fū began laughing wildly.

Mizura exchanged confused looks with Hokuto and Sumaru. Likewise, Naruto wished the Waterfall kunoichi would tone it down a little. He wasn't sure if he had misheard Sumaru, but he couldn't get a word in edgewise.

Fū caught her breath, "Chōmei says that's pretty much how it happened!"

"Who?" Hokuto canted her head.

"He's my—"

Fujita clapped a hand over Fū's mouth, "A good friend of hers! Very learned in history."

"Hold on, how do you know that?" Naruto was stumped, "I think Gaara may have mentioned that Sakura-chan read some book in your village, but how did the author confirm that's all true?"

"It is." Sumaru said simply, "Some records were kept by vassal families who tended to the strongest and most powerful shinobi clans in history. In my village, those record-keepers were the Hoshizora clan. In Stone, the Kamizuru clan. In Cloud, the Yotsuki clan. In Sand, the Shirogane clan. In Mist, the Abe clan. In Leaf, the Taketori clan. There were many. The oldest records in their possession, for the most part, were lost. But not in Hoshigakure," He smiled, "We've avoided many conflicts and preserved that knowledge."

"That's—" Naruto raked a hand through his hair, "Kind of nuts."

"I agree. Maybe it's even crazier to try to harness raw chakra and use it for jutsu," Hokuto concurred, "But my dad always said we never could find a better hobby, being wilderness people."

"I know the Taketori clan very well." Fujita was up to speed, "They are vassals of the Hyuga clan."

"Huh." Naruto twitched his nose. Was the world really this small?

"Well." Fū reached to accept another biscuit from Sumaru, "Sounds like I'll be vacationing in Star Village while these two Leaf boys vacation in Waterfall!"

Hokuto and Mizura proceeded to give her the tourism pitch, minus the bit about toxic gas vents in the Bear Country's canyons. Great food, unspoiled forests, glaciers, streams, a giant crater, and the clear night sky— the Star Village was definitely worth a visit. Fū was doubly convinced afterward.

Both teams took deep drinks of water from the oasis spring before parting with pleasantries.

"We will stay briefly in Sand before going home, once the Exam is over." Sumaru clued Naruto into the plan, "We should go out to eat and talk more! Have your friends join us."

Naruto shook on it once again with the Star ninja, "We will. See you then!"

The teams parted ways, and as Sumaru's team took off on a western route, Fū shielded her eyes and watched them go. From beside her, Fujita determined, "They were very nice."

"They were! Seems like they're trying not to bicker while they're out here," Fū had skimmed some unspoken information, "That Mizura boy is jealous of his teammates because they're dating."

Naruto about-faced and kept walking backwards, frowning at Fū, "Chōmei dug that up for you?"
"Yup! Like, those two are walking on eggshells to keep their teammate happy, but he's always trying to hide how annoyed he is." Fū reported, "Third-wheelin' it re-eeaal hard..."

"Sumaru didn't tell me they were dating." Naruto grumbled.

"That's because it isn't our business." Fujita reminded them both.

"Yeah, I know." Naruto spun around again and continued heading the procession, "Let's go north from here. I remember a plateau that Ero-sensei and I passed. We'll take a break and then I'll try to sense if any Jounin are close by."

All was quiet on the march, at least for a while. Naruto noticed Fū muttering random facts about herself and giggling as they hiked. He tuned in a listening ear.

"My dad died when I was little, but my mom's always been tough." Fū flexed one of her arms, "I take after her!"

After another beat of silence, "My favorite? Oh, it's a tie between katsudon and crayfish."

"Crayfish?" Fujita muttered incredulously.

Naruto asked over his shoulder, "What are you two doing?"

"Nothing!"

"—when he thinks questions I tell him the answers!"

It was silent again after they gave conflicting replies. Naruto stopped and cocked a hand on his hip, "Playing twenty questions and excluding me, eh?"

"You can play next?" Fū shrugged and kept marching.

"Who likes to eat crayfish?" Fujita was still grossed out as he tagged along.

Naruto shook his head and then took up the rear of the team. He overheard again as Fū tittered and shook Fujita by the shoulder.

"Your parents are so sweet! And funny!" After glimpsing Fujita's memory of them, Fū had to give a compliment.

"Thanks," Fujita puffed up a little, "I'll never be as funny as my dad, even though he's teaching me about punchline delivery and sarcasm."

"There are funny people in the Hyuga clan?" It shocked Naruto.

"Well, just one person— my dad." Fujita clarified, "He's the clan steward of the Main House."

"Are stewards some kind of cook?" Fū was unsure.

"No...they are the standby heirs in a clan, in traditional practice." Fujita informed her, "Should anything happen to Hiashi-sama, Neji-sama, or my cousins, my father would step in to lead the Hyuga clan as a last resort. Someday I might do the same." He noticed Naruto had fallen into step with him, looking dumbfounded, "Though I really wouldn't want to! It's almost unheard of. I think only twice before in the history of our clan has an acting steward had to do such a thing. We're sort of like a safety net."
"How come I never heard of any of this stuff?" Naruto stomped a bit in the sand, "Was I just not paying attention?"

"It's archaic, to be honest. Most other clans in Leaf will elect a replacement or candidate heir in an emergency like that." Fujita assured him, "Someday…if we no longer use the Caged Bird Seal…we can move to such a system. Then anyone, even someone from the Branch, could be chosen to lead the Hyuga clan if we lost a leader abruptly."

Naruto rubbed his nose and wondered, "What are they waiting for?"

When the rocky plateau came into view, Fū excitedly took off, flying speedily until she was crouched down in shade again. Naruto and Fujita hustled to keep up. The group took a sip of water while regrouping.

"Do you think a Jounin target would hide from us or try to escape?" Fū was prognosticating, "Maybe we should split up or organize an ambush?"

Naruto held up a finger while he sat down, "Let me see what I can feel with Sage Mode, then we'll come up with a plan. An ambush is always a good default…" He shut his eyes and fell still. A moment later, he cracked an eye open again, unchanged, "Did you hear that?"

Fujita was tense, "Hear what?"

Naruto motioned for his teammates to not move or make noise. A faint sound carried in the air. Eyes wide, Naruto rose to his feet and announced, "That's a bell."

"You can hear a bell ringing?" Fū hopped up while cupping her ears, "Hm. I must be hard of hearing…"

Fujita scanned the area with the Byakugan and gasped, "There's a Jounin close by! A kunoichi!"

"It better not be Temari." Naruto mumbled under his breath, "Uh…Fujita, can you describe her?"

"Tall and skinny like a willow tree! Flak vest, short hair like a boy's…" Fujita frowned, "Looks to be…practicing a color guard routine."

"I have no idea what that is, but I'm guessing that's not Temari." Naruto felt secure in that line of deduction.

"Ohh! That's when dancers wave flags or poles around for parades and stuff!" Fū was familiar with the description, "I bet it's a weapon."

"I think it might be." Fujita agreed.

Fū cracked her knuckles, "Let's beat her over the head with it!"

"Hold your horses." Naruto hooked a finger in the loop of Fū's bag before she could strut away, "Fujita, give me details on her position. Let's assume she's hard to sneak up on, since we're out in the open. This will probably be a head-to-head confrontation."

Fujita nodded and relayed the west by northwest position, 38 meters away. He and Fū listened to Naruto's plan.

"I'll send Shadow Clones ahead disguised to look like us, and try to draw her attention. We can get into position if we do that, and jump on her from the rear and flanks." Naruto rested his chin in his
palm, pondering, "Something tells me this one probably knows plenty of jutsu, and is better suited for melee combat. A lot of ninja in Hidden Sand are experts in weapons or puppets...so we'll have to try to disarm her, or risk getting smashed."

"Yup, yup." Fū was nodding.

"Okay, so here's the part where we lay our cards down on the table." Naruto rested his hands on his knees, "I need to know what kind of techniques you guys can use, especially to stun or disable our target. You've seen mine already— the Hiraishin, Rasengan, Sage Mode, and Shadow Clones...maybe a fireball if we really need one..."

"I'm a sharp-shot with shuriken." Fū boasted, "And I can blind enemies with a flash from my scale powder! Make a sticky string net...I know a little bit of Water Release...which is no good out here. I've got one Wind Release technique that can help, and Chōmei will lend me as much chakra as I need to get beefy!"

"I've got four quivers of senbon. I know a few advanced forms of Jyukken," Fujita shared, "And I can use Heavenly Rotation for defense... I've also been working on Lightning Release too." He smiled at Fū beside him, "My Lightning Release can make your Wind Release stronger, if we work together."

Fū began patting his back enthusiastically, shaking with anticipation.

Naruto reached over for a fist-bump, "We can work with that. Let's grab that bell and high-tail it back to Suna!"

The youngsters tapped their fists together.

The disguised trio of Shadow Clones did very well when it came to sneaking within a few meters of the Sand kunoichi. That cover was blown when the woman fell still and pointed a metal staff in the direction of the dune they hid behind.

"Don't be shy." The woman spun the bar in her hand, "I'll talk to you like a civilized lady first. There are rules to go over..."

The phony Naruto, Fujita, and Fū clones popped up and approached cautiously. The real team had taken a roundabout route west, moving in silently from behind, and beyond earshot as the Sand kunoichi made some announcements. She was olive-skinned and lovely, her white blonde hair trimmed close to the scalp, dressed in dark, form-fitting fatigues of Sunagakure. When she blinked her cat-like eyes, her irises gleamed peony pink in the sunlight.

"I am Zeriko." She stuck her staff into sand, where it stood about her height beside her, "It looks like you are Team 7, if I recall the roster lists...interesting." Zeriko smiled, "I have a single bell that only one team may take in exchange for entry back into Hidden Sand. I am permitted to use any technique against you that I see fit. And that is true for your team as well— anything goes." She had no idea the original team was creeping up in her blind spot, "Before we begin, are any of you ill or injured? Or do you need water stores replenished? This is a courtesy extended by the Kazekage."

Naruto's Shadow Clone gave a clipped but merry, "No thanks!" when it charged forward in time with its disguised counterparts. An odd chain of events unfolded as Zeriko took a timely leap backwards to avoid the lunging group...and crashed straight into the real Fū who had snuck up behind her. Beetle wings spread, Fū cinched her arms and legs around Zeriko's shoulders and waist, relishing the woman's astonished squeak of surprise. Nearby, Naruto and Fujita groaned at the...
reckless attack.

"Flying Suplex!" Fū flapped up and took a back-bending dive down into sand, burying Zeriko head first.

Naruto wanted to bark an impatient what the hell do you think you're doing?! but at first glance it appeared that Fū had single-handedly taken the opposing kunoichi out of commission. A breeze rolled across sandy hilltops in a moment of stillness. Fū released the Jounin and stood, dusting her hands off, "Whew! What a thrill—!"

One of Zeriko's legs lashed backwards and kicked Fū squarely in the mouth. The girl sputtered and fell. In a kerfuffle of sand, Zeriko unearthed herself, unscathed by the assault, and shook dust and gravel from her outfit. She strode past Fū on the ground before lifting up her staff, spinning it round her forearm, "Don't dish what you can't take, girl."

Fujita gaped at the display, but Naruto's command to take the right flank snapped him out of it. The remaining Shadow Clones shed their transformations and surrounded Zeriko, she handily bashed them apart with a whirl of her metal staff. Fujita dove in as Fū simultaneously threw herself forward; the two hoped to catch the Jounin in a pincer move. Zeriko was there one moment and gone the next in a blink of the Body Flicker. Before the two charging teammates crashed into one another, Fujita slipped sideways with thoughtful footwork.

Naruto whistled, signaling a need to regroup, "She's running away! The real trick is going to be catching her…"

Fū was stewing and rattling off profanities, but she relaxed as she watched Naruto hand his anchor knife to Fujita, bidding them to go ahead.

"I'll catch up as soon as I'm in Sage Mode." Naruto took a seat, creating two Shadow Clones to assist him in gathering Natural Energy, "Fujita, track that Jounin; and Fū: blind her or slow her down!"

Acknowledging their orders, Fujita darted off like a bullet, and Fū kept pace beside him while flying low. Her speed built momentum, eventually overtaking Fujita as he watched their target racing over a sandy flattop, "Fū! She's due west!" His directions faded as he fell behind, and Fū bolted ahead in full flight, with a fresh jolt of chakra from her Tailed-Beast.

She rushed through hand signs and took aim at Zeriko below, "Net Shaped Prison!" And Fū spat a sticky mass of webbing the stretched and smacked the Jounin down to the ground. With a web string in hand, Fū landed hard on her feet and called to Fujita as he barreled ahead, "Do that pokey-handthing to her, Fujita!" She pulled back on the string, tripping Zeriko again as she stood and struggled in the net.

Fujita closed in, skidding over sand, spinning into a brutal short-form of Gentle Fist once the Sand kunoichi's tenketsu were in range. He'd drilled chakra into 14 chakra points before recoiling, bouncing his fingertips off of a hard, impenetrable surface. Zeriko's skin—her whole body from top to bottom, was coated in brushed metal armor. In the second he took to evaluate what ability he was witnessing, Zeriko jabbed the end of her pole in Fujita's stomach to push him off. She thrashed and writhed until the web net fell away in stringy pieces. The shiny, sleek armor on the kunoichi's body remained; not a product of a jutsu, but of a natural gift. Fujita was on his feet again, testing to see how strong his strikes had to be to penetrate through the metal surface. Only one hit seemed to reach, and it was nearly a waste of chakra and precision. Zeriko's Taijutsu was swift, clocking him several times in the head and knees. "Where did that third teammate of yours go?" Zeriko was suspicious.

Fujita retreated when he spotted Fū diving in his field of vision, getting in close to Zeriko while
holding the Tiger sign, "Scaled Sneak jutsu!" Fū clapped her hands and Zeriko saw only twinkling light, flash-blind from the scale powder tossed in her face.

As the powder cloud thinned, Fū and Fujita attacked the jounin from both sides—reaching for the small bell on a string fastened to Zeriko's belt. She had tossed up her staff and completed hand signs, unfortunately, "Spike Rock jutsu!" Jagged boulders jutted up from the ground beneath their feet, warding the Genin away. Zeriko caught her weapon without an ounce of effort, observing, "The two of you aim to test me—"

Fū was unceremonious about her volley of shuriken, which cut off the Jounin's remarks on their teamwork. Fujita charged in with that covering fire, ducking under the first few swings of Zeriko's staff before rotating in defense, "Kaiten!"

The dome of chakra heaved Zeriko up, where Fū soared above and extended a hand—brushing the cool bell with her fingertips. Zeriko was a whirlwind of kicks and punches again, using Taijutsu in mid-air to fend off Fū as they descended in a flurry. On the ground, Fū successfully blocked another kick to the head, but screeched when the Jounin improvised and grabbed one of her wings. Fū struggled before Zeriko's reverse kick clipped her forehead, sending her face-first into sand.

Without a second to waste, Fujita was following up on the attack, spinning and jabbing as he called to Fū on the ground, "Are you alright?" She gave a weary thumbs-up while rising to her hands and knees.

Fujita wanted to try his luck with a 32-point strike and see if that could slow her, but Zeriko rushed at him with a burst of strength, her staff held lengthwise in order to mow him down, "Steel Train!" He barely somersaulted out of the way of the unstoppable lunge. It kicked up dust and debris that made his eyes water. Fujita gulped when Naruto abruptly appeared next to him in a flash, his eyelids tinged red.

He extended a hand and pulled Fujita up, "Rough going?"

"She's not the type to be caught off-guard or give us an opening." Fujita assessed. He handed the anchor knife back to Naruto.

"Got any long range attacks, then?" Naruto inquired.

"A few." Fujita motioned to Fū to take the left side and wait for an opportunity, "Let's try to make her use Earth jutsu again. I'll be better prepared."

Naruto saluted him and rushed ahead, swinging wide, indirect punches at the Sand kunoichi that battered her. Zeriko was not in the mood for a throttling, and with some coaxing; Naruto did manage to earn another Earth Style attack from the kunoichi. Fujita waited for the rocky spikes to rise up from the ground when he made his move. He slipped several senbon from his sleeves, snapping them forward and stuck them into the rising boulders, draining the Earth Release chakra into his Lightning technique, "Static Noose!"

When the technique flared with an overabundance of chakra, lightning crackling wildly, Naruto had the good sense to throw himself to the side and duck for cover. Zeriko yelped and staggered away as her jutsu had been usurped, and a Lightning counter easily coursed through her metal armor. Dizzy and slightly fried, the Sand kunoichi turned to make another escape…and walked straight into one of Chōmei's great tails as it lashed out from Fū's back. Zeriko was tossed to the dirt once more.

Hands still protecting his head, Naruto looked up to see the lightning field had died off, and Fū had thwacked their target with a tail that resembled her smaller set of wings. With Zeriko pancake
flat, Fujita swooped over her and snatched the bell from her belt.

He toddled away and panted heavily, pausing to rest his hands on his knees and breathe easy again.

"Woo hoo!" Naruto was rising nearby and cheering the accomplishment. On the far side of the sandy plain, Fū did a little hip-wiggling dance.

Zeriko's metal body ability flickered, and she shed it as she stood up and rolled her shoulders. Fū stopped dancing at the sight. While Fujita had his guard lowered, Zeriko easily hurled her staff with a spin, whacking Fujita from behind and knocking him down like a bowling pin. Naruto dared protest in an angry shout, and the Sand kunoichi sped over to him while baring her teeth, "Who says I can't take that bell back?"

By all accounts he should've dodged the punch to the face— he felt it coming. Naruto was still punched in the face by an angry Jounin.

Fū sprinted over to Fujita on the ground, hooked her arms around him, and took off. The boy was coming to and still in possession of the bell. Naruto could forgive her for trying to make a run for it. While he picked himself back up, still seeing triple of everything, Zeriko was after the thieving Genin like a runaway steam engine. Naruto sent several Shadow Clones ahead before joining the chase.

"Fujita, say something if you're awake!" Fū demanded as they climbed higher.

"Don't drop me!"

"I won't! I bench weights that are heavier than you!" She shouted some reassurance.

Then, she heard Fujita's yelp of fright and looked down in time to see Zeriko's metal staff could extend, lengthening and carrying her up to a height great enough to leap for them. The Sand kunoichi's arm was coated in metal again, swinging at Fujita like a war-hammer, but Fū's barrel-roll spared him as she purposefully dropped her passenger. She dove down to catch him again, cringing as his caterwaul rattled her ears, "Fū! I told you not to—!

"You're fine—!"

A gasp, "I think I lost the bell!" They glanced down again, watching the tiny glint falling through air. Zeriko was after it, swiping her staff round to defend against pestering Shadow Clones.

Though she closed her hand around the bell and retrieved it, two of Naruto's clones were petulant and detonated beside Zeriko. The explosion flung her and her magically extending staff apart, where the real Naruto, Sage Mode refreshed for a second round, crushed the weapon to smithereens with a Big Ball Rasengan. Zeriko quirked a brow at the move, "I can't replace that. It's priceless."

"Should've had that insured!" Naruto barked.

Zeriko stuffed the bell in her pocket and formed hand signs, and to Naruto's surprise— her jutsu wasn't aimed for him. Behind Naruto some dozen meters, Fū and Fujita landed…and were instantly swallowed up in four gargantuan walls and a roof of metal, enclosing them in a great box. The Sand kunoichi brushed sand from her outfit and hair, sighing. Naruto backtracked to strike the box with a mighty Sage kick (no good) and tried to call in vain to his imprisoned teammates.

"You had better decide what to do soon." Zeriko warned him, "They won't be getting out of that Steel Labyrinth Box for at least an hour." With that, she turned tail and ran again.

Sweat streaked down the side of Naruto's face, sliding his hands along the steel wall. There was no
give, no rumbling or disturbance from the interior. He backed up and rammed a fully-formed Rasengan into it, which could only scuff the surface. 'Shit!' Naruto fretted about their target Jounin disappearing on the horizon, 'I can't get them out...it'd take me too long to gouge a hole with a ton of Rasengans, even with a hundred Kage Bunshin at it...she'd be long gone.' Gritting his teeth, Naruto took off running, 'I'm sorry Fujita! Fū! But Ero-sensei and Gaara told me not to let anyone hold me back!'

Naruto gained ground at a grueling speed. He hurled his anchor knife to cover wide distances instantly, collecting the kunai again and again as he progressed. A stab of guilt nagged at him, 'Even if I get this bell, then what? Zeriko could chase me again, unless I knock her unconscious or something! Her box isn't going to expire anytime soon.' He could see the kunoichi as he closed the distance, 'No, I've got to do this. I can go back for them! I won't leave them behind. They're going to pass this with me!'

He was down to his last charge of Sage Mode when he pounced, knocking Zeriko over and trading vicious hammer-fists and high kicks while they skidded in sand.

"You're not quite like the other two," Zeriko noticed, "Such a shame you had to leave them...but you've got to look after number one, right?"

"I'm never going to be number one." Naruto ducked a right hook and skimmed Zeriko with Frog Kumite, blasting her into the side of a dune like a hydraulic press, "This is for them!"

She emerged in full steel-armor again, smiling. Zeriko charged back, weaving and jabbing with enhanced Taijutsu, only to mistakenly go after a Shadow Clone again— which seized her in a full-nelson when it detonated. She skipped like a stone over sand and bramble, aggravated, unaware of the Rasengan coming up from behind her until it had already pulverized her into the ground again. In that moment of bleariness, Naruto extracted the bell from Zeriko's pocket and dashed out of the dust cloud. Like the terminator she was, Zeriko got up again faithfully. She began to form hand signs as she reprimanded Naruto, "I have a box for you too, young man!"

Heart pounding, Naruto watched the walls rise up around him in the millisecond after he let his anchor kunai fly. Zeriko dodged the knife as it whizzed past her cheek, and blinked in shock as Naruto reappeared beside her in a flash. Her second Steel Labyrinth Box slammed shut with no captive inside, and Naruto let a follow-up Rasengan with the last of his Sage strength crash over Zeriko's head. It leveled the area and slowed her for a solid 20 seconds, which was an improvement.

With his Sage chakra spent, Naruto sucked in a deep breath and prepared to make a break back in the direction of his team. Zeriko wobbled to her feet. He'd had yet to meet someone who could take half so many direct hits and keep going. A great tremor shook the ground under their feet. The Jounin exchanged a questioning look with Naruto before settling her eyes on the first giant Labyrinth Box. The top and sides were blown off in an earthquake of energy, astounding the two witnesses as a behemoth blue and green beetle emerged— seven massive tails stretching out around it like wings. Zeriko's shoulders sagged at the sight of it.

"Well..." Naruto dusted his hands, positively jolly, "I guess someone can break your super-strong box."

"My jutsu isn't foolproof." Zeriko understood that.

"Time for me to go...unless you'd like to take another shot at us?" He was inching his way toward his teammates.

"It was challenging enough facing a jinchuriki one-on-one while he went easy on me," Zeriko got
candid, "But I lack the confidence to try and stop a Tailed-Beast in all of its glory, unrestrained." She waved him off, "Take that bell. Now that my segment is over, I can go home and make a nail appointment."

Naruto was grateful, "Thanks lady! You're one of the toughest people I've ever smashed with a Rasengan."

"No one with Metal Body Shock is dainty…though I try to look it." Zeriko bade him farewell and set out into the desert.

With that parting, Naruto hurried back towards the enormous beetle, and halfway it spotted him and closed the distance. Covering his eyes to squint up at the towering beast, Naruto saw Fujita atop Chōmei's horn, "You okay up there, kid?"

A voice echoed down, "Yeah! Did you get the bell?"

"Sure did!" Naruto stood beside the Tailed Beast and patted a greenish tail-wing, "Um…is Fū okay?"

**Better than okay! We're just flexing our muscles again.** Chōmei turned slowly, about-facing to make the way to Sunagakure, ***Climb on, Naruto.***

He did so, finding the way up carefully along the sleek shell of the beast. Never before had Naruto's proximity to a Biju been so benevolent, though he was quickly adjusting. He sat on Chōmei's head and Fujita slid down to join him, bright-eyed and bushy-tailed.

"I felt bad about leaving you guys in that box." Naruto confessed, "Sorry. I had every intention of coming back…"

"I know, I could see you." Fujita patted his shoulder, "Fū told me she was sure that she could break us out, so I trusted her. This could be…one of the most amazing things that has ever happened in my life."

"Yeah…this is pretty high up there, even for me." Naruto conceded.

Chōmei's flight pattern evened out, carrying them north over dunes and rocky outcrops. Suna had not been far away to begin with, but the Tailed Beast delivered them a short walking distance to the outer gate. With a polite farewell, Chōmei traded places with his jinchūriki again, prompting Naruto and Fujita to leap off as the form shrunk back into that of Fū's thin frame.

"Whew! Nice workout." She stood between her friends waiting for two simultaneous high fives, which she got, "Good job, fellas."

"I love flying." Fujita decided.

"See?" Fū laughed as they strolled up to the gate entrance, "You didn't know what you were missing! Now you just need to try some all you can eat buffets."

"I'm ready for a buffet now." Fujita did some back stretches while walking.

Fū poked his exposed midriff when his shirt rode up, "What-? Those Star Village biscuits didn't fill you up?"

"Better than the cactus paddles did." Naruto wagered.
A Chunin greeter welcomed them and held out a hand for their bell, "Well done! Team number?"

"Team Seven!" Fū hopped up and down in place.

Naruto gladly forked over the dinged and scratched bell.

"You can proceed to the final stage of the Exam, which is a review by panel." The Chunin pointed out a passageway covered by tarps for shade, "Follow that path to the end and to the plaza. On your right you'll see the pavilion tent and be given directions there. You'll be reviewed one at a time."

They did as instructed, though Fū did not get a straight answer if there was a restroom near the plaza, "I've had to pee since noon…"

"Why didn't you?" Naruto was feeling like a beleaguered parent, "You had like a thousand opportunities to go before we tracked that Jounin down!"

"I forgot. I was too excited."

From behind them, Fujita blew a small raspberry.

Fū resorted to power breathing to control her bladder. At last, they came upon the large, tented pavilion and stopped outside of it, finding another attendant asleep on a bench. An old woman dressed in gray robes snored quietly while balancing a clipboard on her stomach. Fū gave her a gentle shake.

"…get…your…filthy mits off of me White Fang!" The old woman leapt up with a screech, disoriented as she woke. She noticed the shaken Genin team waiting for acknowledgment.

"Oh. Early birds." Chiyo wiped her mouth on her sleeve, then flipped through a packet of competing teams to pull their profiles to the front, "Listen up…everything you have done up until this point can be used against you, or in support of your promotion to Chunin Rank. You were under surveillance during every stage."

"We were?" Fujita was surprised. He hadn't noticed anyone watching.

"Did I stutter, boy?" Chiyo sniffed, "Yes, you were. Team Seven, is it? Ho, what a handful…" She wiped a bit of crust from her eyes and then pointed out another bench behind the large tent, "Wait there. Go in once it's your turn. You—" Chiyo pointed to Fū, "First."

Fū's wary smile was the last thing Naruto and Fujita saw before moving to sit and wait to be called in.

Inside the tent, Fū was very amused to see a television monitor set up on a rolling cart beside a long table of children. At the center the two eldest children sat, a boy and a girl, about ten years old by Fū's estimate. They had very serious looks on their faces. On either side of the centered children were a pair of younger children who were distracted with paper folding projects to pass the time. Most of the six-person panel looked up and noticed Fū, then called on each other to focus on the task at hand.

"We," The ten-year-old boy announced, "Are a panel of students from Sunagakure's Academy…classes B, C, and D represented. We will judge your proficiency in this Exam based on recorded footage and notes."

The girl beside him added, "It's for project credit."
A young boy of six years at the edge of the table whispered, "Whoa, you guys sound really grown up readin' that script…"

"Shhh!" They hushed him.

"Name?" The eldest boy tried to sound bored.

The girl on his left whacked his arm, muttering, "It's on the placard, dunce. Chiyo-baasama flips it over when an entrant walks in!"

Fū announced herself anyway, "I'm Fū of Takigakure!"

This greeting invigorated the children, who then chorused back, "Hi Fū!"

"Heh, heh…hi." She stifled her giggles.

"Fū of Takigakure, during this review you are required to answer our questions." The head boy prefaced the evaluation.

The youngest boy at the edge of the table piped up again, "You're dirty."

"We were in the desert for three days-ish. We're all gonna be gross." Fū checked her top and skirt and found streaks from cactus paddle juice, and dried blood droplets from when she'd been kicked in the mouth.

A playback of filmed events rolled forward and rewound on the screen as two younger children quarreled silently over the remote control. The eldest girl confiscated it from them, "The recording shows that Fū was the first member of her team to wake up and figure out what was going on."

All children nodded in agreement and scratched their pencils onto notepads. A few minutes went by as footage was reviewed, played back multiple times, paused, and children bickered over the significance of what they were seeing.

"See? She respected water rations and fairness, that's worth a point on the rubric." A nine-year-old boy grumbled.

"She worked really well with her teammates." A younger girl pointed out, "It was…explerary…er…example…exemplary!"

A boy on her right muttered, "That's a tough word, it's okay."

"She is able to use…a variety," The youngest boy pronounced carefully, "Of Ninjutsu."

"Competence in Taijutsu!"

"Strategy!"

"Takes orders!"

"Improv…isation."

"One of four shinobi in this Exam…that was able to fly." The eldest boy noted, "There are points for uniqueness, I think?"

Scratching on paper pads continued.
"So…" The eldest girl had a hard edge to her voice, "Why should we promote you?"

Put on the spot, Fū blinked rapidly before piecing together a truthful answer, "You…can if you want to. I just came here to make friends, actually!"

The children cheered at that comment.

"Want a juice box?" The youngest girl offered one.

"Yes please!" Fū approached the table to accept the drink, and tapped the straw's wrapper on the table to free it.

"Don't forget," The nine-year-old boy snapped his fellow panel members back to reality, "That Fū jumped recklessly into the surf for a clue, and could have endangered herself and her team."

The kids muttered about the point deduction and scribbled subtractions onto their notebooks.

"Yeah, she also used up some supplies carelessly…"

More scratching.

"I don't know how serious you are about being a ninja, to be honest." The eldest boy turned his nose up at her.

"Me neither. It's a job that I'm good at." Fū gave a sincere answer, "Making friends is more important to me. I remember the Kazekage talking about working together, so it made me believe I could."

Soft gasps.

"As long as I can protect my village, that's enough for me." The kunoichi did not care much either way if she was promoted or not.

The silence hung in the air until the youngest boy asked the important question that all of the panel wanted answered, "…are you…that giant bug?"

Fū rubbed the back of her head, abashed, "Sort of!"

"Points! Points for that!" The boy yowled. He and the other children frantically scrawled on paper.

"Do you have any other comments you would like to make…advocating…on your own behalf?" The eldest girl inquired with new vocabulary.

"Nope!" Fū was done, "Where's the restroom?"

"Just across the courtyard." The girl filled her in.

"Chiyo-baasama!" The eldest boy summoned the village elder while he got a final count of points that the panel had tallied up. When Chiyo poked her saggy face in, he reported to her, "Pass."

Fū thanked them with a wave, accepted a promotional certificate, and then hurried out. Chiyo yawned, "I'll…go get the next one."

One of the children reversed the recorded footage until a young man popped into the tent, glancing around inquisitively. Chiyo hooked a new name on a display placard before toddling out.

"Hyuga Fujita." The eldest girl read the name aloud.
The eldest boy went over his script again, "We are a panel of students from Sunagakure's Academy—classes B, C, and D represented. We will judge your proficiency in this Exam based on recorded footage and notes."

The girl added, "Fujita from the Hidden Leaf village: be sure to answer any of our questions as best you can."

He was momentarily confused by the sight of the panel, but nodded when addressed. A young boy pushed 'play' on the remote, which cued up at an unflattering shot of Fujita screaming in the cavern as Fū took off with him for the first time. A few children snickered.

"Well," A little girl tried to redeem the applicant in front of them, "He cut off a scorpion's stinger before this. Go back a little…"

"That's worth some points."

"Initiative!"

Scribbling began on their notepads.

"Look at that, pause it!" A child gestured at the screen, "He can spin and deflect stuff! Like Gaara-sama's shield, but without sand!"

The children liked the look of it as their pencils scratched again.

"Good cooperation!"

"Put a knife in that eel's eye…"

"Speaking of eyes—his are weird."

"It's the Byakugan, you idiot. Don't you read?" A girl snipped in annoyance.

"He's got great Taijutsu…and that Lightning jutsu put Zeriko-sensei down."

"Not for long…"

The eldest girl was critical of the candidate, "He wants to lead…but is not very good at it."

"He's not the worst."

"How long have you been a graduated ninja?" The youngest girl asked.

"About four years." Fujita estimated. He tried not to take offense to verbal assessments bouncing around.

"Hmm…"

The pencil scratching slowed down.

"Why do you want to be a Chunin?" The eldest boy asked.

"I know I'm not the best." Fujita understood their reservations, "And that is why I'll always be motivated to improve. That's the way I want to serve my village alongside trusted comrades."

Quiet fell after that comment, and children leaned over each other to compare notes and scores.
Someone pointed out to the youngest panel member that he'd been writing upside-down in his notepad. He did not see a problem with this, "My characters are still neat."

"Chiyo-baasama!" One of the children seated at the center called the elder back and nodded to her, "Pass!" The same child handed a promotional certificate to Fujita, mentioning that it needed to be presented to the Hokage.

"Good. You," Chiyo motioned with her head, "Run along. Restroom's across the courtyard on the left."

"Actually, is there somewhere I can get something to—?"

"There's a shave ice cart over there, whippersnapper." Chiyo hurried him out.

Fujita exited the tent to find a snack, flummoxed that a bunch of Academy students had been the ones to promote him.

Chiyo flipped the display placard to the final team member's name. She scrunched her face at Naruto, briefly staring after she ushered him into the pavilion. Then, she returned to her bench.

After seeing how quickly Fū and Fujita had been processed and expelled from the tent (both with certificates), Naruto had an inkling that some strange mechanism was in place. That hunch was validated when he walked in and discovered the panel was comprised of six children. It figured that Gaara would want to be make an evaluation as unorthodox as possible. Gaara had always been privy to how brutally honest and unfiltered the opinions of children could be, juxtaposed to the politicized and biased views of adult evaluators.

A child at the center of the table was reading scripted lines about being Academy students, that they were running the panel for project credit, so on and so on until another kid pitched a fit about stupid, repetitive lines, and a ruckus broke out, knocking the start of Naruto's review off the rails. One child pitched the remote control for the television and clocked another child in the head with it. Crying ensued.

Hoping to get some help, Naruto poked his head out of the tent flap to inquire with Chiyo, "Excuse me, Granny…I think the panel is in crisis?"

She was already out cold on the bench. Naruto ducked back into the tent to watch two younger children chasing each other. The eldest girl stood up on her chair, bellowing for "Everyone to knock it off!" and then the two racing youngsters slammed into one another and began wrestling on the floor.

"Whoa— whoa!" Naruto got in between them, lifting each child, boy and girl, by the scruffs of their shirts, "You guys are supposed to work together! This isn't constructive!"

"I'm just…! Tired!" The little girl wept, "I don't like this stuff. Class is easier."

The little boy wriggled wildly in Naruto's grip.

"And Tomio hit me in the he-eeeeaaaad!" The girl sobbed.

"I wasn't aiming for you, Jurina!" The boy tried to pry Naruto's hands off, "Your fat head was in the way! Haruo is being a big jerk!"

At the table, Haruo jumped up from his seat, "I'm following directions! You new kids can hardly keep your eyes open through a full day of school! Cranky little blisters…"
The eldest Academy boy had talked the eldest girl down from her soap box, and those at the table seemed to cool off. Naruto sat down on the floor, keeping each child stuffed under his arms on either side, "Okay…let's just relax everyone…"

By some miracle, cranky students Tomio and Jurina had settled down in whimpers, hugging Naruto for moral support as if he were a stuffed animal. Fuddled, he patted their heads and soothed them.

"Sorry, Uzumaki-san. That was unprofessional of us." The head boy bowed in apology, a gesture that the head girl student mirrored.

"It's cool. Even Kages have bad days." Naruto extended a thumbs up and then looked down at the cuddlers, "Do you two want to go back to the panel now?"

"No. Here's fine." Tomio tucked his head under Naruto's sage cloak.

At the table, a girl reminded them, "You two still have to watch the footage and help us with scoring, if you sit there." Both children nodded and Haruo grudgingly walked their notepads and pencils over to them. Naruto sat passively and held the sniffling pair while the screen flashed with events from the Exam.

At one point Jurina tugged on Naruto's tunic to get his attention, "You smell sweaty."

"Sorry about that…"

"It's okay. I like your whiskers…and butter-color hair." She turned back to watch the screen. She was doodling a whiskered face on her paper pad.

Naruto pressed his lips together and reeled at the peculiarity of his situation.

"Did you see those clones explode? Rewind that!" The eldest boy had the footage turned back, before asking Naruto, "Is that real?"

"Is what real?" He missed the comment.

"Can you really make clones explode?"

"Sure, but I'm not demonstrating in here." Naruto confirmed with a shrug.

Pencils pattered on notepads again.

"Hm…" Muttering from the center of the table, "Good reflexes, strategy…"

"You're so fast I don't even see you move on the screen!" A kid frustratedly tapped on the remote. Some felt that it was worth points, although they were unfamiliar with the idea of teleportation jutsu.

"He kept everyone on track…" The eldest girl observed, "But then he left his teammates in Zeriko-sensei's box."

The face of every child in the tent fell.

"Why did you do that?" Tomio asked in a small voice.

"I didn't want to…but that was the best way to help them. I had to get a bell while I could." Naruto explained, "We would've missed our chance if we let the Jounin go. I'd never abandon Fujita or Fū. They became my friends! I was going to go back for them, but they were able to break out of that box."
The kids seemed satisfied with his line of reasoning. Someone tried out the word rational to describe it.

Naruto overhead muttering about resources and cleverness, and the clatter of pencils dropping. Tomio and Jurina turned in their pads at the table for a tally of points, slumping tiredly back in their chairs.

"Baa-sama…" The eldest boy called in a weak voice. There was no reaction. He called a second time, louder and more noticeable…but the elder did not respond. Annoyed, the Academy student pushed back his chair and stomped out of the pavilion to fetch Chiyo.

Several seconds dragged by and Naruto envisioned what it would be like if experienced ninja were the ones scrutinizing his performance. There would be a degree of pomp and circumstance, maybe even flattery. Perhaps bias or unfairness, and other mercenary motivations that grown shinobi had. To that end, Gaara had likely done away with the partisan views of adults as an experiment, as he had seen the self-serving attitudes on Leaf's Exam review board. The children were straightforward with their interpretations, simple though they may be. Naruto got the gist of the impetus behind arranging such a young panel.

He shook out of his thoughts as a cardstock edge prodded against his arm.

"Here, take this." The eldest girl of the panel was handing him a certificate, "You need to show it to your Hokage to be officially promoted. We won't get Chiyo-baasama to wake up for a while…so you can go now."

The children of the panel wished him well, and Naruto, a bit dazed, gave them a small wave before seeing himself out. He exited the pavilion and spotted his temp-teammates beside a shave ice cart.

"I've probably lived through weirder stuff…" Naruto guessed as he joined Fujita and Fū, "But I never did think I'd make Chunin that way."

"Likewise." Fujita agreed before a bite of cherry ice.

"I wish every test was like that." Fū had no objections whatsoever.

"Do you guys want to tag along with me while I look for Gaara? He's got to be close by to oversee the Exam." Naruto offered, "Maybe he can tell me if Ero-sensei made it to the Tide Village."

Fujita nodded while squinting due to a bit of sour syrup.

"Sure!" Fū bought an extra cup of ice, "I'll give this to him a gesture of good-will. I hope he'll let us shower somewhere, because woo-boy—! I'm ripe."

Chapter End Notes

Grooved to Led Zeppelin for this one! A cute, easygoing entry to offset the calamity to the south. Sorry in advance, it won't be pretty. Let's eat snacks. It's pretty evident how often I think of munching. Thanks for sticking with me constant-readers and new readers alike! I want to drop you down a rollercoaster plunge next, so please keep your arms and legs in the ride at all times.
Chapter 48- Anagnorisis
The same morning that Naruto made lively acquaintances on Team Seven in Hidden Sand, the streets of the Tide Village were bustling far to the south.

A colorful, heterogeneous crowd passed each other in two directions on the main avenue of the shopping district. Gulls and terns swooped above, crying out at the sight of unguarded treats and trash that fell short of litter cans. Clouds parted to wink sunshine down on the city, as the final days of warm temperatures meant tourists were fewer, business hours shorter.

Shiogakure’s health clinic was comprised of three state-of-the-art buildings, and on the central eastern corner of the gridded streets sat the smallest office. Families came and went frequently from the building. Sometimes, congratulatory balloons were stuck by the strings in the automatic doors. Most were set free into the sky and forgotten by distracted parents.

Utakata could admit he felt out of place in such a busy, populated space. For years he’d only known wilderness, stretches of uninhabited coast, fireside warmth, and sparse contact with a commonwealth of any kind. He had to think for a moment as he signed his name beneath Hotaru’s on the intake sheet.

They did not linger for long in the waiting area before they were admitted to an examination room, and the annoyances began from there. Utakata sat passively and watched as Hotaru was shepherded around, sent to the restroom for a urine sample, blood pressure and weight were recorded, and a sizeable vile of her blood was taken by a phlebotomist. After that, the on-hand ultrasound technician made cheerful small talk with them, “Is this your first?”

Hotaru shifted nervously on the reclined table, eyes flicking from the monitor, to the ceiling, then to Utakata’s face. He was rather tranquil, if not charmed by the brouhaha. He could tell she needed some encouragement, so he scooched his seat closer and took slow, deep breaths for her to mimic. Hotaru answered finally, “It is.”

“It’s alright, darling, everything is weird when it’s number one.” The technician nodded understandingly, “All the lingo and instruments and vitamins and rules…good grief. And this stuff,” The woman held up a tube of gel, “Is warmed up but still a little unpleasant. I’ll try to keep it quick, I promise.”

“Thank you.” Hotaru rolled up her shirt, frowning, watching as the goop was applied to her abdomen and swirled around.

“Oh! I’m Yayoi by the way. Nice to meet you both!” The technician paused before pressing the transducer to Hotaru’s skin, She nodded to Hotaru and Utakata, who appreciated the courtesy. Yayoi amended as she scanned around, “Let’s see, well, really I meant the three of you.”

The scrambled, amorphous images on the monitor’s screen sharpened into solid features, including the bumpy roundness of a tiny head. Though the exact body part was uncertain, Utakata’s face lit up at the sight, “Is that it?”

“Yeah…” Yayoi scrunched her face while she searched for better angles, “I’ll confirm, but you seem
to be at about 12 weeks…the baby still has a bit of a kappa look to it…”

Utakata’s fingertips slid up and down Hotaru’s arm excitedly, “How does it have arms and legs already?”

“It’s super small…like a toy…” Her face was flushed, but she was more intrigued than embarrassed.

Utakata had various questions, “Can you look at the organs and see if those are normal? Can we see the heart?”

“Hold on— I need to fiddle a little.” Yayoi was chuckling, “See there? Nothing unusual, two chambers here…and…arteries cross like their supposed to…”

“I want to see the feet again!” Hotaru was more enthusiastic.

“Sure, I’m just going to check organ development a bit more, then we’ll go over the model and timeline of what to expect.” The technician resisted a grin at the tittering parents.

Utakata asked not to be told the gender, because he preferred to be surprised, but Yayoi shook her head, “We won’t be able to tell for another ten weeks, so enjoy the anticipation.”

Further into the appointment, both Hotaru and Utakata had most of their questions answered and concerns allayed. A physician dropped by to go over the imaging, follow-up visits, and how they ought to prepare for the next 28 weeks. Yes, it was still safe for Hotaru to use Ninjutsu so long as she did not overdo it, the doctor assured. Strain on the chakra circulatory system would have to be considerable before it affected a developing baby. With that, Hotaru extracted the answer she had been looking for— she could keep working for the next three months if she wished. Unless bloodwork results dictated otherwise, things were progressing normally.

With the conclusion of the visit, they were both clownishly beatific as they left the office. Up until that point, Utakata knew that the both of their lives had been something like an obstacle course. A glimmer of joy was a welcome change.

“Since the doctor said it was okay…” Hotaru crossed her arms behind her back, grinning, “I’m going to report to work.”

He took a deep breath, “I had a feeling you would.”

“Come on, class will be fun today! One of my co-teachers said we’re going north for a field trip at the wildlife preserve. It’s a good place for the students to practice jutsu.”

“Are you going to tell anyone?” Utakata wondered.

“Maybe not until after the next appointment.” She supposed, “The administrator might get weird about it if he hears too soon.”

Utakata saw her point, and that she wanted to avoid the circulation of gossip at the Academy for as long as possible. He walked her a few blocks to the school’s gate and kissed her goodbye there, watching as Hotaru ambled on to greet students lining up in the yard. He even lingered to witness the gathered classes and their chaperones set out for the trip. After that, Utakata slipped an earpiece out of the pocket of his fatigues and fitted it to the side of his face. He had to click around for the correct radio channel.

Channel Two has twelve shinobi reporting in, stationed at the “four corners.” Sabaku no Kankuro is in command. By the way, has that bubble-boy reported in yet—?
“This is Utakata speaking.” He gruffed into the radio as he walked, “Don’t be impatient with me, Suna. I told you I had something to do this morning.”

Right, well, you need to hurry up so our squadrons can coordinate. These Tide ninja are antsy, and the Leaf Sealing Corps people are not happy about staying an extra day… but we agreed it’s best if we all keep watch. Hustle! Kankuro was being pushy.

“I’m on my way to the four corners.” He confirmed.

--What was your name again? Everyone keeps calling you bubble-boy, but I don’t get it. A new voice chimed in on Channel Two.

Utakata raised an eyebrow, “Who is this—?”

--Obito. I delivered the intel on the Akatsuki to your Jounin Council.

“Oh.” Utakata said, “Thank you.”

--You’re welcome!

Obito, he just said his name is Utakata, if you weren’t listening. Not the most social ninja in these parts, but he’s alright. Kankuro joked over the communication channel.

--Got it. Utakata. Obito memorized the name, Stay safe today. I have no idea when Pein will show up.

“Tell me more about this criminal who wants to capture me.” Utakata took on a defensive tone, “How many members of the Akatsuki can we expect?”

--One. He is considered the ‘leader’ of the organization. Pein is no joke. Everyone in the Akatsuki has immense respect for him as the founder, though…I don’t know much about what techniques he can use.

Bummer. Kankuro snarked, What kind of a name is ‘Pein,’ anyway? Trying to intimidate targets, eh?

“Has he ever tried to capture a jinchuriki before?” Utakata asked.

--Hm. Not that I know of…usually he leaves that work to subordinates of the organization. And they are no picnic either.

Utakata surmised, “So we have very little information to go off of…and how many active duty ninja are on watch in Tide?”

Fifty. Kankuro reported, Fifty-seven if you count the Leaf and Sand forces here, plus this Obito fellow.

--I can still hear you, ya know.

“And what kind of jutsu can you use, spy of the Toad Sage?” Utakata teased.

--Hundreds.

“Pff.” He took it for a joke.

--No really. Water, Lightning, Earth, and Wind Style… though Fire Style is my specialty. Obito
thought on it, My Taijutsu is a bit shabbier these days, but still not half bad. And good luck getting out of my Genjutsu!

Sorry, you didn’t say you were a prodigy. Kankuro was dumbfounded by the tall claims Obito made, There aren’t many ninja who have skills rounded off to that extent. Where did Jiraiya-sama find you, exactly?

--That’s a company secret, I’m afraid.

I’m not kidding. Kankuro made it clear.

--Neither am I. I don’t want to be careless with my identity, based on the line of work I’m in. Please try to trust me. For what it’s worth, I got beat to crap in the last war…and my right arm and right leg are artificial now. There’s a price to pay for experience.

Utakata agreed, “He’s right about that…” He stopped periodically to swirl a small paint brush in his bubble-fluid container, painting marks on brick walls all down the street. He’d been adding small seals all over the city for two days now, since getting the news of an imminent attack.

“Is Saizō on this channel yet?” Utakata asked as he stopped into a tea shop for a beverage.

I am, Utakata. This stakeout blows. I wanted to take Aosako on a honeymoon, but not if this Akatsuki fuckface is going to waltz in here and mess with us.

“I really am sorry about the inconvenience.” He apologized to his friend.

--Yo! You got married? Obito was happy for the stranger, Congrats! That’s awesome. I married the girl of my dreams and I’ve got to say it’s pretty great.

Saizō was appreciative, Hey thanks. Me too. Utakata’s next; he’s got to wife up that girlfriend of his.

“There are a few pressing matters I need to see to first.” Utakata contended at a counter while ordering a latte. The barista gave Utakata a confused look as he spoke to radio contacts.

Saizō added, Are we gonna have old man Tazuna on this com?

Once he gets out of a committee meeting at noon, he knows which channel we’re on. Kankuro confirmed, But he fell asleep during yesterday’s watch so, you know, we can do without if we have to.

Smiling in amusement, Utakata crossed over to a sidebar station to add sugar to his drink, and looked out the window beyond the countertop. He froze like a rabbit at the sight of a dark cloak strolling by in the foot traffic of the street. Though he’d only been given a description of what the Akatsuki uniform was— red clouds on a black coat— such alarming fashion was too obvious to miss. His hands hovered without purpose over stirring sticks and sugar packets. Breathing became difficult.

Can someone bring me an oolong chiller if they’re not already at the four corners? Saizō requested over the radio, I’ll pay you back.

Most of us are here. I bet Utakata’s already at a café though— hey, make that two? Kankuro jumped on the order.

He couldn’t answer with his chest so tight. Utakata took a sip of his drink; hearing Saiken whisper to him, Don’t run. Don’t panic. Everyone’s close by.

Did you get that? Kankuro repeated, —Utakata?

He cleared his throat and spoke, “That order will have to wait. I just spotted him.”

--Aw, fuck. Obito replied back quickly, Did he see you? Where?

“He hasn’t seen me. Westbound on Main. He’ll be passing the corners soon, so keep watch. I’m behind him now.” Utakata left his drink where it sat and stood poised at the door, “Orders?”

For now, Plan A. I’ve got to tell the other channels…we’re getting into position. Kankuro’s sunny mood transformed into solemn leadership.

“Alright.” Utakata inched out of the door, then craned his neck to look down the stretch of street where the Akatsuki affiliate was a distant pedestrian. Utakata took a deep breath before dashing across the boulevard to alleyway cover, and raised his blowing pipe to his lips.

Within twenty seconds, Kankuro was able to give the order to contacts on channels Three and Four to haul ass to the center of town at the four corners. Plan A.

His thoughts contorted in many directions: Breathe in—breathe out through his nostrils, eyes trained on the street below the rooftop vantage point. Utakata—how the barest trace of fear was audible in the man’s voice over the radio, when he’d inquired what to do next. He was only human. Mortal. By association, Kankuro thought of Temari, then, and how she had nearly been killed on her birthday by Momochi Zabuza—August 23rd. Coincidentally, of course. Kankuro couldn’t contemplate how one of the bookends of her life would have fallen on the day his father used to smile the most.

Tazuna’s voice crackled back over Channel One, finally, So this is it, eh? Do I need to come back from the wildlife preserve and...beg for mercy or somethin’?

“You’re with the Academy classes over there?” Kankuro asked to confirm, skulking along a wall and down brick steps toward an alleyway. He wanted to patrol from the ground while Saizō and his subordinates watched from on high.

Yeah, when the committee meeting wrapped up I thought I’d show my face at the school. That was before you told me this dangerous ninja showed up.

“Just stay where you are, Tazuna.” Kankuro advised, “Keep the classes and instructors away from the center of the city. We’re going to confront him here.”

And if my villagers get hurt?

“I already gave an order for a low-key retreat.” Kankuro peeked around the corner of a dentist’s office onto the main avenue, sighting a few calm Chunin shepherding people away from the thoroughfare and store fronts, “Looks like that’s working fine. They’re evacuating Main.”

Tazuna made a few other demands, some tens of kilometers away on the northern crest of the island, pacing beside a magnolia grove. If destruction of buildings and homes couldn’t be stopped, get the people out. Heck—here we go again...He was grumbling. Worried. He wanted Kankuro to make sure that Inari’s orders placed him as far away from bloodshed as possible. Things of that nature.

Kankuro promised to do so and then switched the channel, back to Two. He had a tendril of a chakra string forming on his fingertip, “Maki? Are you there?”

-I’m here, Kankuro.
“Up there with Saizō?”

-Yes.

“Come down here, beside the dental office. You’re with me today.”

-Right away.

It would be more poetic, he thought, to die beside another Sand ninja that day if any piece of the plan went awry. Peering out of the end of the passageway, Kankuro watched a seagull swoop down on the emptying street, striking its beak into a carton of grilled squid forgotten on a bench.

Kankuro held his breath for a moment, preparing his puppet, unwinding chakra strings as he crept backwards through the alley, through a hedge line, picnic area, into the back door of a business, then stopped at the one-way viewing window of an ice cream shop. It was a wonderful tactical position, whether the shop owners knew it or not. One-way windows were great for ambushes. He’d never have known it was there if he hadn’t indulged with some mango soft serve two days ago.

Maki peeked her face in through the open back door, “I followed your strings. This isn’t the dentist.”

“Nope, it’s not. But I might need to get my teeth checked if I keep eating the sundaes here.” He motioned with his head for her to come closer, “Look through this. You can’t see in from the outside.”

“There’s a cute logo on the other side.” Maki had a rough idea of their position.

They watched from the window, inhaling and exhaling, soft and soundless like mice. In the next instant, Utakata was visible outside in the center of the street. Both Sand ninja tamped down their reactionary instincts as their muscles tensed. It seemed like an innocuous meeting as Utakata and the tall figure in the black, cloud-gilded cloak happened across one another, slowing to a stop. This stranger, this threat— the man with persimmon orange hair, piercings in his face—spikes in his ears…had been crossing from one covered archway to the next between shops, trying to keep a low profile. At least, that’s how it looked to Kankuro at a glance.

‘I thought Utakata said this Akatsuki fellow was coming up Main Street westbound...’ Kankuro tried to recall the report of positioning.

In any case, it was the Akatsuki member that seemed most surprised when Utakata so brazenly showed himself on the promenade. The cloaked ninja may have issued a warning in a low bass voice, not that Kankuro caught much of it. He slipped soundlessly beneath the umbrellas and awning of the ice cream parlor’s front, unblinking as the criminal that Obito had called ‘Pein’ rushed forward to stab a sharp, black rod into his target.

Kankuro twitched his index and middle fingers back, strings live. Maki flashed lightning-quick ahead of him with her trusted sealing scroll unfurled.

Like a fish to bait, Pein had attacked and, to the surprise of all spying eyes watching, been swallowed by the snatching barrel ribs of Kankuro’s Kuroari puppet, its Utakata disguise shed at the last possible moment. After that, the puppet took a violent tumble, pulling the chakra strings taught as Kankuro skidded out into the open. The strength of the captured ninja had whipped him sideways across tables, knocking chairs, displays and plants over as Kankuro was lashed. Maki’s follow-up came in time by a hair’s breadth, the captive crashing out of Kuroari’s chest cavity just as scroll paper wound around him with the written seals Halt-Freeze-Interrupt gleaming. Swathed in the Sealing Jutsu, the target fell with a soft thud onto the sidewalk.
‘Plan A went off without a hitch!’ Kankuro was thrilled as he assisted Maki into the cover of an unlocked mechanic’s garage, waiting for the rooftop group to descend. ‘I wanted to see if it was possible to bag this guy and interrogate him.’

He crouched down beside the mummified body, “Okay Maki, this isn’t a perma-sealing is it? Peel back the face so I can talk to him.”

The parchment lifted under her touch, and Maki grimaced as she discovered a completely inert body beneath her Sealing work, “Kankuro…”

“What?”

“We can’t ask him anything.” Suspicious, the kunoichi prodded the carotid artery in the captive’s neck, “He’s dead.”

“How? We didn’t even fight him!” It was preposterous.

“I don’t know. I…” Maki sat on her heels, wracking her brain for an explanation, “This type of jutsu is used by the Sealing Corps to hold and pacify living things…but there’s no chakra flow here. Everything is just…switched off.”

“…I don’t get it.” He stood and brushed his hands, sighing at the sorry sight of his damaged puppet beside a work bench. The patter of feet meeting pavement sounded by the garage door as Saizō and three Tide ninja filed in. They crowded around to get a look at the unexpectedly harmless body.

“Talk about anticlimactic.” Saizō spat his toothpick into a waste bin, “What’s with this shit? He’s supposed to be spilling his guts to us now.”

“Well, it looks like we gave him a heart attack.” Kankuro gruffed in annoyance, “The old bait-and-switch is a classic. I should’ve known it wouldn’t work out the way we wanted it to.”

Obito’s voice came over the radio, Where’d you guys hole up?

“The garage.” Kankuro replied.

In moments, the crazily-dressed man appeared and shoved past the congress of stupefied ninja. Alarmed, Obito stooped down to scrutinize the captive’s lifeless face.

“This isn’t Pein.” He announced with dread.

A hush fell over those gathered, wherein Kankuro began to shake his head in denial, “He fits your description. He fell for the bait. This has—”

“This isn’t the Pein I know.” Obito insisted, “The face is different. The shape and height…these piercings aren’t the same.” He rose to stand again and ruffled his hair, frustrated, “Is this some kind of decoy?”

“If it is, it’s working, and we’re not out there on Main keeping tabs.” Kankuro inclined his head to signal Saizō’s Tide group to return to their posts, which they did hastily. He then turned back to Maki, “Let’s wrap whatever this is up. If it’s Sealed…or dead…so long as it can’t fight, I don’t care.”

Maki closed off the parchment bindings again and rolled it beneath the work bench with her foot, “What if-? If it is Pein like Obito says…but also something else?”
“That makes no sense.” Kankuro abandoned Kuroari where it sat and returned outdoors, leading Obito and Maki down alleyways while radioing to the village’s jinchuriki, “Utakata—head’s up. We had an encounter and Sealed the intruder…but Obito says it isn’t the right person.”

Red hair and ominous cloak with clouds? Utakata confirmed.

“Well, yeah…but a different face?”

That’s what I saw. I can’t recall the finer details—The transmission cut off.

Kankuro fiddled around, trying to overcome static.

“It’s a puppet.” Maki supposed.

Kankuro stopped and rounded on her, immediately having a eureka moment after the suggestion, “Being controlled by the real Pein?”

“That’s my guess. It was a proxy of some kind.” The kunoichi turned to Obito, “Is it possible that the Akatsuki can do something like that?”

“I wouldn’t rule it out just because I never saw it.” Obito reasoned, “If that’s the type of jutsu being used, then there could be—”

Another! Shouting sounded over their radio earpieces all at once. Several parties on Channel Two were clamoring, Utakata’s voice included. I’m being pursued—!

The ground shook.

Kankuro and his companions hesitated to approach the smoke cloud ahead, and sunlight was blocked by the towering figure that rose up after a Summoning. A large crustacean, not quite lobster or crab, lumbered down the road—stuck full of black rods. The group diverted through a dinette to avoid being seen, out the back, and found rooftop cover to watch from as several young Tide ninja engaged the beast to lead it away from civilization.

-the hell—! He can summon something like that?” Kankuro tried to get in touch with Utakata again, but there was only radio silence, “It sounded like Utakata was spotted.”

“There!” Obito pointed out another cloaked figure, loitering on a balcony wreathed in flower boxes, “That’s the summoner.”

The accused wore an Akatsuki cloak, the array of piercings unique on its face, long, ginger hair pulled into a ponytail. All could see the resemblance to the first proxy they had examined in the garage. There was no current explanation, however, for how these proxies related or operated.

“So we don’t know how many of these there will be…or if other Akatsuki members are here.” Obito ran down the docket, “Pein ordered most subordinates to handle other projects…then maybe…he can replicate himself or manipulate multiple proxies. We need to find out how.”

Kankuro released a pressure-valve on his sarcasm, “Let’s ask him.”

“No. I’ll try to get a look.” Obito turned worriedly to his Sand colleagues, “Wait here.”

“O-kay…?” Kankuro watched the spy creep across ductwork toward the newly spotted enemy. Maki crouched beside him, relaying updates to Tazuna in a soft voice over the radio.

There was a sliver of uncertainty about this stranger, Obito, and how he’d come out of nowhere to
intervene. Kankuro harbored a half-justified doubt in the man’s ability to deal with the threat of the
Akatsuki, particularly when he looked at that getup of every-shade-of-blue clothing, goggles,
and Live-Well bracelets. In Kankuro’s book, such a visage fell under non-threatening and/or incompetent.

‘Wouldn’t be the first ninja the Toad Sage relied on that looked or acted whacky…and ended up
being a freakin’ powerhouse.’ Kankuro reflected on Gaara’s old teammates as contrary evidence.

Obito ventured closer, peeking from behind a vent stack on the next roof, his Sharingan observing
faint wisps of chakra radiating from points on the proxy’s body, ‘Where it’s stuck with those rods…
they’re like receivers for chakra. It’s coming from someplace else...’ He looked around, but could
see no solid link of chakra between controller and controlled.

He snuck back to Kankuro and Maki’s position, whispering, “Is Utakata—?”

“I can’t reach him. I’m going to look for him,” Before setting out, Kankuro asked, “Is this something
you can handle? We can trust you?”

“Handle it? I’m Jiraiya-sama’s number one stooge.” Obito pulled his goggles down to cover his eyes,
“Through and through.”

“Yeah, you fucking are.” Kankuro sighed at the overt goofballishness.

“Listen, those rods that the proxies are pierced with, and that animal too…they’re receiving a chakra
signal.” He reported, “That must be why your Sealing Jutsu stopped it— it repels the signal.”

The method by which Obito had collected such information was lost on Kankuro, “And you know
this—?”

The spy insisted, “Work with me. I am insanely perceptive. It’s why I have a job.”

“If that’s so…then that body was most certainly dead before anything was done to it.” Maki was
following the logic, “Hurting or trying to kill them won’t be of use. A proxy has to be incapacitated,
or have its signal disrupted.”

Kankuro passed along those garbled discoveries into his earpiece, hoping against hope anyone was
still listening. A rattle and crash sounded, followed by a volley of small explosions along the south-
facing row of buildings. They took off, attempting to catch the Summoning proxy from behind, but it
anticipated their approach somehow. It wheeled gracefully down from the balcony while clapping its
hands to conjure up a second gigantic animal. Above, another Pein-lookalike was watching from the
stone ledge of the post office.

“How many of this fucker are there!?” Kankuro roared, flinging his Sanshōuo puppet forward to
block the charging, slobbering dog that had at least five heads. While Maki summoned a jet of flame
sealed within her scroll parchment (searing the muzzles of the beast) Obito flitted up the side of the
brick residences to their left, his shuriken expertly aimed for the retreating Summoner proxy.

Trick wires attached to the projectiles wrapped ‘round the Summoner’s right arm and a flagpole,
winching it up to halt its jutsu. In a dive, Obito met the Summoner proxy in a flurry of Taijutsu,
amazed that the decoy was still fighting fiercely while restrained. Somehow, it was also anticipating
his punches, ‘How-? It doesn’t have the Sharingan... ’ He noticed something odd, ‘But those eyes
aren’t normal.’

While Kankuro and Maki were preoccupied with the many-headed, gigantic hound, Obito seconded
their call for backup on whatever channel his radio was set to. He plummeted down after the
Summoner when it wriggled free of its bindings, and Obito chased as it retreated toward its watching proxy comrade at the street’s end.

Puffing in short breaths, Obito repeated, “Utakata? Can you hear us? Anyone! Someone get over to east Main street and take care of this freaky giant dog!”

Saizō replied, *Giant dog? Was that summoned too?*

“Yes, I’m trying to stop the Summoner from calling anything else. It’s just keeping us distracted from helping Utakata.”

_Roger that. My Tide kids are having trouble with this crab, but it’s slow. Follows us relentlessly and its shell might be impenetrable. Watch out for it. I’m moving east for that dog. Who’s handling it?_

“Kankuro and Maki.” Obito dodged low and then vaulted over a recycling station as the two proxies hurled sharp, black rods at him, “Everyone! Be careful. I think these things can sense and avoid what we’re trying to do as we do it.”

Saizō and Kankuro’s remarks in his earpiece were jumbled as he closed in on Pein’s incarnations. In an attempt to drive a wedge between them, Obito unleashed a hellish column of a Fire Style jutsu. He immediately filed off as the Summoner dodged left, unconcerned with the other, less active proxy.

Something was not right. Obito’s speedy swings, locks, and kicks were avoided as if he were a novice; his Ninjutsu was handily dodged. Obito sputtered curses, trying to make sense of the sudden, enhanced evasion of his target. ‘How is it doing this?’ He stumbled sideways when he was stuck in the back with a rod. The proxy that seemed to lack techniques had pitched it at him.

Watching from over his shoulder, Obito took cover and removed the projectile, treating the shallow wound, ‘That could’ve been worse. So that other proxy…is staying. It’s not searching for Utakata because I’ve distracted it by chasing the Summoner.’ By that line of thinking, Obito supposed the Summoning proxy was rather significant, ‘Though Pein wants us distracted, I can keep him distracted too. There’s a priority to these things; certain copies are more important…’

Unfortunately, the Summoner had called another animal while Obito was recovering. A large, pierced chameleon appeared and climbed the side of one of the health offices. Its camouflage made it quickly blend into its surroundings, but the Sharingan was still able to spot it. What was worse: the spare incarnation had lunged at Obito when he tried to pursue the Summoner again. The two proxies rounded on him in full-force, and Obito strained to evade their strikes. Their tussle spanned across the street and over benches, approaching the central fountain of the town.

Buildings swayed and the ground trembled as detonations and the footfalls of giant beasts shook the Tide Village. Obito hastily summoned a huge fuuma shuriken from his tool scroll as he made a run for the fountain, half-grateful the proxies had focused on him, ‘Every second they waste on me is helping someone else!’ And yet, his plight became rather dire when the sneaky chameleon whipped its curled tail out of an alleyway, _thwacking_ Obito into the broad side of a retaining wall. The animal disappeared again and retreated while the pair of proxies seized an opening with weapons raised, prepared to skewer the man.

That was, until the unremarkable proxy was snatched from behind by a whip of water. Startled, the incarnation had nary a moment to struggle before it was reeled back into the fountain. The Water jutsu’s user had sprung ahead in a heel-drop kick that warded off the Summoner momentarily, allowing Obito to pick himself back up.
Obito regarded his savior and saw he was merely a Tide Village teenager—a lanky blonde who had raised a woodwind instrument to his lips. He also had a radio earpiece, Obito noticed.

“Thanks! You are?” Obito molded the introduction into his counterattack, preying on the Summoner proxy while he had the numbers advantage.

The Tide Village ninja was playing a tune, and suddenly Obito was invigorated, blood pumping, flash-quick over pavement. His Sharingan tracked the proxy’s hand signs in slow motion while he landed a successful low-kick trip on the incarnation. As it went down, its folded hands lined up with the swing of Obito’s mele-shuriken, snipping off those hands as if he were slicing lunch meat from a roast. In all of a moment, the Summoner wore a bemused look as it lost its only mode of conducting jutsu. The flute-playing Tide ninja added a timely follow up by cartwheel-kicking the neutered proxy into the same retaining wall with a shattering smash.

“I’m Menma.” The boy’s answer was a bit late, “How do you feel?”

“I feel— wow! I could punch a building down right now. What’d you do?” Obito was impressed, “The name’s Obito, by the way.”

“It’s my Rush Melody, and I know. I heard you over the radio— the things you and Kankuro said about proxies.” Menma concluded, “We have to work in groups to deal with them. They counter too fast when we are separate.”

“Yeah, I learned that the hard way.” They doubled back toward the fountain as the long-haired proxy fled. It ran west along the boulevard, where smoke was rising from rooftops and broken windows.

“There are more of them.” Menma warned, “I tried sharing what we saw over the radio! Utakata was dealing with a proxy that fires weapons and explosives, but we asked him to retreat and hide. I think he has for now. We’ve been distracting the proxies with fakes and transformations.”

“Good.” Obito tapped his earpiece, “Kankuro! Are you alive?”

For now! Saizō’s here and used his Kekkei Genkai on this dog, but it grows more heads every time you cut one off! It’s too big for us to seal.

“Shit.” Obito was alarmed to hear that.

“Yeah, so no head-slicing. We have to find another way to stop it. Problem is— it’s heading westbound. We’re in pursuit.

Menma and Obito could feel the rumble of the ground under their feet. Obito added, “Just so you know, that Summoner proxy has no hands, so I think it can’t do much at this point. It did summon a chameleon though, so be on the lookout for an ambush.”

Oh, dandy.

“Kankuro-taicho, we’re pursuing one of the proxies now!” Menma reported, “Westbound, nearing the coastal barracks. There’s been trouble with a weapon-launcher type. Utakata is hiding for now. His radio may be damaged.”

We need to find him or at least have a way to communicate with him. Keep us up-to-date on anything else you spot. Kankuro’s commands faded as he and his group engaged the dog again.

When Obito switched over to Channel Three, there was only screaming. He raised his voice to try to
get an explanation, “Can you hear me? This is Obito. What is your position and what’s happening?”

- the- beach—! The static of the response was hard to understand, Run! - - He’s killed all of them. - -
- Sucked our chakra dry…we can’t—get away--

The channel went abruptly silent. Obito exchanged an anxious look with his young companion, and then shielded his head when the stone and shingling of a tall building was crushed apart in a plume. The baying of the freakish dog drowned out warnings on the radio. They avoided the stamping, wrecking beast and the debris it flung about. Ahead, the simple, jutsu-less incarnation of Pein disappeared into the manicured hedges of a small garden labyrinth beside the department store.

“Menma, call for backup and find that proxy before he gets away and joins others.” Obito directed him, “I’ve got to do something about this mutt!”

With a nod, Menma raced ahead and pleaded for assistance over Channels Two and Four. Several Tide ninja rapidly joined him beside the store, and the group took a shortcut to the end of the hedged picnic area. Skidding in a turn, Obito formed hand signs for an Earth jutsu that caved in the road and swallowed the hound’s legs up to the shoulder and flanks. With Kankuro’s group racing toward the stunned beast, he had a prayer that maybe this was a threat they could deal with.

The wheeled iris of his Sharingan spun with each jutsu he reproduced and attacked with. Then, there was a twinge of discomfort— disorientation.

His stomach roiled and a feeling of vertigo struck Obito, ‘Oh no…’

It was back again. Double-vision blurred into another hallucination. ‘I can’t! Not here—I’m not putting up with this again!’ It was as if he could see the fuchsia boughs of a plum blossom grove overhead; a green lawn and tree stumps only a few steps away when in fact…none of it was there.

He had to push through it. His participation was crucial. Obito pulled the goggles on his face down, slung around his neck, and slapped his cheeks. The imaginary orchard faded a little.

He knew that he wasn’t oxygenating well— not breathing correctly. Though Utakata had thought himself prepared, perhaps indignantly defiant about this entire Akatsuki threat, he hadn’t been prepared to watch the heads and limbs of young Tide ninja get blown off by an explosive missile. Neither had he been prepared to watch the city, his home, Hotaru’s home— crumble and burn. When the order came for him to hide, he’d done so willingly, trying to take that time to collect himself and breathe.

At the edge of the passageway between the ice cream shop and dentist’s office, there lay a body of a Tide Chunin. Pressed against the stucco wall, and concealed behind advertisement banners, Utakata stared at the fallen young shinobi.

He crept forward slowly, working up the nerve to collect the Chunin’s radio as a replacement. Utakata crouched down beside the Tide ninja and reverently slid his eyes shut, taking the undamaged radio for himself. Utakata then retreated into the darkened ice cream shop and fitted himself with the radio, clicking over to Channel Two, “Kankuro—”

Fuck— you’re alive! Where are you—? The Sand captain sounded preoccupied, as if fighting something.

“The soft serve shop on Tenth and Main. I’m sorry, I had to find another radio—” Utakata choked up as he thought again of the Tide ninja who had given their lives to protect him, “Most of C Squad is dead.”
A voice spoke back over the channel, *I’m alright, Utakata!* It was Menma’s voice, to his slight relief, *I found B Squad and we’re driving away one of the proxies.*

Utakata folded his hands and pressed them to his forehead, grieving, “Menma. I’m sorry.”

*We all knew what we had to do. Please don’t take any risks!*

“I didn’t want to bring…this destruction on you. Not on any of you…” It felt like Hidden Mist all over again. Watching bodies litter the streets, the senseless violence. Still, it was so, so hard to breathe.

*Stay where you are.* Kankuro’s command was clear, *Don’t engage. If you’re discovered, that’s fine. Fight. For now it’s best if Pein can’t find you.*

“But you’ll—”

*We’re doing pretty good, all considered. Obito’s jutsu are helping. We’re close by on Main.* Kankuro added, *This goddamn dog just won’t stop!*

A long quiet followed. He loitered in the ice cream shop as vapor and dust floated by, watching the window. Utakata tried once again to steel his nerves as the bedraggled, hand-less Summoner incarnation of Pein hobbled by on the sidewalk outside, heedless of whom could see it from the one-way window.

When a sound caught his attention, Utakata whipped around to see the alleyway side exit of the shop was ajar, and the conical eye of a giant chameleon was peering in at him. Outdoors, the Summoner proxy seemed to instantly know the hiding place of its target. It re-routed and dashed across the street, to Utakata’s shock.

Utakata blew a swarm of bubbles as a buffer while in retreat, fumbling through the store room of the shop, and out of an east-facing window into a loading bay. He weaved through crevices between buildings, under awnings, hearing the footfalls of a pursuer somewhere behind. ‘*When that animal saw me…the proxy could see me too.*’ Utakata was alarmed by the link, ‘*Even though I was hidden, it didn’t matter. That’s why we need to face these things one at a time…I think they share their vision with one another.*’

He was racing southeast toward the harbor, where the abundance of water would make counterattacking with Ninjutsu a cinch. Utakata also hoped that since the majority of the fighting was taking place on the west side of the city, there was a smaller chance of being discovered around the deserted pier. He shared his insight over Channel Two, “Kankuro, Obito, Maki, whoever can hear me— these things share a field of vision! Even with their summoned animals. Don’t take on more than one if you can help it-!”

Nearby, a dock house exploded as a hail of missiles struck it and its neighboring buildings. Utakata strafed left behind the latticed fence of a restaurant, unleashing a flurry of alkaline bubbles to assail the persistent missile-launching proxy. It rushed forward without a care, shrugging off half of its cloak to reveal a saw-blade attached to its torso like a sash. It had also been concealing six arms. The proxy hacked the fence apart to continue the chase, unhurt by the alkaline bubbles that fizzed on its clothing and flesh.

At the opposite end of the brick passageway, Utakata saw the Summoner incarnation waiting at the end passively, blocking his exit. The jinchuriki pivoted on quick feet, making a hard right down the perpendicular alleyway as the Summoner and Weapon proxies chased from both ends of the brick passage. The Summoner arrived first at the adjoining path that Utakata had disappeared down, and it
inadvertently disturbed a singular black bubble charged with Tailed-Beast chakra.

Jostled, the bubble’s black coating receded, and the resulting caesium explosion leveled the buildings surrounding the alley with a deafening boom. Though the Weapon incarnation was able to clamber out of the rubble with minimal damage, the Summoner proxy was charred and disfigured; motionless under a pile of bricks.

‘One of them is still behind me...’ Utakata made a mental note of how the Weapon proxy just would not quit, and it flushed him out into the yard of a concrete warehouse at the pier. Though he pulled ahead, near enough to lagoon water to begin retaliating with specialty jutsu—a force struck him. Utakata was flung without warning against the side of a warehouse— though nothing had physically made contact with him.

Bewildered, he scrambled to his feet again, his eyes darting between the Weapon incarnation to his left, and the newcomer on the right. Utakata felt an acute feeling of dread, seeing that expressionless face: pierced, solemn, a hard strike etched through the symbol of Hidden Rain on its headband. The new proxy stopped in the exact same moment the Weapon proxy did, then it addressed him, “Six-Tails jinchuriki...”

Without missing a beat, Utakata spat a corrosive stream of alkaline liquid at the speaker. The attack seemed to bend away from the proxy in a sphere— repelled by an unseen force. The hissing, steaming liquid splashed uselessly onto concrete as the incarnation went on, “You are eager to know pain.”

“I’ve never been eager to know anything beyond fine wine.” Breaths came sporadically, his hands pressed against the wall behind him, “You’re the one called Pein. Seem to have yourself a cult following…”

“All are one whole, derived of the Six Paths; one each to rip an equal piece of you away.” Pein raised a hand aimed at his target, “Come, and avert your eyes as this village bleeds.”

Incensed, Utakata gritted his teeth and charged at the heartless shinobi, “—you did this-!”

He lost his footing as he began to slide with speed, pulled by the inexplicable force again. Utakata was dragged in and seized by the collar of his vest, and Pein stuck a black rod into his arm as he struggled. In those fleeting seconds, Utakata spat another jet of alkaline liquid— though a trite response— and Pein released him to leap away from the attack.

‘Why?’ Utakata tried to work out the meaning of the push and pull ability the proxy wielded, ‘It didn’t try to avoid my jutsu before...’ He scrambled toward water, ducking under the swing of the Weapon proxy’s saw-blade.

Covering his tracks with a spray of corrosive bubbles, Utakata sped dockside toward the lagoon shaded by tall silos. He plucked the sharp rod from his arm and tossed it aside, overhearing the explosions of bubbles and missiles that trailed behind him.

There. At the necessary proximity, his hand signs driven by haste, Utakata was able to create a small mob of Water Clones that unleashed a fury of jutsu and bubble-blowing on his pursuers. The force-exerting proxy lingered on the periphery, not actively trying to fight or risk itself. When Water Clones and corrosive bubbles neared, the proxy would deflect attacks with its repelling shield. From where he observed the proxies behind a fiberglass construction panel, Utakata passed on an update, “Kankuro, can you hear me?”

What are you whispering for? Where are you?

“There are two proxies here at the east pier...they’ve cut me off.” Utakata spoke softly as he treaded
around the back end of a warehouse, listening to the commotion of his clones battling Pein’s incarnations. “I would try to escape to the north of the island…but I don’t want to lead Pein toward the Academy classes there.”

Then don’t. Stay where you are and hold on. I’m sending reinforcements to you now. We’re kind of in a spot...there’s something on the beach that’s already killed two of Tide’s squads. Kankuro filled him in, Just keep talking to us. We need to keep tabs on you—

On the opposite side of the shipyard building, the Weapon proxy had opened the mechanized plates of its bald head to charge an energy cannon, and the resulting beam shredded all of the clones in the yard. As dust and silence settled, and Utakata tried to hear any instructions from comrades over the radio...his sprint to escape the yard fell short.

Pein’s force had pinned him to the steel siding of the building. Utakata swooned and tried to see straight as the world spun. The Force proxy seized the jinchuriki by his throat, stabbing black rods into his side and stomach. Over the radio channel, Kankuro could hear the breathless wails of his unresponsive friend. His clamoring in Utakata’s earpiece was of no help.

“With the harvest of the Rokubi’s chakra,” Pein explained, “The Akatsuki will be one step closer to leveling and unifying the many nations that shinobi have quarreled over for centuries.”

He dug his nails into the wrist of the proxy, desperate for a gulp of air. Utakata’s eyes watered as he was made to listen to the manifesto.

Pein went on, “You can rejoice in that you have played your part, jinchuriki. The same function you serve is better managed by the Akatsuki, and your existence has not been in vain. Your submission is to the benefit of this fledgling village. Only those that experience pain can know the value of peace —”

Pressurized, geyser-jets of water shot the proxy off of Utakata with sharpshooter precision. The Force incarnation was blasted to the far end of the pier, through a padlocked gate, and into the lagoon. A squadron of Tide shinobi had descended to fend off the attackers, and as the Weapon proxy rounded the corner of the warehouse to counter them, Utakata inhaled and mustered the strength to expel another corrosive alkali breath at it. The incarnation was struck in the face and chest — blinded. It hobbled momentarily as the gaggle of valiant Tide Chunin unleashed Water techniques on it...which aggravated the alkaline liquids it was coated with; steaming and sizzling.

Out of breath, Utakata was hauled away by one shinobi, stumbling north along the wooden planks of harbor docks. They wound around the perimeter of the waterfront, unsteady on their feet, zigzagging to freedom beneath winches and tether lines. Neither could answer Kankuro’s demands over the radio while still trying to oxygenate. Hotaru slipped Utakata’s arm from her shoulder and let him sink down, sitting tiredly and tipping his head back. She lifted the earpiece from his face to speak into the radio, recovering more quickly, “Kankuro? We found him.”

Thanks— sorry to bother you guys, I know you’re supposed to be looking after your students.

“It’s alright, Tazuna sent us here anyway to help.” Her worried gaze settled on Utakata, “I wasn’t going to leave him no matter what, not after I heard what was happening.”

Utakata made a soft sound of protest, “…you need to go back…”

“He’s injured, so I’m going to treat him over here while we have some cover.” Hotaru decided, “Please keep in touch with everyone on Channel Five. They only have a few radios with them…and they’re fighting two on the east side.”
Copy that. I’m trying to direct medic-nin to those injured on the south side, but we’re short staffed. Let me know if you need help.

Utakata was both overjoyed and troubled to see her, as he’d been relying on the reassurance that Hotaru was far beyond the calamity in the Tide Village for the day.

Dizzy, Utakata watched her tip an assortment of medical supplies from her hip pouch onto the dock, and then press her hands beneath the sites of his wounds, “Take a breath—we’re pulling this out.”

He couldn’t, but she removed the first rod swiftly, ignoring his shriek as she immediately went after the other. Hotaru tossed both of the sharp, bloodied receivers into the olive hued water of the lagoon. His hands obeyed when she arranged them to stem the bleeding. While disinfecting and patting gauze over his injuries, Hotaru did a lucidity check, “Can you talk? What’s your name?”

“Awa Utakata.”

“Good. Can you tell me where we are, and who I am?”

“Shiogakure’s east harbor…and you are Hotaru.” He smiled a little, at ease, “My wife.”

“Not yet, I’m not.” She scoffed, rather annoyed.

“Well, in all but name you are.”

“It’s a nice sentiment.” Hotaru concluded and kissed his cheek, “Are you going to be okay? That was scary.”

He shut his eyes and nodded, thanking his lucky stars, “Very.”

“Think you can stand?”

“I can.” He rose sluggishly to his feet, “None of Pein’s attacks were intended to be fatal…perhaps because the Akatsuki needs me alive for an extraction.”

The hair on the back of her neck was on end, disturbed by the prospect, “We’re not going to let them do that.” Hotaru led him by the hand further up the network of docks, under loading bays and suspended rowboats.

“Were those Academy teachers that came with you?” Utakata wondered.

“Yes, and some members of security patrols that returned after Kankuro’s alert.” She confirmed.

He supposed, “They won’t be able to do much against Pein.”

“We have to try.”

“None of you have to.” Utakata protested, “The village bears no responsibility in my safekeeping. It’s the other way around.”

“It does when we, along with other nations, don’t want the Akatsuki to come into power by collecting the chakra of Tailed-Beasts.” Hotaru protested rigidly, “So no matter how you look at it, you staying far away from the Akatsuki is what matters.”

“Not anymore.” He was shaking his head.

Hotaru gave him another tug down a short flight of stairs, arriving at a recreational boat yard where
motorboats and fishing vessels were moored. She tugged again, but he didn’t budge as they stood on the deserted landing. There was a desperate look on her face.

He had to speak about his obligations, “I’m going to—”

“No.”

“Hotaru, I can’t sneak away while—”

“No.” She stomped her foot, her temper tinged by grief and fear.

“Do you know how many people I saw die today?” Utakata could not sugarcoat what was happening, “Because of me?”

She bowed her head so he couldn’t see the tears welling in her eyes.

He pulled her close and rested a hand on her cheek, “You saved my life.”

Hotaru was nodding, trying not to surrender to his suggestion.

“Please let me save their lives.” He requested firmly.

“Not if it means I can’t have you…if it means I lose you.” She protested with a wild shake of her head, “We can leave again. We have before—when things got tough. If we can put distance between us and those who are tracking you, we can settle somewhere else. They’ll leave the Tide Village alone.”

“No, they won’t.” Utakata was certain of it, “Pein wants to punish this village. The Akatsuki will never stop looking for me no matter where I go.”

“My clan stopped looking for me when—!”

“This isn’t the same.”

“I swear I’d agree with you—I’d let you—if we weren’t going to start a family.” Her admission was tearful, “You’re the best chance they have…at surviving this. I know that. But you’re also our best chance. I’m not as strong and independent as you are. I can’t raise Bindama by myself.” Hotaru wiped her cheeks with the back of her hand, “I’ll turn him into a nervous wreck just like me. Please.” She peeped, “Stay with us.”

Just then, it was impossible to argue with her. The words sliced straight through to his heart, and Utakata suddenly felt the way he had in the old days—as if he could run endlessly, always a step ahead of those who chased him. The flight instinct was overpowering now that his family was at stake.

So when Hotaru led him on to the nearest berth and stepped down onto the swaying deck of a well-appointed motorboat, he stepped down too. Utakata stood listlessly as Hotaru fuddled around, setting the radio earpiece down on the dashboard. She searched for a key to start the ignition. She was also going over how she’d mapped out a location 62 kilometers east to a mangrove island, where they would ditch the boat and continue south toward the Water Country’s archipelago. She could call in some favors with locals there.

Wrapped up in his thoughts, Utakata wondered why Hotaru assumed the baby was a boy. Although, he really liked the name she picked and told her so, “Bindama is a good name.”
“You think so? That’s great.” Her smile was weary, “Go to the bow and check that emergency ration bag, please. All we need is fresh water. Hold on. I’ve got to hotwire this thing.” It wouldn’t be the first time she had stolen a boat, and it probably would not be the last.

Utakata confirmed there was indeed a store of fresh water jugs and life preservers packed, and he watched Hotaru scrounge up a spare battery and some wire from her leg holster. She crouched beneath the steering column to set to work. He lifted up the radio to check Channel Five, knowing that Hotaru’s peers would still have to deal with Pein, “Tide ninja, do you need assistance?”

*We are en route to the city center! This guy can push and pull stuff…and that weapon proxy is just rampaging blindly!*

“You’re being followed?”

*Yeah! Wanted to give you the chance to- The transmission cut out.*

Horrified, Utakata switched to Channel Two, “Kankuro? Obito?”

There was no answer.

“Anyone?”

He tried Channel Four, got some static, and then tried to reach Channel Two again.

“Menma, are you there? Saizō?” The lack of replies made Utakata reconsider a harebrained escape.

He glanced down and saw Hotaru toying with a spark, cursing when the starter would not cooperate. Utakata fitted the radio to his ear and then reached down to get her attention, drawing a questioning look from Hotaru. “A boat would probably be of little use to us, in this situation.” He rationalized.

“Then we’ll go by foot. We’ve done plenty of long-distance water walking.”

“You’re pregnant.”

“And fit as a fiddle.”

“It’s 62 kilometers you’re talking about covering; or 16 to the mainland of the Fire Country if you feel that’s any safer.” The second option he also doubted, “Hotaru, go back to the wildlife preserve and stay there.”

“So you can run to the village and fight?” She was scowling, and bent down again to continue her work, “Psh! Sounds about as stupid as every other idea we’ve had.” The engine hummed to life.

Utakata sighed in frustration. Hotaru sealed up the panel and stood, not fighting the tight hug he pulled her into.

“If I leave, then I am a traitor who forsakes all of the friends we’ve made…and spits in the face of the good fortune we’ve had.”

“We are *leaving.*” She insisted.

“This is the home we chose. The place that held opportunities for us— that we knew would have opportunities for Bindama as well. The old life is gone. This place is everything.”

Hotaru shook her head at him because it felt like he was using the name she had chosen against her, wielding it as some form of persuasion.
“Don’t you love me more now that I’m someone who has a place in society? That I can take responsibility after rejecting everyone and everything for years?” He asked her.

“No.” She lied, “I’ve never liked heroes. You trying to pull this crap gives me heartburn. Stop it, already.”

“Sorry.” Utakata wiped a few tears from her face.

“We’re wasting gas.” Hotaru pointed out.

“Just a moment.” A good kiss was in order, and it was long and forgetful and mutually calming. Afterward, Hotaru nestled her head beneath his chin and relaxed. She was a bit suspicious when she felt his hand move and rise up above her shoulder— then she realized it a fraction too late— the blowing pipe pressed to his mouth.

“Don’t-!” Her cry was distorted when he sealed her in a large soap bubble. Hotaru’s reaction was not as quick as his hand signs, when she drew a kunai from her hip pouch and tried to puncture it. Utakata had fortified the sphere with a secondary jutsu, rendering the bubble un-popable.

“I’ll send you back toward the classes and release you there. Please, stay with Tazuna and the students.” He begged, knowing she wouldn’t listen, “Wait for me.”

Hotaru raged as she floated along the northwesterly winds of the island, kicking and punching the bubble she was trapped in. Her eyes flashed in defiance in the last few seconds he stayed to watch her, and then Utakata took off over the docks, back toward the city.

‘Saiken.’ He thought, ‘I’m scared.’

Me too.

‘She might hate me for this.’

Eh, I say it was the right call. She and lil Bindadoo are gonna be safe.

‘Bindama.’ He corrected.

That’s what I said.

‘Please help me. I can’t leave it to everyone else— I have to fight Pein too!’

The Tailed-Beast slug was hyping himself up, coasting on the adrenalin of his host, Fucking prick! He squashed all our favorite shops! And your friends!

Help me. He felt the surge. There was no barrier whatsoever. No hesitation. No misunderstanding. The chakra cloak that enveloped Utakata dripped with every last ounce of Saiken’s chakra.

Inari’s voice sounded over Channel Two, Hey boss— that proxy that’s got no jutsu…well it does. It’s killing people just by touching them! Rips their souls out or something. They’re just gone.

“Then you stay the hell away, or your gramps is going to lose it.” Kankuro advised, “Where did you last see it, Inari?”

Second and Providence. Also, the scary chakra-sucking one is coming your way. Closer to Fifth, still on Providence heading north toward Main. The Leaf Sealing Corps are still trying to stop it, but it’s
“Like I said, stay out of it.” Kankuro said as he staggered backwards while Kiryama Saizo’s Coral Release Kekkei Genkai expanded with an earth-shaking rattle, covering up the multi-headed dog in an effort to stop its rampage. The peach colored mountain of coral seemed to finally freeze the beast in place.

On a nearby rooftop Obito hooted, “Finally!”

Saizo fell to his backside on the street, wheezing, “I am…definitely…not getting paid enough.”

“None of us will be, after this fiasco.” Kankuro expected meager paychecks in the weeks to come. He shielded his eyes and peered down the street as a lone figure appeared in the distance, “Maki? You see that right?”

“A proxy.” She correctly guessed from beside her captain. Immediately after that, the half-melted Weapon proxy raised its six arms and fired a blind volley of missiles—several colliding with the dentistry and real estate buildings…and also cracked the coral vault imprisoning the summoned hound.

The dog struggled and began to break free of Saizo’s Coral Palace.

Unable to see or react to Tide ninja’s counterattacks, the Weapon proxy was firing wildly, turning and slashing with the functioning portion of its saw-blade. Kankuro ordered his main street companions to redirect their efforts on the loose cannon and worry about the dog later.

Except that, a portion of Tide’s Sensory Corps, headed by Hidden Leaf’s Yamanaka Inoshishi, were being chased by the giant crustacean, mid-way between Kankuro’s counterattack and the blinded Weapon proxy. And the Weapon incarnation had not come alone.

The Force proxy reached out with an attractive force and pulled the nearest, hapless victim it could reach. Inoshishi had no time to react when he was delivered to the Force proxy, where it pummeled him to the ground and then stabbed him through the heart with a black rod. The startled man gaped like a fish while staring at the sky for the few seconds he was still alive. Inoshishi’s accompanying Sealing Corps friends were outraged, and foolishly elected to attack the offending proxy. Kankuro could not get a word in edgewise as the mayhem continued south again towards Providence Street. The crab and dog, now free, sandwiched Kankuro’s group on Main with the flailing Weapon proxy. They were in no position to assist the Sensory Corps combating Pein.

Kankuro. He heard Utakata’s voice on the radio again, after a long while.

“You okay, bubble-boy?” Kankuro asked, puppeteering Sanshōuo to block debris and errant projectile strikes, “I lost touch with those Academy teachers on Channel Five.”

They’re dead. Hotaru is safe. Utakata reported, I’m coming back to the four corners. Are you still there?

He didn’t like that idea, “Yeah, but NO, don’t come out now and blow it! We’ve got one melted proxy shooting at everything and two summoned beasts we can’t kill.”

Kankuro knew full well that his rag-tag team was not handling their predicament well, and so a helping hand from anyone ought to be appreciated. But he was hushed in shock when Utakata rocketed onto the scene, an envelope of crimson-violet energy visibly radiating off of him. A tidal wave of bubbles barreled over both of the troublesome summon animals, sparing all Tide sympathizers, and gave Utakata a clear shot at the maimed Weapon proxy on the street.
Though the energy cannon within its head was damaged, the incarnation was going to give it a try anyway. Utakata struck the ground in a meteoric skid, gouging up pavers with momentum, and exhaled a large, black bubble that swallowed the Weapon proxy. The bubble carried it up and up into the sky above, where the incarnation’s own reckless attack resulted in a violent explosion. It scattered in small pieces over the city, destroyed.

Obito and Saizō were very considerate in trying to stop the charging crustacean from crushing the jinchuriki on the street…but Saizō was plum out of chakra, and Obito’s Lightning Release hardly slowed the creature. Their efforts were unnecessary. Utakata’s partial transformation converted his arm into a serrated, corrosive appendage, and it speared the crab through its mouth, through the brain, and out the back of its shell. With a sputter, the animal disappeared in a cloud of smoke. A residual splatter of Saiken’s liquid struck the ground and buildings.

Saizō warded Obito back, “Whoa! Yo, stay away from that liquid. That shit will melt your feet the fuck off…”

“Thanks. I definitely won’t touch it.” Obito said, a bit amazed by the former Mist ninja’s vernacular.

And then, the gigantic dog pounced, slamming the glowing jinchuriki beneath its paws. Its many muzzles snapped and fought each other, each fighting to get the first bite in on its captive. The dog slipped off and tumbled, thrown aside by the rapidly ballooning body of Saiken as his true form was released.

From the alleyway, Obito and Saizō stared in wonder as the Tailed-Beast slug wrapped a few of its tails around the legs and heads of the dog. The viscous, corrosive liquid that Saiken secreted began tearing the dog apart with hissing steam. In moments, a few of its limbs fell away, and the limp body of the hound crashed to the ground. When that summon was also dispelled, Obito could hear Kankuro trying to get through to Utakata on Channel Two.

--Can you still hear me? Try to be inconspicuous! Not giant! Utakata?

Saiken’s pillowy, slow form dissipated, revealing Utakata’s human shape again—his chakra cloak faded. I hear you, Kankuro.

--Good job man, holy shit! Kankuro was incredibly thankful, Lay low for a bit and take a breather. We’ve got three other known proxies to deal with.

Utakata nodded and hurried into the patchwork of passageways and haggard buildings.

Exhausted, Saizō retreated with a pair of Tide ninja headed west on the street in search of medical attention. Kankuro directed Obito and Maki south, to where he had seen Shiogakure’s Sensory Corps members chase the Force incarnation of Pein. Obito fell behind and started rubbing at his eyes.

Kankuro halted, frowning in concern, “You alright?”

“Yeah, just…” Obito blinked hard, “I’m having double-vision. It’ll pass.”

“You should go to the Medical Corps as well.” Maki recommended.

“Not yet.”

“That’s an order.” Kankuro commanded, “I’m not going to let your impairment weigh on my conscience if I see you get toasted today. Get treated.”

“-you’re banged up too-!”
“I know.” Kankuro then spoke into his radio, “Menma? What’s your position?”

--The florist’s rooftop. B Squad sighted the giant chameleon on Fourth and Grove. I had a visual on Utakata’s position as well, inside the hardware store. He may need to relocate. I think the animal is searching for him and we’re trying to distract it.

“Alright, stay there and keep on that lizard. I’m sending Obito your way, and you let your B Squad medic-nin take a look at him. He’s rattled.” The Sand captain added, “I may ask you guys to keep the other proxies away while we work on the nearest one. Since they can all see the same shit, apparently. The Weapon proxy is finished, as are the crab and dog, FYI.”

--Yes, Captain! Menma acknowledged, I’ll remain here for the time being. Utakata, did you hear all of that?

Utakata chimed in, I did. I also damaged the Summoner proxy at the pier. Has anyone heard if reinforcements from other villages are on the way?

“I told Jiraiya-sama about the situation a few days ago, so hopefully he and some Sand ninja will be here soon.” Obito added, “I am not sure how quickly he was able to contact the Hokage.”

Kankuro nodded to Obito, “Get going, then.”

They separated, and the pair of Sand shinobi slinked cautiously onto the somewhat pristine Providence Street, where the Force proxy of Pein had collapsed a concrete building’s terrace onto two unfortunate Sensory Corps members. In the same heartbeat, Kankuro noted how the Sensor ninja named Reijiro counterattacked immediately, snaring a metal-snap net around the fleet footed proxy. Reijiro gave the order to his comrades to attack the caught incarnation, and while the rain of weaponry and projectiles was considerable…it did not do enough.

“Dammnit, what channel is the Sensory Corps on?” Kankuro hissed, and Maki indicated it was Channel Seven, more than likely. He clicked over to that channel, “Reijiro? You need to incapacitate that thing! Cut the head off—superficial wounds and pain don’t slow these things down—!”

The next repelling wave thrust the metal net off of Pein’s incarnation, and it rose to its feet while nonchalantly plucking kunai and shuriken out of its torso.

--Captain Kankuro! Sorry, we’ll try that next. I’ve been counting five seconds between each push or pull.

Upon hearing that, Maki was on all other communicating channels, repeating the same crucial findings.

“Five seconds? Good to know.” He pulled a new tool scroll from his belt, “Since this proxy seems to be one of the baddest in the bunch, I’m going to give it a hell of a time.” Kankuro kneeled down and summoned a lanky, towering puppet from the scroll. He offered Maki a lopsided grin while he attached chakra strings to the segmented body and limbs of the puppet.

“We haven’t tested that yet.” She reminded him.

“ Seems like now is as good a time as any to try it out.”

Maki disagreed, “A better time would be back in Suna, in a controlled environment. Certainly that would be better than a trial run against S-Ranked criminals.”

“Do this. I’ll buy you dinner.”
“You’ll buy if we live.” She sighed and unclipped a spare sealing scroll from her back, attaching it to the spine of the puppet. Maki also fixed a few chakra strings of her own to the scroll’s parchment, knowing this hazardous stunt would require extreme coordination for a combo-attack.

Waiting for the ideal moment as the last three Sensor-ninja of Tide scrambled around Pein, Kankuro and Maki rushed from their hiding place when the proxy used a repelling blast. One of the Sensors was impaled by a soaring flurry of black rods, and then retrieved by Reijiro to be brought to the Medical Corps. Pein locked his arm around the swinging punch of the last Tide Chunin before kicking the poor amateur through an adjacent building. From the corner of his eye, the incarnation spotted Sand ninja rushing for him while its force abilities were unavailable.

Maki parted from Kankuro at a forty-five degree angle, flashing by at top speed with her parchment flying free of the puppet, Funanori, its tall sail unfurled and absorbing lines of her Sealing formulas. It was a creation inspired by the Tide Village and Kankuro’s commitment to it—plunging ahead while firing two harpoon lines at Pein’s proxy.

The dual-attack was a ploy and the incarnation knew it. It held still and took a singular hit; shot through the shoulder by a harpoon. Had it dodged left, Maki’s unwinding scroll (now half the span of the road) would have ensnared it. Pein leveled a plainly unappreciative look at Kankuro as he cut himself free, harpoon bolt still lodged in flesh, ducking under the gangly, acrobatic swipes of the puppet.

Seconds ticked by and the time gap closed, allowing the proxy to go on the offensive. Pein raised a hand at the offending puppet to strike it with repelling force…but an incredible leap took Funanori airborne like a kite, avoiding the blow that crushed a patio, restaurant, and the trees beside it. While Funanori soared, Kankuro snapped his hand, launching another volley of harpoons while a second spindle of sail fabric unwound—a copy of Maki’s original sealing work. It coiled down to the earth to snatch the enemy, directed by chakra strings.

Maki’s own Sealing parchment spread wide like a trawl net, closing in from behind as the proxy hopped backwards to evade Kankuro’s attacks. Cornered with seconds to spare, Pein was trapped against the façade of a confectionery. Maki’s lateral scroll length contracted and caught an unintended target—a burnt, fouled incarnation of Pein that lacked hands had jumped down from the rooftop. Maki’s Sealing technique illuminated with a blue shine and mummified the sacrificed target, allowing the Force proxy to escape. The kunoichi ejected her chakra strings and charged, jumping over the neutralized incarnation on the ground.

‘He must have been saving a damaged proxy to use as a decoy!’ She watched as Pein wielded a pulling force to pluck Funanori from the sky, slamming it to the concrete and shattering the fragile puppet.

Kankuro was mid-way through trying to shimmy the copied Sealing sail on Funanori from under debris, tugging on chakra strings, when he realized that Pein was upon him like a whirlwind. He was nicked once in the side of the head by the slash of a piercing rod, and frantically countered with kunai as the jabs came in rapid succession. ‘Not good! If he keeps us in close quarters, he’ll have an advantage when the time gap closes…” Kankuro could see that his Taijutsu was child’s play compared to the Akatsuki leader’s—Pein thrashed him from side to side, unspoiled and never tiring, driving him through a decorative stele with battering punches.

He was saving it, Kankuro noticed. The incarnation was not wasteful with its force abilities. As Kankuro heaved himself to his feet, wondering if his Karasu puppet could do any good, Pein observed him with a calculating stare. Maki dove at Pein from behind, her hand lit with high-level Seals on each of her fingertips—and he quickly reacted. He blasted her off with a repelling defense,
in the same moment Kankuro took to summon his last puppet and struggle out of rubble. For Pein had only blocked a Fire Clone; an old trick from Maki’s days as a student of Pakura, the Hero of Sunagakure.

The real Maki appeared with burst of speed from the right, timely in her ambush, bellowing a war cry as she reached to plant her Sealing formula on the incarnation’s face. Pein thrust a sharpened rod through her palm to stop the jutsu, following through with a round kick that knocked her away. Kankuro was able to maneuver within inches of Pein’s neck, Karasu’s scythes extended, when the repelling blast came again. It hurled the puppet away as Kankuro and Maki were thrown back against the exterior of the largest health office in the city. Bricks tumbled down and dust swirled.

Kankuro tried to get his bearings, his sight blurry and ears ringing, “Maki—?” Agony seared through his shoulder, then his thigh. His eyes snapped wide. The proxy was stabbing him.

The Sand ninja weakly struggled, trying to pry Pein off as it casually stuck him over and over with its piercing rods. Pein was speaking to him authoritatively, “Tell him to come.”

Kankuro lacked enough air in his lungs to utter how he didn’t understand, but Pein went on to explain it to him, tapping Kankuro’s radio earpiece gently with a finger, “Use this. Send the jinchuriki to me, and you will be freed.”

“—like fuck I’ll—!” He sputtered and hissed as he was stuck in the shoulder, the rod grinding against bone. Kankuro supposed his screaming was what woke Maki up right about then, as she had been unconscious.

“You caused me great inconvenience by sealing Naraka Path.” Pein told him, “Call the jinchuriki. Tell him to save you.”

He dared not call out on his radio, writhing and yelping until Pein left him stuck against the wall by three rods. Tweaking with pain, Kankuro’s gaze followed the proxy’s path when it went to Maki, producing another piercing rod from its sleeve. The sloshed words of *no and me instead* did not deter Pein at all when he dragged the woman to a standing position and pinned her to the cracked bricks. Maki put up more of a struggle while screaming and kicking, her shoulder and stomach stabbed, and Pein demanded the same of her. That she call Utakata on her radio. The kunoichi’s blood rapidly soaked her fatigues.

About then, Kankuro wanted to give up. He raised a trembling hand to call over Channel Two, “We’re on…Sixth and Providence…” His voice croaked, “If anyone can hear me.”

—*I do, Kankuro.*

“Don’t come here.” He ordered, “Stay away from the Force proxy if you can. Try to get the Sealing Corps…you’ll need numbers…”

—*Are you injured?*

Kankuro didn’t answer. He tilted his head and called Maki’s name, hoping that it would least keep her conscious. Pein took a few backwards steps to regard them, mildly impressed with the stalwart attitudes of Sand shinobi. Yet he had grown impatient. He raised a hand with the intention of crushing them with a *push.*

Pein reneged on the decision at the last moment—a torrent of flames rolled like dragon tongues over the pavement, filling the avenue, spilling into alleyways, and superheated the glass of the confectionery until it broke with a high-pitched *clink.* Kankuro felt sweat slick off of his face as the
heat devoured the road ahead of him. Slowly, he raised his arm again to try to free himself of the rod in his left shoulder.

Though it had been a tremendous jutsu, Pein defended himself with his repelling shield. As the immense fire parted and died down, Obito charged at Pein, letting a volley of shuriken fly. As he flitted around the Akatsuki leader, Obito was yammering into Channel Two, demanding that Kankuro help himself—Still with it? Get out of here! Maki too! I’m not good enough to beat this guy! To Kankuro, it sure looked like he was trying. The man’s craftiness with trick wire and projectiles was remarkable, yet Pein sidled and stepped away from snares with grace. Hacking, Kankuro freed himself, his hands slippery with his own blood as he hurried to aid Maki.

‘This is him alright.’ Obito narrowed his eyes at the face he recognized, ‘This is the form that Pein displays to other Akatsuki members…’ He flipped away from a blasting force, landing neatly beside the saw horses of a construction site. He ducked once, twice, as black rods were pitched at him, rolling over the top of a barricade, and kicked up the steel spade that sat abandoned beside an excavation trench for pipework. It would do. Obito took the shovel and cracked other incoming rods apart like a batter as he rushed at Pein.

His sightline of the road wobbled a bit, but steadied as Obito blinked hard, ‘Phew. I’m fine. So Maki and Reiijiro reported this thing’s attacks are five seconds apart? I’ll have to bait him!’ From the corner of his eye, he could see Kankuro limping off with Maki around the bend of the health office. While sliding over rubble and chipped concrete, Obito moved into close-quarters with Pein, improvising most of his Taijutsu. The metal shovel was a marked advantage, way-laying many of Pein’s counters and strikes. Yet with each exchange and flurry, Pein’s blows intensified. He was precise. Tireless. Reactive.

Obito drew on the do-or-die experiences from when he’d lost his memories as a teen, bending and twisting, lunging— when his body had been younger, faster, cleverer with motion. Obito’s offense did get the better of Pein, and when he’d lined up the merciless swing of his shovel to bash his opponent in the temple, the Akatsuki leader pulled the tool from his grasp and shot it into the broadside of a billboard. In that moment, Pein noticed something was amiss. Visual cues were off—and he’d attacked the blue-costumed, goggled ninja as if their exchange was on a delay. He was rooted in the Genjutsu and realizing his plight in the same moment Obito’s Earth jutsu closed two raised slabs of the street upon him, as if shutting a book. Bam. The concrete slabs stuck up unnaturally after the technique.

Panting, Obito staggered toward the billboard and wrenched the trusty spade out, ‘Huh. I guess Genjutsu still works on this fella…but I’ll have to beat his head in to make sure this is over with.’

The Sharingan could detect faint tendrils of a chakra condensing, diverting more energy into the proxy that was sandwiched between street-slabs. Heart-pounding, he understood, ‘If he gives that thing more chakra…’ Obito rushed forward, dropping into a running-slide to avoid the concrete hunks that were blown apart with a noticeably more powerful repulsion.

Pein was in retreat, traveling west along Providence as one of his remaining incarnations had spotted their target. Obito descended on him with ferocity, crossing the spade’s edge with the proxy’s rod, cracked through it, and Pein slid his hand up while moving into the strike— able to wrestle with Obito and knock him away from the incidental weapon. The proxy discarded the shovel into a street drain, then raised his arms to block Obito’s swift sky-kick and lilting hook-punches.

“What do you care?” Pein wondered curiously, “You are no Tide ninja.”

Obito was cuffed in the face twice, but weathered the hits to gain leverage as he swept Pein’s legs out from under him. Obito plunged the proxy face-first to the ground in a tackle, a fistful of ginger
hair in one hand, and a kubikiri knife drawn in the other— about to saw off the head of the incarnation. He could see chakra condense again before Pein’s amplified push, and Obito was unable to scramble away before the force tossed him over the street and into the outdoor racks of apparel displays.

The wound on his back had opened again, Obito could feel it. He heaved himself to his feet and asked over the radio, "Are you okay, Kankuro?"

--Can’t say that I am. I think I’m losing Maki.

“B Squad should still be…somewhere on West Providence…”

--I called them but I don’t think anyone’s coming. You’re not still fighting Pein, are you?

Obito wiped his lip, “Nope.”

He was staring down the incarnation that had raised itself to stand with regality, its Akatsuki cloak ripped and tattered.

That was not a response that Kankuro could believe, You can’t handle him one-on-one. Wait for Leaf’s Sealing Corps— or someone-!

He changed the channel and threw down a handful of smoke bombs that choked the road with murky vapor. Obito had to concede that this confrontation was personal in many respects. He remembered the day Pein had boasted of making short work of Kakashi’s team in the Land of Rain…the suffering and loss his friend had endured. ‘This no-good fuck who made light of a child dying— hurt Kakashi-! Our friends!’ He was simmering as he coordinated his next move, ‘Pein would do that to anyone and feel justified! He doesn’t feel pain at all— he feels nothing!’

The low-visibility had made the unloading of a weapon tool scroll more effective. Pein was not one to waste his abilities, but the stygian haze made it impossible to avoid all of the projectiles darting in. What mattered was the follow-up, and Pein waited for it— waited for the stranger shinobi who seemed to have no detectable allegiance…but hurled himself with a roar at Pein as they encountered each other in the smoke cloud. The proxy evaded the sweeping blow of a summoned short sword, keening backwards, felt the piercing rod in its hand get kicked away— and then had no means to defend against the returning arc of the blade. With a heightened projection of force, Pein propelled his attacker off, as well as the lingering particles of smoke. And the man he had knocked away was merely a Shadow Clone, puffing back into nothingness as it tumbled.

From behind the proxy, Obito had exited an Earth Style hiding pit with only seconds at his disposal. His view of Pein warped, unfocused, the pretty lawn consuming half of his sight again as he charged.

The plum grove was not at all imaginary; it just happened to be about 200 kilometers away.

Kakashi stood there rubbing his forehead after a productive morning, having coached Sato through a series of drills to prepare him for an upcoming Jounin Evaluation. He had to cut training short because, well, he was probably coming down with something. Or in need of glasses.

“Let me see.” Sato bent to take a look at his uncle’s exposed Sharingan eye, as the man sat in a daze on a tree stump. “You know…I don’t see anything stuck in there…” He backed up and crossed his arms, “Did you overdo it today, Kakashi?”

“Not to my knowledge.”
“Maybe I pushed you too hard?” Sato was amused, “All of this prep tired you out.”

“Either way, a break is in order.” Kakashi supposed, trying to clear his head as he made small-talk, “Have you and Tama made a decision yet?”

“We’re going to wait and see what the results of my evaluation are, then save up a bit more before we look at houses again.” He was marching in place, excited by the thought of it.

“And a ceremony?”

“Just something small. Probably after the New Year, if the shrine will take us,” Sato forecasted.

“That’s sooner than I expected.” Kakashi regulated his breathing while pointing out, “You were never in a hurry before.”

Sato was still marching as he imparted the maxim he and Tama now swore by, “Life’s too short.”

“So use your time wisely.” His uncle agreed.

“Feeling any better?”

“I can’t say—” When he next blinked his eyes shut, he saw it more clearly— the carnage and rubble. Streets he didn’t know. A place with wide sky, few trees…and the sight of a face that scared Kakashi straight to his feet.

Sato raised his brows as his uncle spooked, as if poised to act, “What’s the matter-?”

Even with his eyes open, Kakashi’s visual sense lingered elsewhere as if hijacked, ‘How am I—? That’s-!’ It was the same shinobi from the Land of Rain that had attacked his team. He could never forget that face, or how they’d been at the stranger’s mercy in terms of jutsu. A flood of memories unnerved Kakashi as he teetered around. His waking mind was reliving the ordeal—or hallucinating.

“Kakashi?” Sato stepped up to him and rested a hand on his shoulder.

Oh right. His nephew wasn’t dead. The Rain ninja had all but killed him, sure, but here Sato stood thanks to the effort and care of friends. But that moment of violence lived on in Kakashi’s mind, made vivid when he shut his eye and saw the blur of the Rain nin as if he stood before him. It was so real that he took a swing at it. Sato and the host of reality seemed relegated to the background in those insane, pulse-pounding moments. He was fighting again. Back in that fight, somehow, against an enemy he had no hope of defeating.

Distant, Sato’s voice rang with reassurance in Kakashi’s ears while his eyes lied. He bolted like a frightened colt in the grove, trying to get a better angle, trying to get away, or maybe make the vision stop. He whipped kunai at it, reeling in fright when the Rain ninja, with shocking clarity, exerted that force he remembered, in response to which he ducked to vainly defend himself. For a second, Kakashi knew he wasn’t insane. It was happening, even if it wasn’t. There was no use in explaining it.

With the end of the enemy’s push, he felt compelled to dash again, remembering how he’d been counting the seconds between each exertion of the force technique. Though he may have attacked thin air within the lush grove of the training yard, his body, mind, and something else bid with every extant fiber to counterattack. Kakashi formed hand signs, watched himself do it in confusion—not stopping himself as he tracked the movement with his Sharingan.
Obito acted before he could think, before he could recognize how he was copying hand signs from some unknown source—the bright charge of the Chidori came to life noisily in his hand. He darted forward and ran it through Pein’s chest, to their mutual surprise. The proxy remained standing in the gouged portion of the street, and it closed its hand around Obito’s right arm—plunged through the unfeeling flesh of the incarnation, “…that was not your jutsu.”

He knew. Somehow, Pein could tell it was imitation. Without his battle wits at the moment, Obito was processing what had happened. He may have used the assassination technique successfully, but it hadn’t hindered Pein at all. His vision was still noticeably compromised, but now Obito had an inkling as to why, ‘That was Kakashi’s jutsu…I think I can…see what he does.’ While he wavered, Pein was crushing his artificial arm, gripping it and pulling it out. The proxy’s chest was marked by past wounds and mendings—now freshly punctured again with no blood to spill from its reanimated body.

He had to stop thinking about why he could see through the Sharingan in Kakashi’s head, because Pein had noticed him. Obito realized it a touch too late. Pein had pulled his attacking hand free, the automail fashioning of his arm slightly damaged, and held him while scouring his face for a clue. The enemy wanted to know if he was dealing with the Copy Ninja again, though that was doubtful. This was a disfigured, dark-haired person, with no headband to proclaim village allegiance, but his right eye gave away a connection. Pein recognized the Sharingan. He wanted to understand for a moment. Then he lost interest, and elected to kill Obito instead.

With a powerful push, Pein thrust Obito clear of the street, through the glass picture window of a realty office, through plaster walls within, and he landed roughly on neat desks and shelving, knocking all askew.

Groaning, Obito heaved himself up again, trying to get his bearings. He wanted to contact someone on Channel Two, but balked at the sight of a different incarnation of Pein daintily picking its way through the office’s debris. It was coming for him. The long-haired proxy that could reportedly scan minds and rip away the spirit of its victim; this fit the description others had spoken of. Obito clambered backwards over furniture and into an adjoining linoleum hallway, racing up the narrow stairwell to find an escape. He gasped for breath, calling over the radio, “Is anyone still on Providence?”

The resounding silence petrified him.

He bumped walls when he took the corners with too much speed, bounding up the steps two at a time. When Obito stumbled out of the roof access door, he was stunned to find the Force proxy waiting on the roof. He’d imagined that Pein would continue his search for Utakata, or perhaps let other incarnations wear him down…but he’d made a nuisance of himself.

It was almost a casual gesture, how Pein pulled him in with an attractive force, getting a firm grip on Obito’s throat. He held him up to scrutinize him again like some pawnshop curiosity.

“You shouldn’t exist.” Pein said.

There was really no right way to interpret such a nebulous statement. He was clawing at the proxy’s hands to free his airway, turning blue in the face. His chakra was run down and his body worse for the wear—but Obito thought that if he could just get away to hide for a measly three minutes, he’d be back in the fight again. No comrades were chattering on radio waves. No help was coming. The sound of the other proxy’s steps came from behind, leaving the rooftop exit door. Those few seconds were serene and eventless.

Pein might have said something else, but Obito couldn’t hear it over the shattering smash and
The cacophony of the implosion as the building cracked beneath him. It had been a powerful push, that was for certain—and the materials of the building seemed flimsy on the way down. Ceilings and walls caved while Obito rocketed by, straight down to the ground floor where, miraculously, he was caught in some electrical wiring that stopped his descent. The building swayed and crumbled from Pein’s blow, yet Obito landed on two feet and attempted to scamper away as it caved in. He did not take so much as a step when four levels came down on top of him. With the building flattened, both of Pein’s proxies had left the site to carry on their hunt on the west side of the village.

Obito’s first thought was loud in his head. ‘—! I’m alive.’ He must’ve been, after all, he was thinking.

It was pitch dark, with the quiet punctuated by soft skittering of debris chips falling and settling. His thoughts then turned toward his injuries, which were moderate. Loose plumbing pipe had cut through the back of his left arm in a cookie-cutter like manner. The wound on his back still smarted, most of his joints felt, at least, sprained, and his automail limbs took the brunt of it. When he attempted to move he found it impossible. The mountain of collapsed rubble weighed down, pinning him.

Lying face down on the dusty floor of the space, Obito darted his eyes around, ‘Something…’ He wanted to find a little bit of purchase that he could tug or prod, though only one hand was free enough to do so. ‘I’ve got to get out of here…’ His radio was not only silent, it was gone. It’d been shucked off his head at some point, probably.

Though it was no consolation, he was not hallucinating anymore. The other side had gone dark. As in, it wasn’t looking at anything, or had been covered up. With that, Obito arrived at the conclusion that what he had seen was very real, ‘I can still see some things with the Sharingan that I gave to Kakashi!’ He wanted to laugh wildly. He may have remembered such a phenomenon when he was a teen, repaired and outfitted by Orochimaru and Sasori to handle Akatsuki grunt work. Back when he’d been anonymous and borderline “useless.” On a few occasions, he may indeed have seen things he couldn’t explain. Then there had been a lapse for many years, and so Obito supposed those episodes were a thing of the past—perhaps due to trauma.

Ever since Pein’s run-in with the Leaf team in the Land of Rain, and the disrespectful talk that followed, Obito had felt more connected. He had cried and wallowed while reflecting on Kakashi’s loss and empathized with him, thereafter noticing that something felt different. In an odd way, pain had linked them after all. And so, Obito surmised, he had strengthened his connection with his friend and found a way to reach him…not that it mattered.

He couldn’t move even a finger length. Oh well. You’re connected to Kakashi, but what good does that do you? A voice trilled jokingly in his head. You’re gonna die. Here he was again, years later, pinned once more beneath wreckage with no escape. It’s as if you were destined to die stripped of your dignity, alone, and squashed like a bug!

Obito’s breathing quickened, panic setting in. That was it, wasn’t it? The exact same flavor of helplessness from his Chunin days, though this time he was pressed belly-down. Ouch. It wasn’t any more comfortable in this direction, he could admit.

Never mind the fact that his absence exposed Tide villagers and Utakata to Pein’s full wrath. No, no. He had his own problems. He had a tendency to do way too much for Jiraiya, and only realize it after the fact. He played the game as every character but himself; parading around for Jiraiya, Orochimaru, the Akatsuki, and even neighbors back home in Shincha, who’d never learned his real name. Here in Shiogakure he had given it out willingly. Pft.

Maybe a toad would save him. Jiraiya would arrive in time, right? His help from Hidden Sand?
Perhaps reinforcements from Leaf would sweep over the rattled city and drive off the Akatsuki—the whole of the Uchiha clan’s forces would do it. They’d save him. He could reunite with them and his childhood friends in Konoha. It’d be peachy and idyllic. He could see Kakashi again. He nearly smiled at the possibility. The weight on his back derailed that train of thought. Everything hurt. Breathing was hard. He had a mouthful of dirt.

*You shouldn’t exist.*

Though it lacked specificity, Obito could see why Pein would tell him such a thing. It was probably true. His time had come long ago. If Death kept receipts, it would have looked up his entrapment near Kannabi Bridge, and subsequent, last-second rescue…so it could reschedule his demise in the same style. How consistent.

With each second it was more real. He would die and no one would know about it. There would be no parting words, no fanfare, and no closure. He’d never been someone special. Still wasn’t. Rin might be broken up about his (presumed) death, once he failed to come home. She might even mourn him for a year or two, knowing how dedicated of a soul she was. But time would pass and she’d find someone else, and she and Yuma would be fine. They might even forget him, or at least, he’d forever lurk in the background of their minds as they forged on with life.

Obito dug his fingers into dust, anguished. He may have counted himself lucky when he reunited with Rin, but perhaps not if he had known he’d *go out this way* sometime in the future. There was too much to lose. This wasn’t the line of work he ought to be in. Jiraiya knew it too, most likely, but he was in so deep that to lose Obito’s assistance in spy work would be a catastrophe.

He felt the tears start, brimming at his bottom lids, clinging and then dripping from his face. Always was a crybaby, and always would be. He’d come to terms with it. There was no use in trying to change who he was. Yuma cried just as much as he did. Cut from the same cloth, he’d joke. It hurt so much that he screamed—not for the sting of physical injuries, but for the singular thought of not seeing that boy. Obito screamed in what he perceived to be air-raid warning loudness, projecting like a mythical banshee. Nothing had ever hurt so bad.

Yuma. A face so scrupulously crafted that he bore the features of both his mother and father in truly equal parts. Like art, he was one perfect whole arranged and painted with those traits. An Uchiha, but wild and soft. He’d never hate anyone or anything. He’d been born that way.

But to be pulled away from his son was a cruelty he could not accept, even if he *could* handle losing this mission, losing Kakashi, Rin, and everything else he had. Fuck, he’d made so many promises. Fool that he was. Promised Yuma the Leaf Village, and the Uchiha clan, and friends, all of the trappings and adventures of a life they’d hidden him from. Obito said those things with the intention of being there to walk him through each step and introduction. To let that boy’s hope wilt—to let him languish…there was nothing lower than that.

His piercing screams and wails grew more comprehensible, calling for help loudly, repeatedly. Any friendly ear approaching would have definitely heard him. The chance of such a passerby being *able* to excavate him was a toss-up. Still, Obito shouted until he was hoarse.

He could only estimate how long he’d been trapped, some eight or ten minutes. In that time, he’d recuperated a bit of strength, and focused chakra carefully into his hands and limbs. Though the bonus of chakra control helped, there was still no budging the slabs on top of him as he tried to rise in the world’s most difficult push-up. Some of the rubble shifted and the metal pipe impaling his arm sank in deeper, making Obito shriek. He stopped and stilled, hoping everything would settle again. Crazy-eyed and breathing erratic, he wracked his brain for options. There was nothing more he could do apart from screaming.
Bowing his head for rest, he felt himself slipping, almost dangling off the edge of consciousness. He was insane with grief. Rin’s name rolled off his tongue like a song. Oh! —how had one person kept him going for almost all of his life? How sweet it had been to get to know her better; to play and learn and risk, to feel pleasure that he didn’t deserve. To make life. How love had taken form and become a new person, a child. So strange and wonderful.

*Trash.*

*Who’s this idiot?*

He heard voices echoing from the past that made his blood boil, scraping his hands again at the dirt floor.

*He deserves to see you in person...and you can apologize that way.*

*Late again?*

>You were so angry...I was worried you were going to beat that boy up.

>You love Rin, don’t you?

*I don’t want to be lonely anymore. No one around here really likes me.*

Another, agonized howl escaped Obito and then cut short. He might’ve gone crazy. It felt as if he could move freely. His voice wavered as he experienced an utterly alien sensation— the permanency of objects around him was absent. He rose up to stand cautiously, hobbling out of the cave-in’s litter to look back in astonishment. It was as if he had become a ghost and walked away…but his body was not trapped under the wreck. He was in it. He had gotten free.

Startled, he tried to relax and rested his hand on the remains of a fallen light fixture. Tactile sensation was back. Good. He had a physical presence. ‘I don’t think I’m dead.’ Obito reasoned, ‘But I *do* think I’m weird.’ He sealed up the bleeding gash on his arm with the Palm Healing jutsu he had been taught. His automail limbs were coming close to fragmentizing from wear and tear. ‘Fantastic. Before I know it I’ll be out there leaning on a crutch to stay in this fight…’ Too bad he’d lost the shovel.

Taking a breath, Obito chose to test a theory that could explain his Sharingan’s odd behavior. A twinge of concentration and a *sapping* on his chakra reserves confirmed that, indeed, his Doujutsu was responsible. Obito walked around and phased through solid objects like an apparition. ‘Oh, how I wish I understood how this worked...’ He didn’t have much time to dissect the details. He ran out of the building and gave the technique a rest, because wow it drained him something fierce. ‘The Sharingan probably has higher levels of evolution...not that I know squat about those legends.’ He wanted to rationalize the development, ‘Don’t know how I did it. Don’t know how it works. But I do know what I have to do!’

Eerie silence had overtaken the Tide Village as he ran west.

—*Fall back and call for reinforcements. A voice rasped over Channel One, - - Tazuna, we can’t hold the city. I am ordering a full retreat, for your people and your jinchuriki. Cross the bridge to the Main Land—* The voice cut off.

Menma tapped his radio, harried, “Mochinaga-san?” He repeated the Leaf Sealing commissioner’s name several times, getting no response, “Are there any Leaf ninja still fighting? Please—!”
Behind Menma on the roof of the village’s communication tower, Inari was pacing, throwing his hands into the air. He was wearing a radio of his own, insisting to Menma, “They’re not gonna answer, I told you! That freakin’ chakra-sucking thing got ‘em!”

“I need quiet, Inari!” He strained to hear a soft spoken instruction on the channel.

—H- - Hosoka-

“Hosoka-san?” Menma acknowledged her.

- - Sarutobi-Hosoka- - I’m headed — north- - with this proxy in pursuit— She commanded, All forces retreat over the Great Naruto Bridge. - - That’s an order.

“Where are you? We can send help!”

She did not answer.

Tazuna was speaking over Channel One, Copy that. Inari?

“Yeah, Gramps?” The boy stopped pacing.

Get to the temporary infirmary and help them evacuate. I’m taking all of the Academy classes, chaperones, and citizens waiting in shelters to the bridge. His grandfather was remarkably calm, Can you be quick about it?

“Sure…do you know if Mom’s okay?”

She already crossed to the main land with other evacuees. Took the dog with her, she said.

Inari breathed a side of relief.

He entrusted the responsibility with his grandson, Get on it, kiddo. I’ll meet you over there. Tazuna added, Menma?

“Yes, sir?”

Stop that son of a bitch. The man demanded.

Inari exchanged a bamboozled look with his older friend, watching Menma’s countenance turn down with seriousness. As the comments over the radio ended, Inari wanted to amend his grandfather’s instructions, “Help me out at the infirmary, okay?”

Menma shook his head.

He pointed a finger in his friend’s face, “You can’t do anything to stop Pein. We’ve been hearing it over the radio— pretty much everyone is dead!”

“Utakata?” Menma asked over Channel Two, “Give me your position. I’ll provide you some cover so you can evacuate.”

--I am not sure if I’ll be able to do that. Utakata politely declined, Though I do appreciate your consideration. Just leave without me.

“That’s a terrible idea.” Menma disagreed.

Inari was protesting behind him, babbling.
I have to draw Pein away from the village. I don’t know how else to give everyone a chance to escape.

“Regardless, why be careless and hand yourself over to the enemy? We should make it as difficult as possible for the Akatsuki.” Menma insisted, “You saved me once. I’m going to help you too.”

Utakata laughed softly before he revealed, I’m on Third and Temporal, in the cellar of the brewery.

“On my way.” Menma confirmed with a nod. He turned to Inari, “Please hurry to the infirmary.”

“Forget it!” The boy growled.

“You have orders. You know what they say about shinobi who can’t follow orders.” His friend reminded him, “I have to do my part, Inari. This village has been attacked and razed many times before…and it only stops when we step forward to expel those who would harm us.”

“They said reinforcements—!”

“We can’t stand idly by waiting for reinforcements. We must act.” Menma held Inari’s shoulder firmly, “You told me your friends taught you that. I believe all those things you said.”

“…stupid.” Inari rubbed his eyes and trudged after Menma as they toed the roof’s edge, standing side by side before a leap, “You’ll…get killed.”

“I know.”

“Just come with us.”

“You’re a fantastic friend. Think— in a few years all of the new students will be looking up to you.” Menma smiled at him, “Will you please tell Matsuri that I love her?”

Dropping down from the slated tile ledge, Menma was a blur below in the alleyways as he moved towards Temporal Road. The prickling, heavy anticipation and despair Inari had once felt in the moments before watching his father’s execution returned full-force.

Each of Inari’s cautious steps away from the communication tower toward the infirmary were callous. It felt wrong to go. Most shinobi friends he had made moved on with their journeys and left the Land of Waves behind. Menma had not. He was the friend he could depend on, shoot the breeze with, talk smack, goof off, eat junk food, and generally let his guard down around. The difference in rank and age was immaterial, Inari had come to find. Now it was time to shelve his personal feelings because, with this emergency, friendship could not come before duty.

It was going to be awful to lose him. Inari hated himself for thinking it.

The last Leaf ninja standing, by some happy coincidence, nearly ran head-first into Menma within the many stalls and stands of the market. Hosoka caught herself in a skid and changed directions, electing to stay near a comrade.

“I lost two of the three proxies chasing me— but I guess that means they went looking for the jinchuriki.” She reported, “You’re Menma, right? Help me deal with the Soul-Stealing proxy! It’ll be coming up Torrent Lane because one of my monkeys faked it out…”

“I can try. I was on my way to help Utakata.” He stopped outside the immaculate wooden building of Tide’s brewery, “Would you be able seal it, Hosoka-san?”
“If you can hold it still, I can seal it.”

Menma was not wild about deliberately drawing an incarnation of Pein towards Utakata’s hiding place, but he and the kunoichi dove through the brewery’s front door and slid it shut behind them. While rummaging around the wide space supported by oak beams, between casks, hoses, taps, and processing vats, Menma spoke to Utakata over Channel Four, “Sorry for the disturbance. We’re upstairs.”

—I was wondering what that racket was. Keep it down.

“Hosoka-san was being chased by one of the proxies, so we’re preparing a trap for it.”

...this is not my idea of “cover” for an escape.

“She says she can seal it—” Menma pushed and overturned a huge, airtight wooden barrel with Hosoka’s help, “—just bear with us.”

--If you get yourselves killed--

Hosoka hissed over her radio earpiece, “Quit doubting us, or you can come up here to be live bait!”

A wide, rolling door on at the side of the room slid with a clatter when Menma opened it, and Hosoka hustled to roll barrels outside. Their frantic preparations lasted for a few more minutes before Hosoka made herself scarce at the market’s edge. Once the Soul-Ripping proxy treaded past the last row of vendor booths, Menma taunted the incarnation with a volley of kunai and shuriken. When he had its attention, he made a run for it in the opposite direction, into the dead-end sequestered between the brew house and industrial yard’s walls.

The proxy rounded the corner with speed and charged at the cornered Tide ninja, reaching out a hand to seize its victim by the head. And in a puff of smoke, Menma’s visage was gone, and the transformation revealed a tawny monkey that screeched and wound around the Soul incarnation’s arm. It easily shook the animal off, and had only a beat to look over its shoulder. At the entrance of the dead-end yard, Menma completed hand signs for the aptly named **Fountain Spout** jutsu, a Water Style technique that launched four simultaneous blasts of unrefined barley and hop water from barrels.

Effectively, the Soul incarnation was canon-blasted with beer; blinded and smashed into the concrete siding of the industrial park headquarters. On that cue, Hosoka leapt from the rooftop and wound a prayer-bead rope around the ankle of the proxy. With a tug, she had tripped the incarnation and splayed it out on the sodden ground. Hosoka landed and concluded her technique’s hand seals, the Sealing formula winding up the cord toward the incarnation…as it hurled a black rod at her. The weapon pierced the kunoichi’s neck and she fell backwards without so much as a peep. Likewise, the proxy keened over and fell still.

In shock, Menma stared at the scene of the double-takedown, intending to run to the fallen comrade and move her body. When he heard hollering from within the brewery, Menma acted on instinct and turned around, racing back to the wooden building.

The summoned chameleon had crawled into the open doorway and was dragging Utakata up the cellar steps by its tongue. Though his physical strength was limited, Menma was able to kick the animal sideways into the brewery’s interior. The creature reeled in its catch by its tongue, though Utakata had a timely retort prepared for it: he spat corrosive liquid on the chameleon’s face. It departed in a puff of smoke.
Motioning with a hand signal, Menma ushered his friend along, “Let’s move. Since it spotted you, the others—”

His train of thought was interrupted by crumbling buildings down the block.

“We’re not going to make it to the bridge.” Utakata surmised. He had to say what Menma was already thinking, which meant that they were thinking the exact same thing.

So they turned around in unison as another portion of wall beside the road collapsed under a push, facing down the Force proxy and its yet unseen companion—a stocky shinobi with spike piercings in its cheeks, lip and ears. According to reports, that was the proxy that could rob victims of their chakra and block Ninjutsu. For a moment, the two Tide ninja could only hear the sound of each other’s breathing in the vast quiet of the west ward. Menma had the good sense to raise his ocarina and play a tune before either of Pein’s incarnations charged, hoping to bolster Utakata with his Rush Melody. To top that, Saiken was flooding his host with chakra.

Menma had never seen a chakra cloak before, half-shocked by the sight of visible, violet Tailed-Beast chakra that fit slimly around Utakata from head to foot in an abstract, animalistic shape. He wondered if his friend was still listening and aware of him, “Utakata?”

“We need to separate them, Menma.” Utakata was fully aware of the environment, and who his comrade was, “Can you distract the short one?”

“That may be all I can do.”

The Absorption proxy was faster than it looked as it charged up the street, angling for the glowing jinchuriki. Menma was quick with hand seals, using a Shepherd’s Whistle to snare the proxy in sound-based Genjutsu. It changed directions and pursued Menma as he retreated into the rows of off-beach cabins at the edge of the road. With each whistle he maintained the taunt, yet it was a problematic arrangement. The proxy demolished obstacles with crushing punches, and was for all practical purposes immune to Ninjutsu.

Its fists demolished the front porch of a chalet, wood beams splintering and tumbling, while Menma flitted like a dragonfly over rooftops and between palms. ‘If that thing catches me...’ He knew there would be nothing he could do. Like those who had battled it on the beach, and considered Taijutsu a viable option—they had lost their lives. He dropped behind a large cabana and slipped under the deck skirting of the home to stay out of sight, creating diversionary Water Clones as the proxy broke everything it could get its hands on in the yard.

The clones were a temporary distraction as Menma switched directions, retrieving tuning-rod darts from his hip pouch. Pein’s incarnation merely had to lay a hand on a Water Clone in order to sap chakra and dissolve it on the spot—one after another splashed apart in the sandy yard. From behind the proxy, Menma pitched a dart into each of the incarnation’s limbs, whistling again to change the frequency of the Genjutsu. Only then did the proxy still and stand dumbly as if in a trance. Pein’s connecting signal with that path was scrambled, and visual communication was also lost. It loitered near a stone fire pit and lounge chairs, indolent.

Menma sucked in shaky breaths, blotting the sweat on his head and neck with the sleeve of his fatigues. He took weary steps around the huge luxury cabin, back towards the paved streets where the clashing of Utakata and the Force proxy rumbled and shook the ground. Fixed to the back of his belt was a long, folded rope sash, much like the weapon that had been used by the leader of the Shin clan. Menma counted six remaining tuning-rod darts in a holster, three compact wind instruments he could use for techniques, and said a prayer as he picked up speed toward the fray.
The sight of Utakata’s energy-lit form was astounding: how he could extend to great lengths with impossible flexibility, snapping corrosive limbs at the Force proxy as it darted around him. Before Menma could wet his lips to whistle and distract the incarnation, it raised a hand and immediately pulled him off the street. Pein flung the boy through the rice paper door of the tutoring center, and while Menma tumbled inside, smacking his head on hard desk surfaces and tossing all into disarray— Pein followed. He blocked the first stab of Pein’s rod with an arm, but could not defend against the blows that pummeled his face and torso. Crashing through an interior wall into another classroom, he was seeing stars and helpless in using jutsu.

Pein was no fool. Menma’s ability, though almost exclusively a sound-based talent, could hamper the connections between paths. Had Utakata not come charging like a bull through the ruins of the office, Pein’s force push would have silenced Menma for good. Instead, Pein turned ‘round as he heard the jinchuriki’s rumbling roar and blasted him back. One of Utakata’s bendy, elongated arms held fast to the sturdy doorframe as he was propelled back, using the momentum while outdoors again to swing around the perimeter of the building. He burst through an adjacent wall from the outside on a rebound, rubbery arms flinging him as if from a slingshot. Utakata lunged at Pein and stuck a caustic, sizzling limb through the proxy’s side. It retreated as the jinchuriki threatened to melt the rest of the incarnation, snarling and rampaging.

Menma laid on the floor and pondered if there was any point in getting up. One of his eyes felt as though the orbital bone was broken, swollen shut from brutal punches. A rib or two was most certainly fractured, and injuries to his arm and hip were bleeding freely. Pein would know better than to let him cast another Genjutsu if he dared show his face again. Slowly, Menma sat up. Utakata couldn’t go it alone, and from a practical standpoint, it was a good thing if Pein focused on a bothersome target in Utakata’s stead. It would give his friend a fighting chance.

He peered out of the office wall that Utakata had knocked down, then gasped at the sight of the Absorption proxy on the move. It was accompanied by the Soul-Stealing proxy he thought Hosoka had sealed, ‘It may have been feigning defeat when I left it to help Utakata!’ He could hardly believe such a costly blunder, ‘It freed the other proxy…and now there are three again…’

He had no choice. He heaved himself to his feet, struggling to direct one foot in front of the other. Menma called over the radio, “Utakata— two other proxies are in pursuit. I thought I stopped them…”

--I know. It’s alright.

“It isn’t! I could have kept at least one of them frozen. Genjutsu works against the Absorption proxy.” Menma trudged out of the door while tying a portion of cloth-whip around his bleeding arm, “Where are you?”

--I’m leading Pein out over the inlet. There is enough space here for a Tailed-Beast ball. Utakata estimated, Menma, if you can follow me and slow any of them…that attack might end it. Nestled within that plan was the implication that such a blow could kill Menma as well, but their options had dwindled.

“I’m on my way!” He pushed on, gritting his teeth as his injuries stung, his vision was hampered. Menma got his bearings and broke into a run on the beach, then out onto the rough waves beyond.

He hoped that Inari had not overheard that radio transmission and gotten the bright idea to follow. No. He was smart enough to keep away and escort villagers to safety. It seemed that the only loss of life had been among shinobi in the village, while rapid response had spared civilians. That was a success, he supposed. Shiogakure would learn from this. Other villages would probably learn from this too, at least he hoped so. Ahead, he could see that Utakata had trapped the Soul-Stealing proxy
in a bubble and plunged it underwater. Menma picked up the pace, drawing closer.

The sound of steps along the water’s surface caught his attention, and Menma spotted Obito gaining on him. Ah, so the odds were not quite as bad as he’d thought, but still rather poor in the scheme of things. While running, he just had to scold the spy for showing up late, “Where were you? We broadcasted on all channels for back-up!”

“—lost my radio! Almost died!” Obito panted while falling into step with the youngster, “Came straight here after I saw you taking off from the beach. How many are left?”

“Three. I froze the Chakra-Absorbing proxy with Genjutsu, but another proxy freed it. Utakata trapped the Soul-Stealer below water for now, but I don’t know for how long.” Menma reported, “No other jutsu can stop the Absorption proxy, so we need to be mindful of it.”

“Any way you slice this, it’ll be tough. The three of them means they can see everything going on out here. Genjutsu doesn’t work as well unless they’re alone.” Obito rightly concluded, “But just so you know—I can move through solid objects now. Let’s see if we can use that to our advantage—”

Menma was incredulous, “‘You what-?’

They dodged one of the Force proxy’s pushes, parting in opposite directions and charging in a pincer formation around the two incarnations. Utakata was doing his damndest to spit corrosive liquid on the Absorption proxy, but it was pointedly keeping its distance to avoid maiming.

For a time, it was a high-stakes game of tag, as Utakata concentrated on following the Absorption proxy and damaging it with corrosive spit— while Menma desperately maneuvered himself to try and stick either incarnation with a tuning-fork dart. He dashed and evaded as best he could, but the Force proxy was making a serious effort to kill him. Obito’s onslaught of Lightning Style jutsu was repelled by Pein, and the Force proxy let fly a barrage of sharpened chakra receivers to stick the young, troublesome Tide ninja with.

And yet, nothing struck. The weapons sailed through Menma as if he were a hologram. Obito had snatched the boy’s arm almost instinctively, flushing chakra into his Doujutsu’s new ability. This curious turn of events afforded a few seconds of confusion within which Obito charged, rushing at the Force proxy with swift Taijutsu. Menma had backtracked, hurling a set of darts at the Absorption proxy. His attack also missed— the incarnation dropped down into the water to avoid the blow. Its shared field of vision had tipped it off to Menma’s ambush. Near as quickly as it had escaped, the burly Absorption proxy burst up from the water again, accompanied by the Soul-Stealing proxy that had been imprisoned underwater.

Another Rush Melody filled the air, giving Obito and Utakata additional speed and strength. Obito had driven back the Force incarnation a healthy distance, pestering it with his invulnerability to physical objects. He knew he could not keep it up, ‘This takes…way too much chakra…’ Even with Menma’s boost, Obito was in no condition to continuously use his Sharingan. Behind him, Utakata had laid down a layer of Mist, where he and Menma took refuge as the proxies circled the billowing haze.

It had not taken long for Pein to learn. After lunging at Obito with a piercing rod, he faked the strike and ran through him once he’d gone transparent, barreling towards the pair of proxies waiting for the Tide ninja to reveal themselves. Obito squawked and about-faced to assist, but not fast enough to stop Pein’s push to eject the mist. Menma and Utakata had jumped back into action with a combined Water Style technique, surprising the Force proxy as a water-vacuum opened up beneath its feet, swallowing it. Unfortunately, the Absorption proxy responded in kind and seized Utakata in a bear-hug.
Obito’s cursing grew louder as he ran to try to help the jinchuriki. Or, that’s how it looked at first. The Soul-Stealing proxy gave chase to Menma and was taken aback by the release of a Transformation Jutsu. The Absorption proxy had, in fact, Menma nestled in its arms and the boy was fading fast. Utakata, meanwhile, flushed with violet chakra and severed the head of the Soul-Stealing proxy with a swing of his arm when it drew too close. Obito bum-rushed the Absorption proxy from behind, making himself momentarily intangible to pry Menma away from his captor, moving through the proxy like a phantom. He hauled Menma away as Utakata stood several yards to the east, charging a Tailed-Beast ball.

Bay water erupted when the Force proxy resurfaced, knocking Obito and Menma apart. It bore down on Obito with furious close-quarters combat, and all but knocked his artificial forearm off. Obito felt ice cold panic slide down his back. He could potentially phase through one more hit, but he was unable to keep fighting. His body would fall apart. Menma made a valiant dash to try to stun the Absorption proxy with Genjutsu again, intending to hold it still for Utakata’s attack. In the split-second before the volatile chakra ball soared, Pein had attracted both the Absorption proxy and Menma toward him, pulling them out of the path of the Tailed-Beast ball. It did not end well.

The dense sphere of energy was loosed, zooming a considerable distance out over the open water of the sea…and then collided with far-off waves in a bright explosion, sweeping a rush of recoil wind and sound over the inlet. Water churned and crested after the tremendous jutsu.

Afterward, Utakata came to his senses and re-routed towards the repositioned proxies. The Absorption proxy had clubbed Obito in the head as his strength waned, skipping him like a rock over the water. Menma hardly had willpower to stand, and none at all to dodge the Force proxy as it stabbed him in the stomach with a rod. Pein had lost patience. He kicked the boy aside and watched to make sure he sank into the bay.

Utakata felt hysterical with rage one moment, and then…the feeling was gone. His chakra cloak wavered. He only had the sense to bend backwards and writhe as the Absorption proxy grappled with him, spitting what alkaline base he could in an attempt to try to melt its limbs off. Before long, Utakata fell to his knees and struggled tiredly.

Pein stopped to stand in front of him, unamused, “This has gone on for far too long.”

Though the Absorption proxy’s arm and side were corroding, it was able to hold fast to Utakata in a neck-lock. The jinchuriki shifted his gaze left and right, calling out in the hope his companions were alright.

“Your resistance is what killed them.” Pein’s voice lacked any trace amount of remorse or identifiable emotion.

Utakata stared blankly at the Force proxy for a long moment, bewildered that the struggle was over. Saiken’s chakra was siphoned rapidly by the incarnation restraining him, making it supremely difficult to think or fight back. Obito and Menma were gone. The majority of Tide’s forces and allies had perished. His desperation to belong somewhere had doomed them.

“Such obstinacy is the hallmark of this pathetic village.” The Force incarnation turned to look back at the city that glimmered over to the tops of waves, four or so kilometers from their position. “One path is enough to show you the error of your ways.” The incarnation raised a hand, channeling a much larger reservoir of chakra from its controller. With no other paths to manipulate, the Force proxy was glutted with energy.

His objections were garbled, yet Utakata made a bid to reason with the Akatsuki leader, “I won’t resist— I surrender. Don’t burden Shiogakure with—!”
Pein’s push registered on a far greater scale, crashing into the water of the bay calamitously, and only spared the spot where they stood. As the spray dissipated, the rolling force displaced the volume of the inlet’s sea water. Water peeled back from beaches and land, exposing the shelf the island sat on. Further out, all condensed into a mighty wave that towered above the buildings and streets of the Tide Village. The few people still evacuating looked up with mortal shock at the spectacle, as the wave’s shadow fell over the city.

Tucked in among the brick walls and alleys of the village, a network of small seals illuminated in response to the tide’s dramatic shift. The same seals Utakata had applied while waiting for the inevitable. Over a hundred such seals released a multitude of bubbles that rose up and melded into a singular, massive bubble. The dome stretched over the edges of the city where homes lined beachfront and lagoons, to the reaches of the forest and the bridge’s span. The wave came and crashed, surging up and over the failsafe dome in what could only be an inexplicable miracle to the handful of souls watching below.

Such a denial, though only by the skin of Utakata’s teeth and pre-planning, was the final insult Pein would endure. His face was impassive as he watched the defense rise and protect the village from the tidal wave. Then he turned and struck Utakata in the head with an abrupt blow, watching the trapped man fold backwards, unconscious. The Absorption proxy lifted up the jinchuriki and carried him on its undamaged shoulder.

The two paths retreated toward land with their target, and their controller wondered how he had come so close to failure.

Obito snuffed salt water up his nose and startled awake, dizzy. He was sliding face-down against something he could not place—some wet, frictionless surface. When his vision cleared, he could see that he was high up, staring down on Shiogakure below. The wave that Pein had generated swept him land-bound, up to the top of the dome, but near as soon as Obito had awoken and hacked up a lung, the bubble burst. Residual water and detritus careened down on the village below, and Obito did not have enough time to cry out in terror as he tumbled.

He landed in the top fronds of a palm tree that bent precariously under his weight. Then he fell again, hitting the flat slant of a bungalow roof, rolled off of it, and landed painfully in a drenched residential garden. Obito wheezed and crouped, shaken by the journey. The world around him seemed to swirl, a mess, and he glanced down at his automail limbs. They were coming apart in pieces and unfit to hold him up. ‘Be that as it may, I still have to do something!’ He knew that Pein could not go unchallenged. He had no idea what had become of Menma, though the jinchuriki’s status was not hard to guess. ‘I’ve got to find a radio or tell a Tide squad to track Pein. It’s obvious he’s going to head north toward land…’

As he wobbled upright and took a step in the flattened spurge and irises, a pang raced through him. His body absolutely refused to do anything. He was worn worse than a dishrag. The last few sensible thoughts Obito had bounced around in his head as he fell face-first into flowers.

Time ticked by in darkness. The only sound was a high-pitched ring of exhaustion, maybe tinnitus, or maybe looming death. Using so much chakra had been utter foolishness. His sleep was devoid of dreams or awareness, and ebbed after who knew how long…

When next Obito battted open his eyes, he was laying on his back on a stiff cot. Above were wooden beams of a pavilion in the Tide Village’s shinobi barracks. He was momentarily amazed that he was not dead. Perhaps his luck was not as bad as he thought.

“You made it.” A voice said beside him.
He turned his head slightly, because that was all he had strength for. Obito recognized the heavily bandaged Sand shinobi named Kankuro sitting on a stool. The paint on his face was long since wiped off. On his opposite side, the Sand kunoichi named Maki was asleep on a cot.

“Is she okay?” Obito wondered of the kunoichi.

“Better. We were able to get treatment before the evacuation order.” Kankuro explained, “Two squads are pursuing Pein right now. He took Utakata.”

Obito tried to sit up and sputtered, weaker than a newborn kitten.

“Yeah, we’re not exactly in any shape to assist.” The young man sighed, “Saizō nearly died from chakra exhaustion and so did you. I don’t have much hope for those tracking teams…but I want to believe reinforcements can find them while they’re on the main land.”

“Did you send out messages-?”

“To everyone.” Kankuro confirmed, “Not just Sand and Leaf. We communicated with Star, Rock, Cloud, Dream, Waterfall…not Mist, though. That’d just be kicking the hornet’s nest.”

“Hmph.” Obito wasn’t sure what kind of a response other villages would have, “You don’t think Rock or Cloud would take advantage of this village while things are like this?”

“If they don’t want shitty publicity or ally retaliation, they won’t. Also, any information about the Akatsuki benefits them as well.” Kankuro shrugged, “Or who knows? This place might be wiped off the map on a petty order. It was done to Hidden Eddy way back.”

“…ugh.” He didn’t want to think about future squabbles.

Attendants scurried around the infirmary and occasionally shouted for supplies. The bustle was somewhat comforting, but there was also a looming frustration among those gathered in the pavilion. How many times had they lost their homes? Their livelihoods and loved ones? Why, whether or not they had ninja at their disposal, could nothing be kept safe? Obito could hear a woman crying about her missing son, a Chunin. People were bemoaning the state of Main Street and the surrounding central areas that were destroyed. Many parties were out locating and identifying the dead, with lists of names being updated.

“Kankuro…were you able to find Menma?” Obito rasped, “He was out there with me, fighting Pein.”

Kankuro shook his head, “No. I did hear over a radio channel that Inari’s looking for him.”

He swallowed anxiously, “He was badly hurt.”

The Sand ninja folded his arms and watched Maki absently, thinking about Menma—the brave young blood who had only just gotten into Gaara’s good graces and settled in his new home. How Inari and Tazuna would feel about such a loss, or how Matsuri would feel, Kankuro tried not to imagine it. His gaze traveled over to Obito, taking stock of the man’s artificial arm, or what was left of it. He carefully plucked up the limb to examine it, “Epoxy resin, carbon fiber, it looks like…this was sturdy for a while but overloaded with chakra….” He frowned at Obito, “This material is used for puppets.”

“It was.”

“Who gave you this?”
“You wouldn’t believe me if I told you.” Obito chuckled softly.

“We use stronger materials these days, well, when we can afford to. Softer resins are cheaper.” Kankuro rubbed his chin, “Lucky for you all of my puppets got destroyed today. How about I retrofit some of those pieces to you later? Just so you can move around.”

“Well sure…but I spent most of my money at a gift shop.” Obito admitted.

“I’ll eat the cost. You’ve more than earned it.” Kankuro assured him, “Replacing my arsenal will be expensive, but I’m going to have to do it as soon as I get back to Suna.

“Another day, another paycheck to kiss goodbye.”

That elicited a chuckle. He canted his head and tried to figure out why he thought he recognized Obito’s face, ‘Not the scarred part…seems like he was on a poster or…I don’t know.’

“You know, my wife knows your brother.” Obito shut his eyes and tried to relax, “He came to our house once.”

“Gaara?” He was astonished.

“Yeah, a while ago. Before he was Kazekage.”

“Just who are you exactly?” Kankuro hissed, “This doesn’t make any sense. Where the hell does the Toad Sage dig up types like you?”

“He wasn’t the one who dug me up, technically speaking.” Obito corrected, “But do me a favor and try not to blab to anyone in Leaf that you know me, okay? It’d come as a shock. Most of them think I’m dead.”

“Oh.” That clarified a portion of it, “Yeah, I was wondering about the secretiveness.”

“Believe me, I don’t like being in disguise and pretending. I’d rather be myself.” He sighed, “But I’ve got a lot of different groups fooled right now, and spoiling the illusion could put everyone in jeopardy.”

“Yeesh. Got any aliases?”

“Just two.”

Kankuro snickered.

“But Obito is my real name.” He confirmed, “Uchiha Obito.”

Kankuro stood up and turned in a small circle. He pulled at his hair but made it look like he had an itch, because overreacting was a surefire way to draw attention in the infirmary. He sat down again, “So that’s why you can put up a fight.”

“That, and sheer stubbornness. I’ve been dealing with these criminal assholes for years. So has Jiraiya…” Obito slipped his left arm beneath his head in place of a pillow, which was surprisingly hard to do. “And it’s been too much for just the two of us. All of the major villages need to pull their weight and cooperate, otherwise the Akatsuki will keep slipping through our fingers.”

“Gaara has been aware of that for a while. Problem is…” Kankuro glanced around the pavilion, “When villages see this and need to think about taking on the Akatsuki, they may not be so enthusiastic.”
“The alternative is much worse.” Obito warned.

“And what will that be, exactly?”

“All Tailed-Beast chakra would be in the hands of the enemy, who can then demand direct rule over every village. No Kage and no councils. No alliances. If one group steps a toe out of line…” He forecasted morbidly, “The Akatsuki could reduce it to rubble in one blast. Negotiations wouldn’t exist. The training of new shinobi would be prohibited or strictly monitored. Life might go on, but no one could think, or question, or be enthusiastic about anything anymore.” Obito supposed.

“You’re making it sound like they just want to control everything.”

“That’s the impression I’ve gotten…but it could be…someone wants that chakra. No one ever said anything about dividing it up equally amongst organization members.” He was getting theoretical, “So maybe they want a jinchuriki who can house all of that chakra.”

Kankuro was flustered, “And what’s the point in that? What could a jinchuriki like that do?”

“Kill all of us. Destroy everything. Start over. Who knows…?” Obito speculated, “I think the point is, if you’re that strong…you don’t need any of the constructs or villages as they exist now. Someone like that wouldn’t need anything. They could do anything.”

“Can something like that even exist?”

“How could it not?” Obito asserted, “All that chakra came from somewhere.”

“I just can’t wrap my head around it.”

“We don’t want to wrap our heads around it.”

“Enough already. This end of the world junk isn’t making me feel better.” Kankuro grunted, standing up to leave, “Rest for now. I’m going to write this crap down for my brother, and then look for those replacement parts.”

Obito watched the young man trudge out of the infirmary and past the gate. Then he laid back and found it rather easy to fall asleep again.

“Wake up.”

Obito woke up.

Smoke tufted up from Jiraiya’s pipe, his cheeks puffing. He had taken a seat on the stool beside the cot, and Obito noticed that Maki and many other patients were no longer in their beds.

“All of our Sand ninja friends are at a conference at the moment, debriefing with the back-up that came with me.” Jiraiya exhaled vapor lines from his nostrils, “Thanks for your advanced warning. I’m just sorry we weren’t quicker.”

“It wasn’t really advanced warning.”

“Ten Sand ninja went out to assist Tide’s tracking squads. We can hope for the best. If Tsunade got my message a day ago, maybe she can send some teams to join them.” He sounded hopeful, “But based on what Kankuro told me…this was not a normal enemy.”

“No at all. You’ll want to stay seated for this.” Obito struggled to sit up, and then looked down in
surprise at his arm. A hodge-podge of materials had been assembled to reinforce his automail limb.

“Seems you were out long enough for him to work on you.” Jiraiya noted.

“Yeah…I’ve got to thank him.” He pressed on with the details, “Pein is more than one person—rather, I think he’s one person, but he can control up to six proxies at once.”

Jiraiya recalled, ‘Kankuro said he called them ‘The Six Paths of Pein.’ Does that mean anything to you?”

“They each had different abilities and appearances—”

“No, no. Did you notice if it had a Doujutsu?”

Obito was surprised, “How do you know that?”

“Lucky guess.” He turned his head and exhaled away from his companion.

“Each of those bodies had the same eyes…violet-colored, with strange rings in them. They could share a field of vision. Their bodies were pierced with rods that pulled in a chakra signal to control them.” Obito described it, “Jiraiya, how do you know?”

“That ability doesn’t exist in modern times. It was rumored to have first belonged to the Sage of the Sixth Paths, do you understand where I’m going with this?” Jiraiya recounted, “There’s a bit of shinobi history for you. It’s called the Rinnegan, and I’ve only ever seen one person who had eyes like you described…” He extinguished his pipe, “A boy I met during the Second Great Shinobi War.”

“So no one else has it?”

“No.”

“What happened to that boy?”

“He died.” Jiraiya amended, “I thought he died.”

“Jiraiya…”

“I wasn’t there for those kids…when things went from bad to worse. I knew they’d get caught up in the fighting after they were trained…but I never saw or heard from them again, even when I went looking for ‘em.” He confessed, “If Nagato is alive…then maybe he’s the one called Pein.”

Wide-eyed, Obito stared at the man and tried to process what could be the start of a solid lead.

“Guess I’m going to have to sniff around Hidden Rain and see what I missed. If he and the others are still out there, that’s probably where they’d hide. The regime changed and it closed its borders. It’d be a convenient place to shelter the Akatsuki, come to think of it.” He took a deep breath, “I…didn’t think…they could turn out like this. If it is him…I swear they were good kids. I knew them and loved them.”

“That doesn’t change what just happened. This village suffered because of him— just one member of the Akatsuki.” Obito snapped, “What are we supposed to do about the rest of them? Jiraiya, they have abilities that will make even Special Ops teams second guess themselves. It can’t be just us. There needs to be dozens of platoons out at all times canvassing the main land, communicating between all villages! Suggest a Kage Summit—”
“Tsunade has already been petitioning for strategies like that, but those things don’t happen overnight.”

“They have to! We don’t have any time left. The Akatsuki are out hunting non-stop.”

“Well, from what I’ve heard, the Raikage had a rather inconsiderate reply to Tsunade’s last peaceable communication with Cloud, the Tsuchikage is distracted by a war criminal running amok, and the bureaucratic red tape in Hidden Leaf has snarled emergency approvals.” Jiraiya filled him in, “But once Tsunade hears this, what she’ll do is start arranging missions and squads that aren’t sanctioned. She’ll act. She’ll catch shit for it and be criticized by the daimyo, probably, but she’s got to find a way.”

Obito folded his hands and pressed them against his forehead, beseeching a higher power to step in. None of the Kage would be able to react fast enough if they followed traditional avenues. The Akatsuki would gain too much ground before any village properly countered their efforts.

“You’re in no shape to track them or keep tabs on the Akatsuki, so take it easy and then go home.” Jiraiya recommended, “I appreciate what you did, Obito, more than anything. You didn’t have to, but you stuck your neck out for people you didn’t even know.”

“I do that a lot.” Obito agreed in a mumble.

“They won’t forget it. I’ve got some meetings to sit in on and intel to pass along… then we’ll wait for feedback on Tide’s tracking squads. If they can cut off Pein from a full retreat, there might be a chance. I’d go myself, but….” Jiraiya rolled his shoulders, “I have business to attend to down here.”

“Down here?”

“One of the islands in the Land of Water, I should say. So I’ll be heading East before long.” He expounded, “Haku got caught up with one of the Swordsmen of Mist, Momochi Zabuza. Thought I might try finagling my way into getting a foothold in Kirigakure.”

“It’d take a miracle.” Obito estimated.

“Maybe I can work one.” Jiraiya smiled sadly, “All of these kids… are running headlong into a mess we couldn’t clean up.”

By morning, a message from Jiraiya was sent from Shiogakure with the fastest available trained bird to Sunagakure. The bright red scroll attracted a monitor’s attention in Suna’s communication tower as soon as the hawk landed. Gaara was not available to take the message right away.

He was in an auditorium, seated at the front panel desk at the head of a long U-shape of seats elevated in tiers. Most of those seats were occupied by Chunin, Jounin, councilmen, Suna’s clan members, and other dignitaries who had stake in shinobi matters. Many had taken their seats and checked to see if microphones were working. The assembly was slightly concerned that the doors of the auditorium had been locked from the outside without explanation. They were told it was a secure and brief meeting.

“You better not try to kill any of us.” Baki warned half-sarcastically.

“I won’t.” Gaara scanned the room, full of nervous faces who were unsure of the purpose of the meeting, “I have not been paying enough attention to internal matters, as of late. I wanted input.”

“Is this like a focus group?” A Chunin-level kunoichi inquired nearby.
“More or less.”

To the right, Chiyo sat and regarded Gaara interestingly. She had an inkling of what his motivation was. Temari was a few seats down, even more aware of what was concerning Gaara.

There was a mole in their midst. An informant, possibly one that was delivering intelligence to the Akatsuki. Gaara had pondered with his sister and Naruto how to start putting feelers out to detect a potential turncoat without falsely accusing anyone, or tipping off said mole to the fact that there was an active search for dissenters. They roundly agreed it was better to conduct a survey under pretense — to make the search look like something else. “And lay some bait.” Naruto had suggested.

Gaara announced that the Accelerated Chunin Exam had been a success, with 22 teams passing and 8 individuals achieving a promotion. There was some quiet back-patting and congratulations that echoed his commentary before Gaara went on, “What could have been done better?”

Desk lights glowed green immediately, indicating committee members who wished to speak.

A member of the Shirogane clan suggested sharply into a microphone, “How about not having hosted the Exam at all? It cost a small fortune.”

Chiyo was feeling sassy and responded quickly with her own desk light glowing, her microphone volume a bit high, “You there— you yahoo— that comment does not contribute towards this discussion.”

The young clan member slapped his hands on the desk top, agitated, “Chiyo-baasama, this is an open forum where we can air our grievances-!”

“The Exam has ended already so why are you still complaining about hosting? It was ratified before a committee just like this.” She barked.

The young man cupped his forehead and sat back. Chiyo exhausted him.

“Wenō, it’s alright.” Gaara reassured the cranky puppet-designer, “I don’t think Suna will be hosting any other exams in the coming years. We will participate in promotional exams that other villages invite us to. It is very costly, in spite of the economic support the Tide Village has provided.”

“Thank you, Kazekage-sama.” That satisfied him.

“Pardon me, but is there any word on the squads dispatched to Shiogakure a few days ago?” A councilman asked, “Why on earth would the Akatsuki bother with that village?”

“More to come on that topic later, at a meeting this afternoon.” Gaara promised, “We are still waiting for details.”

Most nodded their heads, relatively unbothered by the update. They had no idea what level of threat had descended on the small village to the south. Other lights glowed, and then were acknowledged to share.

“Maybe the panel of Academy students could have rotated duties between different representative groups? The kids claimed they were tired after ten or so evaluations.” A Chunin suggested, “Other than that, I thought every stage was seamless. We encountered almost no issues.”

Gaara was pleased to hear it.

“Why was such a high-level squad sent to escort the Waterfall team back?” Another wondered.
“Following the report on Akatsuki activity in Shiogakure, that team was arranged as added defense for Waterfall’s jinchuriki while she was escorted home, after her promotion.” Gaara was completely truthful.

Some balked at the revelation, surprised that a jinchuriki had participated and been promoted.

“I would like to propose the inclusion of newly promoted Chunin in our expanded programs. We discussed cross-training and interdisciplinary courses last month. I think there are many new candidates who can join the Medical Corps.” A Jounin recalled, “The green house project is also taking off, if anyone’s interested in volunteering.”

Rumblings of interest asked if they could discuss sign-ups after the meeting.

“At what point are we going to talk about Hidden Leaf’s scatterbrained activity, as of late?” A senior councilman gruffed, “Leaf’s teams are all over the place, tracking Bihokokuni’s rogue cell. Searches have also passed through looking for Orochimaru and the Akatsuki. Following the attack at the border, Konoha and Iwa stopped communicating.”

Gaara nodded, “I am aware.”

“What does that make us—? The monkey in the middle? They need to put their resentments to bed. They have a common enemy that makes their cooperation crucial.” The councilman explained, “Kumo has also been unusually cold to Konoha’s outreach efforts, even as Iwa and Suna continue a steady dialogue with the Raikage. Is there any rhyme or reason for this isolation geared toward Hidden Leaf?”

The observation was an opportune time to take a gander at the reactions and expressions of the committee. Gaara inquired of the group, “Anyone? Do you have a take on this matter?”

There. He could see it was obvious that many of those gathered were troubled by other villages’ exclusion of such a close ally. Some chatter amongst themselves also started and prompted requests to speak. But Gaara noticed a small group of silent, impassive attendees at the far end of the U-shape that did not seem in the least concerned about external affairs.

The chatter went back and forth:

“There was bad blood in the past, right? Between Leaf and Cloud?”

“Perhaps Suna is a more valuable ally to keep, now that we are better positioned than ever. That’s why other villages have reacted favorably to us.”

“The Hokage can be rude.”

“Simple! Kumo doesn’t want to make Dintei Bi its problem. They have enough to deal with. Kumo has two jinchuriki it can’t lose to the Akatsuki. That is their sole focus.”

“Leaf’s councils are more prone to arguing than ever, in recent years.”

“We know what an ass the Raikage can be…”

For that last comment, the speaker was shushed. The clamor died down when doors opened at the edge of the room, after Gaara allowed guards to do so. He spoke to the committee, “Seats 1 through 24 in rows A, B, and C are excused. Also, seats 34 through 50 in rows A, B, and C are excused.”

No one really questioned the unusual dismissal, and the identified committee members slowly
shuffled out before the auditorium was sealed again. There were only 15 people total in the tiered seats between 25 and 33. They were as listless as before, unmoved by the change in the room. They also didn’t seem to care that Temari and Chiyo had remained, close to where Gaara was seated.

“Don’t you have an opinion?” Gaara wondered of the remainders.

“Not any that are unique from those already expressed.” A Torture and Intel Corps member admitted.

“Have any of you been covering the communication channels with Rock or Cloud?” The Kazekage asked.

Ten raised their hands. All were members of the Kazekage’s advisory council. The other two-thirds of the advisory council, which had seemed to care more, had already left the auditorium.

“Please stay.” Gaara invited them, “The rest of you can leave.”

“What is this about?” Shirogane Ibushi, an elder on the council, did not appreciate the strange narrowing-down of the committee.

Those who were dismissed exited the room obediently while Temari and Chiyo sat, watching the council members at the edge of the dais.

“Kazekage-sama,” Another senior council member named Tōjūrō addressed the elephant in the room, “Temari-sama and Chiyo-baasama have not left this discussion, per your order.”

“I’ve asked them to stay.” Gaara clarified.

“Is something troubling you, my lord?” An astute councilman, Manao, suspected that Gaara was looking for a particular type of audience. For what purpose he could not be sure.

“I want those most familiar with current intelligence and operations here to advise me on our peer villages.” Gaara laid the bait, “For a double-cross.”

Manao gulped visibly, shocked.

“Who is being double-crossed?” Yūra wanted clarification. He was the most senior and respected member of the council, and was not so rattled by the idea.

“Iwagakure and Kumogakure continually reject our closest ally, while promoting discourse and trade with Suna.” Gaara stood to approach the dais, “There would hardly be a better time to leverage a high-profile prisoner, or frame either village for thwarting the other. Such interference will reverse or reduce enmity towards Konohagakure. We can achieve a much more level field prior to the next Summit, and utilize our influence to mediate.”

“You want to cut new deals this way?” Tōjūrō scoffed, “That’s rather roundabout.”

“Konoha would be excluded from those negotiations, otherwise.”

“Are you certain? I would prefer sending additional emissaries to persuade the Tsuchikage and Raikage’s councils to favor Leaf. It’s safer than turning their animosity on each other.” Ibushi recommended.

“Envoys are more likely to be rejected if they overtly state our support of Konoha’s welfare. Do we have adequate forces and resources to conduct such a mission?” Gaara cut to the chase, watching
fear and confusion reflect in the eyes of the men sitting before him. They were reminded of his father, Rasa, and his forceful, underhanded tactics to get ahead. To think the son would rely on his father’s methods—they might’ve thought twice about endorsing Gaara as Godaime.

Yūra assured him, “Both are adequate. Give the order, Kazekage-sama. I will send and direct those teams myself.”

“No, not so fast. This will require additional approval by the rest of the council.” Tōjūrō reminded them, “But if you want to move quickly on this Gaara-sama, we will see it done.”

His breath nearly hitched when the two agreed to such a duplicitous task. The others still appeared uncomfortable.

“We will meet again with the full advisory council in the morning.” Gaara decided, “I appreciate your time.”

He had offered the false mission specs to this group, and would then unwind the string to see where the rat would carry the information off to. Upon leaving the auditorium with his sister and Chiyo in tow, Gaara expected this misinformation to circulate to the Akatsuki at some point, and would perhaps encourage the Akatsuki to attack while expecting multiple teams to be away from Hidden Sand. But they wouldn’t be. He would fabricate the whole thing. The village would be fortified and waiting. ‘It’s just that these council members will have no idea that each team they send will have a secondary order that I issue, placing them as sentries throughout the village.’

Any of the council members who were caught after such a bait-and-switch incident would be thrown in prison so fast their heads would spin. Due process would hopefully yield a treason conviction, then the mole would no longer be an issue. The Akatsuki would be, unfortunately. The timing of a reactionary attack and bid to capture him was ambiguous, Gaara knew. Would the organization be wholly occupied with capturing other jinchuriki? Would the Akatsuki turn their attention elsewhere—to Leaf, Cloud, or Waterfall? If his plan worked, Sand would be next in their queue.

“I don’t trust them.” Temari declared as they walked back toward the Administrative Building, “But I’m also not sure if you missed a possible traitor with the first dismissal.”

“I couldn’t get a complete look at everyone, though those who expressed concern are less likely to be culprits.” Gaara reasoned.

“He’s not wrong.” Chiyo agreed, “If you think someone is passing on sensitive information, it most certainly is one of those conceited shitheads on the advisory council. I’ll keep my eye on them for you, Kazekage-sama.” She parted from the youngsters to find her own brother.

Once at the Administrative Building, Temari and Gaara scaled the stairs side-by-side.

“Do you think Gama-sennin made it in time?” She wondered.

“No.”

“What about Utakata?”

“I think he might’ve fought,” Gaara predicted, “And won.”

“You sure sound confident…”

“He’s strong. I think he can do it.”
“Maybe against one shinobi, he could, but not if the whole organization goes after him.” Temari wagered.

He nodded at that, turning on the mid-level landing to look out a window for a moment. The sky was clear. He felt anxious, “Would you mind if I sent you with Matsuri and Shigenori to check on things in Tide? Assess damage and assist with what you can? I can always send more teams if you need them.”

“Sure, but yuck, why Shigenori?” She joked, knowing he had been a rival for the Fifth Kazekage position.

“Because I just realized that I can trust him, and I might be installing him to the advisory council once we oust whoever has been betraying our village.” He concluded.

“Oh. Well, I won’t spoil the news for him…”

“Don’t.”

“He still doesn’t like you much.”

“That doesn’t matter. What matters is that he serves Suna.”

She patted her brother’s back, proud of him.

When they arrived at Gaara’s office and pushed the door open, it looked as though Gaara was already seated at his desk, examining trade permits. The doppelganger looked up from a cup of noodles, slurping slowly.

“Have you been here all morning?” Gaara wondered.

“Yeah, actually. Do I look convincing?” Naruto tried to imitate Gaara’s default facial expression.

Temari gave him a small compliment, “That’s pretty good. You weren’t forging Gaara’s signature, right? That’s illegal.”

“Nah, just reading. I gave out a couple of low-level missions based on these Memos.”

“I didn’t say you could do that.” Gaara circled around the desk and shooed Naruto out of his seat, who released his Transformation, “Did you do anything else?” He chucked the empty cup noodle into a waste bin.

“I took this, but I didn’t open it, because I’m not you—” Naruto handed over a bright red scroll, delivered by one of Shiogakure’s hawks, “I learned a little from one of the greenhouse guys that stopped in, talked to some Genin students, filed some of this junk you have laying around.” He took a seat on the upholstered arm chair opposite the desk, “Fujita made it back to Leaf the other day and sent me a message, and he was wondering why I didn’t go back with him. I kind of bluffed in a reply…”

“You could’ve told him that I ordered you to stay here until you’re cleared. I don’t know what the Akatsuki’s movements will be, and he would understand if you told him why you’re at risk.” Gaara supposed as he settled in, pleasantly surprised by how everything had been organized. Dusted too, by the look of it. Who knew Naruto could keep a space?

“Not just yet.” Naruto crossed his arms, “I’d feel stupid telling the kid first and not telling Hinata!”
“Hm. So that’s what her name is.” Temari chuckled from her place beside a water cooler, filling a glass up.

He craned his neck around the chair to look back at her, “Yeah. You didn’t know that…?”

“I knew some cute girl loves you based on what Gaara’s said, but he never really told me who she was.” The woman crossed over to a bureau and leaned against it, taking sips of her drink.

While the two chattered about incidental details that had been glossed over, Gaara was well into reading the correspondence that had arrived from the Tide Village. Within the scroll were two separate notes: one from Jiraiya and one from Kankuro. Gaara read his brother’s message first.

Gaara, this was a close one. I kind of can’t believe everything that just happened, but overall I think the Tide Village will be alright. We’re still waiting to hear from our tracking teams, and we’re feeling more optimistic that the Akatsuki leader can’t get far with Utakata. His last two proxies are damaged, and we sent about 30 or so skilled shinobi after him.

Listen, this weird spy that works with the Toad Sage—Obito—he saved my life. He saved a lot of people. I’ve never had a brush with death quite this close, so it occurred to me I haven’t told you lately that I’m proud of you, and really glad I’ve had time to be your big brother. You know, not just some cowardly kid back when Dad was fucking things up, but actually get to know you and support you. I treasure you and Temari.

Anyway, Maki and I will be alright. Casualties were very heavy for the Tide teams and Leaf Corps members that stayed here to fight. Damage to the city is as serious if not more so than the Shin clan’s attack, and I don’t mean to be a jerk about this but, Hidden Sand is not on the hook for the repair bill this time. It will be hard for the people here to rebuild, but they’re spunky and making great money. I know it can be done. Tazuna didn’t seem to worry about it much. He’s glad that not a single civilian casualty occurred. We’re all relieved that proactive communication kept people safe.

Jiraiya said he’ll give you the details on this Akatsuki member, based on what we’ve all compiled. When I get home I can tell you more, since I fought and learned some stuff about Pein. Keep your eyes open for follow-up reports, and if by any chance Rock, Cloud, Waterfall, Dream, or Star ask for more information about the Akatsuki: give it to them right away. We’ve asked Hidden Leaf to do the same. Share all of this.

Look after yourself, Gaara. I’ll see you soon.

The heartfelt missive made Gaara glance up after reading and clear his throat, hit by a wave of gratitude that his brother’s life had been spared. Further down the parchment were Jiraiya’s comments:

Hi Gaara, your slow-as-hell Sensei has made it to the Hidden Tide Village and boy have I got some shit to tell you.

First of all, expect to hear some grievances from Leaf’s councils soon. Said grievances won’t be geared toward you or Hidden Sand, but they’ll be directed at Tide regarding the loss of Leaf’s Sealing Corps Director Shimura Mochinaga, as well as other Leaf Corpsmen that died during the attack. These were some highly esteemed shinobi whose deaths will be felt in the village, and their talent will be very difficult to replace. So there’s that. Not quite a major issue, but an issue all the same.

Your brother looks to be fine, however he’s expressed some concern about someone named
“Menma” being missing after the fight with Pein. Likewise, Obito is also okay but took a considerable beating, and will need a few days of rest to recover from chakra exhaustion. I’m sending him home to his family when he is well enough to go.

To get to the meat of it, Pein is alleged to be the leader of the Akatsuki, and per the accounts of those who fought him in Tide, he can control up to six “proxies,” which are animated bodies that possess a variety of jutsu. These dead bodies (examinations suggest they are preserved corpses of former ninja) receive signals remotely through “black receivers,” chakra-demodulator rods they are pierced with. Interrupting the signal or rendering the body immobile are the only known ways to stop proxies controlled by this method. Each body seems to have an exclusive ability, and they do not wield multiple jutsu the way living shinobi tend to. Analysts are still examining the null proxies that were left behind. Four of six proxies were destroyed in the Tide Village, with the exceptions being the Absorption and Force proxies. Reports indicate the following abilities were encountered:

-Unknown Type that was immediately sealed by Kankuro’s team, and as such there is no record of what it can do.

-Summoning Type that summoned many types of large, contracted animals that are also controlled by black receivers. Reports noted a crustacean, chameleon, and multi-headed dog.

-Weapon Type that sported six arms that could fire missiles, and had a variety of weapons imbedded within its body.

-Soul-Stealing Type that could make contact with a single target and read the mind of the victim, was also thought to extract the consciousness of a victim to kill them.

-Chakra-Absorption Type that passively absorbs chakra and can negate Ninjutsu. Those that resorted to using Taijutsu in order to deal with this proxy were outmatched, however some success was reported by isolating this proxy and utilizing Genjutsu.

-Force-Manipulation Type is the form that Obito recognized based on its routine interactions with other Akatsuki members. It can manipulate attractive forces to push or pull anything nearby it. There is a gap of time between each use of this ability, approximated to be 5 seconds. It uses this ability offensively and defensively. If more of the controller’s chakra is devoted to this proxy, or perhaps any of the other forms, its attacks are amplified. Furthermore, the time gap reportedly shrinks.

You might be asking yourself how someone can manipulate various bodies all at once. We are not exactly sure, but I have a hunch. Obito confirmed that each of the bodies had abnormal eyes that fit the description of a primitive Doujutsu called the Rinnegan. This type of power was wielded by the Sage of the Six Paths in ancient times, and is absent in modern day shinobi. That’s what we thought up until now. It stands to reason that this kind of Doujutsu could very well be behind Pein’s ability. For now, we are assuming that Pein can create more of these proxies to replace those that are lost, if given enough time.

I need to confess that I have met someone with eyes like these once before, back when I was a much younger man. I looked after three orphans in the Land of Rain during the Second Great Ninja War, and was surprised to find a boy named Nagato who had the Rinnegan. After an ambush on the hideout where he and his friends lived, I left that land assuming they were dead. Naruto is familiar with this tale. Please let him know that I think those children may be connected to the Akatsuki in some way. I will also be warning Tsunade of the possibility.

Once I wrap up damage control here, I’ll be making my way to Nanakusa. I can keep you in the loop on Haku’s status (I have some favors to ask of him), and if Momochi is stupid enough to cross me. If you have questions, don’t hesitate to send a message to Shiogakure. There were many
witnesses to the attack, and some people might have details we missed.

Oh, and keep Naruto tucked under your wing for a while. Things are haywire with the Akatsuki brazenly attacking villages. I don’t want him going anywhere without me, at the moment. Why not help him out and teach him what it means to be a Kage? He’s going to need a professional leg to stand on when he gets back to Leaf. Polish him up!

-Jiraiya

When he finished, Gaara held out the scroll to Temari, “You should read what Kankuro wrote.”

“Oh?” She raised a brow and crossed over to the desk.

“What’d he write?” Naruto was eternally curious.

“That he loves us.”

Naruto pooched his lips and slumped down in the armchair, moved by the bond of siblings.

Temari was speed-reading and commenting simultaneously, “I think I’m going to have to cut this out and frame it.”

Gaara nodded in agreement and then added, “I’ll see who among the Medical Corps is free to go south with you and the team I am putting together. I am not sure…if Matsuri will be alright.”

“Why not?” Temari was spilling over into Jiraiya’s message.

“Because Menma is missing.”

Her eyes darted up, alarmed.

Gaara sighed and rubbed his head, feeling the weight of Naruto’s stare on him.

“She shouldn’t go with me to Tide, then.” Temari supposed.

“If she doesn’t and finds out anyway, that won’t put her at ease either.”

“So you want me to watch your student find out first hand that her boyfriend is missing or probably dead?” She was not charmed by the task.

Naruto’s eyes went even wider as he looked at his friend, where Gaara had leaned over his desk and plopped his head into his palm, “No matter what she’ll be unhappy. So what do I do? She’s already preparing to travel.”

An immediate suggestion came from Naruto, “Well, you send her!”

Temari and Gaara goggled at him.

“Even if she’s freaking out, it makes more sense to send her. Then she’ll feel like she has slightly more control over the situation, if she can look and ask around. If she’s stuck here she’ll just go insane. I know I would.” He reasoned.

Gaara wasn’t so sure, “Naruto, Matsuri still has to be able to follow orders in a time of crisis.”

“And you don’t think she can? She’s a Chunin. She can hold it together.”
Vexed, Gaara formed hand signs and summoned a pint-sized scorpion. He muttered orders at it while confirming to his human companions, “Matsuri will go too. I’m assigning her.”

“This is going to be ugly.” Temari predicted.

“So was your last mission.” Her brother remarked.

“Seems to have become my specialty— taking tragedy head-on.” Temari watched the scorpion scuttle away from Gaara’s desk and out an open window, “Which meeting point?”

“The village gate in thirty minutes.”

Temari nodded to her brother and then requested of Naruto, “Help him, Naruto. Neither of you do anything reckless.”

He gave her an affirmative sound before the kunoichi hustled out of the office. The door clicked shut behind her as Naruto rose from his seat to approach the desk, and thumped his hands down on top of it, “Tell me how I can help you, Gaara.”

“You already have.”

“Hey, don’t be figurative. I mean seriously. You need to give me something to do if you’re going to stick me on Suna’s no-exit list.” Naruto punctuated the last words with finger-taps, “Keep--me--busy.”

“We’ll be waiting on correspondence from other villages, and I expect Tsunade-sama’s updates will be arriving soon.” Gaara thought on it, “So if you want something to do…”

“Let me shadow your duties.”

“Later. I have a better idea.” The Kazekage fished around a desk drawer for official letterhead, “Now that you’re a Chunin, you ought to know how to climb the ladder of shinobi hierarchy.”

While standing, Naruto flexed in a feline, tongue-curving stretch, still antsy, “I do know. I work hard and earn respect!”

“Along with that, strategy and timing get you there. You can still be respected and go nowhere. If you want to be Hokage, you have to understand how to make the village want you to be the Hokage.” He was testing a pen that was running low on ink, “Arguably the best place to start is to elect a specialization.”

“Elect a wha-?”

Gaara gestured with the pen, “You have various talents. Develop one that allows you to amass greater acclaim and trust, like how Sakura has risen in Leaf’s Medical Corps. The reason why it works is because those in your sphere of influence will begin to vouch for you when it comes time for a retiring Kage and the land’s daimyo to select a succeeding candidate. Fundamentally, that’s how it goes…but there are always other factors that come into play.” He summarized, “At this point you are blessedly well-rounded and sporting several key advantages, but if you choose a talent that aids the village and serves its best interests—”

“People will be more willing to consider me?”

“Exactly.”
“How do I make an election then?”

Gaara dove into the topic, “You show up to a division or Corps office with a recommendation. Usually there will be a preliminary assessment before you are accepted on a full-time basis. For example, if you wanted to serve on Konoha’s advisory council and join it as a junior member, you submit a recommendation and pass a practical interview. Rather simple. Other divisions in the village will require different materials and commitments from you. They might also try to turn you away at-will with no reason cited.” He indicated that the unjustifiable prejudice Naruto routinely endured as a jinchuriki could complicate the feat, “But you won’t be turned down.”

“I won’t?” Naruto squinted his eyes, “Why not?”

“Because the Kazekage’s recommendation is not so easily ignored.” Gaara was a bit smug, “Neither is the Hokage’s.”

“Wouldn’t that look just a little bougie? It’s not exactly a secret that you guys like me.”

“That’s the point.”

He shrugged, “Ah, if it works, it’s still probably not the worst thing someone’s done to get into one of these.”

“True. Now, what division do you think you could serve?”

“…I’m not re-eeally sure…shouldn’t I give it some thought and choose carefully?”

“Just pick one.” Gaara sniffed, pressing the pen to paper.

“Jeez, fine. Ero-sensei had me eating and breathing sealing scrolls he brought along on our trip, before we ended up on Mount Myoboku. That’s how I worked out the Hiraishin.”

“Alright, so the Sealing Corps.”

“Isn’t that, like, the top rung of shinobi divisions-? I kinda fell off the band wagon and haven’t read much lately.”

“That doesn’t matter. Once you join, you’ll be devoted to studying and assisting analysts. Then after that, coordinators and commissioners. The point is to learn. You don’t have to be the best there.”

“—didn’t you say-?”

“Quiet. I’m writing.” Gaara was concentrating on the start of a bewitching endorsement.

He stood there for a moment, doing his best to remain silent while Gaara wrote. Naruto felt the urge to tap his foot, wild with energy and questions, glancing around the office. When not speaking became unbearable, he whispered a question, “…would I…report to that place every day?”

“Ask those questions after you are accepted.”

“Again with the assumptions.”

Gaara cocked his head in annoyance, “Save your questions for when you are a member. I won’t know every detail of how that division operates in Leaf.” He fished for an official signature seal in a stationary box, “You’ll further distinguish yourself by performing well on missions, obeying the Hokage, and maintaining a rapport with all of the standard forces.”
“Sounds like a cakewalk.” Naruto thought out loud, not counting possible discrimination.

“It’ll be much harder than it sounds…” Gaara assured him as he pressed the sealing stamp at the bottom of the page, “However, you can use a good challenge. Your training over the last few years has gone exceedingly well, so let’s see how you perform in the civic arena.”

Naruto accepted the official letter his friend handed to him, feeling a tickle in his chest. Gaara had faith in him. He felt encouraged, even if he was lost at the fork at the start of this particular path.

After putting away odds and ends on his desk, Gaara stood to fetch a drink of water from the cooler at the corner of the room, “We should go over the things Sensei mentioned in his message. Those details will help us deal with the Akatsuki in the future.”

Naruto plopped back down into his seat, “Alright.”

“Then, lunch. Then more committee meetings. You can shadow me for those, they’ll be brief.” The Kazekage downed the cup of water, adding, “After all that, I’ll show you around all of the Corps divisions we have here, so you get an idea of what they’re like.”

“Huh. I’d appreciate it.”

Gaara crossed over to him and patted the empty cup on top his friend’s head, “Once all of that is out of the way, and I have more free time tomorrow…” He smiled, “We can train together.”

*This* was a schedule Naruto could get behind, “About time you suggested that, you know.”

“I was getting to it. My job doesn’t allow for days off.”

“I might kick your butt, Gaara.”

“If you do, it won’t damage my ego nearly as much as it would have in the past.” Gaara circled around his desk again and handed off the scroll with Jiraiya’s message to Naruto, “Neither will I boast about it should I defeat you.”

“You are *SO,*” Naruto emphasized, “Full of shit.”

“I am.”

“You’re buying lunch.”

Chapter End Notes

Hope you liked it, peeps. I need to drink from a jug of motivation juice in order to get working on the next few installments, which ought to be a bit shorter in length and easier to churn out. Fanfic posting gets a bit hairy when it coincides with novel writing, whittling down that stack of books I said I’d read, work, whiskey, life, and 3DS games. To anyone who might find the time to do actual editing work/proofreading on a book manuscript next year: drop me a line. I need a serious brain and set of eyes to look at [working title] Quartz Story. Inquire by PM.
By the look of it, Ino overstuffed the box Hinata had brought to stock up on herbal remedy ingredients. The Yamanaka Flower Shop’s donation of rare roots and blooms was very generous, though Hinata regretted not bringing payment with her, ‘This is too much— and they’re expensive…’ Ino had shooed her along cheerily.

Hinata crossed town in a brisk scurry, and on the third floor of the Administrative Building she spied Shizune in a corner workroom. When she entered and set the very full box down on a table top, Shizune batted her eyes in surprise. “Thank you for bringing these so quickly, Hinata…but we only needed three roots at most.”

Young medic-nin trainees were filing into the room and gathering ‘round.

“I know, Ino-chan shared more than I asked for.” She opened a satchel bag slung over her shoulder and scooped a variety of excess plants into it, “I’ll bring these home with me so I can plant some of my own.”

“Perfect.” Shizune nodded to the girl and acknowledged the Hokage when she stepped into the room, “Good morning, Hokage-sama.”

“Morning. Shizune…let’s talk later about what’s going on in Shiogakure. It’ll be a long talk with the advisory council.” Tsunade kept her voice down, then greeted students, “Good morning, class.”

Hinata was about to make her way out before Tsunade stopped her, “Hinata…”

She spun on her heel and bowed slightly, “Good morning, Hokage-sama!”

“I’ve been waiting, you know.”

“Waiting?” Hinata’s brows were aloft, “For what?”

Tsunade cocked a hand on her hip, as if she didn’t believe Hinata was unaware of the broached subject, “Don’t be coy, young lady. Kakashi said he dropped off a recommendation letter for you over a week ago. I’ve been waiting for you to submit it after I heard… I thought maybe you’d forgotten.”

“A…Jounin recommendation?” She wanted to be sure.

“Of course.” The Hokage balanced her spread fingertips on the table, exercising patience, “Bring it to me when you think of it, and then your evaluation can be scheduled.”

“R-Right!” This was the first she had heard of such a letter existing. Had she been informed, Hinata would have scoured her house days ago for this alleged recommendation. She excused herself, and rather than take the stairs of the building, she exited from a top story window and bounded over rooftops.

‘So I did receive one! Just like Neji-niisan and Sato-kun did!’ Her face stretched in a wide smile, still
in disbelief over the development, ‘Wait until Naruto hears! My hard work paid off, and other shinobi know that they can depend on me…’

She had been too caught up with other distractions to give much thought to another promotion. Hinata and most of the Hyuga clan were still waiting to hear the results of Neji’s assessment. He set out a day ago and had yet to return. As Hanabi had put it: He went off somewhere, with someone, and it could take over a day to finish the test. Whatever.

Also, Hinata had been chafed to hear that Fujita spent time with Naruto on a temporary team for Suna’s Accelerated Exam…after which Naruto had not come back to Konoha. Fujita explained it thusly: Hinata-sama, I know that he wanted to go home too! It seems the Kazekage had further business with him. It’ll be soon now. You were all he talked about!

She could take a bit of comfort in those words, but her patience was wearing micron-thin. Knowing that Naruto was so close made her a little chicken-headed, and disrupted some of her routines and assignments.

At the Hyuga estate she circled around to the garden and set her satchel on the porch, intending to plant the tubers she’d brought with her. Hinata then kicked off her shoes and hurried into the house, thinking to herself, ‘If Kakashi-sensei brought a recommendation letter here, he most likely gave it to Father…’ That too surprised her—that her father had not mentioned such an honor.

Down the hall and through the door of the sitting room, Hinata found Hyuga Hiashi reading a stack of daily news publications at a low table. He looked up at her fondly and his eyes said hello. Sometimes, nothing need be said between them. Unable to help herself, Hinata smiled and sat down, “Good morning, Father.”

“Good morning.” He poured tea for her, “Have you been rushing somewhere, Hinata?”

“I only had a few tasks this morning, and the Hokage told me…that Kakashi-sensei brought a Jounin recommendation letter to the Hyuga estate on my behalf.” She accepted a cup of green tea, “Do you have that letter, Father?”

Uncertainty crept at the corners of his face, “I don’t.”

“Oh.” Her joy fizzled.

“I was unaware, to be perfectly honest. That isn’t something I would have kept from you.” Hiashi stared out of a rice paper window, deep in thought for a moment, “It is possible that when that letter was delivered…it fell into the hands of our elders.”

“Ah.” She understood why that possibility displeased him.

“I suggest that you ask Elder Hichida, once he returns from prayer at the Branch House.” Her father supposed, “Or you may ask your Great Grandfather Haburo. He is in his study right now.”

Hinata sat quietly and sipped, also staring lethargically at the window of the room. It was no secret to her or anyone in the clan how much Haburo disliked her. In spite of this, Hiashi wanted her to advocate for herself.

Hinata asked, “Has Neji-niisan come home yet?”

“I expect he’ll be here soon. I am curious to learn how he fared.”

“I am too.”
He returned to the initial topic, “Hinata, don’t let our Great Elder take this opportunity from you…if indeed that is what he is trying to do…” Hiashi advised, “Challenge him. If all of the clan and village believes you to be worthy, with my Grandfather being the sole exception, then indeed you are worthy. Remember that.”

She downed the last of the tea in her cup and nodded. Hinata rose from a cushion and ventured back into the corridors of the Main House, proceeding toward the office at the far end. ‘Father thinks that maybe…the elders hid my letter? Maybe Great Elder told them to, or he took it himself?’ She was speculating, ‘Or we could be wrong. Maybe-?’ No. Hanabi and Tenten certainly would not have held onto it; they would have stormed up to her and presented her with such valuable correspondence.

It was deliberate interference, Hinata determined. She rapped on the jamb of the study before sliding the door open, announcing herself, “Good morning, Great Elder. Is it alright if I speak with you…?”

The old man was upright, leafing through pages in a binder he had pulled from a wall cupboard. Haburo did not even glance over his shoulder at her when he said, “Come inside and shut the door.”

Hinata did as she was told and hovered at the center of the room while her Great Grandfather trudged around, putting things away. She had scraped together enough nerve to address the issue, “Great Elder…Kakashi-sensei said that he dropped off a Jounin recommendation letter at the Hyuga estate vouching for my promotion. If you have it…will you please give it to me so I can submit it to the Hokage?”

Haburo shuffled around the edge of his desk toward a tall-backed swivel chair, making tired sounds as he settled into it. Once comfortable, he looked her square in the eye and said, “You may not have it.”

Such a response was expected, but Hinata wanted to uncover the heart of the matter, “Why?”

“I tore that letter to shreds.” Haburo informed her.

Heartbeat soaring and prickling with rage, Hinata took all the time she needed to silently fidget and glare. She was never one to throw a tantrum, but she was truly bewildered by such treatment. ‘I have only ever tried to bring honor to my clan and please our superiors! I’m not helpless like I once was! Why does he hate me so much?’

“Hinata,” The old man said, “You mustn’t think that you do not deserve such an accolade. Rather…now is not the time for you to be focusing on a Jounin promotion.”

Her arms were stiff at her sides, “Not to focus-? Great Grandfather—!”

“You must be thinking about the future of the Hyuga clan and how you will preserve it. I need you to pour your mind and efforts into it. Young Fujita, in spite of his recent promotion in Hidden Sand…is ill-equipped to be this clan’s next acting steward.” Haburo clarified himself, “You will assume that responsibility as stewardess, when Neji ascends to leadership. The Hyuga will be very well-positioned between your combined talents.”

This took her aback, “…I thought the Taketori—”

“You will NOT be betrothed to Kitano under any circumstance.” Haburo announced rigidly, “Choose someone respectable, preferably from Hidden Leaf.” He added with a sigh, “Fujita can maintain relations with the Taketori through his future marriage, and his children may be kept as wards of that confounded clan. If not, he may do as he likes and raise his children with the Branch
Seal here.”

Hinata shook from head to foot, frazzled by the projected changes. It did not seem that Haburo hated her at all. He expected many things, but they did not seem nearly as injurious as they had in the past.

“If that is what you want us to do…if you want me to work hard and support our clan—” She marched up to the desk and asked, “Why did you tear up my letter, Great Elder?”

He laced his hands and settled his bony chin on them, weary, “Now is not the time for you to be roaming far and wide, under the direction of many councils and directors. You will stay here…close to the clan. You will not be entrenched in any of the dangerous diversions that superiors would bestow upon a young shinobi like you.”

“I am perfectly capable.” She reminded him.

“Great Granddaughter, please.” The old man’s tone was not cruel, but concerned, “I ask for your cooperation.”

Sullen, Hinata sank down into a spare chair opposite the desk and brewed over the request. Very little of it made sense, but at least she could tell that the old patriarch was not malicious.

After a dragging silence, Haburo admitted slowly, “These trying times…have me worried.” His eyes wandered around the room as he went on, “I ask you to continue your training, and to keep a low profile. With the conclusion of Leaf’s Chunin Exam, too much attention has been on the Hyuga clan.”

A niggling feeling ate at her stomach walls, “What do you mean?”

“I wish for you to pass beneath Root’s notice.” His voice was as soft as snow in deep wilderness, “You must avoid the Foundation while their scrutiny of our clan intensifies.”

The nervous feeling climbing up her stomach and chest reached its peak. Hinata knew precious little about the Root Foundation and what purpose it served outside of the Hokage’s jurisdiction, but she’d heard a few grisly rumors. She leaned forward and lowered her voice, “Great Elder…if we were not being scrutinized, would you have allowed me to take a Jounin Trial?”

“Yes.”

She frowned and considered the implication of such a reply. None of this was personal. If she knew well enough, Root’s primary task was the security of the Hidden Leaf Village through secret and unconventional means, so why would the Hyuga clan fall under their magnifying glass?

“Was it alright for Neji-niisan to—?”

Haburo confirmed, “I allowed him to take a Jounin Trial, although it may not have been wise.”

“What is Root looking for among the Hyuga clan?” Hinata wondered.

“Save your questions for now and do as I ask.” Haburo dismissed the train of thought, “Your ability is inestimably rare, Great Granddaughter. We will take no risks. I will approve for you a mountain of recommendation letters, once uncertain times pass.” He assured her, “The Hyuga clan will depend on you and Neji for protection.”

“From what?” She asked in a whisper.
He tried to speak, but couldn’t. His eyes were glossy and desperate, pale in their sockets as dry air puffed from his mouth. Hinata felt alarmed as the old man strained to give an answer. Then, Haburo gave up and batted his lips, exhausted.

“Run along now.” He told her. His shoulders were slumped as he turned his attention back to items scattered on the desk.

Hinata rose with a cautious bow while watching her Great Grandfather, far more concerned walking out than she had been walking in. She was lost in thought as she retreated down the corridor toward the front of the house. Why didn’t he say anything? Had age robbed him of the thought? He had looked so sure.

She needed fresh air. Hinata stepped out of a side door and spotted Fujita and Tenten seated on the east side of the porch. When she drew close she could hear Tenten gently scolding the young man as she handed him a dagger in a sheath.

“This is new.” Tenten folded his hands around it, “And better than the last one. So don’t lose it, okay?”

“I won’t, Onee-san.” He smiled slightly, “Although, it was kind of cool how I lost my other tantō…”

“Yeah, yeah. In the eye of a big eel or something…” Tenten waved it off, “A waste is still a waste. I give you things with sentimental value, so don’t let them sink into the sea please.”

“Got it.”

Hinata took a seat beside them and felt far more relaxed. The combined easygoing attitudes of the adoptive brother and sister helped her sideline Haburo’s incomplete warning.

“Hinata-sama, Naruto wrote back to me! I got a message this morning.” Fujita reported cheerfully, “He said that he was disappointed he couldn’t join me on the return trip. A broad no-exit order was issued by the Kazekage just after a report on the Akatsuki came in.”

“The Akatsuki?” Tenten was up off of the porch and bending in low Wushu stretches on the lawn, “Did something happen?”

“It said that the Tide Village was attacked by Akatsuki members who wanted to capture a jinchuriki.” Fujita exhaled roughly and leaned back on his arms, “That made me worry a little about Fū…”

Since Hinata was sitting there in a mildly horrified daze, not commenting, Tenten took that time to inquire, “And who is Fū?”

“Our third teammate who we met in Suna. She’s a jinchuriki from Hidden Waterfall.” Fujita was comfortable with the subject, “I know that the Akatsuki is dangerous and hunting individuals like her. I asked Fū to write to me often so that I know she’s alright.”

A presumptuous grin spread on Tenten’s face, “She sounds cool.”

“She is.”

“What does she look like?”

“Uh…well, about my height. She’s strong and fit.” His description was feeble even though he could picture the kunoichi clearly in his mind’s eye.
“Pretty?” Tenten gathered while she sank into a low leg extension.

Fujita puffed his cheeks and nodded.

“You’re such a sucker.” Tenten teased, “Boy can you pick ‘em. A jinchuriki! What must her jutsu be like-?”

“Amazing!” Fujita was compelled to share, “She’s versatile and easy to get along with! Fū can grow beetle wings to fly, or transform completely into a giant insect when using Chōmei’s chakra.” Understandably, Tenten was not familiar with who or what Chōmei was, so Fujita filled her in, “That is the name of her Tailed-Beast.”

“Wow.” Tenten stopped stretching and rested her hands on her hips, “Must be nice to grow wings. Or be huge.”

“It was very helpful.” He recalled Fū’s finest moments.

To Fujita’s left, Hinata was unusually withdrawn while she had been listening to the description. Much of her cousin’s account of making acquaintances with a jinchuriki, even identifying a Tailed-Beast by name, seemed more than coincidental when Hinata thought of what she had learned while ‘visiting’ Naruto. The possibility swirled around her mind, mixing with her disappointment over her torn up letter, as well as her awareness of the Root Foundation that Haburo claimed was ‘scrutinizing’ their clan.

She snapped out of her thoughts when Tenten patted her knee.

The woman smiled warmly at her, “Is something on your mind? You haven’t spoken much to us, Hinata.”

“I…I…” Hinata exhaled and blew a strand of hair from her face, “I’ve had a morning.”

“Ah.” Tenten got it, “Did your Elders get you out of sorts?”

Hinata drummed her hand on her leg, a bit anxious, “Great Elder Haburo said something strange…”

“He spoke to you?” This surprised Fujita.

“I thought he might be in possession of the Jounin recommendation letter that Kakashi-sensei wrote for me, but Great Elder tore it up.”

Aghast, both Tenten and Fujita were on their feet, about ready to light torches and locate pitch forks. They would arrange a mob to rally against such gross injustice. Hinata reached to pull both of them by their sleeves so that they were seated again.

She shook her head, “Please…don’t cause a fuss. He said he would have many other recommendations written for me, as an apology. He was worried about me taking a trial…how it might attract the wrong attention.”

Tenten crossed her legs and arms, still furious as she sat, “An apology? That old man is terrible! How could your promotion attract bad attention?”

“He thinks that…” Hinata glanced around, then dropped her voice to tell them, “The Root Foundation has been watching the Hyuga clan. Since the Chunin Exam, he said.”

Fujita’s concern was rather shallow, as he was unfamiliar with the ancillary Black-Ops organization.
Tenten, however, had a glint in her eye that suggested she was privy to the murmurings of unsavory activity Root was rumored to conduct.

“We haven’t done anything—” Hinata rephrased it, “I haven’t done anything that would be considered…objectionable by security forces. I know that.”

“We all do.” Tenten confirmed.

“Though Great Elder said he was worried.” She added in a whisper, “And he couldn’t tell me about what.”

Fujita protested in a hushed voice, “If Great Grandfather is going to dramatically cancel your chance at a Jounin promotion, surely he can explain-!”

“No. He…couldn’t speak. It was as if he couldn’t breathe, or…I’m not sure.” Hinata pressed her fingers together, bending and flexing them, “He was stopped from telling me. Maybe.”

At that, Fujita ruminated in silence while Tenten held Hinata’s gaze, taking the news very seriously.

“So…” Tenten took a breath, “We should be on the lookout for anyone who thinks they need to watch us. Your dad should know about this. Well, Hideyasu too…” She rubbed her chin, “And Neji, of course.”

“I don’t want to trouble everyone.”

“It’ll be more trouble if they’re unaware of what’s going on when we are inexplicably arrested or who knows what.” She prophesized, “Let’s not blow this out of proportion, but let’s not ignore it.”

“Could we really have committed an offense?” Fujita wracked his brain for any possible context of guilt that would incur Black Ops supervision.

“No, we didn’t. Let’s relax.” Hinata coached her two companions to inhale with her, breathing out heavily, “Now, I would like to eat ramen.”

“Straight to the sodium we go.” Tenten chuckled, “I’ll have lunch with you, if you want. Later I have—”

Reaching over to direct her by the shoulder, Fujita turned Tenten around so she could observe Neji plodding through the entrance of the estate. These days he wore black and white Hanfu almost exclusively, thanks to Kayato’s fashion influence. It looked as though Neji had been jostled around in the forest: green leaf and dirt stains visible on white sleeves, hair a bit untidy. He’d certainly worked hard on something.

The question blared off of their faces as Hinata, Tenten, and Fujita stood in front of the engawa, watching the heir of the Hyuga clan approach tiredly. Neji felt the force of their stares. Of course they would want to know how it went. He wasn’t going to have a few minutes to sit and relax and eat something. The most he’d had for a meal in over a day was a handful of almonds, donated by one of his evaluators.

Ah, and there was Tenten watching, her eyes astute and calculating. She read the signals. His disheveled state. His lack of energy and emotion. His gait. Her mouth curled up in the beginnings of a smile. She didn’t need his explanation to know how his trial had gone.

The expression on her face immediately goaded an honest reaction from Neji. He tucked his head down slightly and tried not to smile, because she always made him want to, but resisting the urge
was futile. She had caught him. Without speaking, he’d let the truth slip.

She grinned and folded her arms, thrilled, “Congratulations, Neji. I see that you didn’t come back home a complete chump.”

He stopped in front of her and quipped, “I never do.”

Hinata had surfaced from her funk to greet Neji with her typical congeniality, and beside her Fujita was also chirping his congratulations. Down the way, a door slid open and Hanabi charged out onto the porch with a clamor. Hiashi was following behind her slowly. Neji’s return had not gone unnoticed since they had been watching indoors.

Hanabi’s questions drowned out all other comments for a full thirty seconds. Neji’s answers did not illuminate much: Yes, he’d passed. No, he was not officially a Jounin; the decision still fell to the Hokage, who would look over his transcript later. No, it wasn’t very interesting.

“You need to give more detail than that, Neji-niisan.” Hanabi complained flatly.

“Detail.” Neji sighed as he sat down on the porch, “I would prefer to exchange details for a meal.”

Tenten was assessing his needs, “I bet you’re starving.”

When he nodded, she set out into the house to find something for him to eat. Hiashi stood between his daughters with his arms tucked in long sleeves, amused by his nephew’s evident burnout, “It was a trying task, no?”

“Trying, but not unmanageable.”

“What were you made to do?” Hinata asked.

“I came to understand after a talk with Gai two days ago… it is tradition for old teammates to test the protégées of former team members. In my case, Shiranui Genma and Ebisu agreed to host my evaluation.” Neji explained, “I reported to the designated training area and listened to their instructions.”

“Which were?” Hanabi pressed.

“To test my competency, they wanted to see if I could disable the both of them while adhering to limitations they set.”

Hanabi pestered, “What limitations?”

Story-telling was not Neji’s strong suit. He was frowning as he went on, “None of us were individually permitted to use hand seals to perform Ninjutsu or Genjutsu. I was also told not to use my Kekkei Genkai.”

“But it’s only natural for us to use it!” Fujita was astonished by the handicap.

“They knew that.” Neji acknowledged.

“You clearly overcame their test.” Hinata noticed cheerfully.

“Not without hardship.” Neji acknowledged, “I might have misunderstood the parameters of that duel initially… because they did not hesitate to use combined hand seals for jutsu against me.”

Hanabi’s face was blank, “What’s a combined hand seal?”
To demonstrate, Hiashi wordlessly extended his hand and Hinata folded hers against it, creating a Horse Seal.

Hanabi clucked impatiently at such a simple concept, “So ninja can actually use jutsu that way?”

“To great effect.” Neji confirmed, “I wasn’t expecting it.”

When Tenten returned with a tray of rice, mackerel, and vegetables for her boyfriend, Hanabi caught her up to speed by paraphrasing the start of Neji’s trial retelling. Tenten nodded and sat down beside Fujita on the porch.

“Oh, so they tried to trick you?” Tenten was pleased, “Did they land a hit?”

“A few.”

“You fought without the Byakugan?”

“Without it.”

“So how did you counter a no jutsu situation while your opponents were still technically using jutsu?” Tenten let him have a few moments to chew the food he stuffed into his mouth.

“I focused on Ebisu to wear him down with Taijutsu.” Neji explained, “That additional pressure made him use Supplementary Jutsu, unintentionally…which did not stop the trial. But I felt it was reasonable to bend the rule after a host broke the rule.”

“You used jutsu.” Hanabi accused.

“Just once.” Neji was pleased with himself.

“A Shadow Clone.” Tenten guessed.

“They didn’t notice until it was too late.” Neji took another victorious bite of lunch.

“You were not reprimanded for that breach of regulation?” Hiashi was surprised.

“The matter was debated fairly…and they agreed not to fault me for a reaction to their mistake.” He finished another mouthful and added, “Following the initial trial, I was asked to accompany them on an A-Rank mission. We completed that this morning, and they gave me their endorsement.”

“Huh. So that’s how it works.” Tenten was impressed.

“You will keep this in mind for your own evaluation in the near future.” Hiashi turned to Hinata, arcing a brow as if to say, *Did you find that letter?*

“I…will need to speak to you about that, Father.” Hinata had a few things she needed to address, “May we go inside to talk about it?”

He nodded and shepherded Hanabi along, and Hinata trailed after them on the engawa while parting from Neji and Tenten with a wave. Across the lawn, Hideyasu was bellowing for Fujita to *get off his tush* as he was *late for Nature Manipulation training!* Fujita sprang up with a squawk, “Ack— Neji-niisama! Congratulations to you on your promotion! Look after Onee-san today—” He took off to meet his father.

Blinking, Neji watched the boy skirt around the corner of the house in the direction of the pebble training yard. When he wasn’t looking, Tenten picked food from his bowl to sate her empty stomach.
He still noticed, of course.

“You haven’t eaten anything?” He suspected.

“No. I was up early this morning working. I told Lee and Gai-sensei I’d join them for weight training this afternoon.” She wore a pleased-as-pie smile, “And now you can come with me to tell them the news.”

“Yes. Though there’s still time.”

“For what?”

“To go somewhere.” He said.

His bowl was about empty, to Tenten’s displeasure, “Where?”

“Wherever you want—”

Before he could finish speaking, Tenten had selected their destination, “To Nabezo! Let’s get shabu shabu and dumplings.” She did not even wait up for him. Tenten was on her feet and marching off of the property to the beat of her hunger pains.

He set aside the food tray on the porch, which he knew was a rude thing to do to housekeeping staff, and followed after his girlfriend. Their dates were always more pragmatic than romantic, not that Neji would complain. He took comfort in the routines and rituals they had established. There was a time and place for displays of affection, and that was usually beyond the public’s view. And yet, he thought to himself as he walked and caught up to her, watching Tenten from the corner of his eye, ‘I wanted her to…’ He’d expected to come home to less clan fanfare, hoping to discuss his success with Tenten only and then revel in her attentions. His family had mucked with that goal.

Neji slid his fingertip along the back of her hand and arm while they walked. She only spared an acknowledging glance, smiling at him, knowing better than to hold his hand. He didn’t like doing that while out among peers and society who might, heaven forbid, witness him tethered to an attachment.

“I’m proud of you.” She said the words he wanted to hear, because she was also a part-time mind reader.

He smiled and, oh well, some other pedestrians may have seen it.

“I knew you could do it. I wasn’t worried. Lee and Gai-sensei aren’t worried either, but they’ve been preoccupied devising new ways to challenge you when you get back.” Tenten warned him, “Wong Leung’s training might be gentler than what they’ve got in store.”

“Then I’m switching training regimens.”

“Ha, nice try. You can’t go soft right after a promotion. Keep working hard.” She looked lively for someone who had been up since four in the morning and had not eaten anything. Neji kept catching himself looking at her, even after they arrived at the tavern and were seated.

While chatting about the last 48 hours of their lives apart, Neji noticed that in spite of the fact he’d eaten already, he kept up with Tenten as they dipped marbled beef into the hotpot, clearing two plates and then some. Tenten had finished a basket of dumplings without his participation, as that item was her gastronomic fetish. Somehow she was pacing herself to eat long after Neji had politely sat back to quit.
“On top of all that,” Tenten continued the conversation as she boiled radish and mushrooms, “I learned some weird things today.”

“Did you?”

“Yeah. Fujita said he made friends with the jinchuriki of Hidden Waterfall.”

Neji was authentically amazed, his eyes widening a fraction.

“And,” Tenten crowed softly, “He has a crush on her.”

Neji sipped from his glass of water. Apparently his young cousin had a particular palate when it came to women.

“He didn’t say so, I just have a feeling that he does.” Tenten clarified, “He also talked a bit about being on a team with Naruto, which was very entertaining. By the way, do you know what the Flying Thunder God technique is?”

“A legend.” Neji recalled from Academy stories, “Born from the endeavors of past Kage.”

“Well, Naruto uses that technique.” She popped a mushroom in her mouth, “That’s what Fujita said.”

“Fujita is mistaken.”

“I don’t think he is.”

“We’ll ask him to clarify his comments later. He was delirious from heatstroke in the desert.” Neji explained away the contentious claim.

“Yeah, sure. Also…Hinata told us that Elder Haburo said some crazy stuff about the—”

He held up a hand to deter the subject, “For now, I would prefer not to think or talk about Elder Haburo.”

“But he—” She quieted when she took note of the withered expression on Neji’s face. He needed to mentally fortify himself whenever Haburo was mentioned, due to past experiences with his dour forbearer.

“Okay, save that for later because you will be hearing about it from your uncle and Hinata. Most likely.” Tenten forecasted, “What he said was unsettling.”

“It always is.”

She had to hand him that point. She also paid for lunch, which Neji did not object to. Upon leaving the eatery, Neji asked her to take him to the location stipulated on the land deed her father had left her. Tenten thought it an odd request, “Are you sure you don’t want to…go home and take a bath or something?”

“I’m sure. There’s something I want to see.”

“I haven’t been there since I was a kid. It’s south of here…probably overgrown and unfit for resale.” She supposed glumly, leading the way.

They passed the Han Ethnic Quarter, circumvented the west side of the park, and came upon untended flat land at the foot of gently sloped hills. Everything was green but not overgrown, as
Tenten had predicted it would be. She stopped and turned her head, “It doesn’t look so bad...” Businesses in the village were developing land and growing ever closer to the unused plot, but for now there was still half a kilometer of pristine, natural space.

Neji was dawdling around, observing young cypress trees that marked the edge of the property line. On a nearby stone, a lizard lay still while warming itself in the sun. Tenten crossed the grass and rested her hands on her hips, asking Neji, “Do you think I should sell it?”

“I don’t think you should.”

“I wish I could’ve lived here. Had a big house...our own yards and everything.” She reminisced about her father’s plans for a new home that he was never able to build.

“Is that what you still want?” Neji inquired.

“No. I have everything I could ever want.” She nudged him in the side with her elbow, content.

“Then what will you do with this place?”

Tenten shrugged, “I don’t know. My home is with you now. If I sell it, it’ll be like selling my Mom and Dad’s dream.”

Red and gold leaves blew loose from a nearby maple, tinted with the start of autumn. They stood in silence and wondered what good they could do together. What could be done that would not insult the past nor forsake the future? Tenten didn’t know. Since the loss of her parents, her life felt like a leftover piece of something, struggling to fit and settle her identity somewhere else.

“What if you restored another dream with their dream?” Neji suggested.

“...if I knew how to do that I certainly would.” Tenten was a little overwhelmed by such an objective.

Without clearing much up, Neji went on, “I plan to take a few solo missions as a Jounin.”

“You mean annually? Or monthly?” She already knew she would miss him.

“Monthly. For a short while. I prefer being with our team.” He explained, “Extra income will be helpful.”

Tenten scoffed, “Extra income.” Like he needed it.

“Permits can be expensive. We should ask about materials...”

“Hold it, you want to build something here?” Tenten caught on. She turned up her eyes as Neji stood very close, trailing his hands down her sides while thinking.

“Would you consider it? This land belongs to you. It’s your decision.” He reminded her, “But if you did, I think Wong Leung would teach at a school built here. He told me that he gave up that goal to raise Lee.”

She shut her eyes to deliberate for one silent minute. Tenten glanced around again and then tapped her finger on Neji’s chest, chuckling, “You thought of that yourself?”

“After he told me about his past, I’ve been thinking about how to help him.” Neji admitted.

“I think I remember Wong Leung mentioning that, once. That he came here to open a school, but it...
never happened…” Tenten nodded, “Quite the opportunity we have here…I say we do it. We’ll figure out the budget piece and then get to work.”

When Neji went in to kiss her mouth, Tenten simultaneously leaned back to offer her hand to shake on it. She laughed at his dumbstruck face. To seal the deal, she shook his hanging hand and then pecked his lips. After that he appeared to recalibrate.

“I was going to find a way to build it no matter what,” Neji said as they set out back in the direction of Leaf’s city center, “But thank you for doing this.”

She noticed that he was holding her hand, yet she did not bring attention to it, “Not at all, Neji. Though I don’t want to tell Wong Leung or Lee what we’re planning. I want it to be a surprise. Or more importantly, to not get their hopes up since we’re inexperienced and could fail miserably at this.”

“We won’t.”

“We won’t, eh? What do you know about constructing martial arts schools?”

“Nothing.” Neji conceded, “But who knows about anything when they are only beginning?”

Tenten had to tease, “I seem to remember you did as a kid, in the Academy. You were so stuck up.”

“Don’t remind me.”

A few blocks south of Konoha’s Administrative Building, where Neji and Tenten intended to inquire about building permits and such, they passed Tama and Sato traveling in the opposite direction. Tama and Tenten greeted each other civilly, but Sato was his usual cheeky self as soon as he laid eyes on Neji.

“Neji! Someone else’s fashion sense looks great on you.” Sato provided a thumbs-up of salutations.

“Likewise.” Neji was aware that Sato had formed a habit of repurposing his grandfather Sakumo’s clothing.

“Have you taken your Jounin Trial yet?” Sato was curious, “I just had mine scheduled with Asuma-sensei and Namiashi Raidō for next week.”

All Neji shared was, “Yes. It went well.”

“Of course it did.” Sato was smiling. He had a new fondness for Neji after they’d beaten the daylights out of each other in the Chunin Exam. Reciprocally, Neji seemed a touch less prickly around the gregarious Hatake. Only Tenten could have noticed such a subtle change.

Neji was still not very responsive to Sato’s attempt to gossip with him, whipping up tales of Kurenai-sensei and Asuma-sensei’s upcoming, clandestine nuptials, Hinata’s possible participation in Friday’s ramen eating contest at Ichiraku Ramen, and how was life with Tenten at the estate going? Because as soon as Sato got the scoop on that direct from the horse’s mouth, he’d be sure to spread it among their peer group and tease.

Meanwhile, Tenten and Tama carried on their own amenable conversation:

“‘You’re feeling better, Tama?’”

“About back to how I felt before the Exam. Therapy helped! Sakura-chan looked after me.”
Tenten agreed, “She’s been protective of you. Me too, come to think of it.”

“Are you going to train with Uncle Gai today?”

“This afternoon. Were you thinking about joining us?”

“I was.”

“By all means.” Tenten invited her, “3:30 on those nose, field C.”

“I’ll be there!”

Tenten walked on with a brief farewell, though Sato grumbled as Neji tore himself away from forced chit-chat to follow his girlfriend.

“He’ll open up to you more soon.” Tama supposed as they walked down the street, “If you pass your Trial, Neji will definitely see you as an equal. He’s not as rough around the edges now that he has Tenten.”

“Yeah, he’s just not a talker. He’s barely even a listener.” Sato joked.

“That’s why we have Lee-kun, Chouji-kun, and Shino-kun.”

“They’re much better listeners, by far.” He agreed, “But I am stoked for Naruto to come back. He’s a chatterer after my own heart.”

“It won’t be long now, right? Hinata-chan would know.” Tama slowed to a stop when Sato did, as her companion had noticed a visitor to the Leaf Village wandering around the intersection of the avenue, trying to get some directional bearings.

Right away, Sato recognized the non-inhabitant as the new Mayor of Kuro Town and his tutor, former Grass ninja Toshisue Anyo. Sato took Tama’s hand in his own and trotted up to his friend with lively greetings, “Anyo! What brings you here?”

“Ah.” The white haired man had a careworn look on his face, “Hello, Sato. It’s nice to see you.”

“How’ve you been?” Sato extended pleasantries.

“Better.” Anyo’s gaze fell on Tama, “Hm. Is this your special someone?”

“Yep, this is Tama.” Sato introduced, “Tama, I’ve told you about Anyo who works in Kuro and chills with me sometimes.”

“He’s told me many good things.” Tama confirmed with a formal bow, “It’s good to meet you, Anyo-san.”

“And you as well, young lady. I’m looking for the Administrative Building.” Anyo announced, “Would you mind pointing me in the right direction? I am not very familiar with Konoha.”

“Oh, sure.” Sato gestured north up the road, “Just continue straight and bear right about…eight blocks up from here? You’ll see it’s a big circular building— kind of faded red with a beat-up roof.” He then wondered, “Did you need help with something in town? A project-?”

“This is more of a personal matter.” Anyo explained, “I wanted to submit a mission request to the Hokage to hire a tracking team.”
Sato and Tama exchanged eyebrow-raising glances.

“That might be a wait-listed request, since Hidden Leaf has a high volume of tracking assignments posted to search for various criminals and organizations.” Tama warned him.

Anyo nodded in understanding, “I’ll still apply. I’ve been struggling lately…since Sarincha went missing.”

The boy’s heart nearly stopped upon hearing the admission, “Sarincha’s missing?”

“It’s been over a week and she hasn’t come home…which is completely out of character for her.” The man lowered his voice, not truly comfortable sharing the situation, “She did not tell me that she would be away if it was for work, or visiting Kusagakure, or perhaps to see her father in Nanakusa…” It appeared as though he was in physical pain just speculating, “Or if something happened to her while I was occupied at the office…though I found no signs of foul-play in town or at our home.”

“That’s terrible.” Tama empathized.

Sato wanted to volunteer, “I can-!”

Anyo flicked his hand at him, “I don’t need you to work yourself up, Sato. There is much that the Hokage depends on you for…and Tama says this village is short on trackers.” He assured Sato, “I won’t stop until I find her. My instincts tell me she’s safe, it’s just…I have no idea where she might be, if not with me.”

“I really want to help you.” Sato protested.

“Well, you told me where to find the Hokage, so that’s enough.” His smile was lopsided.

“Is everything okay, though? You didn’t have a fight or anything?” Sato whispered.

Anyo was miffed by the implication, “No. Everything’s been fine. Better, even. That’s why none of this makes sense.”

“Sorry, sorry. Just wondering…” He was sincere, “It’s just that I really care about you guys. I’ll probably go crazy until you tell me that you’ve found her and that she’s safe. I mean, Orochimaru, Dintei Bi, and the Akatsuki are at large right now…so it’s hard to relax.”

“I know.” Anyo patted Sato’s shoulder appreciatively, “I promise I will keep you informed.”

“Thanks.”

With a nod of his head, Anyo acknowledged Tama, “Once again, it was a pleasure meeting you, Miss Tama. The two of you stay out of trouble…and hopefully I will be introducing Sarincha to you soon.”

“I hope so. Best of luck.” She watched as the man hurried on up the street, watching with Sato beside her, “He looks so jittery…”

“I would be too, if I lost you.” Sato spoke absently, watching his friend go.

Tama smiled to herself and laced her hand with his. Sato did not comment on how he was aware of Anyo and Sarincha’s tumultuous past, or the fact that Sarincha had once privately admitted to him that everything was not perfect in her marriage. She put up with many disappointments as Anyo’s
spouse, yet claimed it was worth it. This recent development certainly cast a shade of doubt on that claim, Sato thought with a frown.

“Yo.”

The pair whipped around to observe Kakashi.

“Friend of yours?” Kakashi inquired as he loped to a halt.

“Toshisue Anyo. Swordsmanship tutor and Mayor of Kuro Town.” Sato explained, “Yeah, I know. He looks a lot like my dad.”

“Freakishly so.” Kakashi confirmed.

“Good afternoon, Sensei.” Tama greeted brightly.

“Hi, Tama. I’m not too late for practice, right?”

“You missed it by three hours, but you know we understand.” She relayed Kiba and Sakura’s expectation that Kakashi could never reconcile himself with dates and times.

“Sorry about that…”

Sato circled closer to his uncle, “Are you feeling better Kakashi?”

The man sighed softly, “For the most part. That last episode hasn’t repeated since…”

Tama seemed to be partially aware that Kakashi intermittently experienced strange phenomena attributed to his Sharingan eye. She did not press for further details, though.

“So you know what might’ve caused it?” Sato asked.

“Not at all.” It was a seamless response that was only half truthful. Kakashi had ideas on what catalyzed the hallucination, but he wasn’t ready to share them with his talkative nephew.

He regarded Kakashi with a tilt of his head, “Take it easy, alright? We’ll catch up later.”

“Later.” Kakashi carried on as the young couple proceeded south down Main Street. He was not in the mood to broadcast how out of sorts he’d felt since seeing that Akatsuki member again, or how he wasn’t so sure he had imagined it all. It felt real. It still did.

Based on the morning’s update, passed through the grapevine top-down from the Hokage’s Advisory Council… the Akatsuki had attacked the Tide Village. That much was certain. Both Sunagakure and Shiogakure were reporting shinobi casualties, extensive damage to the city, and one missing Awa Utakata. The tidbit that Kakashi had asked for that no one had been able to answer was: How was Tide informed of an imminent attack? That isn’t information that Jiraiya casually happens upon.

None of the council members or Jounin had a clue. While climbing the steps of the Jounin Standby Station, Kakashi suspected that Jiraiya more than likely had an insider within the Akatsuki. It wouldn’t be outside the realm of possibility. Plenty of shinobi were well-connected, and practically made a second living off of espionage and selling information. Accessing the Akatsuki’s inner circle, however, was not common spy work.

‘That type of intel…planning attacks and the like…that would be shared with those who are considered unfailingly loyal to the organization— and this person clearly isn’t. Or…” Kakashi
pushed open double doors at the top of a landing and made a stop at a vending machine, ‘It could be one of the active members who snitched.’ His stomach swirled, ‘Like Uchiha Itachi.’

That, of course, bordered on absurd. Kakashi slipped a coin into the machine and pushed a button, ‘That’d be incongruent with what he did to the Uchiha clan. Although, the thin plausibility of village loyalty might fit there…I’ll have to ask Jiraiya to explain.’ It seemed too soon to try to explore the missing-nin’s motivations, or possible affiliation with Jiraiya. Trying to think about the slim chance of exonerating one of Konoha’s mass murderers in light of the greater good, whatever that was, would probably melt the brains of many councilmen. Kakashi at least prided himself in peeking outside of the box, once in a while.

He unwrapped the sweet apple bun, cozied up in a secluded corner near a window, and ate the snack. As someone who had known Itachi from a professional standpoint, back in the ANBU days, Kakashi could admit he still did not see why on earth the young man had chosen to destroy his clan. There was a fishy smell to it. A faint odor of doubt. Yet, Sasuke’s suffering and Itachi’s defection to the Akatsuki seemed to certify wrongdoing at a cellular level. For most people in Konoha, those actions were proof enough of Itachi’s guilt. They did not need to dig deeper.

And then there was the other coincidence, Kakashi thought as he chewed. That he had seen the Akatsuki member on the very day the attack on Shiogakure reportedly began. ‘Why?’ Had the trauma from his fight in the Land of Rain been so great that he had developed a sixth sense for it? What he could recall with certainty was that his Sharingan had changed during that past struggle, after watching Sato die. Kakashi could not claim to know everything about the eye that Obito had given to him, and so it helped to keep an open mind as he discovered new things. ‘If I am somehow able to see a member of the Akatsuki, I’ll have to grow a spine and keep it together…so I can report on it to the Hokage.’

He tossed the snack wrapper in a trash can and slipped his mask above the bridge of his nose. Kakashi strode past the panel window of a conference room door, deciding that since he was nearly an hour late for the Jounin Council meeting anyway, he’d get caught up once they called recess. He exited a sliding door onto the top floor balcony, where Asuma leaned on a rail and smoked.

His friend did not even turn around before speaking to him, “Get into that meeting, Kakashi. You’d be a useful mediator.”

“I’d feel more inclined if you weren’t out here shirking.” Kakashi happily took the spot beside Asuma.

He uttered a single word after a long drag, “Stress.”

“That bad, huh?”

“There sure as hell weren’t any good topics brought up in there. They didn’t even start discussing Shiogakure yet.” Asuma exhaled smoke from his nostrils, “Kurenai was tough enough to stay; said she’d fill me in later. The council was covering the details of Sasagainu Huo’s escape from custody.”

“I heard bits and pieces of that.” Kakashi turned around to lean his back against the rail, propping up his elbows, “Most of Leaf’s squadron was killed.”

Asuma recapped, “Only Inuzuka Hana survived when Bihokukuni’s group attack on the Leaf and Rock squads at the meeting point…they said our Captain Aburame Shihori took down two of Bi’s men and ordered her squad’s retreat.” He paused to inhale and exhale, “We also confirmed Oku Sekieima made it back to Iwa with serious injuries, but most of the Rock team was also killed in that skirmish. What a fucking mess.”
“I did notice Kiba saying a prayer of thanks yesterday. I had no idea his sister was on that detail.” Kakashi admitted.

“Guess he doesn’t want to bellow it out for the world to hear, or he’ll jinx his family’s luck.” The man had burned his cigarette down to its filter, putting it out in a stone tray, “To be honest, I don’t know how I feel about Tsunade sending out four units to track Huo and Bi’s group. We just got the report on the Tide Village…so rapid response teams aren’t readily available.”

“We’re spread thin.” Kakashi acknowledged.

“She already has stealth trackers checking the Rice Country for any word on Sasuke’s whereabouts. That team had to regroup after triggering a series of Orochimaru’s traps, plus that decoy base fiasco…” Asuma stared out on the city below, “Now a small fleet of medical teams will have to go to Tide. You see why this is a problem, don’t you?”

“Why it’s a problem?” Kakashi was amused, “I should circle all of the above.”

“It means we’ll be pulling double time on our assignments, at the very least.” His friend warned him, “It’ll suck. That’s why the Hokage has been campaigning for young bloods to take Jounin Trials, to pick up some of the slack. In case you didn’t hear, Raidō and I will be testing Sato next week.”

Kakashi only gave his friend a knowing, sidelong smile.

“Eh…so you’re confident in him?” Asuma chuckled.

“He’s ready.”

“Yeah, sure.” Asuma turned back toward the door, “I don’t know if I am.”

Since neither Matsuri nor Shigenori had protested, Temari cut their break short before sunrise and ordered the team to continue. By the time it was proper morning with a blue sky overhead, she had her two companions crossing the Great Naruto Bridge with no complaints of fatigue. The signs of damage and calamity were immediate. As they approached Shiogakure’s main hub at the shinobi barracks, Matsuri held her breath and observed an entire road of brick buildings had been flattened, spread out like toy blocks.

Areas that had been washed out and crushed had only just been dried out and cleared. Temari found it heartening that the battered city was crowded, full of citizens actively assessing the scope of loss and clean-up. She and her teammates passed the gate of the barracks, meandering through a dense pack of shinobi responders. Even without his traditional face paint on, Temari was able to pick out her brother’s face among the throng. In seconds, she had slipped through the bustling bodies to reach Kankuro, Matsuri and Shigenori tailing behind her.

“Uh— don’t mind my appearance.” Kankuro said as he rose from a canvas folded stool, still bandaged with an arm in a sling, “Hey Temari…I’m glad you’re here.”

“If only I’d been around when it happened…” Temari was careful not to squeeze him while hugging.

“Trust me, none of you wanted to be down here for that.” Kankuro acknowledged Matsuri with a nod, and was surprised to see Shigenori, “Oh, Shigenori, Gaara’s not giving you a streak of garbage missions is he?”

“Not that I’ve noticed.” The man seemed good-humored about it, “He hasn’t asked me to do much
until recently.”

Temari kept her mouth shut, aware of how Gaara was hoping that he could rely on the veteran Shakuton-user when the possible treason case with the Advisory Council blew wide open.

At Kankuro’s feet was a pile of disassembled carbon fiber parts, which Matsuri vaguely recognized, “Kankuro-sama…those aren’t your-?”

“Yeah. All of my puppets were destroyed.” He confirmed, “Further proof you guys didn’t want to be here when the shit hit the fan. It was bad.” Matsuri was cringing at the scrap heap.

“The city looks…” Temari trailed off, “How about the people? Should we be reporting somewhere?”

“Right now, there are four active emergency infirmaries running. All of them also need help identifying the dead, mostly shinobi. A lot of victims were admitted after the big wave…” He further explained, “The Tide Village was spared from that attack thanks to one of Utakata’s failsafe jutsu… but it also struck a nearby community on the mainland. There were a lot of unintended civilian injuries because of it.” Kankuro crossed the busy lobby with the Sand team and asked for directions from Kiriyama Saizō (also bandaged), as he was the only remaining co-chair for Shiogakure’s Jounin Council.

“Do us a favor and help excavate some of the south side buildings— there might still be people trapped there.” Saizō recommended, “Later, donate some of your blood. Most everyone here already has.”

With that, the Sand group proceeded past the more-or-less untouched Star Notojiso Hotel Resort on the south end of the village, and assisted a large group of ninja and townspeople among the rubble of collapsed buildings. The day wore thinly, stomachs empty and complaining, food and supply lines overwhelmed; but Matsuri got a sense of stubborn optimism from those gathered. She too felt a boost when buckled scaffolding over a pit was shoved aside, revealing two trapped Academy students who were shaken, scratched, and in need of food and water. She guided them to the barracks for care, holding the hands of both students as they trudged up the road.

“Matsuri!”

Her heart leaped when she heard someone call her name. After handing the children off to a kind faced Chunin attendant at the gate, she spun around to see Inari sprinting towards her. They crashed together in a weepy hug.

“Oh my god— this has been—” The boy was sniffling, “Thank you for coming here, I wasn’t sure if your Sensei would tell you to stay away-!”

“No, of course he wouldn’t!” Matsuri wrapped her arms around Inari’s shoulders, letting him gasp and cry for a short while.

“…eh-hem. Sorry.” He rubbed his dripping nose on his sleeve, “Thanks. We’ve been working to get everything under control since the Akatsuki attacked. I’m so damn tired…and a report came back from one of our tracking team members.” Inari’s eyes were still watering, “Saying that squad is gone.”

“Gone?” She felt electric fear course through her.

“We think other members of the organization…attacked our follow-up groups. They might’ve had a chance to stop Pein’s escape otherwise…” Inari shook his head, “But they took Utakata, even
though we fought our hardest. All of the Leaf ninja and Menma are gone.”

Matsuri gave him a light shake, “Are you sure? About Menma?”

“I dunno! I’ve looked for three days straight. They said he was last seen fighting on the bay.” Inari wilted, “Matsuri… he told me that he loves you and he didn’t expect to…” He cleared his throat, “I think he knew he couldn’t win. He tried to help. He had to.”

“Then…we’ll keep looking.” She swiped a tear at the corner of her eye, “If we’ve got to…identify him at the infirmary…where do we go to ask?”

Inari made a small sound of despair in his throat, but led the way to a wide, tented area of the barracks. Matsuri followed him and reflected, while shaking head to foot, that she had considered this type of an outcome on the way over from the Sand Village. That someone she knew and cared about could have been a casualty of the Akatsuki’s attack. Temari had pointedly not commented on the subject while they traveled the day before. All the same, Matsuri had adopted a few crucial threads of cynical wisdom from Gaara. Thus, she was able to draw sobering conclusions. Her stomach hurt terribly as she thought it over, holding out hope that maybe Menma’s body would not be one of the dozens laid beneath white tarps all over the ground.

The smell of the No-ID tent also made her want to gag, though she marched silently up the row behind her friend. Matsuri guessed that Inari had been through this area before. At a secretarial station beneath blowing fans, there were several shinobi talking to a pack of worried-looking people. Some broke off from the group with chaperones to check rows, guided by descriptions of the deceased.

While speaking to an examiner, Inari learned that unidentified victims from other emergency infirmaries had been consolidated here. Quite a number of them had been identified, claimed by friends or family, and moved to the hospital a few at a time. After Inari gave his description of Menma, the examiner appeared relieved to say, “Thankfully…we don’t have anyone that age, of that physical description here.”

“Are you sure?” Inari pressed.

The man nodded, “I’ve checked all of the victims and had my assistant verify all 24 of our unclaimed. No one blonde, teenaged, etcetera is here, I assure you…though…” He lifted a microphone piece on an old radio atop a table, calling over to another area, “Mimi? Hi, it’s Seidai at the central barracks. We’ve got a party here looking for blonde-haired, fair skinned victim, aged 15 or 16, approximately 61kg and 177cm tall.”

The radio crackled an answered, We have several deceased kids and teenagers on the mainland. Some are fair colored, young…all unidentified. Why don’t you send the identifying party over? We need help with IDs.

All color drained out of Inari’s face and he toddled out of the nearest exit flap of the tent. Matsuri asked the examiner where to go, learning they would have to cross the Great Naruto Bridge and travel a few minutes south along the coast to the tourist town Noto, the hamlet nearest to the Land of Waves. She thanked the examiner and exited the tent, discovering Inari hurling his guts out into a garbage can. Her insides twisted at the sight. ‘Keep it together. Keep it together.’ She patted Inari’s back as he stood upright and spat to clear his mouth, apologizing again.

“It’s alright, Inari. I think you need a break.” Matsuri suggested as they carried on through the camp, “You’ve been working for over three days now.”
The boy stopped at the closest bench to sit down, a film still visible in his eyes. “I was the last person with him, Matsuri. If I’d known the right thing to say, he wouldn’t have gone to fight.” Inari’s imagination had veered toward the hypothetical.

“He never liked quitting.” Matsuri reminded him.

“Yeah…and well, it cost him.” Some resentment crept into his voice, tears slicking down his cheeks, “Why’d he leave? Idiot.” Inari got comfortable and spread out on the bench to lay down, relaxing. He asked Matsuri to come back as soon as she could.

With that, she was off— out of the barracks like a bullet and running over the bridge, recalling the directions she’d been given. Along the way, makeshift signs had also been propped up along the path to direct people to Noto. Matsuri arrived with speed, and was surprised to find not a pitched tent, but a real facility. She entered the clinic to find even more chaos, with many injured patients alive and fussing in the overcrowded space. Matsuri squeezed through and tried to find her way around.

A medic-supervisor in a white coat stopped her before she left the lobby, “Hold it! Are you injured?”

“N-No. I’m looking for someone.” She scurried up to the very tall, burly woman who’d called to her.

“For an ID? Seidai must’ve sent you over. Deceased or living?”

“I don’t know.”

“Start in the east ward here. We have all no-names, coma patients, critical injuries, and mortuary.” The woman named Mimi pointed out a whiteboard on the wall, “We have some details up there you can refer to. If you—”

A raucous erupted behind them, with several medics responding to a heart-failure patient coding on a gurney. Mimi forgot all about Matsuri to help guide the shouting gaggle to a treatment room. The kunoichi turned around and struggled to breathe, her eyes scanning over the chart on the wall. The only details of consequence, since most physical descriptions were unhelpful or incomplete, was “age 16.” Knees knocking, Matsuri ventured down a corridor with fewer occupants, glancing around as she passed rooms toward her destination. At room 33, she poked her face through a door into a darkened room. A white sheet had been cast aside, with only empty beds, unlit monitors and drawn curtains.

Right then, her chest clenched so tight that she retreated from the abandoned room, her back pressing to a white cinderblock wall, then she slid down to the floor to sit.

What a quick result.

There was nothing— no one, where someone was supposed to be. To the left, a few more paces down the hallway, were double doors with signs posted to direct identifiers toward bodies. ‘I can’t take it…I just need to…’ If she could have only a moment of peace to not have to think about how Menma had died and been carted away with other unknowns, she would’ve traded years off her own life for that. Matsuri bowed her head onto her folded knees, trembling tearlessly. The rattle inside of her was so terrible that there was hardly any evidence of anguish on her face. Shock gripped her for a full minute.

This was the fate that so commonly befell ninja. It was a well-known fact. Her parents had been no exception. So too would her boyfriend, and mentors, and good friends perish, if they kept to the path of a shinobi. Bogged down by morbid thoughts and drained of her energy, Matsuri raised her head.
and took a breath. She tried to place a strange sound: pipes and water. If she had not imagined it, a toilet had flushed.

Bounding to her feet, Matsuri launched herself into the dark room and hooked around the corner to an unassuming, attached lavatory where the door opened…and both the startled occupant and she screamed when they came face-to-face. The person trying to hobble out of the bathroom slipped and fell backwards. Matsuri staggered but maintained quick thought processes, identifying that, yes, it was Menma. Though crumpled on the floor and wrapped up like a mummy, she felt in her bones who she’d scared the hell out of.

It looked as though it would take him an age to slowly and painfully stand up again. He was obviously injured. Menma stared up at her in the faint light with his good eye, watching as Matsuri crouched down to help him.

“Menma, I’m sorry!” Nervous laughter was woven in her words, “I was looking—I thought you were dead.”

He couldn’t talk he was so flustered, though his face betrayed a feeling of relief that superseded the aches keeping him floor-bound.

“Can you stand up?”

“…I don’t think so…” He admitted, “It took all my strength…just to get in here without assistance. Nurses have been busy—” Menma took her hand and looped his arm over her shoulder to rise up with her. He was glasslike; feeble in her hands. Menma didn’t utter a word of protest when Matsuri scooped him up in her arms like a maiden to return him to bed.

After being laid out, Menma held fast to her hand. It was then she got a thorough look at him— his head bandaged and left eye covered with gauze. Through the thin, parted material of a hospital shirt, his chest and stomach were also bound up where his injuries were worst. Matsuri sat down at the edge of the cot and gently touched his face. His exhaled wearily while trying to make sure she was not a figment of his imagination. When her fingertips strayed towards the covering on his eye, Menma flinched.

“That hurts?” She supposed.

“…everything…” He had a hard time speaking.

“Is it hard to breathe, wrapped up like that?” Matsuri gathered, “Your ribs.”

Menma nodded.

The ghost of a wane smile graced her mouth, “You fought hard…”

Giving up, he shut his eyes and had a little faith that she wouldn’t disappear. Just being conscious was exhausting as he endured jolts of agony that sparked from many wounds.

She was irked by the clinic’s scatterbrained handling of patients, “They shouldn’t just leave you in here unattended! The info board outside has no information on you. I had no idea where to look. I should talk to the supervisor to get you something for the pain, and a bed pan, maybe something to eat or drink…”

He shook his head tiredly, smiling.

“Something for the pain at least. Look at you, Menma-!” Matsuri had lightened up a little, “Inari was
so worried about you he threw up.”

Menma strained not to laugh because it hurt his fractured ribs.

“I’ll tell him you’re okay. Tazuna-san and Kankuro-sama will want to know too.” She warmed his hand between both of hers, adding, “Try not to worry about Utakata. There are tracking teams hunting the Akatsuki right now, and Hidden Sand is helping. We’ll find him.”

His eyes cracked open, concern stilling him, “Utakata-? He was…”

“Yeah. The village will be alright, though. Kankuro-sama said he saved everyone.”

“What about…Obito?” Menma asked.

She frowned in confusion, “Who’s that?”

“The spy. He was helping us.”

“No one mentioned that person.” Matsuri said as she began to stand, slipping her hand free, “But I can find out for you, if you want to know. Let me go find a nurse, okay?”

Reluctantly, Menma withdrew his hand and watched as she swiftly exited the recovery room.

Matsuri hustled back to the lobby and made an honest attempt to get the attention of anyone who looked official, or of some medical persuasion. Her chirps for assistance and taps on shoulders were brushed off. ’No wonder so many people haven’t been identified or helped! They’re not listening!’ Fed up, Matsuri scaled the check-in desk, her head nearly brushing the ceiling as she stood and shouted indignantly for someone to pay attention.

“I have a patient to identify AND he needs treatment!” Her fuming did not go unnoticed. Several startled people in the clinic stopped to stare at her tantrum, “Something for pain! Update his records! Don’t you realize he fought that Akatsuki member head-to-head and lived? You should all be thanking him-!”

“Eh-hem.” A voice interrupted below her.

Matsuri glanced down at a pretty woman who had her arms folded, clearly tousled and dirtied from helping other patients. The woman motioned for Matsuri to get down from the desk, which she did.

“Oh angry kunoichi, pipe down.” The woman sniffed, “Don’t do what I did and make a scene. They sedated me with a needle when I freaked out earlier. Then I had to tell them to keep their hands off me because I’m pregnant, and well…” She sighed, “I’m Hotaru.” She shook Matsuri’s hand before the girl could bow in traditional greeting.

“Nice to meet you, Hotaru-san.”

“Just Hotaru is fine.” The woman was crossing the lobby toward the No-ID patient board, “And you are?”

“Matsuri.”

“I’ve heard of you. You’re rather popular in Shiogakure.” Hotaru’s expression was somber, although she put up a sociable front, “Let me help you…since I’m under surveillance and not allowed to go beyond Noto to help look for Utakata. What patient ID do you have?”

“Um…Shin Menma.” Matsuri pointed to the empty box on the white board’s chart.
“Menma’s here?” Hotaru was surprised, “Thank goodness.” She scribbled notes on the board and checked off the ‘guardian’ box in the column, adding Matsuri’s name. “So you said he needs something for pain? I’ll have a nurse come by with us to check him, then bring a schedule III or schedule II medication.”

“It hurts so much that he can barely talk.” The girl’s eyes were watery, “Thank you for your help.”

“It’s fine. I just have to keep my mind—” Hotaru gave her head a shake, “Here. For the people who need us…Utakata would want me to.” She ushered Matsuri along towards a drug storage room.

“Miss Hotaru, is there a radio somewhere around here that I can use?” Matsuri wondered.

“Yes, but what for?”

“I need to tell some friends that Menma is alright. They’ll want to know. And also…” She remembered Menma’s other request, “I need to ask about someone else who helped the Tide Village. Someone named Obito.”

Obito had left the Tide Village a day prior to the Sand team’s arrival. That was not to say he had made great progress traveling north on the mainland, struggling up a route that straddled the border of the Land of Rivers and the Land of Fire. Though most of his injuries had been adequately mended, chakra exhaustion was not something he could shrug off. The average senior citizen could outpace him up the winding dirt path, he estimated. He was slow and half-delirious.

‘I’m not sure how I am going to get home like this…but I couldn’t ask anyone to escort me, with Shiogakure in need of so much aid.’ He considered, ‘And heaven help me if any Akatsuki members are out here…I can barely swat a fly right now, never mind fight...’

As evening drew near, while trudging through the foothill forests, he felt his energy leave him for good. It was impossible to take another step forward. Obito stooped down to the ground and curled up on his side on a bed of pine needles, “Just a short rest.” He had to hold still and hope some strength returned to him. Even searching for food and water was out of the question. He shut his eyes and sleep immediately took him.

Sometime in the middle of the next day, he woke with a start. He was still groggy and sore. Obito blinked, noticing a box turtle crawling by on the forest floor. With his head pressed to the ground so, he had an impeccable close-up view of the wild creature. He watched it journey by and resolved that even if he was as slow as that animal, doggone it, he would get home eventually. His family must have been worried sick, ‘I’ve never spent this much time away from Rin and Yuma. What are they thinking? Are they scared or angry?’

Since he lacked the strength to move, and finding water would become a priority in the near future, Obito shut his eyes again. He would steal a bit more sleep and expect that no one hostile would come across him in the random expanse of wilderness. He had to take the chance. If he’d been more patient, he would still be recovering on a cot in Shiogakure’s main infirmary. That would’ve been the practical way to rest before trekking home. But instead he’d faked resilience, bade his new comrades farewell, and rushed out before realizing what an idiotic task he had undertaken.

Night in the valley was cloudless, the sky clear and starry. Obito woke again as something tickled his face. At first, his senses urged him to react to a threat— whatever had found him was big…but he recognized the slobbery licks were that of a dog’s greeting. His dog, rather. Obito squawked in delighted shock, then wrapped his arms around the huge hound’s neck, “…whoa! Sesshu! …you found me?”
“It’s what I do.” The ninken laid down beside him, content in the man’s hold.

“Thank you, thank you.” He breathed a sigh of relief, “I’m so tired. I thought I could make the trip back to Shincha…but I sort of collapsed.”

“I can see that.” Sesshu was sniffing him curiously, putting together puzzle pieces of scent, “A battle?”

“Yeah.” Obito petted the great oaf’s head and rubbed his ears, “If you don’t mind waiting until morning…I think I can get back on my feet.”

“There’s no need to wait.” The dog said off-handedly, peering out into the dark of the woods as if waiting for something.

Obito didn’t get it. He stared dumbly at the dog who offered no explanation, but the soft crunch of footsteps in the scrub and pine litter alerted him to another presence. In moments, a second visitor had arrived—human this time. With that realization crashing over him, Obito found the strength to sit up and lean into the tight embrace of Rin as she kneeled down. An errant sob escaped him.

For her part, she was far less emotionally raw and physically worn. She made soft sounds while patting the back of his head, her hands covertly searching him for injuries, “Obito…”

“What’re…you-?” He hiccupped, “Doing here-?”

“I came to find you. I got your message, and I had a feeling you would need help.” Rin told him matter-of-factly, continuing to check him, “—my god. You’ve got almost no chakra. What have you been doing?”

“I…” Obito changed the subject, “If you’re here with me, who’s looking after Yuma?”

“I left him with Yoshige and Nozomi back in town. I told them something was wrong and I had to go out for a few days, although Yuma just thinks I’m away on a house call.” Rin filled him in, “Come on, sit up a bit more. Your wrist is broken.”

“It is?” He hardly felt it.

“Yes. It’s hard to tell out here in the dark. Two kilometers north of here there’s a hot spring inn. Let’s go there and I’ll see what I can do with you.” The woman heaved him to his unhappy feet, then draped him over her giant dog, “Sesshu, will you carry him for now? I’ll take over later.”

“I can—” Obito’s protest was cut off.

“Shush. You’re injured. I need you to stay awake to tell me what happened.” Rin braced her hands on his shoulder to steady him, and her ninken strode forward with his cargo aboard.

The walk through the dark was strange, and Obito guessed some of the details of his discovery and subsequent rush to Shiogakure were garbled, sometimes out of chronological order. He spun the tale as best he could, filling in gaps in the story when Rin addressed them, “So the jinchuriki was formerly of the Mist Village, but settled in the Tide Village. Is that right?”

“Yeah, that’s what I meant to say.”

“Got it. It makes sense now. Continue.” They carried on.

He spoke of the Tide ninja and their varied backgrounds. The beautiful seaside city. The Great
Naruto Bridge. The Sand ninja who were close allies of the new hidden village, and had risked so much to defend it. He also discussed Pein and his incarnations, although it was very uncomfortable to revisit those memories. Luckily, they arrived at the inn and he took a break from rendering the Akatsuki’s assault. Rin helped him stand and hobble through the entrance of the inn. The door chime woke a middle-aged attendant dozing behind the check-in desk. He was astonished to see two strangers appear in the middle of the night.

“Could we please…” Rin secured her arm around her husband’s waist to support him, asking the innkeeper, “Have a room for tonight? We’re worn out.”

“Is that dog with you?” He pointed to the giant, golden beast behind Rin, “No pets.”

“I’m not a pet.” Sesshu corrected him.

The man stared.

“Sesshu is not a pet.” Rin willed herself to be pleasant, because she believed the honey, not vinegar adage, “Yes, he’ll stay with us too. He’s worked hard and I don’t want him sleeping outside. I promise he won’t make a mess.”

“Uh…” The innkeeper nodded slowly, “Alright. One futon? We’re almost completely vacant so you’ve got prime pickin’s.”

She nodded, “That’ll do. How much?”

“400 Ryo. Another 100 Ryo for breakfast in the morning. I’ll throw in a soak in the onsen for free, if you want.” He tried to be generous after realizing he was most likely speaking to shinobi.

Rin patted down the pocket of her husband’s unusual (she just realized) pants, “Got any money on you?”

“I spent it all.” He admitted quietly.

“On what?”

“This outfit.”

“Are you kidding me?” Rin hissed.

Obito just chuckled and tried not to fall over.

Since she had nowhere to put him, Rin set Obito down on the floor for a moment and riffled through her satchel for money notes. The innkeeper watched, mystified, as she presented him with payment, accepted a room key, and then schlepped who he supposed was her spouse down the corridor. The dog followed behind them.

Somehow, she maneuvered through the door, flipped the lights on, and settled in. Rin lowered Obito into a cushy armchair and then drew the curtains of the room, to block out the blackness of night beyond the window. She crossed back to him and held out her hand, “Show me your arm again. Let’s get you fixed.”

For twenty minutes, she worked without a word, mending bones, strains, and cuts. Obito fell asleep for some of it, and woke again when Rin tried to remove the orange goggles still slung around his neck. He helped her lift them free, amused when she muttered, “Isn’t this a blast from the past? Goggles...”
“I thought that too.”

“Of course you did. This is a nice sweatshirt, though. It’s a shame it got ripped up…” Rin began tugging the rest of his clothing off, “Do you have any energy to take a bath? You stink.”

“No, but I should try to wash up anyway.”

“Where are your other clothes? The dark ones?”

“In my travel bag…which is lost somewhere in Shiogakure.”

Rin grumbled. Across the room, Sesshu’s ears flicked as he dreamed, curled up in a ball to sleep. Obito apologized to her, “Sorry. Nothing important was in there, if that helps.”

He limped towards the attached washroom with her help, not commenting as he stripped down and watched her do the same. When Obito tried to sit down on a bathing stool, he nearly missed it. Rin caught him during his descent to course-correct him into a safe seated position. She sat on her knees near the spigot and turned the showerhead on, glancing her husband over, “Your arm and leg look different…”

“I needed to get them repaired after fighting.”

“Here.” She made him hold the showerhead to hose himself down with warm water, getting behind him with soap, “So you said you fought many of Pein’s incarnations?”

“I did. With help.”

“And…he saw your face.”

“…yeah.”

“You don’t think he recognized you as Tobi, do you?” Rin asked the critical question, “What if it’s not safe for you to go back to Akatsuki meetings?”

“I don’t think he knows I am Tobi. I had my mask put away in a Tool Scroll, and he’s never seen my jutsu before…but he knows I’m a problem. Pein noticed my Sharingan.” Obito admitted, “And he tried very hard to kill me.”

She was silent as she listened, going over his back with a sudsy cloth.

“He was angry. I used a jutsu that…” Obito trailed off, wanting to wait before relaying his theory about Kakashi, “I nearly defeated the incarnation he uses most often. Then he trapped me under a crushed building. It was like…that day, all over again…”

Rin stilled in her scrubbing, immediately aware of what he was referring to.

“I was so sure I would die. Must’ve sounded…so undignified screaming for help like I did…” He balanced the hose over his leg to soap up his hands and wash his face, “I kept thinking about…never doing enough for you and Yuma…everyone…”

“Well, you’re alive.” Rin pointed out archly, resuming the clean-up process, “God may have heard my wishes when I ran all the way down here.”

“If that’s so, then I was made to save myself. I can…do something kind of weird now.” Obito told her.
“Something weird?” She was scrubbing herself while sharing the warm water.

“I can’t show you yet. It takes a lot of chakra.” He explained, slowly rising to stand, “But I’ll definitely show you. It saved my life.”

Rin waved it off and concluded rinsing herself down, then they toweled dry. Neither bothered with getting redressed. They made a bee-line for the room’s futon, slipping beneath the covers, and did not so much as utter goodnight before they fell asleep.

Sesshu woke them late the next morning, as they would have slept through the breakfast they paid for. Equally groggy, the couple sat down in complimentary robes to eat the spread on the table of a tea room. When the innkeeper greeted them sunnily to ask how they were enjoying their stay, Rin and Obito looked at him morosely from between slitted eyes. The poor innkeeper backed out of the room. It was quiet for a while.

“Maybe…” Rin said between spoonfuls of soup, “You should quit.”

“Being a spy?” Obito wanted to verify context.

“Yeah. I mean, this is all just…it’s crazy. It happened so suddenly. You had no time to rally for adequate help or contact Jiraiya—or me. If you can’t quit, because this has become a major threat to state security, well, it makes sense to reorganize. It’d be different if—” She took a fortifying breath and suggested, “It’d be different if we had the Leaf Village backing us up. You could call the cavalry when something like this happens. Respond effectively.”

Obito raised his eyebrows at her. Whenever discussion of the Leaf Village was on the table, Rin was never the one to bring it up. She hardly ever entertained the idea.

“You have a point.” He said before sipping his tea.

“But I’d rather if you quit.” She was honest.

“I know. I think I would too…but I don’t know if putting our selfish wants ahead of the lives of everyone the Akatsuki threatens is possible. Jiraiya-sama must have thought about this at some point as well…whether or not to back down…” Obito sighed, “If they dismantle everything in the world that we love and value, just because they’ve amassed unbeatable military might…then there’s no point in us living our solitary lives in Shincha. It’d go to shit.”

“That’s not the world he deserves.” Rin acknowledged Yuma’s future.

“It’s not what anyone deserves. We’ve got to take a bit of responsibility. I bet that’s what Minato-sensei would say.” He waggled a bite of baked fish in his chopsticks, “We might pay with our lives, but fighting the organization means others will have the chance too. To stop the Akatsuki.”

“The thing that worries me most…” She professed softly, “Is if this struggle drags on…if someday…Yuma would have to—”

“He won’t.” Obito’s voice was sharp, “This isn’t his war. It’s ours. We’ll finish it. Us. The Leaf Village. All of the great villages—we’re not going to leave it to our kids.”

Rin nodded, fully aligned with his declaration.

“So this conversation gives me the impression you’re more open-minded about Hidden Leaf now?” He ventured carefully.
“I don’t want to dive in without any warning, I mean, everyone still believes you’re dead.” Rin reminded him, “Your clan might not take it the way we want them to…your sisters…”

“Eh, they’ll probably just keep on ignoring me like they always did.”

“The Hokage would need some reassurance from Jiraiya-sama, about the good work you’ve done. Tsunade-sama will just see us as slackers, most likely.” Rin speculated, “And Kakashi…”

“He’ll be the least of our problems.” Obito was optimistic about that reunion, “It’s Yuma who’ll have to bear with the biggest changes.”

“Right.” Rin cupped her forehead in her palm, “We’ve taught him quite a lot, so he’ll need advanced placement in the Academy. Now that’s some paperwork to look forward to. He’ll need to learn about getting around Konoha and making friends…and I’d like for him to finish out this semester of school in Shincha, so it’s less jarring for him.”

“It might be hard to time this switch to the ebb and flow of our son’s schoolyear, Rin.”

“Can we just try?” She gruffed, “In the meantime, I’ll write to Tsume. I think it’ll be easier settling in with my family for the transition. We can’t really sell our house in Shincha— no one would buy it. Once we get to Konoha, we can start working…save money and look for a new home. And if you try to reach out to the Uchiha clan, they might find your reappearance suspicious. At best.”

“Yeah, I’m not expecting open arms. Your family is a safer bet.”

“Okay. But then, after all of that…” Rin brightened, “We’ll just go with the flow.”

“It might be more of a raging current than a flow, just sayin’.”

Ah, did her husband have a way with words… They finished eating, presented leftovers to Sesshu, got dressed, and checked out of the hotel. Obito could only travel at slightly more than a snail’s pace, and so it was decided Sesshu would carry him as far as possible. That arrangement lasted until they reached the northeastern forests bordering on territory near Kusagakure. The great dog wearily came to a stop in a mushroom ring, then dumped Obito to the ground. The two groaned in unison.

“Looks like we should take a rest…” Rin glanced around as the sun set, “We have another day of travel into the Land of Earth. You two pick some of those mushrooms, and I’ll find something else to eat.”

Sesshu was no good for picking much of anything, and so he laid there, forcing Obito to work around him. When Rin returned with river trout to cook over a fire, she found her husband asleep again, using their dog for a pillow. She examined the small pile of edible mushrooms, set up a campfire, and roasted their spoils. Her companions woke briefly to eat, but were snoozing shortly after their meal. For practicality’s sake, Rin stayed awake to keep watch during the night.

The journey north resumed in the morning, with Obito lasting for a greater portion of the route through a mountain range before relying on Sesshu. The dog hauled him dutifully through one of the secluded valleys in the Land of Earth, and then up the familiar, wooded slopes toward Shincha. Cresting the peak and passing the town by to reach their forest home, Rin made due and half-dragged Obito up the footpath. She asked her ninken, “Sesshu, go into town and pick up Yuma from Yoshige and Nozomi’s house. Make sure he doesn’t leave his school bag behind. I want to make sure he’s been doing homework…”

“I’m so tired, Rin…” The dog whimpered.
“I know, so take your time if you want. Just make sure you bring my kid home.” She teased, “I’ll see you later?”

Sesshu turned around to trudge down the hill towards the town proper. Obito gave their loyal dog a wave of farewell, taking weak steps as Rin draped his arm over her shoulders. As the view of their quaint house grew ever closer, Obito’s tittered punch-drunk reflections, “This is like one of those nights we’d go out drinking, then slog home up the mountain…”

“Except that neither of us are drunk, and in fact you nearly died.” She mused.

“Yeah.”

“You’re a little bit stronger today.”

He even made it up the front steps onto the porch, nodding as Rin unlocked the door, ‘‘Lil bit.’’

“Maybe when you’re recovered, you’ll show me that jutsu you talked about?” She wondered, “If it saved your life, I was thinking maybe it could help others?”

“I guess it could.” He really didn’t know enough about it. They did an awkward dance in the genkan to remove their shoes.

The pair toddled through the house, down the hall, and into the bedroom, where Rin rolled him onto a mattress and slid a blanket up. In seconds, Obito was out like a light. She stood back and collected herself. There. She’d done it. She had retrieved her wayward husband and brought him home.

It had been a close call. Rin left the room to wander numbly through the house lit with high-noon light filtering through windows. In the living room, she sank down onto the sofa and pondered the wall in silence, tears slowly slipping down her cheeks.

When she had set out on this rescue operation, after receiving Obito’s message from Shiogakure, she was only half sure that she would succeed. Part of her had assumed the worst, like always. Each time he set out to do business with the Akatsuki, or sometimes report to Orochimaru, a lingering fear in Rin’s gut intensified. Every day that passed while Obito was gone felt like the stroke of a hand-saw, scraping back and forth over her nerves. For him to have been absent for nearly a month had been hell.

‘I won’t always be able…to save him.’ She thought as she leaned back in her seat, inhaling deeply, ‘Next time, I’ll have no idea where he is. Or what happened. If I don’t know anything, then there’s no way to help him.’ Rin squeezed her eyes shut, ‘He talked about…super powerful ninja. Proxies. Destruction. The Rinnegan. Whatever that is…I wish he’d just give all of this up.’

Based on their conversation at the inn, she doubted that was an option. Too much was at stake. Knowing that his line of work would continue, and that help from Hidden Leaf was critical, Rin was still digesting the inevitable change that would come. They would leave this comfortable life and the friends they’d made behind, ‘I have no idea what’s waiting in Leaf. For all I know, my family’s disowned me. Everyone might react badly…and what if Yuma struggles?’

And yet it had to be done. So she would see it done, no matter the pains it caused. She pushed up from the couch and wiped her slick cheeks. When she had left to find Obito, she had thrown out all perishable items in her pantry. The search had lasted a few days, as she expected. Restocking food was a necessity for a functioning household. She changed clothes, splashed her face with cold water at the sink, slung a canvas tote on her shoulder, and then set out. Waxwings in the yard’s berry bushes sang and squabbled. They’d fly further south to the Land of Fire when winter came, Rin
thought. Like her family would.

She hiked through the woods and down the slope toward the garden, glad that a few plants were still yielding vegetables. Rin was swift up two rows, plucking okra, daikon, and peppers. When she passed by the tomato plant she stopped to give it a second-glance. A linen, drawstring bag that would fit in the palm of her hand was snug against the base of the plant. ‘Did Yuma put this here?’ Rin bent down to scoop it up, peering inside the purse. Within she found 50 Ryo. She tugged it shut and dropped it in her tote with the vegetables she had collected.

On her way out of the garden, it occurred to Rin, ‘Yuma doesn’t handle money…’ She looked back at the plant, noting all of the tomatoes had been picked. Her eyes widened, ‘Someone…took them?’ And paid for them…while she had been gone. Her stomach flipped in fright, ‘I know that Char’s told me villagers are too scared to come up here, in case shinobi from Iwagakure are patrolling…’ So she concluded it must have been someone else, as she bounded up the forest hill.

The idea tickled the back of her mind. She remembered the visitor Obito had spoken to her about.

Nothing in the yard or around the house seemed or smelled out of place. Rin hopped up the porch, dumped her tote of vegetables on a table beside the genkan, and reached up to a tall shelf for a bag of hunting gear, ‘I want to stay close in case Obito needs me, I can’t go into town to buy meat.’ Thus, she planned to catch a meal instead. Since she had settled in Shincha long ago, she’d become a hunting wiz. Rin hiked up a northern trail, keeping her ears pricked for bird calls or a possible tomato-stealing intruder. When curkling noises in the underbrush caught her attention, she leapt into the branches of a tree and surveyed the ground.

A gaggle of grouses toddled by, turning up fallen leaves for insects and seeds. Rin waited without a sound, deciding on the fattest-looking birds before pitching a weighted net down. Though she captured one of her chosen targets, she also netted a smaller specimen. The rest scattered in a splay of feathers and escaped. She worked quickly—pulling in her catch, crouching down to snap their necks with a soft-spoken prayer of thanks. Rin unwound her net to replace it in a satchel, making haste back towards the house.

In the rear yard, she peaked into the bedroom window. ‘Yup. He’s still asleep.’ Obito hadn’t moved an inch. Rin crossed over to a waste barrel by the shed to begin de-feathering the birds. She tested their fragile beaks, confirming that they were juveniles, ‘Young grouse are the juiciest…’ It took time to pluck them bare. She sat on an old, wooden bench while carving off the limbs and heads with a knife, removing innards. The viscera went to her compost pile, the rest was for cooking.

No sooner had she seasoned the meat and put it into an oven for roasting, Rin heard the front door slam open, followed by quick stomps and shouting. When she rushed to meet Yuma in the sitting room, it was mainly to hush him up when they collided in a hug.

“Ma—!”

“Not so loud, Yuma, please. Your Dad is asleep—”

“DAD’S HOME-?”

Rin sealed his lips with the pad of her thumb, frowning, “You’re being loud. Shush.”

Awareness colored the boy’s expression as he looked up at his mother, instantly tamer as he kept his thin arms lassoed around her middle. With a library-approved volume, Yuma inquired, “Where did you go?”
She plopped down onto an ottoman and Yuma scooched to sit beside her. “I wasn’t on a house call…” Rin informed him with a sigh, “I went to find your Dad. He was in trouble.”

Since that only skimmed the surface of why his mother had been gone for three days, Yuma listened without comment, expecting that she would tell him more.

“He was fighting an organization of dangerous shinobi…hoping he could protect a small village from them. He succeeded for the most part, but he was injured.” Rin could not help a slight back-and-forth rock as Yuma kept hugging her, “I knew where he was, so I went to find him. He wasn’t able to get home on his own.”

“…everything’s fine now?” The boy wondered.

“Yes.” She kissed the top of his head.

He nestled into the hug and relaxed. Rin relished the contact for a while, not saying anything.

“Good thing you found him, Mama.” He gestured for a high-five to commend her achievement, which she accepted with parental bemusement. Yuma stood up and retrieved his tossed school bag from the floor, “Did my homework…” He crooned proudly.

“All of it?”

“I even read that dumb book.” Yuma confirmed, “It would’ve been better if I read it with Dad.”

Rin ventured to the kitchen, “He can read the next assigned book with you. Where’s Sesshu?”

“Outside. Said he had to go.” He made a face that indicated potty-business, “I’ll let him in soon.”

And so the afternoon faded, Sesshu came inside and slept on his favorite rug, while Yuma respectfully kept his distance as his father convalesced in the bedroom. He was entrusted with cutting up some vegetables at the table, recounting his stay with Yoshige and Nozomi, school, and how he’d spent his free time.

“Yeah, Yoshige-san showed me how to trim the hedges. We made a good team.” Yuma gathered chopped peppers into a pile, “Then after that there was nothing left to do around their house, so I went to Char-san’s shop to make those truffle candies, you know— the fancy stuff in the case? He let me eat some of the messed up ones. And then…” He smiled gleefully, “I made a friend.”

Rin stilled at the stove, hopeful to hear such news, “You did?”

“Yeah!”

“Is Fumitake spending time with you?” She nearly added the word finally, because that little scamp from the Hirano family was an indifferent butthead towards her son. Sometimes miracles happened, though.

“Nah. His name is Kirin. He was sitting under those umbrella-picnic tables outside. I finished my snack out there and he talked to me.” Yuma explained.

“Oh. Did he and his family just move here? How old is he?”

“I dunno…he was alone and didn’t say anything about moving.” Yuma snuck a pepper piece to chew, “He’s, like, not as old as Tonushi…but kinda close.”

Rin looked over her shoulder, “Tonushi is a grown up now.”
He kept chewing, unconcerned.

“Then, you mean a teenager?”

“I think so.”

“It’s not always good when teenagers talk to younger kids. Sometimes they’re up to trouble.” Rin advised.

There was something about the expression on her son’s face that proved he understood. Young as he was, Yuma was starting to grasp the nuances of social interaction— that it was not always benevolent.

“He stole.” Yuma announced flatly.

“He stole?”

“He told me he did, but then I said: That garden belongs to my family, and we work hard for it! So he said sorry and that he’d pay for the tomatoes.”

“Ahh.” She nodded and dribbled oil into a stovetop pan, feeling fire in her chest.

“I told him thanks, and that no one was home, so the tomatoes would’ve gone rotten after a few days anyway. He should eat them! Kirin had some in his bag and we shared one. It tasted weird after having candy…” Yuma’s story prattled on, “He wanted to know if I knew jutsu, and why you weren’t around, Mama.”

“How much did you tell him?” Rin kept her cool as she slid diced vegetables into the pan off of a cutting board.

“I know you wouldn’t…want me to tell.” He wiggled in his chair, half-guilty, “I said I couldn’t show him jutsu or anything. And you go out to help patients, so I said that…”

Rin turned around and braced her hands on the table, meeting eyes with the boy, “Is Kirin a ninja?”

“…yeah.”

“Did he tell you where he’s from?”

“No.”

“Yuma.” An edge of impatience crept into her tone, “We’ve told you it’s dangerous to talk to people you don’t know, especially shinobi. If you know better, why would you disobey me?”

“Because he didn’t say much, and he was nice to me! All the kids here don’t let me play…or they get bored of me.”

“None of those are good reasons.” Rin said with an icy look.

“He wasn’t going to do anything, Ma—”

She pounded a fist on the table, “What do you know about the intentions of real ninja? You’re a kid! The fact that you didn’t get hurt or stolen is not something we take for granted— you’re smart enough to know-!”

Tears welled in his eyes, “I know.”
“You have to *listen to me!*”

“I…do.” Yuma squeaked.

“You didn’t this time.” Rin paced a little, haphazardly stirring the contents in the pan, “I ought to punish you for a week! You’ll till the whole garden, deliver medicine, read a *stack of books* and *then* I’m *telling your Dad.*”

The child crumpled over the table, burying his face in his folded arms to cry. Rin did not crack her hard-line display to comfort him. If only to instill the gravity of the situation in her son, she’d have to let him suffer a bit. At least among her family, reprimands and consequences were indispensable when it came to parenting. Now that she and Obito had discussed saving the world while juggling child-rearing duties, she was in no mood to sugarcoat anything.

Sesshu plodded out from the main room in an automatic good-dog response, ready to lay his head on Yuma’s knee and solicit pets. Rin made a clipped noise and sent her hound away.

“Mama…” Yuma sat up and wiped his face, “I’m sorry.”

“I know you are.”

“Kirin told me we’ve got to be careful too. So I know you…mean it. Pay attention and be careful.”

He muttered.

Rin frowned, “He told *you* to be *careful*?”

“Yeah. ‘Cuz the bad ninja from the music place come snooping sometimes. He makes them go away.”

“Music?” She had to interpret the message, “Are those Sound ninja?”

“They look for Dad.” Yuma reached to pluck a tissue from a box.

“Oh.”

He was blowing his nose and calming down.

“So…Kirin stops them?”

“He said he has jobs and travels, but he makes sure they don’t get close to the mountain. He’s got…” Yuma motioned with his hands around his head, “Genjutsu.”

She gave the contents of the pan a chef-like toss, then shut the heat off shortly after. Rin prepared the rice cooker in silence, feeling her child’s eyes glued to her back as she worked. With that done, she crossed over to him and kneeled down, resting her hands on his shoulders, “Thank you for telling me, Yuma. You’re still in trouble.”

He nodded.

“Can I talk to Kirin?” Rin asked, “Will he come back?”

“Uh…” Yuma considered the possibility and came up with, “Probably! I said the picnic tables are a good spot.”

“They are.”
“He stays away when Sesshu’s around.”

She rose up to set the table. “That would explain a lot.”

Yuma assisted her with the task before being sent to the utility room to stuff his dirty laundry in the washing machine. As a reward, Rin let him peek into the bedroom to check on his father, on the condition he did not wake Obito up. Yuma managed that too.

They ate dinner without Obito, since Rin suspected he’d prefer to eat in the morning. After cleaning up, Rin found she had a bit of strength to play in the yard. She snuck some tracking lessons and self-defense routines in, hoping they would stick in Yuma’s brain. By the time night fell, household bath time was complete, Sesshu was fed, and Yuma went to sleep without a fuss.

In the dark, Rin locked the house up, ‘This feels sort of pointless now. I know that someone is still watching us. He could get in if he wanted…’ It took her bottled anxieties and shook them, set to blow from carbonated pressure, ‘Why? Why is someone interfering with Sound ninja? Orochimaru might want to know what’s going on here, he’s not that dense…but who is Kirin?’

She drew the shades of every window. Sitting innocuously beside her potted Clivia plants was the small bag of money that Kirin had left. She twitched her nose at it, then departed for her bedroom. ‘I’ll have Sesshu memorize the scent on that purse. No one is going to play games with me…’

Smells of the wilds and travel still lingered on Obito, who had not changed out of the tattered clothes he wore. Rin caught a whiff of it when she stepped into the pitch dark room. She bumbled around and undressed, trying not to make too much noise, and then leaned on the edge of the bed to peer down at her husband. Even as she tugged his touristy sweatshirt off, clumsily slipping his arms free, undershirt and pants following; Obito’s head lolled as she removed the offensive clothing…his slumber undisturbed. ‘That…is impressive.’ She balled up the garments and tossed them in a hamper. Exhausted, Rin slipped beneath the blanket and mashed her face into her pillow.

On the days when she thought merely being a parent was a lot to handle, Rin would wonder how she managed the other half of her life— the toils of shinobi affairs. Topping it off with medical responsibilities in Shincha and neighboring towns did not simplify things either. Her brain raced with intersecting thoughts, even as her eyes shut and breathing slowed. Muscles in her back and arms hesitated to relax. Rin was poised to spring up and fight at a moment’s notice, more alert than she could afford to be.

Then, the sunshine of late morning was the next thing she was aware of. Though the start of her sleep cycle had been rough, eventually it all went dark and quiet. She woke up and tasted how parched her mouth was. Rin cracked an eye open. She was too comfortable to abandon the conforming indent of the mattress to fetch a glass of water. She laid there and reveled in the silence of her snoozing household. ‘Before long…Yuma and Sesshu will both be up. There’s no school today…’ Grumbling, she rolled over to get an eyeful of her husband.

Obito slept on his side with his back facing her. She examined the new, crescent-shaped scar on the triceps of his left arm. He mentioned he’d been impaled there by a jagged piece of metal during a building’s collapse. ‘How did he make it out of that…? I’m still not sure.’ Rin traced her fingertips on the mended site of the injury. Her touch traveled to reacquaint herself with the skin of a man who had been away from home for too long.

There was something about him so intangibly captivating, something not quite explained, that rooted Obito to her thoughts and nerves. Rin supposed it had to do with her relationship being born from true friendship and equality, or perhaps it was his virtue, principles, and general brightness that were
so attractive. Even when he got things wrong or struggled, she longed for him. It didn’t feel anything like the yearnings she knew in her youth. Here in this moment, she could ponder without interruption this rare, super-magnetic quality. She wanted to appreciate him.

Snuggling closer, Rin pressed against his back and sighed. There was no use in imagining what things would have been like if she had been more cognizant or receptive to Obito’s feelings when they’d been kids. She thought about it at times, but acknowledged it had little bearing on the present. She walked her fingers down the ladder of his ribs; felt the rise and fall of his breathing. He shifted slightly under the touches without waking. She snuck butterfly-light kisses up each knobby vertebra between his shoulders. While she had him, she had to have him and know him. Before long he’d be gone again: watching, fighting, or risking himself.

The morning sun landed a direct hit on Obito as a consequence of his proximity to the window. It warmed his skin up, to the point where he ought to be clammy or tossing the blanket off. He did not. He snored softly while Rin adventured down the incline of his side and hip. While her hand investigated the lovely, imperfect body beside her, Rin’s thoughts soared to faraway places again. ‘Since I finally conceded on moving us back to the Leaf Village…I didn’t really think about other logistics until now. Such as taking time to get new accreditations to work in Leaf’s Medical Corps…or if our marriage is legally recognized.’ She imagined Obito and Yuma tearfully trying to reason with obstinate, unsympathetic Uchiha clan members who rejected Rin’s presence as a family member. Or even better, those among her clan who objected to her unsanctioned union.

‘Yikes. I really need to write to my sister and confess some things in advance. At least then Tsune will be able to give me the heads up about what problem areas we might run into...’ Her elder sister would probably get naysayers in line for her.

“Hmm…” Obito stirred unexpectedly, “…mornin’.”

“Good morning.” Rin cheerily echoed.

“Hey, Rin?”

“Yeah?”

“Why are you giving me a handy while I can barely move?”

It was about then she noticed what she had unconsciously been doing.

“Oh. I uh…you know. I missed you. I’m being indulgent.”

His chuckle was throaty, “Indulgent.”

“Yes. There’s no need for your participation. You can just enjoy it and not concern yourself with reciprocating and all that.” She assured him, amused with herself.

He accepted the terms with a soft murmur. Lately, he had gotten used to waking up by himself in strange, dangerous places. Today was a marked departure from that routine. His eyes slid shut and he inched closer to Rin, savoring the sensation of her smooth body grinding into him from behind. What bold salutations this was, Obito thought for the single moment he could think. Though she was sweetness incarnate, time and again Rin would pounce on him at home. He couldn’t complain. She was voracious and crafty. Her fingertips played over receding skin that firmed and charged every nerve.

It was not surprising to Obito when she eventually rolled him onto his back, climbing over him to fit her lips to his while her hand worked. Touching her was always a half-satisfying act, since his right
side lacked feeling. For that reason he let his left hand be twice as greedy, roaming down the rounds of her breasts and her silken stomach. Morning light colored Rin in sharp contrasts—so bright. He could see flecks of bedroom dust floating in the corona around her, her shadow stretched over him. She had a body that could be the subject of divine paintings. Oh no, no. It wasn’t enough. To just see her and surrender to her.

He had to plead in-between kisses, “Rin. Why don’t…we-?”

“Shh. Just hold still.”

“‘There’s no way I’m doin’ that—’” He attempted to wriggle out from beneath her.

“Oh, what?” Rin was contented with dominance, “Want to flip me over? Remember? Like before you left—”

“Yeah, and we can do that all day…”

“We definitely can’t.”

Obito had to grit his teeth and tip his head back, on the edge of a delicious limit, “—okay. We’re short on time. I need to be in you.”

She smiled like a thief, “How will you survive otherwise?”

“-really— how will I-?” He tried to muffle a loud groan, helpless.

“Maybe you’re doomed.” Rin continued her sly work.

All that was left as his hands roamed over her, his breath hitching and hissing, was the on-the-brink feeling. It had not been for him to decide, Obito knew, not even if he’d had all of his strength. He was very much a ‘what the wife says, goes’ kind of man. He kept his eyes shut for an existential second of pleasure, then the feeling flared when Rin slid down on him, her knees bracketing his hips. She watched him with a sovereign gaze as she won and took what she wanted. The soft wail that escaped him might’ve woken up other occupants of the house, but no matter. Being alive was all about this. The kisses she stole from him afterward dripped with euphoria. Yes, it was good to be home, but this was even better.

Rin gracefully spread out beside him to rest, pleased.

“I promise I’ll get you back when I’ve built up some stamina.” Obito was compelled to compensate her.

“I know you will. Don’t worry about it. I don’t concern myself with what I get back when I do these things for you.” She poked her pinky finger at his belly-button to tease him.

He batted at her hands but she was quicker, trapping his fingers in her own. He sighed contently.

“So…” Rin said, “If you’re feeling up to it, can you show me the jutsu you talked about? We can get dressed and go outside.”

“Uh. Actually…I think here works fine.” Obito sat up and looked around the room, gathering his wits. He was feeling a heck of a lot better.

“In here?” She was not sold on that suggestion.

“Yeah, it’s not exactly a big production or destructive sort of jutsu…it’s weird. Come on, sit up and
I’ll show you.” He yanked Rin upright again, ignoring her chuff of annoyance. She arched a brow at him as he cleared his throat and stretched his arms.

Tilting his head at her, Obito suggested, “Hold up your hand.”

“Why?”

“Just for a second.” He raised his own hand in invitation, and after a moment hers rested flush against it. Rin appraised Obito’s face during the innocuous exercise, waiting for some kind of result. Then she saw it.

“…there’s definitely something up with your eye.” Rin reported in a pitchy voice.

“The Sharingan?”

She leaned in close to stare, “It changed shape.”

“I think that’s because it sucks up way more chakra. Wait ‘til you see this…”

“See wha-?” Rin stopped speaking when her hand fell through her husband’s as if it were transparent and untouchable. Of course at that point, she only had minimal morning faculties to work with, so she panicked with a small scream, lurched forward, and fell through the rest of him in a terrified somersault. She rolled off the edge of the bed and landed on the floor, hyperventilating.

Contritely, Obito tried to reassure Rin as she scuttled around the edge of the bed, google-eyed, “Rin! It’s okay! You can touch me now, it was just for a second. It’s like I can, uh, manipulate local matter and its tangibility—I guess?” He reached out to pat her arm comfortably, “That’s how I describe it.”

Her voice was small, “Oh.”

“Told ya it was weird. It saved me from some major injuries.”

“You did say that.” She confirmed as she wobbled to her feet.

“What do you think?”

“I don’t know what I think.”

“I’m still not exactly sure what it is…or why my Sharingan changed.” Obito admitted.

Exhaling deeply to relax, Rin stood in the buff and crossed her arms, grappling with the new information, “If it…takes a lot of chakra…don’t use it too often.”

“I already figured that one out.”

“Maybe we should test it a little more later?” Rin suggested, “Just in case you overlooked any other harmful drawbacks.”

He nodded in agreement, “Good idea.”

“Alright. I am going to digest what just happened and get over it.” She announced as if she had to convince herself.

Brisk rapping sounded at the door, and the two naked parents froze as they heard it.

“Mama? Dad?”
“Wait just a moment, Yuma!” Rin wrenched open a dresser drawer, seized a pair of pants, then threw them at Obito— they collided with his face. She quickly fetched her favorite floral robe off of a closet hanger and pulled it on. Only after Obito recovered and was also adequately dressed, she opened the door for the bouncing boy on the other side.

“Good morning, Mama!” Yuma hugged Rin around her middle and she bent to kiss the top of his head in greeting.

Cross-legged on the bed, Obito reached and was ecstatic when his son raced over to him, folding into his arms. It was a fiercely happy embrace that made Rin tear up slightly when she saw it.

The child gazed up at his father, aware that he had been through much, “You okay, Dad?”

“Much better now. Thinking about you got me through it, Yuma.” Obito tucked the boy against him as they hugged, “Mom and I have some things to talk about with you, later…about some changes. They’ll be good changes, though we expect you to take them seriously.”

Yuma pursed his mouth, emulating what he thought was a serious expression, “Got it, Dad.”

“Good.”

He then turned to his mother, “Hey Mama, should I pick vegetables for-?”

“Yes, please, since you’re so full of energy— go find us things we can have with breakfast. I’ll get it started.” Rin grinned down at him, “Take Sesshu with you and come back fast.”

With a bound, Yuma was off the bed and down the hall, “Fast like Kirin!” He shouted at the giant ninken on the living room rug to wake up and get a move on.

That comment was out of left field for Obito, who turned to Rin expectantly, “Who’s Kirin?”

“That’s what I want to know.” She countered, “Yuma told me about some things we should investigate.”

“Not the lurker who watches us and sometimes steals food?”

“That one.” Rin confirmed.

“Great— now he’s talking to our kid?”

“I think…and I know this will sound ludicrous…he might be looking out for us.” The subject was broached carefully as Rin went on to add, “Don’t hold me to that, but I get that impression based on what Yuma said.”

“Huh. Let’s cook and then try figure out what the hell that guy is up to.”

“Let’s.”

When evening came and darkened the land, considerable cloud cover obscured the rosy sunset over the Leaf Village.

Asuma made sure he found a comfortable spot to wait beside an old teahouse in Konoha’s central ward. He was on time for patrol duty, but it was guaranteed that his patrol partner would not be. The man sighed and watched the village’s foot traffic dwindle; string lanterns and neon signs illuminating the square. Across the street was the restaurant that his father visited most frequently in life. ‘Hm.
Maybe I should eat there some time…’

Remarkably, Kakashi was only twenty minutes late.

“You sick or somethin’?” Asuma couldn’t help an impish smirk.

“What, do I look sick?”

“No. Prompt.”

Kakashi noted, “You’re speaking in relative terms.”

“With you, I have to.” Asuma pushed off the wall, starting off on a northbound street, “How many checkpoints on this patrol?”

“All of them.”

“We have enough people to man all twelve posts?” He could scarcely believe it, “I thought Tsunade said she sent four teams to the Tide Village and three into the Rice Country.”

“That, on top of all the standard forces’ assignments.” Kakashi estimated, “Even if tonight’s patrol posts are on high alert, we’re still very short-staffed for now.”

“Yeesh. When are those kids getting promoted to Jounin? We need all the help we can get.”

“When Tsunade approves it.” Kakashi flitted up to a rooftop, and 30 meters to the left was one of the initial posts manned by a near-retirement age tokobetsu Jounin. Their gazes met briefly in acknowledgement, confirming no news was good news at the start of the night. Kakashi led the way with practiced ease, winding through darkened alleys and ‘sensitive areas,’ so termed by shinobi charged with village security.

Time marched on as they made their rounds at several checkpoints, making small talk.

“Did you buy that new place yet?” Kakashi wondered.

“Our offer was accepted, but the closing isn’t until next week.” Asuma was mildly annoyed, “And the lease ended on our shithole place, so Kurenai and I have had to crash at my brother’s until we can move into the house.”

“What are brothers for?” A merry chuckle.

“Pretty much that.”

Dry leaves rattled on tree branches as the breeze blew through Konoha’s north-central cemetery. It was then Kakashi slowed their pace somewhat, sweeping his gaze back and forth across the stone dais where memorials were held. Somewhat distracted with his father’s grand headstone, Asuma paid little attention to the quiet graveyard.

“This post’s shift changes every four hours.” Kakashi spoke the fact aloud.

“Yes.” Asuma agreed.

“Chunin stationed here are never late.” His eyes darted around, “Where are the guards?”

“Maybe the cemetery’s southside?”
“No. There’s another post there.”

“Then let’s check with those guards and see what the deal is.” Asuma suggested.

There were no explanations for lateness nor guards on the opposite end of the cemetery either. No shinobi to be found anywhere in the vicinity, which Kakashi declared alarming.

“Alright...” A tense growl escaped Asuma as he tapped on the bottom of a cigarette carton, “Never seen this before in my life.”

Kakashi was prowling between rows of headstones, moving east with his companion, “These posts are never abandoned.”

“Fuh...and I’m supposed to stick to a limit of three per day...” Asuma lamented as he perched a smoke on his lip, “Here’s number four.”

“Now, now...don’t throw your health goals out the window just because we may have stumbled onto something.” His friend chided him, “We’ll look around, and if nothing turns up we rat on delinquent sentries at the standby station.”

“Are you telling me this doesn’t look suspicious to you?” Asuma grunted.

“I’m trying to be optimistic. This is textbook suspicious.”

They explored the grounds in silence, sleuthing for any clues or lurkers. Nothing was out of the ordinary until Kakashi passed beyond the hedge line and down an acute, grassy slope at the property’s edge. Asuma trudged down the small knoll after him, and stopped to stare in wonder at a perfectly symmetrical, excavated doorway in the hillside. He exhaled a long line of smoke and inquired, “That looks new, right?”

“Right.”

“Wanna go in there?”

“No, but that’s what we’re about to do.” Kakashi informed him.

“Just figure I’d check that we’re not doing any surprise emergency drills tonight, are we?” Asuma verified.

“Who has time for drills when there’s an emergency every other week, these days?” Kakashi kneeled down and concluded hand signs, summoning his faithful hounds in a semi-circle when the smoke cleared, “Pakkun, we may have happened upon an intruder. Two patrol posts are missing.”

“You don’t say?” The pug yawned and stretched, “Good thing I just finished my beauty nap.”

“I want Tenzo notified. He’ll be picking up his next shift right about now, so head towards ANBU headquarters. Tell him and any others there to report to the cemetery for a search.” Kakashi commanded, “Take Biscuit and Guruko with you, in case you’re followed.”

Pakkun glanced over his shoulder at the human-sized, dark hole in graveyard soil, “Sure...eh...you’re not going in there, are you, Kakashi?”

Asuma continued puffing away while Kakashi nodded in confirmation.

“Watch yourself, then.” The dog warned, and with his two small ninken companions, Pakkun raced off with his orders.
Kakashi added to the remainder of the dog pack, “Bull, Urushi…wait here to direct any reinforcements that arrive. If someone tries to escape from this hole to avoid us…make them heel.”

A soft bark in the affirmative answered him.

“The rest of you,” Kakashi regarded Shiba, Akino, and Ūhei, “Are coming with me. Get in there and find me a scent.”

And so the party of dogs dispersed accordingly, with three ninken leading the way into the dark as Asuma flicked his lighter on, following the underground tunnel. Kakashi riffled around a supply pouch as he walked.

“Based on what Netsuke said about my dad confronting Orochimaru…the snake’s done plenty of grave-robbing in his time.” Asuma tried to pin down the rationale of mischief in a cemetery, “Though I think we have an alert that goes up with the Sealing Corps whenever Orochimaru’s chakra is detected.”

“We would’ve known a while ago if he was here.” Kakashi confirmed.

“So what’s up with…?” The man stopped in his tracks, noticing disturbed earth along the tunnel’s edge. Several extension paths had been dug beneath the graveyard, towards plots where bodies had been laid to rest. Asuma held his lighter beside a tributary hole, “Shiba…wanna look in there and see if a body was taken?” The dog trotted in fearlessly.

Meanwhile, Kakashi had drawn out five chemiluminescence sticks, snapping the tubes to produce a soft light. He fastened two to the collars of his present dogs, one to himself, and handed another to Asuma. Shiba returned and kicked his back paws at the extension tunnel, indicating there was no body remaining at the other end. Kakashi affixed a glow stick to Shiba’s bandana as well.

“Bodies were definitely stolen…although most buried here were interred ten years ago or more.” Kakashi observed, “So that begs the question why anyone wants bodies that are in such a late stage of decay…”

“Pretty fucked up.” Asuma agreed. He patted his hand against the soil wall, “See how this was dug? Not by hand. It’s too smooth…like it was automated. Not sure what kind of jutsu…”

“Me neither.” Kakashi noticed that strange detail as well, due to most Earth Jutsu being rather untidy in excavation projects. That, or someone with skill in that chakra nature had dropped by to thieve in the night.

They carried on into the narrow tunnel, following behind the ninken that pressed their noses to the ground. Abruptly, the dogs gained momentum, excited by a smell. Kakashi and Asuma kept up. The underground path extended on and on, which Kakashi estimated to be nearly a kilometer, to his shock. Silence and damp earth pressured the tunnel’s occupants from all directions, venturing further into uncertain pitch. Akino slowed, as did Shiba and Ūhei when the constricting earth tunnel ended in a perpendicular cross-section with a much larger, recognizable shaft.

The dogs burst out in the wide, spacious underground, circling and sniffing. Kakashi lifted a glow stick to get a look around, “You know where this is, right?”

“We went so far…I have no idea where we ended up.” Asuma stamped out his spent cigarette.

“This is one of the Jounin passages used for exams and drills…” Kakashi reminded him, “Beneath the Forest of Death.”
Fiddling with the carton of cigarettes he had with him, Asuma groaned in frustration and then stuffed the box in a hip pouch, “Who the fuck is using these tunnels without our patrols noticing? They dug all the way the hell up to the central cemetery!”

“I have theories.” As Kakashi dawdled about the space alongside his ninen, he glanced around for markers, “I think this is sub-passage A. It has three exits. Might as well check them and see what the boys can smell…”

When Ūhei broke away suddenly in one direction, Akino and Shiba yipped, then took off in the opposite direction. Flummoxed, Asuma and Kakashi exchanged a look before mutually deciding to split, darting after the dogs. Asuma did not have to go far. In about 15 meters, he and Ūhei discovered the dead body of a Chunin guard crumpled in the dark. Upon feeling the victim’s skin, Asuma found he was ever-so-slightly warm to the touch. Freshly killed.

“Kakashi!” He chanced a shout in the unknown space, “See any dead guards down there?”

A call back, “Three. You?”

“One. Looks like we found ‘em. This is Bekkō, actually. Just saw him at a meeting the other day…”
He stood up and muttered curses, motioning for Ūhei to lead him toward Kakashi.

They reunited further down the tunnel, identifying the three other Chunin guards who had been killed. Thankfully, none of their students were among the victims. It was still a damn shame that veteran Chunin had been lured into a trap, throats slit in the dark. Asuma briefly wondered if it was “an inside job.”

“Possibly. Only Jounin and proctors know about these underground passages.” Kakashi said as the ninen pack led him south, on the trail of the mystery scent.

“No, that’s not true.” Asuma corrected him, “Students know about it too. From the last Exam.”

Kakashi halted.


The peril they had wandered into dawned on Kakashi, “We need to get out of the dark.”

Asuma did not grasp the urgent need for escape right away, not even when they arrived at a hollow tree-trunk exit at the tunnel’s end…but then a patterned ring of pictograms lit up beneath their feet. The patch of floor they set foot on had triggered a trap. A latent Tao Art belched hellfire into the enclosed space, and though the dogs had made it outside, Asuma and Kakashi were a tick behind. Somehow, some way, the burst of bone-scorching flame was pinched off, allowing the two shinobi just enough space to tumble out of the exit into the Forest of Death.

They rolled for a while to put their clothes out, and the dogs rolled with them in the dirt out of solidarity. The entryway to the tunnel was charred, wafting smoke up into the above-ground world.

Asuma asked in-between hacking, “How the- -? Heh-!” He sat up and rubbed embers out of his beard, “How did we get out of that?”

Panting, Kakashi heaved himself onto his knees, pointing to his exposed Sharingan, “Thank Obito, if you want.”

“—what?”
“The Mangenkyo Sharingan,” Kakashi clarified for him, “I’ve learned how to transport matter and energy with it, for lack of a better term. If it’s within my line of sight, I can target it. Even fire, turns out.”

“Oh. Brilliant.” Asuma was thrilled, “Thanks for saving my ass, Kakashi. And thanks too to Obito, I guess.”

The pair hobbled to their feet and dusted themselves, watching bits of their burnt fatigues flake off. Kakashi then examined his ninken, all unscathed, and then glanced back at Asuma, “That was a Tao Art.”

Asuma followed the line of thinking, “Do you think that was set by Huo?”

“I don’t know. He’s familiar with this area, unfortunately. Since he escaped…anyone in Bi’s rogue group might know how to navigate this sector now.”

“So how’d they get in?” Asuma folded his arms, hounds sniffing circles around him, “The Sealing Corps has a barrier up. We’d know.”

“There are some underground bypass routes into the village…and those are monitored by Root Black Ops.”

“Root?”

“Well, I don’t know if they’re monitoring in earnest or lying dead somewhere.” Kakashi supposed as they followed the pack into foliage and bramble, “It wouldn’t surprise me if village entry routes were given as a tip to Dintei Bi in exchange for something.”

“I thought Root’s main function is to covertly negotiate the security of our village.” Asuma grunted, “Not undermine it.”

“Most of the time, the Foundation’s definition and pursuit of security does not align with the consensus reached by the standard forces.” He ascended into tree tops and his ninken followed.

When Asuma landed on the branch beside Kakashi, he kept his voice low, “This seems like a punishable fuck up to me, if Root really did share the location of a bypass.”

“There will be nothing to punish unless we find who did this,” Kakashi added sunnily, “And get out of here alive to report it.”

With no sky visible through the dense cover of the canopy, Asuma reaffirmed their course with a compass. They decided against marking their path through the forest, in the event an intruder caught onto their trail and staged an ambush. It seemed as though the scent had gone stale—the ninken pack drifted between tree tops and the ground, trying to detect what was lost. The night felt heavy and unbearable, as wild creatures in the woods peered from thickets and perches as the Leaf shinobi fluttered past in silence.

They maintained as straight a course as they could, arriving at the outer reaches of the preserve. The dogs went tense. Instinct goaded them to dash into the brush, but training compelled the ninken pack to stay when Kakashi made a soft sound. Shiba and Akino’s ears lay flat against their heads, teeth bared, while Ühei made his body rigid to point in the direction of the trespasser. With a hand signal, Kakashi and Asuma moved in toward the edge of an open glade ringed with giant trunks and roots. The dogs crept after them without so much as a whimper.

And there in the dimness, with only shreds of moonlight piercing through canopy cover, were two
rows of stolen coffins stacked two boxes high, about a dozen across. Crouched beside the pilfered caskets was a figure in violet, Han-style clothing—vaguely slim and youthful in the dark. His palms were pressed together in concentration as a Tao Art ring extended beneath the contraband.

“Try not to jump on me.” The man warned as he worked, not bothering to turn around and confront the lurking Leaf ninja, “You have no idea how long it took to organize them neatly.”

“You get one warning—quit what you’re doing and back away.” Asuma raised a trench knife as he and Kakashi inched forward.

The man stood slowly and kept his hands facing out, where they were visible, “Are you sure I can’t Shadow Step? What good is your warning if I can move anywhere in this forest?”

“He can’t.” Kakashi assured his partner, “This one’s in the bingo book—Bi’s subordinate, Shimofuri Koinyu. You’re not like the rest of them.”

Koinyu stole a look at them over his shoulder, “The Copy Ninja comes informed, I see. I may lack some talents, but I got all the way over here, no?” He smiled, “And you just barely managed that.”

The Tao Art at his feet glowed and condensed, gradually swallowing the stacked coffins to transport them to an unknown exit point. Koinyu was pleased with his timing, “I can’t Shadow Step, no. It’s true. But my master can lend me Shadow Gates from time to time. For now, we part—”

Quick as wind, Ūhei leapt and sank his teeth into the man’s leg, pulling him off balance. Akino and Shiba charged half a moment later as Koinyu stumbled, driving a kunai down through the top of the attacking dog’s head.

In the confusion of it all, Kakashi dove in for an offensive counter while Asuma blasted a few caskets free of the shadow gate with a Wind Nature strike. The coffins smashed against the ground, rattling the bodies within, and Asuma spun ‘round to whirl another cutting strike at Koinyu as he gained his feet and slipped between Kakashi and his ninen. All were forced to duck under Asuma’s attack. It was then Koinyu substituted himself and made a break for it, only to be tackled again by Akino and Shiba.

With Ūhei lying dead behind him, Kakashi could not help a furious cry as his two other ninjens were stuck full of knives after the shrewish ninja used a Magnet Release jutsu. Koinyu’s squeals of laughter incensed the Copy Ninja, and Kakashi hurled a barrage of projectiles that were captured in a magnetic field, stopping short of Koinyu to hover around him as an expansion of his own arsenal. He slipped away from the fallen dogs to disappear into tree tops. Asuma flanked Kakashi as they tore after the slaughterer.

“Kakashi, don’t—!” He caught up to his friend, “That gate’s going to swallow the rest of those bodies if we chase him—”

“It will anyway. We can’t stop Tao Arts.” Kakashi reasoned, “But I can stop him.”

They moved fast, almost blindly, having close shaves with magnet-propelled kunai and shuriken fired from the shadows as Koinyu noisily avoided them. Twigs and branches snapped, roosting birds scattered.

Asuma wanted to apologize for the loss, yet he knew Kakashi was not going to respond to sympathy. Killing intent radiated off his friend, who otherwise looked as normal and collected as he always did. Ahead, a Shadow Clone of Kakashi’s that had been lying in wait handily surprised Koinyu, hurling him down several stories with mighty Taijutsu.
Below, Kakashi and Asuma closed in on the projected point Koinyu would fall. With little verbal direction, Asuma readied a Wind Release attack as Kakashi’s *Chidori* flared, and allowed his Lightning Nature to be absorbed into Asuma’s cutting whirlwind. Their synchronized chakra leveled 50 meters of forest—chopping apart ancient trees and toppling all obstacles before them. No scream came from their target when he met the ground. Instead, Koinyu stood in shock, genuinely cowed by the tremendous combined jutsu that destroyed his *Tao Barrier* defense in one hit. It was the first and only time he would go unscathed. He was a naked target without a place to hide, locked in the sights of two veteran Leaf ninja.

They charged, and Koinyu reacted in pure fear, lacking rationality or strategy. He fired every last floating weapon at his disposal; a wall of metal sailed for the incoming ninja. Asuma’s Wind Release tore the volley apart as they bore down on the shrieking intruder. Koinyu had been quick with a follow up: a Fire Nature Tao Art latched onto the lingering Wind Release Asuma had pitched forward. Kakashi and Asuma descended upon the shrew as a wheel of empowered fire enveloped them all.

Heat unlike anything Asuma had ever felt blistered every bit of skin on his body. He was not sure if his clothes and hair had burned off. The experience only lasted a second: Kakashi had been able to contain the tornado of flames with his Sharingan’s transdimensional ability.

Then, Kakashi dropped to his knees. Skidding in embers and dirt, Asuma rushed over to his partner to deflect another small volley of projectiles that Koinyu pitched, covering his retreat.

“You okay, Kakashi?” He could see the man folding in exhaustion.

“That just about…leveled the last of my chakra.” Kakashi admitted in a wheeze, “Go. Follow him and be careful with Wind Release…I’ll be right behind you when I catch my breath.”

Suggesting such a naïve plan galled Asuma, “You’re probably not catching your breath for the next few days. The Sharingan—”

“Go.” Insistent, Kakashi wanted some justice for the beloved ones he lost.

It was a solid order, so Asuma took off. He vanished into the dark as Kakashi crumpled on the ground, *ringing* with the hollow, pervasive hurt of chakra exhaustion. It squashed his lungs, tightening and slowing every bodily process. He had known that liberal use of his Sharingan’s new technique was risky. Now, he’d have to have some insane luck in order to stay conscious and somehow get out of the Forest of Death on his own. Following Asuma to assist in the hunt seemed the least likely goal of all. He said a brief prayer in his head, hoping that his friend would be unharmed.

He stretched onto his back and tried to focus on breathing. His vision was washed out. Kakashi spread his arms wide and felt tears sting the corners of his eyes. He had raised those ninken from when they were pups. He’d been introduced to them as a serious, know-it-all kid. His dogs were a connection to his father. And for his father, so too they had connected to Sakumo’s mother, their family’s most talented dog-trainer. With a trembling hand, he pulled down the mask from his face to suck in a breath of cool air. The pain was worsening. In heart and body.

When next he batted open his eyes, Kakashi could see his vision had slipped again. It was not an alarming, life-or-death struggle he was witnessing, this time. Though only for a few heartbeats, he could see the interior of a home he did not know. He saw Rin’s face lit with surprise that soon melded into stern interest. She was learning something. She was looking right at him.

‘I knew you were alive. You’ve stayed away from me because I hurt you.’ The thought was a
confession he had avoided for years, finally dislodged from the dam of emotions he’d built up, ‘I need your help. Rin.’

Shortly after that, he saw no more. Salt slipped down his cheeks. The quiet of the forest made Kakashi wonder if Asuma had been successful, or if he was struggling on his own.

Swift footsteps crunched over debris and nettle, and a comrade suddenly kneeled down beside him, “Kakashi?” His hand was plucked up and squeezed, the newcomer leaning down to confirm if he was responsive, “I brought your pack with me. They’re waiting beside the…” The voice trailed off, referring to the unfortunate trio of dogs found in a nearby glade.

The touch was familiar. When his foggy sight cleared up, Kakashi could see Tenzo staring down at him, owl-eyed with concern.

“Ah.” His speech rumbled in a phlegmy throat, “Glad you could drop by…”

Pakkun must’ve broken away from the rest of the pack. He was vigorously licking Kakashi’s face.

“I’m alright…I’m alright.” Kakashi tiredly assured them, “My Sharingan wore me out. Asuma went ahead. We have an A-Rank intruder from Dintei Bi’s group stealing bodies from our shinobi cemetery. He took most of what he dug up, I think.”

“I sent Sai and three of my subordinates to convene. They’ll find him.” He pulled Kakashi into a sitting position, “When I saw Ūhei and the others…I thought you might be dead too.”

Pakkun whimpered in agreement, “Yeah…”

“I’m a bit of a cockroach. Takes quite a lot to stomp me out.” Kakashi joked before adding, “But I want him dead. No one touches my kids.”

“We’ll get to it.” Tenzo supposed, “Can you stand?”

“No.”

The younger man smiled, “Alright, then.” Tenzo shuffled to scoop his long-time friend onto his back to be carried, “Let’s retrace our route and mark the site where those caskets were transported. There’s evidence of an expired Tao Art there…and some damaged caskets as well. I’ll get you to the hospital and then look after the dogs.”

“I want them to stay with me.”

“They’re stressed. So are you. I think a vet-nin needs to check them.”

“I want you to stay with me too.”

Tenzo paused before noting, “It’s been a while since you told me that.”

“I’m sorry.”

“For avoiding me?”

“For all of the pretext. I’m not…” Sad laughter dampened his admission, “Not really that aloof. I do care.”

“I always knew you did. Don’t worry about it.” Tenzo did not need the apology.
Kakashi kept his arms secure around Tenzo’s shoulders with what little strength remained, “You know… I might be going crazy. Just slightly.”

“That wouldn’t surprise me, given the circumstances. You need a head scan—”

“I mean I’ve been seeing things for months. With my Sharingan.” Secrets were of no use to Kakashi at that juncture, “I might need to tell the Hokage… that I can see the Akatsuki. And I just saw Rin.”

“You can see them?” Tenzo was doubtful, “Or is it a hallucination?”

“Debatable, at this point. I think it’s real. I could be wrong…but I’ve got a very strong feeling it’s real.”

No further convincing was needed for Tenzo to buy it, “I believe you.”

“I don’t know what to do.”

“To start: rest.” Tenzo recommended as they arrived at the initial forest clearing. He formed hand signs to produce two Wood Clones molded from the ground, rising to stand and collect Ühei, Shiba, and Akino. The remainder of the pack was antsy, restlessly pacing beside Akino.

Pakkun reunited with his ninken brothers and raised the alarm, “Akino’s breathing!” He ran in a pugish circle, clamoring with the pack.

Though it was only a tiny sliver of hope, Tenzo shrugged Kakashi on his shoulders, his expression lightening, “Kakashi, I think we can… save him.” His passenger was unconscious.

Undaunted, the ANBU veteran organized the group and mobilized to exit the forest, “Let’s go, boys. I’ll get you home.”

Chapter End Notes

So my pondering of Kishimoto’s treatment of the dead in Naruto canon, and what shenanigans can be conducted with said deceased shinobi, has led me to believe that the literary decision to have intact bodies buried underground was deliberate. In Japan, cremation is (most often) the first step prior to burial, though this cultural norm was disposed with in the Naruto manga on account of, well, most every villainous plotline.

As much as I can, I try to fold authentic cultural traditions and ideologies into this fic. That’s why I got to thinking about it. I suppose somewhere out there there’s an interview with Kishimoto speaking on this subject.

Thoughts on this chapter? Whip ‘em right into the thought collection box below.

Many blessings to you, good reader, as we approach the end of this year!

Chapter 50- Knife and Toad
Eleven children scampered around the preschool's yard, released from a small classroom and into the autumn air to play. From the corner of his eye, Zabuza watched them as he stalked past. What rare creatures they were. They were probably the sum total of all people under age five in this lonely hamlet on the tip of the main island. Children were a fragile commodity in the Land of Water, particularly within Kirigakure's walls, but on outskirts such as these they seemed to do better.

At the rear of the preschool building he came to a metal door, marked as the entrance to a utility room. He glanced left and right, confirming that no witnesses were watching, and then pounded on it four times. The door swung open, and after Zabuza entered it lumbered shut behind him.

The sole occupant of the utility room was a handsome man— peachy and young in manhood, dressed in a dark blue uniform and a preschool smock splattered with paint and stickers. He was unenthused by Zabuza's visit, and resumed his work at a large hydraulic press installed in the corner of the concrete, pipe-patchwork room. Without exchanging formal salutations of any sort, the swordsman dropped a stack of money notes on a wooden workbench.

And then Zabuza posed one question, "Did you go to Hidden Mist?"

"How about…?" The man huffed as he pulled down on the machine's lever, "Nice to see you, Do-yeon. Or, Glad you're not dead, Do-yeon…"

"Sure." Zabuza agreed, unflappable.

"Keep your money." The school worker spat over his shoulder, lining up sizeable, white bricks beneath the press.

"You got another job in a better location, and you're still going to be pissy about what happened in Moji?"

"Three of my friends died because you made an unwelcome appearance and a Mist hunter-nin noticed. How do you make up for that?" Do-yeon wondered.

"That's twice your annual salary sitting there, plus a thirty percent bonus."

"Oh, so you know some math? Inagawa's put you in front of a chalkboard for practice."

"Take it and feed the kids with it." Zabuza suggested.
Do-yeon froze in his work, then turned slowly to face the nukenin, "Fine. I'll feed my students and their families with the money you got from killing people. I can expect to launder filthy money all my life, so long as I'm here…"

"Did," Zabuza repeated harshly, "You go to Hidden Mist?"

They stood in rigid, unfriendly silence, watching each other.

"I did." Do-yeon admitted, "All of the standard forces there are looking rather dour and underfed. About half as many as I remember seeing a year ago. They've been purging whoever they deem "disloyal." So I didn't really talk to anyone; I just made my sales and left."

"The report?"

"It was cheap, surprisingly. It was on record that Hōzuki Mangetsu was attacked and mortally wounded in the east marshland." Do-yeon went on, "But he didn't die there. The archived report said the ambushing squad retreated and saw him flee into the birch forest."

Such a place, as far as Zabuza remembered, was an old battleground littered with unclaimed corpses from Mist's civil war, and strung with thousands of fatal traps that had never been disarmed.

"So it was assumed that he succumbed to his wounds in the birch haunt. No one tried to recover his body, or…puddle seems more accurate." He quipped, "I don't see why you want to attempt it in such a dangerous place."

"It's not like I'm mourning that know-it-all." Zabuza corrected, "I just need what he had with him."

"Your undying affection?"

"The Master Scroll, you fucking idiot."

"Of course. How can you give something that was never given to you in the first place?" As if remembering a silly truth, Do-yeon gaped in mock-mortification.

"That scroll acts as a container for all the other blades."

"Yeah, yeah. I know that's what you want." He muttered under his breath, "I always know what you want."

Zabuza pressed on, "And the auction?"

"The most recent rumor is that is was scheduled for the end of next month, the 31st. It will be hosted at the Keiseki House in the Land of Mountains. Do you—?"

"I know where that is." Zabuza snapped.

"Everyone will be there."

"Which means every piece of shit not behind bars will be there."

Do-yeon heaved again on the press's lever, smirking with the effort of the task, "Give or take a few."

"I need to sell some ill-gotten baubles." The swordsman leaned against the workbench, "Otherwise I wouldn't bother."

"Obviously. Black market auctions are not your specialty."
"Any other news of consequence?"

"Pft. About how wonderful the Mist Village is?" Do-yeon moved several of the bricks to a packing pallet in the corner. "Well, it's worse off than it was, like I told you. Anyone even suspected of dissenting from the Mizukage's rule is locked away, tortured, or executed. It's really thinning the numbers and padding the forces of the Hunter Corps. And the Hunter Corps are just a bunch of spineless killers who'll do what they're told to lead a comfy life." He returned to the press, frowning as he went on, "But the kunoichi…not so much."

"…kunoichi." It was not quite what Zabuza expected from an update.

"Not a single one of them joined the Hunter Corps after…" Do-yeon glanced over at Zabuza, "You know about Karatachi Kaigara, right? The Fourth Mizukage's wife? People said she went crazy, spouting nonsense that Yagura-sama was replaced with an imposter—that he was killed in secret. She insists that a fake is being puppetted around. Many of the kunoichi in the standard forces believed her tale."

While Zabuza listened in silence, Do-yeon continued, "They support Kaigara fully. A miller told me close to 30 kunoichi have been executed for trying to help her and her son escape captivity. It's like a Joseon drama, I tell you! And he said that those kunoichi are alleging the shadow cabinet was installed by the Akatsuki. There's even a shinobi who appears every so often…giving directions to hunters and threatening Kaigara when she fusses."

"Which one?" Zabuza was familiar enough with the Akatsuki to identify a member or two by name. Do-yeon shrugged, "No one could tell me. This Akatsuki director stays out of the public eye and wears a Hou-ou mask. Not someone you could pick out of a bingo book anywhere…" He pulled down on the press lever again, "I heard a rumor that he has white hair. Nothing else was recognizable."

"So he's the one using the fake Yagura as a figurehead?"

"That's what they say." He pushed another pressed brick to the side, "Though how can you and I confirm any of that? Could be pure bullshit."

"Doesn't sound like it."

"Nah, it doesn't." Do-yeon agreed, "But no matter what happens, I am never going back to Kirigakure. It's too risky now."

"Suit yourself." Zabuza pushed off of the workbench, "I'll come back before the auction."

"Bring more money." Do-yeon called after him as he exited, "I need to pay my dealers for deliveries."

Out in the sunshine, Zabuza took a less-traveled route away from the school. Do-yeon had always been a good informant, even back during the days he'd worked in the pleasure house in Moji. It seemed that he was putting his information peddling days behind him. Not that secretly prepping cocaine bricks in the back of a preschool was more wholesome of a profession, but Zabuza yielded it was a change of direction.

Down the beach hills beyond the seaside town, Zabuza returned to a small motorboat where it had been moored earlier. Above the engine's starting purr, he could hear the last peals of laughter from schoolchildren across the dunes. He unmoored and pushed off, preparing for an hour-long crossing back to the small island of Nanakusa. He strayed into his thoughts.
It was a relief to hear that the Master Scroll would likely be tucked away in one of the most deserted, treacherous areas of the main island. Few ninja dared set foot there, though he supposed Kirigakure ordered patrols to skim past the perimeter to make sure no one was lurking. *'Just to avoid getting caught, I might have to instigate a diversion and draw Mist's attention away from that area.'* He had the kindling of a plan on his mind, prepared to retrieve the hosting scroll for the Seven Swordsmen's blades. And of course, he would have Haku come with him. Though Haku would be unfamiliar with the perilous terrain, he was endlessly helpful.

What was most surprising to learn was that Kirigakure was experiencing internal pushback from its kunoichi population. Though it was only a hunch, Zabuza suspected that the group was galvanized by Terumi Mei's open rebellion against Hidden Mist, and was trying to emulate her resistance. Do-yeon indicated the movement began thanks to Karatachi Kaigara's revolt against false leadership, but surely the causation was a multi-faceted. Until today, Zabuza had also had no idea that Yagura welcomed a child before his untimely (alleged) demise. Such were significant hostages for the Akatsuki to take while oppressing Hidden Mist.

*’If the women are courageous enough to die for the Mizukage's widow...then maybe they are the ones I need for a coup.'* Zabuza thought to himself. It would be a matter of contacting them, and then organizing an attack. Arresting that idea was the possibility that Terumi Mei had already beaten him to recruiting such a population. From any angle he looked at it, Zabuza found that he could only take silver in this race. With Mei in the lead, it was starting to feel inevitable that another tense, contrary meeting with her would have to take place... wherever she was hiding these days.

He had enough money to buy out Mei's current men, an estimated 105 shinobi of Chunin and Jounin level. That, unfortunately, did not count the dozens of kunoichi that had joined Mei's ranks, and Zabuza doubted there was anything he could give them in exchange for forsaking their woman-leader. Even if he paraded around Haku and his virtuous grandstanding, few would bat an eyelash at his bid. He would forever be *other* and *untrustworthy* to those seeking a brighter future... even though he was every bit as thirsty for it as they were.

After crossing the bay and landing on Nanakusa, he moored at a small private dock that did not belong to him. Zabuza pushed the defeatist thoughts from his mind. It was making him sick. The deep-seated frustration and helplessness curled within the pits of his stomach scratched closer to the surface. There was nowhere he could belong. No one would listen to the likes of him. Even Haku was too smart to trust him to be something *decent*, for even Zabuza could scarcely see such conduct in himself. At least he'd not started any fights or made threats in the past week. Haku and Migawari were tolerating him again, for the most part.

His gut growled and clenched, *'I'm hungry as fuck...'* He turned left down the lane that would take him towards Main Street, where Hiroshi's café was located. The foot traffic ahead was minimal, and flea market stands were just being set up in the center of town.

He was only able to take two steps on the gravel walkway when something sinewy and powerful wound tight around his midsection. Barred from continuing, Zabuza's eyes skirted down in a moment of dubious recognition, taking in the sight of something fleshy and pink. It had snared him from behind, whatever it was. Before he could even attempt to wriggle loose or form hand signs, the fleshy lasso pulled back with force, flattening him to the ground. Then, he realized it, *'A tongue.'* He was wrapped up in a tongue.

With a *whoosh*, he was pulled back again by a power he could not place, and daylight disappeared. All of Zabuza's mental capacities scrambled, trying to make sense of the unexpected predicament. For the time being, he'd been swallowed by whatever thing the tongue belonged to. Fantastic.
'This motherfucking animal never thought it'd get dissected from the inside...' He reached for a leg holster, hoping a kunai could be of use, but, no. The pressure of esophageal walls coated in mucus was smothering him— crushing him. An apex moment of lost dignity collapsed upon Zabuza. He had never suspected he was about to die while minding his own business. Or what ate him. Or why. 'I didn't work this hard just to blink out without a goddamn explanation—!' He was going to be unconscious in a second.

Then, the digestive pressure let up, and some daylight squeaked in. He was pushed from fleshy innards just a bit, still bodily constricted…but his face was free to see out of the open maw of, well, whatever it was. From there he could see the sidestreet's gravel and garden boxes. He also saw a man leaning down to take a gander at him— hair long and white, a face distinct with age and experience. There was a lit tobacco pipe in the voyeur's hand.

"Didn't think that I'd swing by to fuck you up, did ya?" The man announced merrily, "Well I did."

"—who are—"

"Jiraiya." The old ninja exhaled a line of smoke in Zabuza's face, "Of the Legendary Three. Not so pleased to make your acquaintance, Momochi Zabuza."

Oh.

The insane circumstances made far more sense. Zabuza was a well-informed individual. He had been trapped and swallowed by a toad, unable to defend himself or escape. The Toad Sage must have heard about some recent misfortunes that had befallen his student. More specifically, Zabuza's recent extortion attempt against Haku.

Perhaps this had been his most epic misplay on the game board yet.

Default response was set to intimidate so Zabuza went with, "Do you want me to kill this toad, Old Man?"

"Hey. I've been eaten by toads before, so I know you can hardly move." Jiraiya shut down the bluff, "And really, I'm not so old. Have a bit of respect for someone who grinds your types into dust on a regular basis. I might've had more respect for you if I didn't hear about how you've been messing with Haku." He added pointedly, "He's one of my shining star pupils. He's probably your star pupil too. Why treat him like garbage?"

"Because his philosophy doesn't get very far in the Land of Water." Zabuza was willing to protest, even though it was starting to feel like the toad's digestive fluids were nipping at his feet.

"Ah." Jiraiya hung the pipe from his lip and puffed, "So your philosophy works better around here? Hmm. Where are your adoring comrades? The glowing testimonials? How about honor? Got that tucked away somewhere?"

"If you're going to kill me, I'll skip your allocution, Toad Sage."

"Wow. I got a formal address out of you." This time, Jiraiya exhaled smoke away from the peeking face in the toad's mouth.

Jiraiya interrupted Zabuza when he tried to issue another feeble threat, "Listen. If I wanted to kill you, I'd let you stand on your own two feet with that stupid-big sword of yours in hand, with all of your strength. And I'd squash you in your prime, Momochi. That's what you deserve." He was as sincere as could be, "That'd be a wrap, but, I've noticed some disturbing trends in the Land of Water…and I have a feeling you've got your finger on the pulse. So I would prefer to hear your take
on what's going on down here before I issue a punishment befitting of Haku's mistreatment. If that sounds reasonable to you, what do you say this toad spits you out and we discuss that matter over tea?"

"It's a deal." Zabuza felt his feet stinging. Abruptly, the toad heaved him up and out, splattering gracelessly to the stony walking path. He slicked what mucus he could from his arms and torso. Then, he goggled up at the sight of a huge, canary yellow toad. As Jiraiya thanked it for its help, the summoned creature disappeared in a puff of smoke.

"Might want to dry yourself off before we go to a sit-down place for lunch." Jiraiya suggested, "You look gross."

"I can't be blamed for how I look right now." Gritting his teeth furiously, Zabuza marched into a neighboring backyard and pulled down a dry towel from a laundry line. He mopped up the saliva while contemplating just how foolish it would be to try to take on the Legendary Toad Sage in a fight without the Seversword. It was sitting in his bedroom at the hideout. He did happen to have a Tool Scroll filled with reliable weapons, however... good sense assured him it was a duel he could never win.

Tossing the soggy towel aside, Zabuza led the way toward the Main Avenue as Jiraiya tagged along beside him fearlessly. It was bizarre to have a living legend appear unannounced, and more so to be effectively trounced by said legend in all of three seconds.

"So, where is Haku?" Jiraiya asked, "I looked for him."

"He went out to train. Comes back around noon to help the old folks, eat, medical training, then usually I put him through his paces." It was true. Zabuza saw no reason to lie about the schedule they established, "He's going to inherit the Nuibari sword, as soon as I get it back."

"Is he?"

"He agreed to it."

"Haku agreeing to be a swordsman doesn't mean that he volunteered." Jiraiya noted.

"What? So you want to override his commitments? I'm not just going to mosey up to the Yuki clan and introduce them for free." Zabuza sniped, "It's nearly impossible to track that clan down. They hide like door mice and change locations. It'd take weeks."

"You've had ample weeks to do that." Jiraiya pointed out, "And you've taken even more of Haku's time in exchange. I don't appreciate you demanding so much of someone you are not even fit to kiss the boots of."

Zabuza established, "I don't bow down to his goody-goody disposition. He's benefited from my training, and that isn't free either."

"If it isn't, it should be. It's not like apprentices flock to you these days."

"In here." Zabuza ducked into the tea shop and Jiraiya followed.

Behind the counter of the shop, Hiroshi was replacing display signs and prices. He barely looked over his shoulder, "You got back late, Zabuza. I can't promise fresh rolls at this hour..."

The beleaguered swordsman dropped heavily into a seat at a small table, "It doesn't fucking matter, Roundy. I'll eat whatever. And a pot of tea, too."
Hiroshi was rattling off the specials menu as he turned around, then stopped dead in his tracks. His beady eyes darted between Jiraiya and Zabuza, trying to grasp the purpose of such a conference. Hiroshi's memory was sharp, and since Jiraiya did not look much older than he remembered, he bowed reverently for the visitor, "It's nice to see you again, Gama-sennin."

Harried, Zabuza slammed his hand flat on the table. If he rolled his eyes they might roll plumb out of his head and out the door. He could hardly believe so many people were familiar with and willing to kiss up to the Toad Sage.

"It's Hiroshi, right? My memory is a little foggy on our first meeting, but Haku always talks about you fondly in his letters." He smiled warmly at the man, "I appreciate you putting up with these knuckleheads. I've come by to provide some counseling to this basket case here. Do you mind if I-?"

"Please, please have a seat and relax!" Hiroshi gestured to the free seat across from Zabuza, "Let me fetch that tea. I'll just be a moment." His dark clothing was streaked with white flour, which Jiraiya found endearing as the stocky man retreated to the kitchen.

Once seated, Jiraiya got a read on the antisocial, embittered body language Zabuza was displaying. He was slouched back and away from the table, eyes narrow and glittering. Clearly, he was livid that violence was not a viable option. And though Zabuza may have thought himself clever on a good day, there was no way he could outmaneuver Jiraiya in verbal negotiations.

"Before Haku comes back and I go to speak with him, let's get a few things straight." Jiraiya offered. "Better than being eaten." Zabuza allowed.

Jiraiya dove into it, "Is it true that the Akatsuki are controlling the Mist Village?"

There was a long pause of thought before Zabuza answered, "To the best of my knowledge, that's the case."

"Are you aware that the Tide Village was attacked by the Akatsuki less than a week ago?"

"No. What the fuck village is that?"

"A new shinobi village that was established in the Land of Waves. One of Hidden Mist's former jinchuriki, Awa Utakata, was living and working there. After a tremendous fight, he was captured by the Akatsuki." Jiraiya took out pipe cleaner wire from a linen bag tied to his hip, "Did you know him?"

"Not well."

"We fear after this much time has passed, and after losing four search party teams…" Jiraiya sighed, "He's dead."

Zabuza grunted in acknowledgment, but his reservoir of sympathy was nearly bone-dry. He didn't say anything.

"If you knew Utakata, you probably know about Hidden Mist's other jinchuriki." Jiraiya steered the conversation smoothly, "What can you tell me about him?"

"I can tell you that he's a small shit-turtle with some nasty reflective jutsu, the Coral Palm technique, and moderate control over his Tailed Beast." He said that with certainty, "At some point he got married and had a kid. That's what I hear. What I've been told more recently is that Karatachi Yagura is dead." Zabuza added in a low voice, "In all likelihood the Akatsuki is responsible. They've been
parading around a cipher that looks and sounds like him to keep up the ruse… but it's not fooling everyone in Mist. Certainly not the missus…"

"Another proxy, eh?" Jiraiya wondered, "I wonder if Pein is controlling it."

"Who?"

"The leader of the Akatsuki. He's the one who attacked the Tide Village."

"Never heard of 'em."

"I'd be surprised if you did. He's been very secretive until now. He can use the Rinnegan to control up to six repurposed proxy bodies at once to fight." Jiraiya shared what he knew, "Pein is a threat that has many of the great villages on edge right now. I think he might be hiding out in Hidden Rain, but I'll have to confirm that before I put it on the record."

"For the uninitiated, what the hell am I supposed to make of the term Rinnegan?"

"It is the ancestral Kekkei Genkai from which the Sharingan is descended. Those are some powerful eyes and jutsu that, quite frankly, shouldn't exist in these times." Jiraiya finished cleaning the stem of his pipe, "And yet here we are discussing it."

"Fuck. Might as well give that new dipshit village some credit, taking that on." That was as generous as Zabuza was going to get with an appraisal.

"They fared better against Pein than I anticipated, but the toll it took on Shiogakure was much too steep." Jiraiya stopped to thank Hiroshi for bringing a teapot and sweet buns to the table. The café owner then politely excused himself to count a cash drawer, not inclined to insert himself into the conversation.

"The Akatsuki's making moves elsewhere, meaning less of their attention will be on Hidden Mist." Zabuza interpreted the news, "So now would be a great time to pull the rug from under 'em."

"I agree wholeheartedly." Jiraiya poured his companion tea, "How do you intend to do that?"

With that cue, Zabuza outlined his plan to buy off as many of Terumi Mei's rebel force of Mist ninja as possible. He also listed the complication of the kunoichi faction's loyalty and likelihood of sticking with Mei. He included his intention to fully train Haku, have Kurosuki Raiga and Raiga's apprentice, Ranmaru, assist in the coup. Zabuza extended the possibility of recruiting disgruntled mercenaries in the area, as well as mercenaries from the mainland for added muscle. He had access to an intelligence network observing weaknesses in the Hunter Corps' patrol routines, and Zabuza was confident enough to disarm the alert barrier on Kirigakure's fringes.

"I just need to pick a time to move that group in and ambush the Hunter Corps from within their base." Zabuza forecasted, "Because without Hunters around, most of Kirigakure fucking hates the leadership currently in place. They'll turn on it too. The Akatsuki scum who's running the show—we'll decimate him after the raid."

"Why are you so sure that Mist's non-Hunter standard forces will cooperate with you?"

"They will. They need the external opportunity to strike, so I'll provide that."

"And all of this you do without Terumi Mei's help? Someone who has two Kekkei Genkai?" Jiraiya was aghast.
Zabuza chomped on a bun, "Yeah."

"That idea is top-tier shit."

He chewed in odious silence, hating Jiraiya from across the table.

"The truth is a bitter pill to swallow." Jiraiya could tell how the nukenin felt, "But really, how the hell do you expect to get anywhere with a plan that excludes major resources?"

"I don't need Mei."

"You don't want her around."

"No. I just don't fucking need her."

"No one is going to prefer you over her, when it comes to leadership. Even if you spearhead the whole operation and free the village, they still won't choose you. You come with too much baggage." Jiraiya shot him down, "Demon of the Hidden Mist."

Somehow, Zabuza kept calm enough to pour more tea. He wanted to toss the pot of hot water in the visitor's face.

"At the very least, you need to sketch Terumi Mei back into your plans. When it comes to the Akatsuki, you'll have no idea what you're getting into until you finally re-enter Kirigakure. I won't object if you use that woman as a shield, or convince her with a silver-tongue to champion you for the top job…but the more talent you go in with, the better off you'll be." Jiraiya raised a hand nonchalantly, "Another option is to petition with the other great villages to back you. If you use me as a channel, you might possibly get some extension of aid from Sand and Leaf. It'll cost you, though."

"Cost me…fuh. It'd never happen. If you applied for clearance to give me back up teams that will infiltrate Hidden Mist, they'd have you institutionalized." Zabuza rejected the idea on principle, "The Kazekage hates me because I, uh, nearly killed someone related to him. The Hokage has no reason to trust me either, since she'll go off of what the Kazekage says."

"True. You've shot yourself in the foot when it comes to applying for outside consideration." Jiraiya nodded while cleaning the bowl of his pipe with a rag, "But you'd be amazed by the strings I can pull."

"Nothing amazes me."

"Haku does." Jiraiya reminded him.

Zabuza stared at him silently, more bewildered than angry.

"Why have you bent over backwards grooming someone who is so unlike you? So unlike a swordsman." Jiraiya wondered, "You said it yourself: the Yuki clan are a bunch of cowards."

A swift counter, "He wasn't brought up with their ilk."

"No. And so I guess you took that to mean he has more potential." Jiraiya probed a new curve in the discussion, "So do you."

"I am what I am. I've plateaued." Zabuza demolished another bun in two bites.
"Is that the kind of talk that should come from someone who wants to be Mizukage?"

"I don't know *what kind of talk* people want to hear *from me.*" Zabuza griped, "As it is, Haku's stronger than me now."

"And smarter." Jiraiya vouched, "Though there are still gaps in his education. Big ones. At least in this region, you know how to fill him in."

"Where are you going with this?"

"I am going to give you a set of terms, and should you agree to them, you can rest assured I will follow through on everything I've promised." Jiraiya proposed, "Or you can decline in two ways: you stay on as a consultant to get Haku up to speed on the Land of Water, accept Haku's refusal to be a swordsman, and then you leave. I'll keep Haku here for a short while as a liaison with Terumi Mei and those who will liberate Kirigakure." Jiraiya further added, "If that doesn't sit well...you leave immediately. Depending on your tone, I may or may not send Special Ops squads to apprehend you. Got it?"

Zabuza could only stare moodily and hear the Toad Sage out.

"Good. I intend to temporarily install Haku as a "kiting" shinobi down here to relay information to me, the Kazekage, and the Hokage. A spy, in fancier terms. He wouldn't be the first ninja I have doing that for me. I will send him into dangerous areas, and allow him to collaborate on a coup in Mist. I need him to collect as much information on the Akatsuki as he can, and whatever else is going on out here. When his assignment ends, he comes back to Leaf. He can apply to work in Hidden Sand, if that's what he wants. At that point, you leave him alone." Jiraiya explained, "But until that times comes, you will just as much be my informant as Haku is."

"Paid work?"

"Paid. In coin or jutsu, or a combination thereof. You can stand to learn a few more tricks, no? How about a few of mine?" Jiraiya offered, "And if you need more muscle to get into Hidden Mist, I can follow through on sending Sand or Leaf teams when the time comes."

Zabuza crossed his arms, "Great. Though I don't know how the hell you are going to word that mission request."

"I'll use some flowery language. Do I have you so far?"

"You do."

"Let's see if this throws you: the caveat is...you answer to Haku from now on."

The blank look on the nukenin's face did not bode well.

"If you want to check in with a crime syndicate for leisurely purposes, as opposed to information-gathering, and Haku pans it—you don't go. If you ask things of him that he will not do—you square yourself with that. If you attempt anything that Haku does not approve of—I will give him the means to make you wish you'd never been born." Jiraiya warned, "Are we clear?"

"I'm no one's lieutenant."

"If you want all of the handouts I just described, you will be."

After sucking down the last sip of tea in his cup, Zabuza crushed the porcelain beneath his flat palm,
grinding bits of it against the table.

"You'll work with Terumi Mei, if Haku finds that alliance favorable. If you want endorsements to become a candidate for Mizukage, you face down your competitors fair and square. Treat others well. Just because you don't think you can make people like you doesn't mean it's impossible. Look at me for some inspiration." He pointed at himself with his pipe, "I'm not gonna stop you from slamming your head against the dead-end brick wall that is your life. Do that if you must. Alternatively, you can take some direction from someone who's won two wars and trained multiple Kage." Jiraiya smirked, "And see where that gets you."

"You don't think the Snake Sannin would offer me something better? I could dangle Haku in front of him." Zabuza could not help but play the traitorous chords of the song.

"Heh." Highly amused, Jiraiya tucked his pipe away, "By all means do. Tell Orochimaru about my offer and watch how quickly he kills you because you don't fit into his agenda. He's got little to provide, as hard as that is to believe. No village backs him."

Fascinated by the bloody pricks in his hand, Zabuza pulled a few shards of the broken cup from his skin, "...I will say...this is the first time I've been trusted in a while."

"It's not fond trust, but it has a purpose."

"The cliché? The enemy of your enemy?"

"All self-proclaimed enemies are going to wake up one day and realize the Akatsuki will dominate them equally." Jiraiya put a fine point to it, "I have one enemy, and you are not it. You're just a bad-tempered shit stain."

The silence of the café was interrupted by Hiroshi knocking over a stack of plastic drums in the back room. He muttered while picking them up.

Zabuza rolled his neck and recapped the terms, "You want Haku taken care of and respected? Fine. You want detailed information? Fine. A better planned and backed coup? I'll do it your way." He leaned forward and growled, "But you can't roll up in here and postpone my plans completely so that I can execute your plans. There's an auction in a month that I can't show my face at, so Haku is going to sell spoils there to fund the rebellion."

"What auction?" Jiraiya scrunched his face at the thought.

"Keiseki House."

"What a cesspool. How'd you get kicked out of that crowd?"

"By not actually following through on a sale, last time."

"Cheapskate." Jiraiya simpered, "Where's that again? The Land of Mountains?"

"Yeah."

"I've got another ninja kiting out in that area. Who'll be going to that soiree?"

"Magnates from the Kingdoms of Han and Joseon. They fund it. A few undisclosed, aristocratic houses from shinobi nations do arms-dealing there. A few Mist clans go to it, some from the Lands of Lightning, Earth, and Snow. Thieves and entrepreneurs. Scientists."
"Scientists? What's at Keiseki House that they'd want?"

"What they don't already have, and the other side of the world does." Zabuza imagined.

"Hmm. You don't suppose Orochimaru would appear there?"

"I don't know. It's not like they put me in charge of attendance lists. It's all hearsay."

"Sending Haku isn't ideal. I'll ask my guy to—"

"He's going to prove himself. If I handle everything else you demand, Haku goes." Zabuza insisted on it. "I'm not going to count on your mystery middle-man to make a sale this important."

"It's a lion's den of dangerous, rich assholes."

"Haku should be strong enough to handle himself." Zabuza crossed his arms again, "I believe in him. I don't believe in your "guy". Alright?"

"This is not a concession I'm comfortable making, but I'll make it." Jiraiya granted with a sigh.

No other points of contention were raised as Jiraiya finished the final sweet bun on the plate. He dusted the crumbs from his hands, and then offered a clean table napkin to his brutish associate. Zabuza pressed it to his bloody palm.

"I get the feeling this sucks for you." Jiraiya acknowledged, "But it could be much worse."

With a half shrug, Zabuza did not disagree.

"You've terrorized Haku and the people of Nanakusa. Even that man over there, Hiroshi— he saved Haku's life when he was a child. You've bullied him too, I bet." The Sage scanned around the space of the shop, "Coerced your fellow swordsman to work with you, most likely. Rejected those from Mist who might actually be of help to you… It must be hard when things don't go the way you intend." Jiraiya could put himself in the rogue's shoes, "When all of this is over, I never said I wouldn't put out the order to have you executed. I'm sure you've done enough to merit it."

"Mist will handle that for you. No need to waste your pen ink." A morbid forecast on Zabuza's part.

"…If you had no choice but to die or rehabilitate yourself, which would you choose?" The older man wondered as he emptied the tea pot, "Which path yields you more dignity?"

"Are you going to inflict your Sage teachings on me?"

"I've been doing that since I caught you in that alley. Try answering the question, Zabuza."

"…" He gazed up at the pendant lights of the café, softly glowing, "I don't know how to not die as I am."

"And what are you?"

"The scourge of my village."

"No, no." With a shake of his head, Jiraiya asked again, "What are you really? Not what they say, but when you look at yourself?"

The lull of the dining room was dense and noiseless. Perhaps there was an answer, or maybe there wasn't— Zabuza said nothing to affirm Jiraiya's suspicion. And so Jiraiya ceremoniously rose to
riffle around a wallet, drawing out money notes in excess of the meal they had just eaten. He crossed over to the counter and set payment down beside the register, then explored past the egress of the dining room to the kitchen. Hiroshi looked up from the intense work of delicately icing a design on a pastry.

"Thanks for the pick-me-up. I left you some money on the counter. Everything's fine, by the way." Jiraiya made his appreciation known, "Also, thanks for entrusting those kids to me. Never got around to finding you and thanking you, did I? I wasn't much to look at back then, but I've cleaned myself up. I hope Haku's brought some joy back into your life."

A hearty chuckle rumbled from Hiroshi, "Like the child I always wanted, he has. Though he came with a few barnacles attached, I guess those oddballs became my friends as well...in their own grumpy ways."

"Heh. I'd love to bring Gaara and Naruto by, sometime."

"My god, they must be a sight..."

"Wait 'til you strike up a conversation with them. Naruto could talk your ear off, unless you stop him. Gaara's more refined these days."

"What are they up to while you are here on these isles?"

And so Jiraiya, who was a gabber much in the way Naruto was, got to chatting with the friendly tea shop owner. The Sage hung around the edge of the door frame, half-in, half-out of the dining room while Zabuza stewed in his seat with his eyes shut. He vacillated between the turmoil of his thoughts and eavesdropping on the gossip.

He peeked an eye open when the entryway chime signaled a new visitor, who barged in mid-way through a rant: "—you can't keep stealing boats and leaving them at docks that aren't yours." Haku was huffing, "Zabuza, move it off of Hasekura-san's—"

Whatever Haku was indignant about, he forgot. There at the far end of the tea shop was Jiraiya making small talk with the kitchen's occupant. Mere paces away, Zabuza was seated at a table, worn down and milder than he usually appeared.

Haku could not negotiate the wild surge of elation and anxiousness that hit him, or deduce the meaning of the gathering before he'd crossed the distance between them. Jiraiya's turn was slow as he beamed at the sight of a handsome young man approaching him, who then sunk into a deep, back-bending bow.

"I've dishonored you." Haku quickly addressed the mea culpa.

Jiraiya raised his eyebrows, "Your detour, you mean? It's no personal offense to me, kid."

"Please accept my apology, Sensei. To you, and to everyone I've neglected."

"Let's call it even." Jiraiya suggested, "I'm sure you weren't served well by an alcoholic escorting you and then dumping you in Hidden Leaf. Did I ever apologize to you about that?" He was smiling, "Don't worry about it, Haku."

Rising up again, he shed the formality and embraced Jiraiya with a squeeze of relief. An affectionate pat started atop Haku's head, middled at his back, and then rubbed a rough circle there. Jiraiya had not forgotten that, of his three diverse pupils, Haku was most inclined to show physical affection. So it was a high-quality, uncommon hug by Jiraiya's standards. They stepped back to look at each other,
shiny-eyed.

"Whoa. You are what young manhood longs to look like in fairytales." Jiraiya estimated, "Been busy breaking hearts while you're out here, hm?"

"If so, only my own. I've made many mistakes—"

The Sage waved it off, "Lighten up a little, you don't need to confess your sins to me. But we should sit down and talk for a bit. Zabuza and I finished our discussion."

Dumbfounded, Haku gaped briefly at Zabuza who scooched aside, freeing up a chair for him. Hiroshi poked his face around the doorway's corner, "Welcome back, Haku! I won't need any help today. I think it's best if you catch up."

"Hiroshi-san—"

"Quit gawking and just sit down already." Zabuza gruffed.

He did. Haku took the space beside Zabuza, still marveling at Jiraiya looking so put-together and composed across the table.

"I've left Naruto and Gaara back in Hidden Sand, though I can tell you they desperately wanted to come along for this trip." The Toad Sage announced, "But that scenario was canned as soon as we learned about the Akatsuki's recent attack on the Tide Village. The organization is active again, so I can't let those two travel together…at least not without a heavy escort."

Zabuza sniffed at the explanation, "Why the escort?"

"Because, Zabuza, they are both jinchuriki." Jiraiya pointed a finger in the man's face, "In case you didn't notice when you fought them as children; pretty unusual for kids to tote so much chakra, right? When you got whooped on the great bridge, I'm not sure what you attributed it to. Those are just the facts."

"Both of them?"

Haku nodded, "Yes. I wouldn't want them to needlessly jeopardize themselves. I'll be fine. Tell them I'll come back as soon as—"

Jiraiya then shushed Haku with a hand gesture, "Don't make pledges to them just yet. I have work for you. Only you can do it."

That quieted the young man while Zabuza, again, was boggled by the circumstances of Jiraiya's peculiar trio. It turned out that Zabuza was so surprised by the revelation, that he missed two-thirds of Jiraiya's relaying of "the terms" to Haku.

Haku's ears were tuned into Jiraiya's every word: each detail about the Akatsuki in Mist, what happened to the Tide Village, the objectives, responsibilities, hazards, and Zabuza's own rebellion-funding request via the Keiseki House auction. When Jiraiya came to the projected afterward, when Mist's administration and ruling party turned over into new hands, Haku might be expected to liaise here and there, "But you can live and work in Leaf primarily…or Sand, if you want." Jiraiya detected that his mind was not made up between the two.

"I'm not sure. Is it possible to get clearances for both?" Haku asked.

"Gaara will probably approve the extra paperwork so you can accept missions from either. There's
Excitement was dusted on Haku's face, eyes expressing that his mind was living far ahead of the present—grateful to be an ambassador between the villages of his two dearest friends. As Jiraiya chronicled some current events involving Gaara and Naruto, such as Naruto's success in the Chunin Exam, and Gaara's intent to educate him about civic engagement; Haku was riled. He wanted to see them. To do everything and nothing with them. To get reacquainted with life and friends there. While Haku prattled about his expectations, Jiraiya was half-listening: he kept an eye on Zabuza.

He had been warned by Temari that something was atypical about Zabuza's attachment to Haku. It was evident in the man's posture and nondescript watchfulness. Low-key as it was, he was reacting to Haku's optimism. Steely eyes were trained on the young man, studying him. So there it was, Jiraiya thought, as he witnessed it for himself. Even if Zabuza did not want to play second fiddle to anyone in this lifetime, Jiraiya suspected that he probably would for Haku. Jiraiya logged the furtive response away in his mind, just in case it needed discussing on a later date.

"How about you show me around town for a bit? I noticed that this is a charming place, in spite of its few seedy inhabitants." Jiraiya redirected Haku's babbling, "And you..." He turned to Zabuza, "Read and sign this if you truly agree with what we've laid out." He placed a scroll in front of Zabuza on the table top.

Brooding, Zabuza flicked his eyes down at the contract. He said nothing as Haku led the way out of Hiroshi's tea shop with Jiraiya in tow.

Halfway down the street, Haku observed aloud, "He's furious."

"Oh I know." Jiraiya was unruffled by it.

"How did you avoid a fight with him, Sensei?"

"It was pretty simple, actually. I got here and tried to find you—and couldn't. Had a cup of tea and read a magazine on the corner while waiting. When a few of my toads noticed Zabuza disembark from a boat..." He puffed up with pride, "I conducted a preemptive strike. That sure got his attention."

"I am genuinely shocked." Haku confessed, "And also so glad you did that."

Jiraiya clapped his student on the back, "Anytime. I get the impression he thinks I'm just going to stroll out of here with you and not abide by anything I just told him. In all honesty, I can. I'd like to see that brute try and stop me..." He halted in front of the single neighborhood liquor store on the road, "Oh, this reminds me...meant to pick up Daiginjo while I was out..."

It was only natural to follow Jiraiya as he casually shopped for wine.

"Sensei...you mean to tell me that we're following through on that agreement?" Haku verified.

"Even if we can force our way out of here...that won't do a lick of good in the long run. We need intelligence on the Akatsuki and what's happening in the Land of Water." Jiraiya confirmed, "I meant what I said: I need you to get this done. To protect Naruto and Gaara."

Heartsick, Haku hovered aimlessly between rows of bottles, and snapped out of his thoughts when Jiraiya tucked a bottle of sake in his arms, "Here. I'll get this one for you."

"No thank you, Sensei."
"It's not exactly *for you*, it's just that you're going to need it in a short while." Jiraiya spoke absently, and if he had a point Haku certainly did not get the message. The boy carried around the unnecessary premium sake as they traipsed two minuscule aisles, and Jiraiya picked out a few vintages for himself.

"I'll be fine, Haku. You're cut out for this sort of work, and you have good instincts. Since no one down here knows who you are, you'll be working with an advantage." The Toad Sage encouraged him as he paid at the register and picked up a new book of matches, "You know who you remind me of?"

Haku's interest was piqued, "Who?"

"My last set— the Fourth Hokage's teammate— Namba. You remind me so much of him." Jiraiya shook his head, fuzzy with nostalgia, "A charmer. Good-looking and intelligent, worked best behind the scenes...he spent much of his time roaming far and wide to resolve crises during war time." Jiraiya recalled as they exited the store, "I had a much closer relationship with Minato...ah, but Namba would show up once in a while to party."

"Did he pass away in the last war?"

"Eh? No!" Jiraiya clacked his geta on the ground, flabbergasted with Haku missing the point again, "He's not dead, Haku. *He's still working.* Namba is one of my oldest informants, he just doesn't live in Hidden Leaf anymore." He clucked his tongue, "He settled down in Kumogakure and has a family now. Every now and then he picks up a task for Tsunade and I."

"*Oh. I see.*" Haku backtracked, "I'm sorry, I thought you brought it up because—"

"Because...past students of mine aren't exactly plentiful." Jiraiya then muttered under his breath, "That's what I thought."

"Are there other spies you rely on?" Haku was curious about the new role he was entering, "For other regions?"

"Absolutely. An old lady in the Apple Village...a few commercial fisherman based in the Tea Country...a new fella named Sumaru in Hidden Star...Pitekuyo in Hidden Grass..." Jiraiya rubbed his chin, "You and Zabuza, now. And Obito."

"The one who helped in the Tide Village?" He recalled the story that'd been summarized for him.

"Yep. Naruto and Gaara can tell you about him on a later date. He's a sensitive asset."

"Sensitive-?"

"Anyways..." Jiraiya changed the subject, "I left some supplies on that footbridge outside town...the one in the forest. Can you pick them up for me? I didn't want to schlep everything here while I was looking out for your esteemed tutor."

Frowning, Haku did not approve of the intentional misdirection, "Did you really leave supplies on a public footbridge where anyone can take them?"

"I really did— *hey.* Don't snark at me. I get enough of that from Naruto...and Gaara just wouldn't let up back in Suna." The Toad Sage grumbled, "I'm bringing a bottle back to the tea shop as a peace offering. You can find me there."

No further inquiry was conducted once Haku parted from his master with a sigh, turning right off of
the main avenue and toward the surrounding forest's treeline. For all of the information Jiraiya could
so casually dump on others, Haku was peeved by the withholdings and evasive language he wielded.
Better still, he was walking around with an unwanted bottle of sake in the crook of his arm. 'Because
he came all the way here to help me...I feel like I can't decline what Sensei has asked me to
do.' When he thought of the magnitude of the assignment, and who it benefitted, refusing was
impossible. 'But more than anything I want to go home. I want to see them...'

At a grassy crossing near the stream, Haku paused and found that he had been hoodwinked. There
was no supply bag or travel gear or anything of the sort. The bridge was empty as he set foot on
it, 'What a cheap diversion...' He could hardly believe Jiraiya sent him on a goose chase.

Movement in his peripheral vision bade him to turn, and Haku looked out beyond the bridge and
upstream, where Temari was water-walking and surveying the bubbling brook. Her back was to him
as she kneeled down and plucked a small crustacean from the water, holding it up to her face to
examine it. No such thing existed in the desert. The white sheen of her short dress, brightened by the
watercolor designs of blue and copper at the shoulders was airy and free. Temari's fan was wrapped
up in a blue sash 'round her back and waist.

Seeing her there confirmed, no, Jiraiya had not exactly left supplies behind...though it was still a
thoughtful gift. Haku vaulted over the bridge's railing, and his footfalls on the water's surface drew
attention. When she saw him, Temari tossed the zarigani back into the stream and hurried to him.
There on the rill that cut through the island's lonely woodland, they folded their arms around one
another, and Haku rested his forehead against hers. He remembered belatedly to breathe. Everything
seized up and stilled— to see her alive and well was an exquisite way to be astonished.

"What?" Temari's voice lilted with satisfaction, "Missed me already?"

"Yes."

"Aww."

He noticed that her hair was fastened with the glistening pin he had sent to appease her. Haku trolled
his eyes down to spot that the pilfered, priceless ring sent with it, fitted on the middle finger of her
right hand. "Hm. Where did you get those?" He had to tease a little.

"Some lovesick scrub sent them to me."

"He must be rich."

"He's not, but he'll do." She was smiling.

"May I?"

"Yeah."

Unable to wait another solitary second, his hand slid up to the back of her head and drew Temari in
for a kiss.

"Hmm." Pleased with the greeting, Temari then usurped the bottle of sake from his grip, "Is this for
me? Thanks."

Jiraiya was two for two when it came to gift-giving, Haku noted. He then had to ask, "Temari, why
did you come back here?"

"I was in the Tide Village the same time your Sensei was, so I suggested that I accompany him to
Nanakusa. In case anything unexpected happened. Though I think he was just being nice…then he filled me in on this plan he wants you to work on." She explained, "And come on, you know why I'm here."

"I have an idea."

They turned back in the direction of town, and Haku only gave half a thought to what could happen if Zabuza and Temari encountered each other again. The swordsman was thoroughly occupied at the moment.

Temari added as they passed through back-end alleys of humble buildings, "Gama-sennin came up with a decent enough strategy…and the results will be valuable…but I'm honestly not feeling good about you spying on Hidden Mist. Or infiltrating it."

"Me neither, though Sensei would say someone has to. Which is true." Haku countered.

"I don't know how trustworthy Momochi is going to be…"

"He'll do what we ask." Haku predicted, "Just not with a smile on his face."

"Uh huh. But what if you're caught, or scrubbed by Mist's Intel Corps after you sneak in?" Temari had a habit of zeroing-in on uncomfortable scenarios.

"…then that'd be terrible."

Her tone was serrated, "Don't let that happen."

"I won't, I won't."

He led her up a flight of stairs toward the flat he shared with Zabuza, "Did the trip here tire you out?"

"Not quite. I had to slow my pace so your Sensei could keep up." She smirked and followed him indoors, slipping her gaze around the modest space of the home. It was a bit more disordered than she remembered: throw blankets and articles of clothing tossed around, empty bottles and shuffled periodicals on the table— not Haku's type of mess-making, she guessed. A pot of stew simmered on the stove top and warmed the air with its aroma.

Sighing happily, Temari set her fan aside, slipping her travel bag from her shoulder, and sank down on the sofa. Haku worked around her to tidy things up, smiling like an idiot.

"It's a mess in here."

"Not my typical standard of living, I must admit." Haku confessed.

"Can I eat whatever's cooking?"

"Of course. It'll be ready soon. I'll make some rice."

"And do you have wine glasses?"

"It's a bit early to—" Haku was interrupted by the sound of the woman unscrewing the bottle's cap, "I'll find some."

"Good. Split this with me."

"I don't like to drink, Temari."
"No? You must not be doing it right." She set her prized sake down on a sitting room table, and folded a stray blanket to make Haku less obsessive-compulsive. Temari then searched cupboards for rice. When she found it, she waved him away, "I'll do it. The cooker's right here. Look through my bag, Haku. I brought some things for you."

Since she clearly knew her way around a kitchen as well as he did, Haku retreated to the sitting area to curiously rummage through the satchel Temari brought with her. He extracted clothing that looked familiar.

"Those are yours." She spoke over her shoulder, "You let me take them when I high-tailed it out of here, last time."

"Ah. That's right." He simpered at how the outfit had been cleaned and folded. Haku set it aside and cheerily carried on the investigation, pulling out a large, narrow gift-box next, "What's this?"

"Open it." Not only did she have the rice going, she also found wine glasses. Temari returned to sit down as Haku lifted the lid free and discovered a dark, metal tessen packaged reverently.

His squirrely gaze went between Temari and the war fan before he raised it up and unfolded it. If he had to estimate, it was nearly 44cm in length; rather plain with the exception of a single white snowflake design etched into the centerfolds. Speechless, he looked at her again while Temari nonchalantly poured wine, unimpressed with her own gift.

"I know you can use Wind Release when you want to, so you can channel it with that." She set a glass down in front of him on a low table, "You can't exactly fly with it either…it's too small. But I felt that it was fair to get you something since you're so fond of sending me tokens."

"Temari…"

She gave him an expectant look as she raised her drink to sniff the aromatics.

"This is excellent." He was thrilled by her thoughtful gesture, "I'm truly not deserving."

"Maybe." Smiling impishly, Temari crossed her legs in a ladylike manner. When she toasted, "To your new job." Haku was compelled to raise his glass and, per the custom, he drank to it. He discovered that the wine was terrifically palatable. He would be partaking after all.

"Before I dive into some Kazekage-mandated directives…" Temari prefaced the discussion to come, "I want you to know: I think we should date."

It took Haku a beat to reply, "We should?"

"I think we did. For like a month."

"Slightly longer than that." He was crestfallen by her shoddy recollection of their courtship.

She shrugged at him and sipped.

"It won't be easy. I'll still be here doing reconnaissance work." Haku reminded her, "And I'm of the opinion you would benefit from someone who can see you more often than once a month."

"Make it twice a month and we have a deal. I can tell you this: I've dated men who I saw every day…and it wasn't so great. Time in quantity is not my primary concern." Temari corrected him, "Contrary to what I may look like right now," Haku observed her and assessed: authoritative, collected, elegant, "I've been the most susceptible to you. I try not to look it, but I don't…feel this
way…with any—"

"I know." He understood and was very encouraged, "I've been hopeful…"

"So it's a good idea. That is," Temari concluded with a glint in her eye, "If we're still attracted to each other."

He didn't mean for a hungry look to convey his sincerest answer to Temari's bait, much faster than words could convey his sentiments. Haku was not about to beat himself up over it. She was teasing, after all. She already knew how he felt. She would not have suggested such a thing if she wasn't interested to begin with. He took a few deep breaths and his cooler head prevailed, resolving not to pounce on her even though Temari seemed to be inviting it.

They toasted again to dating because it seemed like the best (stupid) idea thus far. Temari's self-congratulatory snickering included mumblings about a hot boyfriend and emotional intelligence. She then retrieved a manila folder from her bag and handed it to Haku, "Here. Gaara wants you to have this information on the Akatsuki that he and the Hokage have compiled. We'll want you to add to it and fill in the blanks."

Right away, Haku came across a detail that curdled his stomach. Page one indicated the objectives of the organization, and the next page displayed the identifying uniform of Akatsuki members which, until that moment, Haku had not given much consideration, "This cloak…"

"Yeah…?"

He recalled his travels beyond the Land of Water, through the Land of Snow and back again. Haku locked eyes with her, "I remember meeting a shinobi who wore this."

"You met one of the Akatsuki?"

"Yes, on peaceful terms."

"How?" Temari was disconcerted.

"While I was traveling south to the Land of Snow, on a stopover island. It was a woman. I'm not sure how old…forty? She was beautiful and had blue hair. She was wearing this." Haku indicated the file's stock photo of the Akatsuki cloak, "She seemed to be in charge of subordinates and…she was traveling with a partner."

"That's not good." A tinge of suspicion crept into Temari's voice, "And what were you doing with some strange woman?"

"I was trapped by the Cursed Seal of Heaven." Haku rubbed his neck tenderly, fearful just thinking about it, "I haven't used it since…but I was attacked by someone who was sent by Orochimaru. I couldn't shed my Cursed Seal form after a seal-tag was stuck to me. This woman helped get it off of me when all else failed."

Leaning back into sofa cushion, Temari sipped sake and noodled on the tale.

"She can control paper." Haku recalled as much as he could, "And she was not hostile towards me. Which would be unusual for an Akatsuki member, no?"

"Maybe not. Some of them might be more level-headed." She then ventured, "By any chance, was it a Rain ninja?"
Confused as to how she could guess correctly, Haku confirmed, "She was."

"Hmm. Gama-sennin said he's worried that the Akatsuki may have a base of operations in Hidden Rain." Temari informed him, "I guess he's on the right track."

"I'll have to talk to Sensei about it." Haku supposed as he flipped through the file. It took some time to sift through it, and he was boggled by an extensive section on the one called "Pein" that had been compiled from various reports.

They took a break to eat a late lunch, glad not to be disturbed by Zabuza, Jiraiya, or any of Nanakusa's inhabitants. Between their combined efforts, most of the Daiginjo had been consumed by the end of the meal. Too sloppy and buzzed to clean properly, Haku committed heresy by leaving dirty bowls in the sink with no intention of washing them. He toddled back to the couch to stretch out on it lengthwise, and the trickle of his thoughts concerning Hidden Mist and spying on the Akatsuki halted altogether when Temari overlapped herself with him. Her cuddling was welcome. They were a sedate sort of drunk.

"Good food."

"Thank you."

"Did we leave any for that douchebag?"

"Yes." Haku thought so, at least.

"Hmf."

An edge of worry in his voice, "Are you leaving tomorrow?"

"I have to. Gama-sennin and I can't stay."

"You can stay."

"Not for another bloodbath. I'm taking a risk getting drunk and being defenseless here of all places." She chuckled at her brashness.

"I'll protect you." By that, he meant he would gladly kill Zabuza if he so much as stepped in her direction.

"I know." She yawned, "I think…we should wait before Gaara finds out."

"About us?"

"Yeah."

"Give it a week." Haku suggested.

She shook her head, "Two weeks, at least. He has hissy fits like you wouldn't believe when the subject comes up…"

"Alright." He let his eyes drift shut for a superb, fuzzy feeling of impending sleep, "I don't want… him to be angry."

Her head was heavy on his shoulder, "He shouldn't be, y'know. He knows that you love me, and that I love you. Gaara's got issues."
That procured a sharp snort of laughter from Haku that subsided back into his half-conscious state. "He said he's upset that he let you go. He wanted your support when he went through all the shit in the beginning for Kazekage candidacy." Temari went on after another long yawn, "But he knows me well. I think he's just fucked up about knowing I want to do you."

Haku woke up slightly, "...is...that why...?"

Her languid position seemed more purposeful to him than it had moments ago. The way her leg draped over his, the slow exploration of her free hand over his shirt was almost beneath his notice. A flighty sensation pattered in his chest. Haku could feel her warm breath against his neck, and it was difficult to concentrate on anything else.

"Mmm." She shared her perspective on the matter, "You're too gentle and innocent." Temari could only communicate in sleepy mutters, "Virtuous people are— psh. What am I supposed to do? I've got to...handle you with kid gloves. Treat you super well. It's weird and scary."

Those observations were muddled, so Haku asked, "...what's weird and scary?"

"Not being...cavalier about it. I always was." Temari's cheek bunched as she curled into him, "I don't want to hurt you. It'll sit on my conscience if I did."

"Even if you do, I hold no grudges. And how fragile do you think I am?" Really, Haku thought, how much physical or emotional damage could she inflict?

"You are." Temari insisted, "Fragile. Better said; naïve, inexperienced. Have you ever let a woman prey on your insecurities or maltreat you before? Doesn't seem like it. That was one of my habits when it came to past guys." She added, "They kind of deserved it, though."

"Well, try not to maltreat me or abuse my insecurities." He was amused by her locution.

"Try is the operative word."

"I have faith that you mean well." He wasn't going to worry about possible disagreements. Mature communication was one of his prided extracurricular activities.

"You..." Bemused, Temari tilted her head up to glimpse him, "Why are you like that?"

"Like what?"

"You might've noticed, but your two best pals can get very hot-blooded and melodramatic."

"So can I."

She scrunched her face, "Right. But you're on a different wavelength than they are. Less bull-headed."

"I am not sure how you are measuring that quality in us. You sound biased." Haku accused.

"From what I do know, you've never been overtly masculine." Temari brought up a buzz word that Haku heard rather frequently, "Not like them. You know what I'm talking about. See, you're still a guy...but you have capacities others don't."

"Feminine capacities, you mean?" He tried to interpret where she was going with the topic.

"Would you call it that?"
"I understand what you mean, and frankly, it doesn't matter to me what it's called. Society wants to classify recreation, work, and behavior by gender roles so badly…but those classifications never did suit me." Haku smiled a little, "I might like and do many things women generally do, true, though I'm no poorer for it. While I grew up in Hidden Leaf, no one was pressuring me to be a certain way. Naruto and Gaara always accepted me as I am."

She settled her head back to relax, "Yeah, they're all about acceptance."

"They are. I've been free to express myself however I want. I'm sure others in this world haven't been as fortunate."

"So identity-wise, does it matter?" Temari rolled to adjust herself front-to-front with him, "I'm genuinely curious. It's not like I could interview you about your sexuality before this."

"Oh, so you're asking?"

"Inquiring minds want to know. I'm a woman and reasonably sure I appeal to you…but how do I fit into your preferences?" Her eyes were narrowed playfully. There was no judgement in them.

"I…" His eyes traced the ceiling and then peeked down at her, "Think…"

"Hm?"

"All." Haku said finally, "I like everything."

"I had a feeling."

"That's not to say I've met a man I like. I haven't." He added candidly, "But I could, I know that. So far I've preferred girls…it must be the mental chemistry."

"Pff. What are you doing with me, then?" She joked.

"I want to chase you. You've always challenged me to be better, braver." He was poetic, "You are beautiful in form and thought. It's hard to resist."

"Who knew I could be loved for my brain too? For a while I thought it was just being blonde and having B+ curves."

"That grade is more of an A-.

Temari flicked his chin in annoyance, "I'll grade myself, thank you very much."

Chuckling contently, Haku played with her plaied hair and shut his eyes again.

After a yawn she wondered out loud, "Maybe it will feel good…with someone I really like."

He got fidgety again. Her casual way of expressing her intentions rattled him. Temari was interested, there was no mistaking that. If he was honest, Haku would admit that he could never rebuff such advances and would most likely enjoy them. But at present he was drunk, sleepy, and in no physical condition to impress. He was melding with the couch. His best cautionary tagline was, "It's much too soon for what you're asking."

She squashed that train of thought, "Don't get all hot and bothered, Haku. I need a nap." As good as her word, Temari was asleep after a few minutes.

Haku estimated that he only dozed off for ten minutes at most, but when his eyes batted open again
the sun was setting beyond the window. And Zabuza was standing over the room's table after he had just gotten back from negotiations with Jiraiya, as tense as a tiger fit to spring on a cornered deer. Haku was not precisely sure how long the swordsman had been standing there—how long he had chosen to fester over Temari's unannounced visit. Haku sidled free from beneath the sleeping kunoichi, and rose groggily to his feet.

"Since I've been fucked back to front today in terms of free will, you had better get this bitch out of here before I collect her head." Zabuza warned. His face was uncovered and plainly irate, veins protruding from his neck.

"You didn't have to agree to anything Sensei proposed, you know." Haku reminded him, resting his hand gently on Temari's shoulder to stir her.

"I had no choice. There's no sense in declining the offer for reinforcements. But I pay either way."

When Zabuza came nearer, Haku stepped forward as well, bodily barring him from approaching, "You really let that witch come back here?"

Awake and sitting up, Temari groused, "I can hear you."

"Leave."

She rubbed the crust from her eyes and did not grace Zabuza with a retort.

"If your verbal abuse is anything to go by, you've had a difficult day." Haku granted him that, "So we'll both leave. Try to relax. There's stew if you want it."

"And go where? The swordsman wanted to keep a short leash.

"Why does that matter? Did Sensei ask to see me?"

"In the morning. He's spending the night at Roundy's place."

Roughly translated, Haku worked out that Jiraiya would probably be dining at the tea house and stay as a guest in Hiroshi's home. Unlike Temari, who had gathered her bag and fan to see herself out of the flat, Haku was marginally compelled to protest against Zabuza's spiteful banishment. If this was the only instance within which Zabuza could assert himself, and Jiraiya touted that the power balance was now to shift in Haku's favor—the young man was more inclined to put the brute in his place. He could've argued until the sun came up, but whoa, Temari was well out the door and pressing on.

He gathered his war fan from the coffee table while watching Zabuza, "Tomorrow, then." Haku left and clicked the flat's door shut behind him. The goal for the night would be for Zabuza to meditate on and accept his new position. Only Heaven knew if he could.

The pair hopped over to the next rooftop, observing a sunset that was every shade of a sherbet dessert. Temari spun the flat bottom of her fan beneath her palm against the gable she stood on. Without speaking, they lingered as the island's cricket songs gradually intensified.

"Shall we go talk to Sensei?" Haku broke the silence with a sensible offer, "I can arrange for you to stay with Hiroshi-san as well."

"No need. I don't want to be involved in any strategy discussions while I'm drunk." As Temari tottered eastbound and somehow cleared the gaps between buildings, Haku worriedly tailed after her.

"-careful—"
"I won't fall."

"Where are you going?" He stifled a burp. He was not sure where else to go if not Hiroshi's residence, or possibly convince the landlord who housed Raiga and Ranmaru down the road to let them stay for the night.

"Here." Temari landed and slid on the truss of a tall house, prying open an unlatched window.

Haku swayed beside her, but he caught himself while batting at her hands, "What are you doing? You can't just break into someone's house-!"

"I didn't break anything. And we've been here before." Unconcerned, she swung the panel open and clumsily heaved herself through. Her fan stuck on the jamb so she returned to pull it free.

Stomach swirling, Haku glanced around and realized that it was the office/house that belonged to Migawari. The retiree medic-nin was currently on the other side of town to gamble the night away with Oguni-san and other old gamesters. Haku half-fell into the top level room, which had recently been dusted. The lack of cobwebs was remarkable, 'He must have put Ranmaru up to cleaning…'

Temari set her belongings down on an upholstered bench, then grandly stretched her arms over her head. She watched Haku scuttle downstairs quickly to explore the house, shouting back up to her, "This is breaking and entering—"

"He's not here?" She gathered. Temari turned her ear toward the doorway of the room, hearing only drunken bumbling downstairs. No. The medic-nin who resided here was probably out. Triumphant, Temari laid cross-wise on the room's bed and yawned. She had to sleep off the sake and stew.

Eventually Haku returned with a tray, noticed there was no space for it on the cluttered bureau, and so he settled on the wood floor, clacking the tea platter down. Dizzy, he sat down cross-legged beside it and poured himself a cup of tea, "Temari, get off that bed. You are an intruder in this house."

"Says the one who's stealing an old man's tea set."

"I'm not an intruder. I am an employee in this office, and I'm permitted to make tea." Haku defended, then he noted in an afterthought, "I have a stomach ache."

"Because you are needlessly worrying about stuff." Temari assessed, unmoving.

"I shouldn't have—"

"The sake didn't make you sick. That wasn't low-grade swill we were drinking." She disarmed his complaints.

He sat there and sipped ginger tea, which was the exact prescription for his malady. Yes. It was the worry, not the alcohol. Haku relaxed slightly, and gave up on being cross with his girlfriend as she laughed like a kookaburra nearby. Mischief delighted her, he already knew this. As he was not exactly a purveyor of mischief, Haku had to get his kicks by indulging in it vicariously. He poured another cup of tea and struggled across the floor. Temari slid down from the mattresses' edge and took the outstretched drink.

She had to fight back ongoing chuckles.

"Is this really funny to you? It won't be when we get caught." Haku warned, but he couldn't suppress a contradictory smile.
"He's not gonna care if we don't mess anything up. All I want…” She leaned her head back and stretched her legs out in front of her primly, "Is to not get killed by Momochi, and have some alone time with you. Then it's back to Suna and back to work." She took a noisy sip of tea.

"Back to work." He echoed with a sigh. Back to risking his life in strange places, among strange people. The payoff could be substantial, but Haku hesitated to get his hopes up.

"Blech, this tea is not my favorite." Temari poured more for herself, "But if it keeps that stew from biting back— bottoms up…"

Haku shimmied around the tray to sit side-by-side with the woman propped up against the bed. He admitted that on a few past missions with Zabuza, they had broken and entered into spaces with malicious intent, "So I suppose this pales in comparison…"

"It really does." She leaned her head against his shoulder, "Hey. Do you like my dress?"

"It's lovely."

"I got it in the Tide Village. A bit of a departure from my usual colors."

"And those are?"

"Burnt reds. Black. Navy."

"Fearless colors." Haku assessed.

"Is that what they mean?" She gulped down another pungent cup of stomach-soothing tea, "And you, in blue."

"Always blue." He confirmed.

Temari set the cup down on the tray and sat back again, "Why?"

"To remember." Haku told her, "It's the color of fidelity."

As she sat there and pondered the soft look on his face, a memory from her Genin days sifted up from the annals of her memory. When she had been a rather lonely, brusque child at the time— she recalled what it had been like to feel the first monumental push of air raise her skyward, when at last her proficiency for Wind Release lent her fan the gift of flight. A miracle of her own making. It was freedom and fear and satisfaction. The new frontier she would master for missions and battles. But above all, Temari remembered how nothing had ever felt like that again. Not the hundreds of times she took flight afterward, not her achievements, friendships, trysts or anything else could replicate that joy… Though this did. Being with him felt just like it.

'The sky.' She shut her eyes and thought that, ah, so it too reflected his color. The hue that mattered most to him. Flying home tomorrow, it would be all she could think about. Always, he'd said. Steadfast and beautiful. A vast sea.

If she could open up his head to ascertain what Haku was thinking about, she was sure the reflection would be there too. All of the same feelings. This sentimental mush she was thinking about— that she worked to suppress most days…he emitted it non-stop like a heat lamp. Though fuzzy-brained and in a stranger's home, she gladly tilted her head to reach him when he moved to kiss her. His fingertips pressed softly against the side of her face. It was a slow kiss. Temari leaned into him and enjoyed everything about it, then broke it off suddenly.
Haku watched with wide, fretful eyes when she climbed away from him, ascending to the bed and flopping down, "Get up here. Sitting there was killing my back."

Part of him knew that she had cast a line expecting him to bite. She was very good at this, so of course he wasn't going to ignore her request even if he had an idea of where it could go. Haku followed after her and reclined, noticing how the last rays of sunset cast his shadow over her as she laid parallel to him. Temari was sighing, "Ah, that's better."

"I don't suppose you intend to stay the night here?" He correctly guessed.

"Will your Medic-nin pal even notice we're up here in this dustbowl?"

"No, but I don't want to abuse his trust."

"Then," Temari scooched closer and fiddled with the neckline of his tunic, "Send me to that tea house to sleep, next door to your perv Sensei."

"In spite of Sensei's old pastimes and favorite literary genre, I can promise you he's quite respectful. Of anyone he knows well, at any rate." Haku countered with a small smile.

"Yeah, Gaara and Naruto told me that too." She rose up groggily, "Well, I'll go. A cold, empty bed works for me…I can hug a pillow-"

Before she rose completely, Haku tugged her back down, slightly annoyed with her theatrics.

"Make up your mind you rulebook-thumper." Fighting back her grin, Temari settled again.

Haku palmed her shoulder to give her a small shake, "You wouldn't. Think of it: mid-act. No regard for law or common decency."

"Gaara would probably find them first, honestly. Then he'd smother them with sand."

Her wild chuckling got him going for a second, but Haku tried to shake it off. He gave up on trying to persuade her to leave, and instead let his hand travel down the slope of her shoulder to the column of her neck. He wore a pensive look as he touched the soft skin there.

"What?" She was aware of how fraught he was.

"When I first met you, I didn't trust you. I even wanted to…" Tripping over his words, Haku got on with it, "I wanted to hurt you." He found the spot he had struck with senbon needles, rendering her helpless in a past duel, "I'm sorry."

"It's fine. You were trying to protect Gaara. How could you have known my actual intentions? And besides, I did participate in Leaf's invasion, however reluctant my involvement was." She confessed guilt with ease, "You were right not to trust me. I could've gotten my baby brother killed by going along with my superior's idiotic plans."
"That still doesn't make me feel justified." He murmured against her forehead.

"I appreciate that you came at me with no mercy. It made sense. You did what you had to. You were someone I could trust, given the circumstances." She tapped a tune against his knuckles, knowing the site of her old injury still bothered him, "No hard feelings here."

"Yes, there are." Haku disagreed.

This was news to her, so she raised her eyebrows at him.

"I left." He reminded her.

"Ah." She still felt lingering frustration over that fact; he knew it as well as she did, "You left."

He could not speak out loud about the disastrous mistake and its cost, though she could read it all in his eyes. What he sought to do had been utterly obstructed, his time and effort had been extorted, his life threatened repeatedly, and those who truly depended on him were left to wait and wonder. Their pain was what shamed him the most. Gaara and Naruto's pain, and hers.

"Still…" She tipped her head up to brush her lips over his brow, "No hard feelings."

"If I had stayed…"

"There's no point in speculating, is there?" Temari thwarted his contemplation, "Because you were down here mixing with the wrong crowd, it provided an opportunity. What could you do against the Akatsuki in Kirigakure if you were some clueless Medical Corps officer in Hidden Sand?"

"Something, I'm sure." He smiled wanly.

"You might've gone soft, living safely among friends…gotten weak or complacent. Imagine: Things between us might've gotten dull, and I might've dumped you if you'd stayed."

Haku was amused, "Weren't you the one who said there's no point in speculating?"

"Oh yeah."

Sometime between drinking ginger tea and curling up on the bed, the dark of nightfall overtook the room. A tranquil lull kept them from overreacting to Temari's suggestion that Zabuza could stop by later to kill them, if his mood didn't improve. Haku would not write off the risk, but he yawned and supposed, "He probably won't."

"Spoken like someone who really knows the guy."

"Better than anyone…and that's not saying much." An afterthought dawned on Haku, "Oh. I never fed Pua."

"Can't she feed herself? You let that rabbit roam free." Temari pointed out.

"She can graze, yes, but she makes trouble in this neighborhood. Pua will go door to door begging if I don't feed her." Haku sighed, "She may be cute, but she is a glutton the likes of which I've never seen. I've had reports on how bad her food thievery gets around here."

She snickered, "You're raising a monster."

"A small one."
"Hmm. Before I forget, I wanted to tell you…" Drowsily, Temari traced her fingers along his arms and front, tugging at the opening of his tunic, "I bought a place in the Tide Village, so you can meet me there when you have time off. You know, like a halfway point."

"You bought a house?"

"With my hard-earned money, that's right." Temari took pride in the announcement, "I've had it for a little while already. Just a small beach cabin. I couldn't believe it was undamaged after the recent attack when I went to check it. Phew. What a relief…"

Haku did not bat an eyelash as she slid half of his gi down, hooking a fabric belt with her pinky to undo the tie at his waist. He noted, "You weren't going to tell me you invested in a vacation home."

"No. I was still angry at you, at the time." Temari confirmed.

"How generous of you to invite me." His smile had a satisfied feline quality to it.

"It's not like I put a welcome mat on the front step for you…" She pulled the unknotted sash free, somewhat surprised that he shrugged off his open shirt just like she wanted, "And…I'm not keeping an…extra toothbrush around…"

"Right, I understand. You wouldn't want me to mistakenly get comfortable in any home of yours." Haku watched her survey the landscape of his chest and shoulders with her hands, dipping down his abdomen toward his waist, which felt much nicer than personal attentions he paid himself on lonely days. She idled over the brutal scar below his ribcage, where a strike from the Chidori had run him through.

As delightful as Temari's expert touches were, she was still a bit too daring for his livewire nerves. His wish for a gradual introduction was more or less lost on her. This he gathered once she slipped free of her white sheath dress so swiftly it could have been a magician's trick.

Balking, words failed as he sat up, face-to-face with a woman kneeling in her underclothes. Temari plucked the hair pin and ties from her tresses, shaking her hair loose, "I don't know about you, but I don't sleep in clothes when I have the choice."

A gulp, "Ah. Good to know."

With a stretch, she reached the edge of a bedside table to set her finery down, and sort of flung her white dress into the darkness of the room. Temari then lowered herself front-ways onto the mattress, and mashed her face into a pillow. If he wasn't mistaken, it was as if she was trying to give him space. Haku's gaze may have lingered a second too long on the skintight, café-colored shorts on her impeccably round bottom.

"Relax." Her command was muffled by the pillow.

"I am." He laid back and uh, no, he wasn't exactly relaxed.

"I wanted to touch you, but it seemed to freak you out." Oh, so she'd noticed. Temari told him, "You're interested, and also not interested…so I'll err on the side of caution and leave you be."

"I'm not sure that I want you to—" Haku clarified while staring at the ceiling's wooden beams, "To leave me be, I mean."

She rotated her face to glimpse him from the corner of her eye, "I don't do things to people who aren't sure."
"What I mean is, I want to, but I don't know what I want." He was clearer with the issue, "I don't know anything about this."

"…hm." She rolled her shoulders and turned her face away again, "Sleep."

After that she was quiet, her back rising and falling slowly as she took calming breaths. Haku felt strangely sidelined by the dismissal.

It was not news to him that she'd gone out and gotten plenty of experience during their time apart, and he didn't need the numbers or specifics. Likewise, in spite of his knowledge of the body and physiology, Haku had been in no hurry to apply that education in pursuit of pleasure. Yet from what she'd said, Temari had gleaned her most valuable lessons from the failure of connection. The irrelevance of intimacy in her dating environment had made her forsake men like that. Neither did she quite know how to coach a tender-hearted neophyte, Haku supposed. Even if she couldn't figure out how to progress things, she refused to pressure him into anything.

For such demanding a person, Temari was remarkably attuned to the feelings of others. He smiled to himself, gliding a finger down the span of her bare back, noticing a minuscule twitch of muscle. She otherwise did not react. Haku shifted nearer on his side, tracing an ellipse over her skin with his fingertips. The orbit narrowed at the nape of her neck and widened at the base of her spine. If there had ever been something so exquisite to look at and feel, he'd certainly never found it. He edged closer to feel the heat of skin against skin.

Haku spoke softly in the dark, "I don't want you to leave."

Temari's weak affirmative mumble acknowledged how he felt. Her conscious mind teetered on the edge of sleep, even though she was silently preoccupied by his migrating hand along her back and neck.

He then said, "Or…it's more like I don't want to stay here. To do all of this."

"…who could…blame you?" She pressed into him more, savoring the touches, "That kind of work sucks."

Yes. It was going to be dismal, borderline thankless work. But the way Temari aligned herself against his front, golden hair furling off the edge of a pillow; she would be thanks enough for now. The last vestiges of hesitation slipped away from Haku, because there was no denying a neck so perfect, and to not put his lips there and taste dwindling sunlight on her skin. He heard the small sound she made and felt his blood get hot. Oh.

"Temari…" On the inhaling breath, his voice rasped, which was a first to Haku's ears. "Don't confuse me." He moved his hand anyway, but slid it over her hip and up her strong stomach.
His memory was still fresh with the day Temari had been injured. It was hard to linger on the thought. It stung to remember how narrowly she had avoided death; the blood—how it stole his breath and made him wince. When Haku thought of how vulnerable she had been, lying naked and unconscious in his arms, the sight was burned into the back of his eyes. Though, at the time he'd been overcome with horror and panic. There had been no element of attraction nor untoward advance, not while she was blood-splattered and frail. Maybe it was wrong to have that incident as a frame of reference? For what he was doing now? Maybe he was a degenerate for recalling it at all, or to be excited by what he'd seen?

After all, he'd come to a conclusion some weeks ago that he was not, in fact, good. The revelation snuck up on him, but Haku processed the facts as they turned over in his head, certifying that really he just acted as if he were principled. He was an actor. A fine one. Prudent and honorable to the bare, untrained eye. This was his best friend's sister. What decent man did this sort of thing?

Haku rolled onto his back to grapple with the thought, staring upward and inhaling deeply. 'I still want to.' He was undaunted. If at some point he'd fully embraced being a dirty, envious, promise-breaking assassin type who dabbled part-time as a healer for some shabby cover—to veil what he'd actually become…he couldn't take it back.

Why should he? Haku smiled wryly to himself. Temari seemed to like what he was. Whatever he was. No, he wasn't going to reverse his course. To correct these transgressions or abruptly comport himself like a saint. When he turned again onto his side and wound his arms around Temari, she felt the difference. His mind was made up. So she melted into him with a sigh, more responsive than before, her back still warm against the front of his body. Haku traced a finger below her chin, down her neck, through the valley of her chest, the plane of her stomach. Everything about her lit his senses.

"That's…nice," Temari was muttering, "You don't feel nervous now, huh?"

He removed his lips from her neck for a single word, "No."

"-ah." She was feeling clearer after having tea. And jittery.

Haku had set the starting line high on her body, his lips toying with her earlobe, hands fiddling mindlessly with the front closure between her breasts. Intermingled with the heady feeling was a dash of frustration, Temari found, since she couldn't really get her hands on the strong body curved splendidly behind her. The most she could manage was to reach her arm back and feel Haku's smooth, unbound hair slide between her fingers. If she ground into the erection pressed against her bottom any more, she'd probably shove him clean off the bed. It was tougher than she thought to exercise self-restraint. As for Haku, he seemed to be innately suited for such gentle, electric attentions…but hell if he could ever figure out how to open a bra. She'd have to wait for her watch to strike never O'clock.

All along her skin, descending down between her shoulder blades, he was whispering, "Don't go without showing me…without touching me—" Peppering kisses along the way, he rolled his hips into her to feel the stellar pleasure halted only by a thin buffer of fabric, ":-Temari." She had shrugged out of her unhooked bodice, a courtesy, and then placed her hand on his to direct it south along her waist. In a practiced motion, Temari slid his hand beneath the band of her shorts. They bunched before slipping free and down her hips. Haku trained his gaze on the bloom of pale, undressed skin.

"…I'm not a passive player." She issued a warning as she rolled onto her back, bare beneath his eyes, "You want to. Right?"

Fuddled and staring, it took several seconds for Haku to form a reply, "Very much."
To that, Temari rolled over to her hands and knees, setting her mouth on the smooth planes of his body. He was not tense— not like before. Eyelids fluttering, Haku felt her nip at the trapezius muscle at the intersection of his neck and shoulder, her fingertips drumming down his pectorals and stomach. Touching her was a frantic matter, the kisses short and teasing his patience. She faltered slightly when his attentions converged at her chest, palming the rounds of her breasts. Temari's whine and grinding against his groin was an equal distraction.

Restless for instruction, Haku slowed down to ask, "What do you like? I'll do it."

"We're getting to that." She was occupied by divesting him of pants, pulling them down and free with a helpful shimmy of his hips, "There. That's an improvement. Huh." Temari scratched a fingernail down the sable trail of hair middling his stomach, fine and byssine, "You know, I didn't expect any hair to be on you." His muscles jolted under her touch, eyes trained on her face, "Not after finding those three measly hairs on your chest."

"Don't understate." A breathy admonishment.

"Okay. Eight or nine." She pawed at him, scanning her eyes down again, "You've got a little star right here." Temari poked at the down around his belly button, "I almost want to turn the lights on to get a better look."

"You can if you want to be caught red-handed."

"No one can see my hands when it's this dark." Her smile was sly and almost audible, lowering herself to be front-to-front with Haku, "Neck again, please." He tipped his head back to present it to her, and she scaled the smooth column with her lips up to his jawline. Dizzy, he could only rub himself against her stomach and knead her back like a cat, hoping, praying for some relief.

Temari angled to level her chest with his face, resettling his hands on her backside while she hovered over him, "This is something I like, so start here. I want a lot of attention—" Her announcement crumbled apart when he took the offering in his mouth, hands boldly studying her.

Silk made flesh, like fragrant petals beneath his lips. Oh why had he ever shied away from this? It'd only ever been presented to him in the most obscene, unwelcome of ways— how Zabuza could partake of such a ritual, wholly impartial and unemotional.

If he had to share his opinion on the matter, Haku was now sure that the cardinal appeal of sex was the other person. Not himself. What did she feel when he tasted her like this? When his mouth roamied? It was so good, but her soft mewls made it better, made it all make sense. When solitary nights were too much to bear on occasion, his brain and his hand were enough. Yet this sweet, pliant body he tasted; rolling a budded nipple along his tongue, soft brushes and sounds... There had never been a temptation like this before. He was going to burst before long.

Fidgeting and murmuring, Temari raked her nails along his scalp and folded into his nuzzling licks. When it crossed her mind, she repositioned his hands where she wanted them to guide his caresses. After a while his mouth carried on to explore parts undiscovered, and Temari obliged his travels. Even though he only merited a scant few words of encouragement or hums, the performance echoed in his blood, boiled with longing. It didn't matter what he did so long as she wanted him to. Well. Haku wanted something for himself, but Temari was not keen on giving him much beyond stray touches.

Their bodies flattened after a while and she tested him, finding nerves along his chest and flanks, down the trail of stomach hair she'd complimented. Temari made all of him sing. What a devil she was. Death might take him soon; the withering thought in Haku's bloodless head panged, so hungry
to slip past the wetness between her legs. He'd never endured such a pressure, nor the radical softness waxing all along his body. While he braced her thighs with wide-splayed palms, Temari nearly undid him by slicking along his length with the most subtle buck of her hips. He wanted to kiss the grin off of her face and beg, but she spoke first, "Haku."

Now. Yes, of course now. She was too crafty and skilled for her own good. There ought to be a shrine constructed in her honor and he'd pay tribute there daily. Her next words had to unscramble in his ears: "You can't go inside. I'm not going to let you do that."

And thus his faculties splintered while nodding to her in acknowledgment. Haku was further tormented when Temari stamped a wet patch on his leg, curved over him while determinedly kissing his mouth. No, oh no, it was no good to lay vulnerably and let her continue to tease after establishing such a limitation. He'd want in. That option was off the table.

"I won't." Haku rose up from beneath her, taking the top as she was spilled to her back, and he pinned her wrists above her head, "We can do whatever you want."

"Ah, good, but was that something you wanted?" Even breathless from his kisses, Temari was still impish. She knew full well how hard he was since she had not stopped rubbing against him.

Reassembling some of the shattered expectation of a minute ago, Haku told her, "Yes. But it can wait. Especially if you say so."

"Especially if I do." She agreed, wriggling her hand free, "Here. I need this." She brought her fingertips down to the slip of skin cowling his length, "Though...you know I still want you to cross the finish line, don't you? Whooa now," Haku thrashed at the touch, "Relax. Get down lower on your knees, it's alright. I have you."

Easing down to nearly overlap with her, he took a rickety breath, his hands seeking the sides of Temari's face and neck. He kissed her bottom lip and felt his body aching. Since when were there so many nerves to dynamize him? Were they always there? No, it must've been that another's touch bears a certain degree of magic his own can't. That was it. But then, when a bold swirl of her fingers overwhelmed his exposed tip, Haku's hackles raised at the discomfort. It was supposed to feel good, but that didn't, so he had to mutter the admission.

"I see, no, don't sulk— I need you to tell me." Temari rearranged her hand, borrowing a bit of loose prepuce to slide between her fingertips and the sensitive bulb, rolling down so slowly and getting it right, yes, that was better. Down, firmer; then the pad of her thumb so knowingly zeroed-in on the underside nerves that felt so good. Haku bowed his head to rest at the curve of her neck, small puffs of sound escaping him as he exhaled. Her free hand migrated to the small of his back, independent of her working hand.

Stopping the short bucks of his hips was not possible by then, and really, she adapted well to that pace with her strokes— equal parts talent and cue-reading. Haku's kisses along her neck were wet and decadent, interspersed with clipped moans. Temari had reliable reference notes from past hay-rolling. How fortunate for him; the idea eclipsed any remnant of jealousy that lingered in his gut. She slid the tissue with precision up and down, with an exact firmness and surety that allowed her to wander, kiss his temple, and notice other things about him while she endeavored. A few stray droplets of his dewed on her stomach.

Haku estimated he could endure the contact for a while more if she let up just a bit, and he wanted to recommend it so he could extend the sublime buzz of sensation...but Temari's right hand descended past the buttock she was squeezing, lightly skimming her nails along his thighs. By then every exhale of his was laced with breathy, astounded mutters, and it made her bold. Temari's touch traveled
lower, stroking glands tightened by oversensitivity. He shook with a groan that was much too loud for a house intruder to get away with. Try as he might to nudge her, Temari did not withdraw her supplementing hand. It was too much. The feeling. He bit her shoulder and even then she did not relent. She kept pace, rubbing and prodding.

So words would have to do, somehow, "Temari, please don't—"

Her hand retreated from his underside, "Sorry. Was that no good?"

"It was…" He kissed the spot where his teeth had nearly broken her skin, "—felt…I-I can't…" Haku was less eloquent, not that she'd fault him for it.

"Nearly there?" Temari understood, "Just a second." Like a luge athlete she slipped below him, between the bracket of his legs, and gripped his bottom to bring him closer to her face. He yelped in surprise, then hissed when she acquainted her mouth with his erection. She misunderstood! his fried brain insisted. He wanted to prolong this, not expedite it. But if he asked her not to play at the rim of skin with her tongue, or disregard how she took him in so skillfully, he would have to be certified insane. If he lasted for more than three of her masterful bobs he could never know. Haku's arms were ramrod straight on the bed, holding himself in a near Cobra pose out of necessity, his neck craned to look down at her out of desperation.

And when Temari's eyes flicked up at him, so self-assured and greedy for what she was doing, that was all. Haku could bear no more. A slight bend in his arms and hunch of his shoulders helped brace him, gasping. He paid close attention to his shudders as he came, the spike of pleasure needling his core. He had to look at her face while feeling the slick of her tongue still working, and she gradually drew her lips further back with each throb. As an aesthete, Haku had to appreciate her grace while she freed him from her mouth. She concluded the act with the most perfect tongue flick as to not waste what remained at the tip. Temari held his stare while he tried to survive the full-tilt pounding of his heart.

Steady as a noodle, Haku then keened sideways and reached to caress her face. For a moment he was shocked that she swallowed the proceeds of that transaction. Temari patted his hand against her cheek as she settled on her side, "Hm. Not bad. Kind of an unexpected volume, but I guess you haven't been up to much lately." He was blushing though she couldn't really tell.

Haku encircled her in his arms, "I haven't ever…that was…thank you." His synapses were reconnecting as he added, "That was probably ill-advised. This probably breaks every rule…"

"Probably." She agreed in a chuckle, "I've never been thanked for doing that before…that's a first."

Haku felt indignant about past flippant partners she might've had, "Thanks should be in order for—"

"Calm down, Haku. Not everyone feels gratitude the way you do. I'm glad you liked that. We can try something else next time, if you like, or we can stick to blowjobs." Temari's smile was satiated.

"That is the crassest thing I have heard all day."

"You're welcome. Just get used to the terminology."

"I'll have to." He returned her smile tiredly, "I've never felt like that."

"Oooh," She stretched, "I really wanted to hear you say so."

Pressed into her body, his fingers mapped the geography of her smooth stomach, up to the underside rounds of her breasts and down again. Temari's kisses landed on random points on his face, as if to
annoy him, "Don't sleep. Stay awake."

"That's…harder to do than I thought."

"We're not done." She notified him.

"…oh."

"On your back, please. I need to show you a few things, my routines…" Temari pushed him flat, clambering over him, "Can you breathe through your nose?"

"I…what an odd question." Haku was perplexed.

"Your mouth will be busy once I show you what to do."

"I can try." He fought his drooping eyes, hands settled on her waist.

Temari lightly slapped his cheek, "Don't you want to get me there? Pay attention."

"I am, I am…"

###

Morning sunlight didn't budge them. The only two things Haku was even slightly aware of were: 1) something on top of his head that didn't belong there, and, 2) his arm had numbed while wound underneath Temari. There was no need to open his eyes. He could feel her curled into him, tucked beneath his chin and snoring quietly. Since the embrace was too sublime to disengage from, Haku blearily reached up to pat his head…feeling a small, bumpy amphibian occupant there.

"Ah." Dear lord, what happened to his voice? It cracked like gravel. "Did…Sensei send you?" With a sluggish pluck, he replaced the toad at the bed's edge. The creature hopped away without comment, since, he gathered, it was not yet capable of speech. Such evidence was enough to indicate that Jiraiya expected him soon.

He sighed, puffing air against the top of Temari's head. He replaced his arms around her, recalling the things he had been taught in the night. Pale scratches on his back were a rather pleasant reminder, almost done stinging. Her taste was still on his lips. Haku peeked his eyes open, fighting off the mental and physical fog.

Maybe he would get through this.

Zabuza would cooperate and no longer protest negotiations with Terumi Mei's rebel faction. Combined, those would be solid numbers to attack Kirigakure with, and gouge out the corrupt Hunter Corps colluding with the Akatsuki. He'd sell stolen gems and line the pockets of indecisive rebels and mercenaries. As soon as was appropriate, he and Zabuza would retrieve the Master Scroll that stored the blades of the Seven Swordsmen, and he would learn how to wield Nuibari. When the day was won in Hidden Mist, and a functional republic restored there, Haku would bow out to resume life on the mainland. He could concentrate on the goings on of Naruto and Gaara's lives and safeguard them from direct harm.

It would probably take a miracle to tick off the boxes on that checklist, though Haku felt it was the most prudent and workable checklist he had thus far received. And if Temari was willing to cheer
him through the hardships, these goals didn't seem so far-fetched. His blood was fresh and alive, never so willing to cut obstacles down before.

Stirring and ruffling the sheet draped over their bottom halves, Temari quietly woke, mostly aware of where she was. She tugged Haku's hand up from the space between them and pressed it to her lips, "You know…these hands might be able to do a lot of damage," She paused to place two long, reverent kisses on his knuckles, "But they are much better suited for love than they are for violence."

"I tend to agree." He scooted down lower to reach her mouth, greeting her in kind, "Did you get enough sleep?"

"No. We were up most of the night."

"I didn't either…and I can't recall hearing if Migawari-san came back. I should probably find out." He was delayed from sitting up by a fusillade of loving pecks, claiming his face, chin, and the bump of his throat. Haku dared not laugh out loud in case the homeowner had indeed returned, "Temari…ah…" He pushed back lightly on her shoulder, "Sensei will want to see me today."

"Yeah, he will." She relented and tipped back to stretch her arms, "I'll get dressed." When she rose, Temari glanced down at her stomach, "Oh. Some of it dried. Do you think I can wash this off here?"

"You can." He pushed aside the curtain of her hair to plant a final kiss on her neck, "I'll dress first and see if Migawari-san is here…then make up some falsehood about why I stayed over…"

"Heh, the truth might sound like a fabrication at this point…" Amused, Temari gained her feet, shaking sleep from her limbs and tossing her hair. Haku watched for the twelve paces it took her to walk naked to the attached washroom.

Oh, this morning felt better than all the others that had come before it. Each muscle was vibrant, bones cracking into place with a sunrise stretch, his hair half-wound in a sleeper's bird nest. He scooped up discarded garments on the floor as if he were the singular most effervescent person alive. Haku dressed and then folded Temari's clothing over his arm, waiting at the doorway as she concluded cleanup at a sink. Piece by piece, she snatched her clothing and pulled it on in front of his watchful eyes, "Uh…your hair is destroyed."

"I fear for my life trying to untangle what is on the back of my head." He admitted.

She pulled on her dress and finished tying the sash around her midsection. From her tossed satchel, Temari drew out a comb and motioned for him to approach, "Might as well get it over with…" She dropped a spare hair tie in his hand and then set to work, ignoring Haku's grunts of discomfort as his hair was wrenched free of the knot. When all was smooth again, he put it up in a merciful ponytail.

"I'll wait out front." Temari informed him as she collected her belongings, "Make the bed if it matters…and maybe get that medic friend of yours to come outside—? So I can thank him for saving my life."

He nodded, "He does deserve the lion's share of the credit." Haku trotted down the stairs to the first floor while Temari retreated out of the second story window.

He paused and got the sense Migawari had returned home, although he could not hear the heralding snores of the retiree. In the living area, winnings, knickknacks, and a depleted bottle of Shochu from Migawari's late night gambling bonanza were scattered on the low table. He was seated and folded face-first on the chabudai, and his legendary snores were absent. 'If he came back impaired, how did he remember to use an apnea mouth guard?' It was remarkable what habits some drunken folks
Haku kneeled down beside his tutor and patted his back. "Migawari-san, you shouldn't sleep like this."

The old timer started awake, feeling around the table for his glasses, then pressed his spectacles on. He spat a mouth guard out before speaking, "Pleh...what are you doing here?"

"I stayed over to avoid Zabuza. He's been in a foul mood since Jiraiya-sensei arrived." Haku maintained two-thirds of the truth.

"Really!" Migawari chuckled as he sat straight and ordered the table, "One of the Sannin showed up to punish him, heh! That's comeuppance! You actually did train under Jiraiya-sama, how about that..."

"You can meet him, if you want. I'll see him for breakfast at the tea shop."

"Eh...I should wash my face. I won by a landslide last night at Oguni-san's, but I may have celebrated too much..." The medic-nin hobbled to his feet, "I can tell Jiraiya-sama all about what a sucker his beloved Tsunade-hime is."

"Meet me at Hiroshi's shop in ten minutes. There are a few things I have to do." Haku turned to go as Migawari toddled around to organize himself into a socially-acceptable appearance.

Leaving through the back door, Haku travelled several blocks to the hideout, and was glad to see his rabbit had returned to the flat. Beside the sofa, Pua was curled up in her sleeping basket. He rubbed between her ears to wake her, "Did you eat everyone out of house and home yesterday? I'm sorry I didn't feed you."

Her yawn revealed a long set of teeth, and her nose jigged wildly at the sight of him.

"Are you hungry?"

"Maybe." Pua assessed.

He fetched a handful of timothy hay from a container, which she gladly accepted as a morning meal. Haku pointedly did not acknowledge Zabuza as he stalked around in the periphery, freshly woken and shirtless. Haku paid loving respects to his furry companion before venturing on to his room, gathering weapon holsters and the scroll that depicted the Hokage's Yin Seal. He switched outfits, tucked the tessen in his belt, and then couldn't get past the living area when Zabuza confronted him.

"I'm going out." Haku told the brute flatly, "Let me pass."

"I can smell her on you."

"I don't care."

"Don't," Zabuza growled, "Get used to this. No matter what he says, you don't own me."

Haku regarded the man and thought that, maybe, that kind of appeal was the inverse of what he'd actually said. Zabuza seemed upset for reasons other than being strong-armed into a deputy role, Haku could tell.

"If you say I don't own you, then that must be true." With his folded fan, he flicked it against the man's arm to move him aside. Haku crossed to the door and let Pua out ahead of him, before telling
Zabuza, "You don't have to admit what you really think."

The man sank down on the couch with a mug of hot tea in his hand, scowling at Haku, "What I think-?"

"That you want me to." Haku said simply, "Own you."

He shut the door.

There was a chance that suggestion reached too far, Haku guesstimated as he trotted down the stairs with Pua. But if he was going to get that demon to cooperate, psychological devices might just keep him in check. By then, Haku had learned plenty on the subject of manipulation. If he told Zabuza what he wanted to hear, if that was what he wanted to hear, it could stay his baser behaviors. Hopefully.

A warm sea breeze swept up streaming koinobori suspended from rope lines across the street. The colorful carp windsocks waggled above Haku's head as he came to a stop outside of the tea shop, where a most unusual congregation was conversing. Either Raiga had no idea who he was talking to, or his aggressive tendencies had been muted by Ranmaru's outgoing disposition. It seemed as though Migawari had arrived sooner, and introduced Temari and Jiraiya to the other half of the current swordsmen troupe. Ranmaru peppered the newcomers with questions. Pua scurried around their legs, sniffing and identifying.

Haku came to stand beside Temari and greeted his teacher, "Good morning, Sensei."

"Slept in a little, did you? Hiroshi already set me up with breakfast. Nice guy…” Jiraiya handed a bento box to his student, "Here. You can take this with you and eat, before we train."

"We're—?"

"Haku-kun, Temari-san says that she has a Wind Nature just like mine!" Ranmaru was buoyant.

"You can use more than one element, so what's the big deal?" Raiga's defense of passing Lightning Release down to his student was brittle.

Temari shrugged when Haku looked between them, astonished that the meeting had been amicable.

"Nice to see you all, but frankly I didn't come here to stand around outside on an empty stomach." Migawari shooed Raiga and Ranmaru into the tea house, "You come along, Miss. Hiroshi will be delighted to meet you. And I can retell the story of my heroism when you nearly died on your last visit."

"Sure. Seems to be your favorite topic…” Temari turned to Jiraiya and Haku, "Don't be long, please. I don't know any of these people and they all seem like busybodies."

"They are." Haku confirmed.

"Have a good time. We'll be back before noon, then you and I can return to Hidden Sand later.” Jiraiya assured her.

They parted with that promise and Haku exhaled heavily, letting his shoulders rise and fall. Watching him from the corner of his eye, Jiraiya blew a small raspberry of amusement.

"Sorry that I had to shake things up so much.” The Toad Sage's apology was lighthearted, "You can manage, I'm sure. Also, you understand why I couldn't broadcast the fact that Temari made this trip
with me?"

"I'm glad you didn't." Haku added, "Yet Zabuza noticed, regardless."

"It'd be tough to sneak something past him. He's quite smart." Jiraiya noted, "For a misanthrope."

Per Jiraiya's request for a more secluded area, Haku ventured toward a section of forest that bordered on the innermost reaches of beach dunes. Pua hurried toward purple-flowered clover to have brunch. Beside the clearing were six honeybee boxes, recently smoked and tended to. Seated on the grass, Haku took a few minutes to eat the morning bento he'd been given.

"It's like a little patch of paradise back here." The Sage rested his hands on his hips, looking around while turning in gentle trunk-twists, "Not to put down Gaara's home or anything, but this has it beat by a longshot."

"If one overlooks Nanakusa's tactically poor position relative to Kirigakure, then maybe you're right." Haku wagered as he finished eating.

"Well yeah, Sunagakure is more defensible." Jiraiya agreed, "Speaking of defenses, why don't you show me what you can do? Call it a skills assessment. I'd like to tailor our lesson to cover your weaknesses for now."

It was not an unexpected request. To confirm that Haku could handle the Mist espionage project, Jiraiya would need to glimpse the portfolio of techniques his student had built up.

"Any handicaps?" Haku inquired.

"Eh…just hold off on using your Kekkei Genkai against me. Other than that, anything goes—" Jiraiya was immediately bowled over backwards. It wasn't that he properly had to speak the word go before being saluted by an obnoxiously strong, single whirlwind of Wind Nature. No. Or less that he was already peeved at Haku for fanning himself with an innocuous looking hand fan—like some overheated fair-goer on a summer day. Smiling too, that scamp. Jiraiya had a few shreds of pride left though the sucker-punch technique had flattened him.

The Sage stood up and brushed his clothes off, "Yeah, nice, ya sneak. I expect it from Gaara, since it's his bread and butter to ambush me…"

"I can abstain from Wind Jutsu if it's—" Haku was punished with reciprocal retaliation as his teacher exhaled a fireball at him. He leapt and rolled out of the way of the attack, "-annoying."

From there, there was a single, test-flurry of projectiles from Jiraiya to verify that no such weapons could get past Haku's windy defenses. They plinked back and scattered once caught in a gust. He was just too quick. 'Heck, and I thought Naruto's speed was a pain before this…'

Jiraiya feared he might break his back trying to duck and weave away from the elegant Taijutsu that Haku employed. The young man was pulling his punches to be polite. And the blasted tessen was another obstruction, Jiraiya noticed. With simple gestures and flicks, Haku diverted his teacher's strikes and punches, rolling Jiraiya's wrists in useless directions. He had a keen sense of how to ward away incoming attacks with tools.

'I guess I don't want to see him use a sword, knowing that he's already this good.' Jiraiya thought to himself, 'But I still need to test him.'

Jiraiya summoned a pint-sized toad to make a nuisance of itself, and then easily blocked Haku's volley of senbon with the head-to-foot protection of Hari Jizō, hardening his hair to points. In a
smooth counter, sharpened hair fired out of the conical defense en masse, forcing Haku to swing his
fan for a repelling wind. *There!* Jiraiya was waiting for his toad to snatch his student by the ankle
and trip him, prepared to disarm Haku…but it didn't happen.

"Hey, Sokobi!" Jiraiya shrugged off his needle defense while barking at the distracted toad. The
animal was lollygagging beside the hive boxes, trying to eat bees, "Is it so much to ask for an assist?"

The amateur toad groved at Jiraiya, "Um…"

"If this were a real fight, Haku would've stuck me up in a tree by now and stomped you back to the
Toad Valley!" He admonished the unhelpful summon.

"I'm sorry, Jiraiya-sama-!"

"That's okay," Jiraiya crossed his arms and watched Haku, who was adequately distracted by the
spectacle, get tackled from behind by Kosuke the toad— lying in wait the whole time, "Even cheap
gimmicks will work this morning. But seriously, Sokobi, get over here!"

He'd been working with youngster toads as of late. It was a favor to Gamabunta and his
contemporaries, who wanted the newer generations to build up more practical experience on the
battlefield.

Haku could not for the life of him shake Kosuke off while stumbling to his feet. The toad's knife
skills were, admittedly, remarkable as he sliced the tender web of skin between the human's thumb
and forefinger. Haku dropped his fan with a cry. Bouncing on the up-step, Kosuke 
bashed
his foot
into the young man's face while escaping with the folded fan. Haku had to give the speedy fellow
credit while healing his injury and ducking beneath Jiraiya's opportunistic Rasengan. The assault
blew over a row of decade-old trees.

And though it took a bit more effort than he would've liked, Jiraiya caught up to his nimble pupil and
was rather proud that, punch for punch, he was stronger. Or at least, much less shocked by the
environmental damage they were causing. It couldn't last, of course. Haku had been training with
Momochi Zabuza for quite some time. A whip-fast combination of joint locks stilled Jiraiya's
extended arm, and with enviable flexibility, Haku's high-kick caught him in the sternum. The man
tumbled back into the crimson, leafy boughs of a pieris shrub. He had to struggle out of the bramble
while Haku warned him to watch out that's a toxic plant—Kosuke was on him again, this time
accompanied by Sokobi as they tried to wrestle Haku to the ground.

To the brave red toad's surprise, Haku let Kosuke's small knife stick into his forearm. He wrenched it
out of the toad's grip, then pulled it free to confiscate it. There was a glint in Haku's eye, intending to
retrieve his fan from the thieving toad. Unfortunately, Sokobi the distractible summon had a nerve-
stinging agent on his tongue, and he'd already gotten a few good licks on Haku. And so the young
man retreated and procured a Tool Scroll from his belt, watching as Jiraiya heaved himself upright
again. With a dash of blood from his arm, Haku summoned the knock-off of Nuibari. He spun the
needle sword once in his hand, tugging wire line loose from the spindle.

Jiraiya steeled himself at the sight. He personally had never stood face-to-face with any of Mist's
swordsmen. Excluding Zabuza, Jiraiya yielded, since the bastard had been unarmed and ambushed
technically. Though the same calm, gentility, and humanity was evident in his pupil, Haku had been
redrawn in darker, stronger lines; calculated and predatory in a way that Jiraiya hardly even saw in
Gaara at his most menacing. Maybe he had not willingly agreed to represent the now defunct
division of blade-wielding vagrants, but Haku's posture and aspect whispered that he was wholly
suited for it.
Clapping his hands, Jiraiya got Kosuke and Sokobi's attention, "Time for you to go, kiddos. Good hustle today…"

"Our practice is over?"

"For now. Go help Kinji reset those pavers at the theater, if you've got nothing better to do." With that send-off, Jiraiya sent the novices away before forming hand signs again. He summoned another small toad, though much older and worldlier. Jiraiya held up a hand to Haku for a time-out, "Just for a quick introduction, Haku— pay some respect to an old instructor of mine, Fukasaku. He's one of the Sages of Mount Myoboku."

Blinking wildly, Haku knew to bow and greet the visitor, "It is very good to meet you, Fukasaku-sama…"

The green toad ruffled his cloak, looking between the young man and Jiraiya, "Ah…is this another one of them, Jiraiya-boy?"

"Haku is also one of my students, yes."

Hopping closer, Fukasaku scanned Haku from bottom to top with a discerning frown, and then nudged the lowered needle sword, "Mercy me, there's nothing gentlemanly about a weapon like this! What unsavory sports young people get up to, these days…"

"It isn't a weapon I would have chosen for myself, Good Elder." Haku assured him, "I've just been told to learn how to use it."

"That's a relief. You seem like a nice fellow. Have you a warm heart like Naruto-boy?"

A chicken-headed reply, "I-I hope so."

"Here." Fukasaku reached up his hand, squeezing Haku's fingers appraisingly, "Let's see. Chilly. Clever. You've been up to trouble, lately."

The young man blanched.

"There's nothing extraordinary about that. Jiraiya-boy never grew out of his mischief, if you want my informed opinion." Fukasaku crossed the clearing again, "You would be welcomed in the Toad Valley should you ever desire to learn more about it." He gave Jiraiya a knowing look, "I take it that we are going to test this young soul?"

"Yup." Jiraiya rolled his shoulders, "I don't want to make this too easy on him. If he ends up fighting elite ninja down here, I want to know he's got what it takes to win…" He picked up the discarded tessen from where Kosuke had dropped it on a moss bed, then tucked it in his belt.

Standing prone and at peace, Jiraiya paid no mind at all to his student after that. The old toad was another matter.

Like a green bullet in the bramble, Fukasaku feinted to the left before charging at Haku, opening his maw to conduct a sound-based technique. Haku took to the narrow tree limbs above to avoid the Frog Call, which he suspected had a stun-quality to it, 'And Sensei is just standing there…' It was a familiar scenario based on correspondence Naruto had shared with him, 'That is how Sages collect natural energy to form Sage Chakra.' Such a meditative state was famously easy to interrupt. As Haku vaulted over a branch and wound a length of wire around the limb, pitching his needle sword down at his pursuer, it occurred to him that Fukasaku wasn't going to let him interrupt anything.

The toad's strikes were disproportionate to his size, hacking treetops apart, tumbling thick trunks with
the strength of his punches. Haku spun and dove, pulling back on the line like a fly-fisherman to redirect the needle that skimmed but never struck the old master, "Sensei fully intends for me to face him in Sage Mode!" He had to muster some nerve. Fukasaku's soaring kick landed because Haku allowed it, tumbling down to the ground again while simultaneously ensnaring the toad's ankle. The old sage realized his mistake as he spilled down toward the earth's fronds and ferns—then swung up as if on a bungee-line. He'd been strung up like a piñata. He shrieked and struck the bark of a chestnut tree face-first.

Upside-down, Fukasaku twisted to get a clear view of the quick swordsman, and with a thousandth of a second to spare, the toad caught and halted the pointed tip of the needle between his webbed palms. It would have made an embroidery project of his gut.

"-ho, heh-!" He cut the wire that had snagged his foot, freed just as soon Haku reeled his weapon back, "Barbaric tools like that have no place in friendly contests!" Fukasaku ducked. Haku and a complimentary Shadow Clone of his were exchanging positions around their opponent, pitching, winding, tangling the needle and its wire through the clearing. The option of close-quarters combat dwindled as Fukasaku bounced for his life.

While he had the toad on the run, Haku side-stepped to the right as the needle sailed passed him (thrown by his Kage Bunshin) and towards Jiraiya. His stomach churned for a second, wondering if the attack had been premature. Not quite. His teacher was a sudden flash of motion imbued with energy, front-flipping up to alight upon the taught line after Haku's sword stuck fast in a tree. Jiraiya dashed across the wire toward him.

Haku might have noticed elongated red facial markings, or an unusual amber coloration of his teacher's eyes the moment before a Frog Kumite hammer arm hurled him dozens of meters back into thickets. The tree he struck at the end of his trajectory rained ripened chestnuts down, clocking Haku in the head as he wheezed, trying to catch his breath. Falling off of a tall building would have hurt less. On all fours he hacked and waited for double-vision to pass. 'He truly expects me...to deal with Sage Mode.' Haku wasn't exactly brimming with ideas, but he'd work on it. He wobbled to stand and formulate a counterattack.

There was a high-pitched tenor of wire straining with pressure, flying and wrapping around branches and trunks; as though a violin spider had spun a web for defense in the forest. It seemed at first blink that Haku and his assistant clone had made the area nearly impassable for Jiraiya. In the next blink he could see his teacher's hair extend fantastically, a so-called Raging Lion's Mane weaving through the wire labyrinth to reach its target. Haku plucked a particular length of line that cut the advancing hair mass like a buzz-saw...but the regrowth was instant and continued to reach. When Haku turned to retreat, Fukasaku socked him in the stomach. He hit the ground hard, rolled, and was immediately on his feet again while the toad chased him.

"I am not even using my Sage abilities, dear boy! I can hit much harder!" Fukasaku formed hand seals and then exhaled a hyper-pressurized jet of water while Haku's back was turned.

Jiraiya's warning shout came a bit late for the toad.

In a perfect counter, Haku turned on his heel, fingers folded in a single Urchin hand seal to freeze the water jet. As the ice rebounded on the jutsu's originator, a frozen spike nearly took Fukasaku's head off. Leaping and descending in a panic, thick icicles rained down on Fukasaku from all sides, "Bwah! What is this? Jiraiya-boy, that jutsu—!" Haku had caught him.

There was a pained yelp as the needle sword's line wound around Fukasaku, pulling him back to be flush with a tree trunk. The wire spun round and round to trap him, arms and legs pinioned. The toad screeched for assistance, "Jiraiya-boy, I'm too old for this! You should've called Shima instead!"
A dual nature— Heaven almighty! Do you want to kill me—?

Usurping the ladder of Ice Release material remaining, Haku shattered it and fired upon the Lion's Mane, eventually buffering it with frozen projectiles. Not that he felt much safer. In a heart-pounding moment of awe and terror, Haku watched an enormous Senjutsu-fueled Rasengan tear down most of the forested area and all of his cross-hatched wire work. Dust and debris kicked up, twigs everywhere, and Haku tumbled away from the crushing force. Somewhere in the cloud Fukasaku was still clamoring for help.

Almost instantly, Jiraiya was upon him. Haku swallowed a yelp of terror, 'He could find me that fast—?' He ducked under another hammer–arm on pure instinct, since he remembered the sting of Jiraiya's previous punch. 'I can barely see anything, and he-!' Ah, yes. This predicament had also been foretold by Naruto. Visibility would become a non-factor now that Jiraiya could sense the energy of other organisms, as far as Haku understood it. 'The assumption now is: he's going to be able to catch me no matter what. I need to maintain distance! Our Taijutsu isn't equal.'

The close-quarters squabble skidded in bramble and shards of shattered trees. Haku slid down an embankment, taking backwards steps in retreat as he kept his guard up. His teacher's counters were wicked, anticipating movements a breath before they were made. It was a waste of energy to stage an offensive against Jiraiya, who ducked under the point-blank jabs of the needle, side-stepped wire trap knots on the ground when Haku thought his clockwise dance could get away with such a trick.

And when his offensive maneuvers shifted to strict defense, Jiraiya stole the momentum—a toady hand cemented to a thick tree trunk to rotate about it, hooking around to kick his student in the back. The needle sword flipped and then stuck in the ground several paces behind Haku when he somersaulted to his feet, eyes watering in pain. Jiraiya was on him again, making a mockery of his arm locks, "What's the matter, kid! You can handle this, right?" A miscalculation; a sloppy strike—Haku's extended arm missed Jiraiya's elbow when he dodged with his Toad Sense, and then came Jiraiya's counter: he whirled another hammer fist into Haku's exposed forearm and smashed it flat to the island's oldest chestnut tree with a crack.

Cross-eyed with pain, Haku backpedaled and muffled a screech. That was most definitely a break, perhaps multiple fractures on both ulna and radius. Right about then Jiraiya's message got across. There won't be mercy. Mistakes won't be overlooked...' Haku had to expect only the most ruthless of encounters ahead. He had to cope.

Haku kicked the needle sword that popped up with a spin, and caught the hilt in his right hand. He dodged another massive blow and scaled the tree with Jiraiya in swift pursuit. Wire stretched and wrapped around two branches a moment before Haku slipped away from his teacher's rising kick, plummeting down with the ease of a pulley system, wire extending.

Below on a thicker tree limb, Jiraiya presumed he had the boy cornered. His lunge was a bit careless—Jiraiya could later admit; Haku ducked low, sticking with chakra as his footwork turned him 180 degrees around the branch. He correctly guessed his teacher would retaliate with a Frog Kumite right hook. It came as a small shock to the Sage when Haku successfully ducked his punch and then stabbed the needle down. Jiraiya grunted and took a few milliseconds to adjust to the awful sensation of his foot being pinned to a tree branch, immobilized.

Haku crouched so that his Shadow Clone could leap over him, racing down the limb to beset Jiraiya with a finishing tactic. Jiraiya swung a powerful arm in a wide arc, "Heh! Not today—!" The hit connected and, to his surprise, the clone erupted into a ball of ice spikes. Jiraiya sputtered a curse, barely able to launch chakra-infused hair over his shoulders to deflect the ambush of Ice Release with his Lion's Mane. "Huh, shoot. Coulda had me there..." His Toad Senses tingled. Haku had snuck up behind him and retrieved his fan, "Wha— don't you dare-!" A hasty Wind Release strike hacked the
top of the chestnut tree into fifths, careening down to the ground.

Kneeling below on the forest floor, Haku took a chance to heal his broken arm, sucking in labored breaths. His ears were pricked for any activity near where Jiraiya had fallen. With his arm mended enough to function, Haku pushed to his feet and skirted around the wood pile. There he discovered Jiraiya pulling the needle sword from his foot, "-jeez-! Ack!" His Sage Mode markings had vanished.

Haku asked with an inquisitive blink, "Is that...how long it lasts?"

"Yeah. When I gather Natural Energy on my own, Sage Mode will only last a few minutes." Jiraiya tossed the sword into leafy nettle, aggravated, "You are one big pain in the neck, Haku. But that's what I was hoping for..."

"Should we-?"

"Oh, no, no. We're not done." The man rose, standing tenderly on his bad foot. Fukasaku leapt up to roost on his shoulder, "I wonder what you'll do when Sage Mode doesn't expire..."

Petrified by the prospect, Haku pulled back on wire that had been discreetly threaded through his sash, reeling the needle sword in rapidly with a twinge of chakra. Even armed with both sword and fan, he doubted if he could withstand a never-ending gambit of Sage shenanigans. He'd only lasted by the skin of his teeth earlier.

A preemptive move seemed advisable, and so Haku lashed out with an exorbitant gust of wind from his fan. Jiraiya avoided the move to retreat further into the grove. Why is he still moving if he's gathering Natural Energy? That can't work, can it? He was puzzled, dashing into shade and foliage. Fukasaku had reappeared to directly assist Jiraiya. Could the toad accumulate energy for Jiraiya? Haku would wager a hefty sum on that bet.

Then came the proof: Jiraiya's Sage markings and toad-like features returned. As if it were a casual thing, Jiraiya began to swirl and condense another gargantuan Rasengan in his palm.

'He's going to tear down this whole forest if he keeps doing that!' Haku was not appreciative of such collateral damage, This time...I don't think he'll let me avoid it. Like a charging bull locked-on to his student's position, Jiraiya rushed for him. If the Sage was going to sense wherever Haku decided to flee to, perhaps the wiser way to defend himself was to make it as difficult as possible for Jiraiya to get close. Haku created two Shadow Clones and handed off the needle sword to one of them. He then tossed his tessen into the air, and before it dropped again he completed a string of hand signs. Haku funneled as much of his Blood Limit's dual nature affinities as possible into the tool, and swung the hand fan to unleash a veritable blizzard.

A dune of snow and compacting ice washed into the battle-worn wood, whipping wind stripped most tree branches naked of their leaves and fruits. A hundred paces beyond them, bees flitted into their hive boxes to avoid the unseasonal chill. On his front-side, Jiraiya was rendered in artic textures, blanketed in crystalline white from crown to toe. His pace reduced to a slow trudge through snow banks as he pressed on, balancing a glut of spiraling energy on his hand— and Haku was a few long paces away from him. He swung his fan again, propelling a singular gust of wind that Fukasaku took upon himself to counter.

"Keep going, Jiraiya-boy! I'll handle this!" The perching toad exhaled a breath of flame that devoured the Wind Nature walling them from the way forward, heating a portion of frozen forest. Flanked on the side, one of Haku's creeping Shadow Clones pitched senbon needles aimed for Fukasaku's neck. Jiraiya handily dodged and had the misfortune of slipping on an icy patch, where a
grounded tendril of needle-sword wire pulled taught. And suddenly, the Sage's inability to stick the landing pitched him forward, where the giant Rasengan crushed the sword-wielding clone back into nothingness. The resulting crater was filled with bramble and slushy mud. To the right, Haku's final clone retrieved the sword while its originator swung his fan again.

Fukasaku's fire counter to the young man's Wind Release was expected, and Haku immediately freed his hands to perform a Colliding Wave technique. It drained the empowered tornado of flames to flood the forest, too quick for Fukasaku to capture with a contrary Earth Style jutsu. Jiraiya hollered irritably, "Pa! How'd you fuck that one up?" This much water was a worst case scenario when it came to battling his ice-inclined pupil.

"Jiraiya-boy, don't chide me as if I purposefully—!"

Jiraiya whirled around to launch a barrage of Needle Hell from his overgrown hair, sniping off the ambushing Shadow Clone that pounced. The needle sword was reeled in by Haku once more, tucked away in a harness on his lower back for later use. He was keeping his hands free for Ninjutsu, which had summarily turned the tables. Or, so he thought.

A second flurry of Needle Hell prompted Haku to retreat underwater, a withdrawal that Jiraiya and Fukasaku took advantage of. The pair combined Toad Oil and a fireball to ignite the flooded stream's surface. It was a quasi-Bath of Boiling Oil that lacked Shima's participation. Some oil slick washed up on surviving trees, many of which burned and became additional environmental casualties. When the underfoot watercourse froze solid, only a few oleaginous patches continued to burn. Hexagonal sheets rose up to surround the Sage and toad with ice panels.

"Great. You gave him fuel and now Haku's prepared his coup de grâce." Jiraiya stretched his senses wide, hoping that he would be able to detect Haku exiting from an Ice Mirror in time to counter him.

"Gave him fuel? He gave my technique fuel! His Wind Jutsu—"

"Was a set up! He knows elemental weaknesses better than most. Since you knew Haku is a dual nature, you shouldn't have gotten played by using an element he can still exploit!"

"Cease that disrespectful chatter you child!" Fukasaku grawped, vibrating on Jiraiya's shoulder, "What will he do now?"

"Well, he'll—"

Haku darted out of a mirror, visible for less than a fraction of a blink, and nearly crashed into Jiraiya's waiting, much smaller Rasengan. At the last moment Haku redirected his course to merge with another Ice Mirror, 'He felt me! Sensei can sense me outside of an Ice Mirror, even if only for a moment. That would be all he needs...’ He couldn't sneak by his teacher's Sensory ability. And if he recklessly charged into a jutsu Jiraiya had in store for him...that would look very foolish indeed. No. A degree of caution could make all the difference here. Just because Jiraiya could feel approaching chakra did not mean he was always fast enough to react—

Mirrors were shattering. Haku had only taken three seconds to deliberate his next course of action, but he'd tarried too long. Jiraiya amassed another sizeable portion of Sage Chakra to begin mowing down the Ice Mirrors surrounding him. The force of the spiraling sphere reduced ice sheets to dust-sized flecks, which for practical purposes would be of no use. Except that...Haku could still feel a link to those infinitesimal specks of ice. They were still live as far as his Hyoton senses were concerned. Here on this side in the white dimension, physics operated in peculiar ways. When he took the chance to move through that particle shower of ice, the mass of his body compressed and took on a different quality; not quite energy, not quite matter. Haku traveled even faster than an
instant, a warp of light.

Out of the ice shower and into the enfeebled forest, Haku struck Jiraiya so hard and fast in the back that the man skidded in a ferocious face-plant. Both Sage and toad were bewildered by the move. And from there, it finally made sense. The relative size of any ice mirror Haku made had little to do with being able to pass through them—it was the relationship of chakra and matter that made his transience through two realities possible. Haku materialized a small disc of ice about a pace in front of him, and formed six others to encircle Jiraiya, each no bigger than a dessert plate. *I have him!* Haku hurled the needle sword through the nearest disc, and willed it via chakra to exit from the left, angled perfectly to re-enter other portals of ice. It stretched and knotted line in an insanely small amount of time. The needle returned through another disc beside Haku, retiring in his outstretched hand.

The move was beyond any Sage's ability to detect. Webbed in a wild cat's cradle of metal line, Jiraiya was stuck. Wire was drawn taught from Haku's side, tightening through each mirror as he pulled back on it like an angler. It seemed to be a sorcerer's trick to Jiraiya's bugging eyes. The threat, however, was not imaginary. Haku had tapped into a frightful technique. Wire strained against the Sage with enough pressure to slice flesh.

"Don't cut me up like soft butter, please! You can let go now." With his back turned to Haku, Jiraiya gave up, "That was an impressive demonstration."

Haku let out the slack of the needle's line, and then coiled it back into the spindle. After that, he let each of his mirrors dissolve into water and recede. Fukasaku hopped down from Jiraiya's shoulder and gave his cloak a dusting, "What a mess we've made out here! Is there a community nearby?"

"Yes, and I don't think any of them will appreciate their forest looking like this." Haku stowed his weapons and crossed the muck back to his teacher, "Sensei, are you alright?"

"...I will be once you fix my foot." With a lopsided smile, Jiraiya hobbed toward more stable, unspoiled land and sat down on fallen tree trunk with Haku's help. His student then dutifully went about healing the injury.

"Haku..."

The young man looked up expectantly, his hands glowing.

"What was that?" Jiraiya asked. Fukasaku sat on Jiraiya's opposite side, staring as he too waited for an explanation.

"I...don't really know what to call it." Haku admitted.

"There was nothing for me to counter. No time. I smashed your mirrors and the next thing I knew—I had a face full of slush, watching that sword zip around, tying me up like shoelaces..." Jiraiya wiped some of the dirt from his face onto his sleeve, "When you got behind me, you moved as fast as Minato used to. As fast as Naruto can move."

"There's no way to tell how fast—"

"I know what I saw." The man stated firmly.

After restoring his teacher's foot back to its pre-punctured state, Haku rose to take a look around the space. Though there was plenty more to Nanakusa's woodland, this bit of the island grove would need a decade or more to recover from the damage.
He glanced over his shoulder at Jiraiya and confessed, "I'm still learning the limits of my Kekkei Genkai. I don't think...many other dual-nature affinities allow for dimensional transience. Or if they do, no one has ever said so."

"Transience. Dimensional...uh...? You mean when you're on the other side?" Jiraiya followed.

"Yes. I don't know if...other dual-types, like say Earth and Fire, can move through matter in a way similar to the way I can."

"Hate to break it to you, Haku, but it probably isn't strictly two elemental affinities that are responsible for something like that. So no one else with a Kekkei Genkai of other combined natures can accomplish whatever it is you can do. I suspect." He turned to Fukasaku on the log beside him, "What do you think, Pa?"

"I think the lad should show us again." The toad suggested.

Haku wilted at the prospect, "I don't know if I can do it."

"Just trying to might give us a clue." Jiraiya made a shooing motion with his hand, "Go on. There's still plenty of puddles out here."

Momentary stage fright set in. How was he supposed to recreate those circumstances? Ice that was particle-sized, wafting in air within a dense cloud—that was a structure far more complex than what he normally managed through jutsu. Haku stood beside a lingering pool of water, stretching his hands out to get a feel for the natures he needed. His chakra tapped and tested, trying to mold something that existed in his mind's eye, but had no tool or hand signs for a precedent. His first few attempts failed to manifest anything smaller than coin-sized crystals of ice, which stayed airborne until he dropped them in frustration. Haku ran his hand through his hair and paced.

"You need another component." Fukasaku supposed. He had procured a smoking pipe and held it up toward Jiraiya, indicating he needed a donation of tobacco.

"Which component? The Wind and Water elements are here, but I can't get the measurements—"

"If you're trying to manually guide the size and consistency of that Ice Release trail you made earlier, it's pretty hopeless if you direct it through thought alone." Jiraiya drew out his own pipe to join Fukasaku for a smoke, "Concentrate on breaking down the composition into smaller parts. Sift the sub-units of chakra out of Water and Wind Release to tweak the balance." When Haku looked at him blankly, the man shrugged, "Hey! It's just a suggestion."

"Sub-units?"

"You can probably feel it. Every bit of chakra inside of us is comprised of Yin and Yang."

"Well, how am I supposed to know if I'm affecting the Yin and Yang composition of my chakra?"

"Didn't you do it already? Why would I know what it feels like?" Jiraiya scoffed, "I don't have a Kekkei Genkai. Or a talent for Light or Dark techniques."

The young man flexed his hands at his sides, frowning, "It's different from this side."

"It can still be done." His teacher maintained.

Coupling effort with impatience, Haku harnessed Wind and Water natures again with a snap of his hand. Perhaps there really was something else to it. A subtle, tiny prompt. Like an itch at the back of...
his mind. For someone who understood how to control his chakra so well, it was maddening to fail to identify what this scintilla of internal energy was. Water crystals froze in air again, smaller than pearls now, but no, something else had to be there. Something had to sustain the fluctuation of states of matter, and it was there behind his eyelids, somewhere in his brain and fingertips. If only could he feel it well enough to identify it! Haku squeezed his eyes shut. What had he done before? Within the nucleus of chakra, a constituent part of it, there resided the axiom of balance. And it could be touched and molded even with a thought.

In the midst of his exploration of chakra in its least refined state, Haku noticed the soft gasp of his companions nearby. He had let his hands daydream their way through the puzzle. Any practical set of watching eyes would assess it was a nonsense hand-sign with no meaning— his right thumb and two forefingers looped around the left thumb, all other digits pointed up towards the sky. But it osmosed light in a way no other conduit could. That was what compressed chakra and made matter flow: tamping down on the Yin to expand the Yang. Not that he could put the concept into words, so Haku went ahead to stretch the dust-line of ice in front of him into a trail that crossed the clearing.

When he passed through it, there was no worldly delay of resistance, gravity, or any such force. There membrane between this reality and the white dimension was almost negligible with atomized portals such as these. Haku reappeared at the far edge of the glade upon exiting the channel.

Jiraiya cupped his hand and shouted over to him, "Yeah, that looked about right!"

Though the cost was workable in the way of chakra, the ice-faring technique demanded the utmost concentration. Giving it another go, Haku navigated a pristine expanse of forest through a comet-tail of ice, arrowing and cambering through the boughs of chestnuts and rhododendron. He could move dynamically, change course and redirect however he wanted. He could maintain the Ice Path with thought and subtle gestures, focusing on the upsurge of light in the jutsu. Haku exited the trail and walked back towards his teacher as exhaustion started to set in.

The toad and sage were a pair of chimneys puffing away while seated on a log. They had reserved their commentary for the end of the demonstration.

"It would appear you can do it after all." Fukasaku commended him, "You should continue to develop that skill."

"I will try, Fukasaku-sama."

Smoke tufted from Jiraiya's nostrils before he noted, "That's a teleportation jutsu."

"It's…" Haku was at a loss.

"If it's not, pfft, how else can I typify it?" Jiraiya snickered, "No one can copy it. No one else can use it, I'm supposing. Much like the Nidaime Hokage who invented the Flying Thunder God Technique on his own, I guess innovation still happens these days."

"It relies on a visible trail, which means it can be tracked. And I don't know if it's an instantaneous warp. So terming it teleportation could be a stretch…"

"Maybe it's not, since technically you're moving through a medium. Or another dimension. Whatever." The man shrugged his shoulders.

"Even if it can't be compared to contemporary techniques similar to it, that does not devalue your jutsu in any sense." Fukasaku assured him, "It's quite remarkable, Haku-boy."

"At any rate," Jiraiya extinguished his pipe, "You've got that new zippy ice thing going for you."
Keep that in your rolodex of surprises, kid. As for the rest of my assessment: you've got a clear advantage in long to mid-range fighting. Ninjutsu is still your specialty." He added gravely, "But Heaven help you if a Taijutsu expert has you cornered. You need a boost there."

"I'll do my best. I didn't use any Genjutsu today if you-

"I'm not concerned about your Genjutsu; it was always above average. I'm saying you need to double down on improving close-range combat. I found it rather easy to break your bones to impede you. You'll slow down even more when you stop to heal yourself. That's not a practical means of survival on solo-missions, or a Mist free-for-all." Jiraiya shared his criticism, "I know you won't be dealing with many who are strong as I am in Sage-Mode, but if you do come across someone on that level…"

Haku nodded his head ruefully, "I know."

"I don't know what's waiting for you in Kirigakure. I need you to be prepared. Zabuza having your back won't be enough if he ends up dead in a gutter." Jiraiya passed cleaning supplies to Fukasaku to tidy up their pipes, "So work on Taijutsu and avoid being out-muscled. It's clear that your hand-to-hand fighting has already been polished drastically from the last time I saw you, but you need to be able to take a hit—or twenty. Develop a tight defense. I've got a jutsu or two to show you that'll clean up those weaknesses."

"Thank you, Sensei. About now I think I should mention…" Haku pulled a technique scroll out of a hip pouch, "That I've also found and studied this."

Jiraiya exchanged a look with Fukasaku before he stretched out his hand to accept the scroll. He unwound it to take a look. After 36 seconds of reading it began to sink in that he was examining something eerily familiar, "This is…Tsunade's Yin Seal. I think."

"I came across it when I arrived here, and I want to return it to her so that it doesn't fall into questionable hands again." Haku explained.

"How very thoughtful of you." Jiraiya's countenance flattened in seriousness, "You didn't apply this to your head, did you?"

"I…"

"You did."

"I did."

"How? Just managing the Sealing work is a chore. Never mind what comes afterward." Jiraiya was curious.

"Zabuza helped me reproduce the formula. Though I've learned charging it with chakra is very difficult."

"No shit. It drains your normal reserves like a leech. Takes a ton of control." Jiraiya rolled up the scroll and tucked it in his belt for safekeeping, "So you fought me today with an undisclosed handicap and still did pretty well, which I've gotta give you extra points for. You don't use Orochimaru's Heaven Seal anymore, do you?"

"Never." Haku confirmed.

Such news surprised Fukasaku, who planted a dubious look on Jiraiya as if to say, What kind of
calamity have you allowed your students to get tangled in?

"Good. Because I'd beat you senseless if you did." Jiraiya folded his arms, "And Tsunade's technique is no picnic either... but now that I think about it, it'll be a boon to you if you're ever in dire straits. I kind of prefer that you have that just in case a fight takes a turn for the worse."

Haku held his chin and estimated, "I might need two years or so to finish charging it. Maybe less if I can actively devote more chakra."

Jiraiya shook his head, "I don't want you burdening yourself more than you have to. Go slow. If you're spying on the Main Island near Hidden Mist, why the heck would you want less chakra to work with? Don't prioritize that seal."

Fukasaku concurred with that recommendation, "Yes, self-preservation is paramount."

With a slight bow of respect, Haku acknowledged their guidance, "I understand."

"Now, let's take some time so I can show you those jutsu I mentioned. I might run a bit late for my return to Suna, but this lesson's well worth it." The man stood and stretched, "I guess I'll have to come up with a harrowing tale to tell Tsunade when I return this scroll to her... how I found it and stuff."

"Please omit as much as you need to." Haku did not want to end up on the Hokage's bad side.

"I'll let you know what I say so you can corroborate the details. She may not be thrilled you have the seal on your head, but better you than someone else, right?"

"Right."

"Okay. On to a close-range counters lesson." Jiraiya rubbed his hands together and looked his student over, "So, how long has your hair gotten, kid? Huh. We can work with it."

Scents of disinfectant and iron wafted in his nostrils, but he couldn't bring himself to open his eyes. Kakashi did not actually have to wrestle back his conscious state to detect the few relevant details of his surroundings. Stiff linens, static quiet, dry air aggravating a nosebleed: he was most certainly laying in a hospital bed. Even with his head swirling and body inoperative these things weren't so hard to figure out. He even remembered what landed him here.

He'd surged the last of his chakra into a demanding technique in the Forest of Death, possibly hallucinated or actually saw Rin with his rebellious Sharingan eye, and had no confirmation of whether or not Asuma had apprehended the intruder that had killed Ûhei and Shiba. The dog pack had reported that Akino was critical but holding. Tenzo had been there. It was heavy and dark when he tried to plot the chronology of events thereafter. Maybe he'd dreamed it all? The probability of that was low, but he could hope.

It felt like night. That was an educated guess, judging by the lack of atmospheric activity and noise. Being awake and thinking about how two more lives he treasured were forever gone from him was godawful, so Kakashi gladly surrendered his mind to the dark.

Then, there was a gruff, impatient voice fetching him from the fog of sleep, just as a gaff collects a fish from water. He fought and fought and then finally peeked his eyes open. Kakashi painstakingly turned his head a few degrees to the left. Tsunade billowed into view as his eyes adjusted. She was
sitting beside the bed on a physician's rolling stool, her arms folded guardedly.

"Kakashi."

"Hokage-sama."

"Let's talk." Her arms loosened and her hands pooled in her lap as she rolled closer, "It took you a while to respond to me. How do you feel?"

"Not particularly good. Full bladder."

"I'll get you a bed pan shortly. You won't be able to move around." Tsunade told him, "It's been two days."

A long, dusty breath escaped him. Yes, his body did feel as though it'd been dead to the world for that long.

The Hokage went on, "You pushed it very near the brink of full chakra depletion and death. Later you'll thank Sakura for the overtime hours she put in to help me keep you stable."

"I will." He moved his index finger; a tiny, bonafide miracle, "What time is it?"

"Just after 5:00AM. I've been checking in frequently. Yesterday and the day before last I reviewed the reports from Security patrols and the ANBU squadron that backed you up."

"You're up this early just for me?" He was touched.

"I haven't slept in over a day. A top-level alert was issued in response to the perimeter breach. Since a Tao Art was able to infiltrate our detection barrier and checkpoints, and we have no techniques that disarm Tao Arts, the council's hysteria has scrambled most of our shinobi forces."

"—Asuma?"

"He's alright. When I last spoke to him yesterday, he regretted losing Shimofuri Koinyu through a Shadow Gate. That's the technique they've tried to describe to me in debriefings, and so I imagine it looks much like the Tao Art we saw at the Chunin Exam." Tsunade took his pulse at the carotid and radial arteries, "You're a bit low."

"Tsunade-sama, the intruder—"

"I know what he did. I'm sorry." Her voice softened, "His escape was incredibly narrow, and there was some debate regarding the ANBU squad's decision not to pursue through a Tao-portal, though it seemed possible. Sai and Mashu very nearly made that choice before Asuma discouraged it. His wounds needed immediate attention anyway..." Tsunade recapped the events, "The way I see it... anyone who pursues a Tao-user through such a gateway has no confirmation of an exit location...or who is waiting on the other side. I'm glad they weren't so foolish."

"I don't think anyone should ever attempt something like that." Kakashi replayed a name in his head that he did not recognize, "Mashu... A new recruit?"

"Yes. Tenzo has been working closely with Yugao and Sai for the last few months. Shimura Mashu completed his practicals and was accepted into ANBU full-time, as of a few weeks ago. Tenzo felt he would be a worthy addition to the team."

Kakashi vaguely remembered the young Jounin named Mashu, who was a generational peer of
Tama's and had visited her while she'd been hospital-bound. It did stick out as an oddity that a
member of the Shimura clan had enlisted in the ANBU, a chain of command that answered to the
Hokage. Since the obvious preference may have been to report to Shimura Danzo, one of the clan's
most respected shinobi and the Director of Root, the youth's deviation was an eyebrow-raiser.

"You don't suppose Danzo-sama wants a member of his clan working in your Black Ops…or if it
was an indiscriminate assignment?" Kakashi wondered.

"I've asked myself that. I really don't know." Tsunade admitted, "Both Yugao and Tenzo are
watching him closely, though thus far he is an ordinary recruit lacking ulterior motives. One can't be
too careful, of course."

"Hmm. It's a superficial impression…but that kid probably isn't under any Root orders. He was never
qualified for or admitted into the Foundation. He's much too personable." Kakashi recalled, "He's
called my nephew The White Wing of Konoha."

"Ugh! Another schmaltzy nickname."

"Did the Council request Root forces to ramp up security checks as well?" He circled back on the
unnerving topic, "Because if that's the case, you may want your standard forces double-
checking everything Root touches."

"Only two groups have in-depth knowledge about sub-passage entries and exits: ANBU Black Ops
and Root Black Ops. If you have every member of your ANBU scanned by the Intel Corps and
Ibiki's team, I guarantee you that none of them said a word about that sub-passage to anyone without
clearance. Huo may have known those tunnels existed, but someone has to disclose where the
external access points are." Kakashi concluded, "Maybe I'm presumptuous…but Root has had
communications with rogue groups before. Sometimes for our benefit, sometimes to our detriment."

"Regardless, every secret bypass route will have to have maximum oversight from here on out.
That's stretching my stretched forces thinner…and you want me to double-check Root's security
collaborations? I don't have enough shinobi, Kakashi."

"Sato and Hinata should be tested for Jounin promotions. Maybe even a few of the others—"

"It still won't be enough." Tsunade huffed, "And I don't feel comfortable requesting any of Gaara's
squads from Sand as emergency sentinels. His council would notice our internal vulnerabilities if I
did, which is not conducive. I also want Naruto and Haku back here soon."

"Ah, well, yes. They'd be helpful." Kakashi supposed.

"Two of the most senior members of my Sealing Corps are also dead, thanks to the Akatsuki's attack
on Shiogakure." She tapped the edge of a bright red nail against her teeth, anxious, "Do I ask for a
new ANBU commander to be nominated so I can move Netsuke back to the Sealing Corps?"

"As long as I'm not nominated, sure. Do what you have to."

"Maybe Kegon could handle it? Feh! What am I saying? I need Netsuke where he is. He already has
a credible case building against Danzo, but I can't weigh him down with additional work…."

Intrigued by such an admission, Kakashi attempted to lift his head from the pillow to engage the
matter further, but it flopped back like a bowling ball.
"Oh, right." Tsunade fetched a bed pan, "You'll still need to be monitored for the next 24 hours. I don't expect you to return to duty for another few weeks. Maybe you can be discharged in a week if your mobility returns, but I won't give you missions." She arranged the man with clinical motions and completely ignored the sound of urgent urination. Kakashi, who had been through worse debilitation in his life, was not in the least embarrassed by the leader of the village waiting on him so.

With that business finished, he announced, "I don't really care what I can and can't do this week, Hokage-sama. I'd rather know how my ninken are doing."

She didn't say anything as she cleaned up the bed space, moving to an attached restroom to empty the pan. Ah. This was standard. There always seemed to be a tart pause before someone told him a loved one was dead. Minato and Semi had been among the most jarring announcements. Here came another emotional battering-ram, Kakashi told himself.

Still drying her washed hands with paper towels, Tsunade stalked back into the recovery room and said, "Two confirmed fatalities. A third dog was stabilized. The rest have been spooked and are being watched by Tenzo. I asked him to report to me this morning. Asuma was discharged last night…" She tossed the towels into a trash bin, "Four of my Chunin guarding the northern sector were murdered. To top it off, I was told you nearly killed yourself with a Visual jutsu perhaps used against your better judgement?"

"…my judgement was hairline at that point, I will admit."

"What exactly did you do, Kakashi?"

"From the beginning or-?"

"Asuma said you used a jutsu exclusive to the Sharingan. Tell me about that." She specified.

"It isn't like the kind of Visual jutsu I know that Uchiha Itachi can use, which was Genjutsu-based… mine seems to be…uh, how do I put it-?" He had no elegant name for the technique or simple way of describing it, "Whatever I look at with the Mangekyō Sharingan I can target and warp to another dimension."

"Another dimension." Tsunade echoed doubtfully.

"Near as I can figure it. Nothing I've sent there has yet come back, although I haven't tried retrieving anything. It's another plane that the Sharingan can tear open a rift to, and I can't use it more than three times in close succession." Kakashi reported, "When I first learned I could do it, my aim was terrible and I couldn't deal with quick targets."

Tsunade was staring at his face without really seeing him, since her brain was abuzz with information, "And when did you learn you could do it?"

"Shortly after my team's mission to the Land of Rain. When I lost Sato…I felt something change."

"You didn't think that was worth mentioning to me?"

"I had nothing to show for it then. I've only just become competent with the jutsu." His head flopped tiredly to the side on the edge of a flat pillow, "If I can even be called that."

"You could have lost your life. I'm not going to gamble the well-being of one of my best ninja just because you have a kooky technique at your disposal. Be wiser from here on out." Her admonishment was a bit warmer, though on the fringes her anxiety still prickled him, "I need you to help me sort all of this out, Kakashi. There aren't many I'm willing to trust to drive out whoever is
corroding the security of Hidden Leaf."

"Are you going to share what you told me with anyone else? About what Netsuke is doing?"

"Tenzo and Asuma have already been filled in. I've considered a few others with A-level clearances. Naturally, you'll be keeping all of this to yourself unless ordered otherwise."

The man agreed with a soft, exhausted nod of his head.

Tsunade rolled the stool back and stood, "Rest for now. I have another meeting in forty-five minutes. I'll make sure your visitors don't make nuisances of themselves, or if they must, that they'll bring your dogs to see you."

"Thank you, Tsunade-sama."

And no sooner had the Hokage passed the threshold to leave the room, Kakashi slid back into the violet deep of unconsciousness again. What periphery senses lingered afterward detected someone else stopping in briefly, though it could have been seconds or ages later. There was no telling which. It felt like his hair had been mussed.

By late morning when the sun was much brighter and the space far busier, Kakashi had little choice but to wake up again. Voices muttered around the bed in a cluster. Since he was the curious, nondescript sort, Kakashi continued to play dead, or rather, asleep, with his eyes shut.

"He's got a cow-lick."

"You would too if you were bedridden for days."

"My hair's always perfectly styled."

Sakura's voice was distinct and annoyed, "Sato, it's not. It is equally messy. You two look nearly the —"

"I look good don't I, Tama?"

"Consistently good." Tama confirmed.

"Pff. Don't stroke his ego." The sound of a saline bag being changed on the drip device filled the pause before Sakura added, "Did Tsunade-shishou give you two guard detail missions?"

"Yeah, we've got to report in less than an hour." Sato sounded crestfallen, "I wanted to stay with Kakashi longer and make sure he's alright."

"He is alright."

"What if he wakes up addled? He told me he was seeing things a few weeks ago. Maybe he's just noticing multiple personalities he's suppressed, or the PTSD flashbacks are—"

"Kakashi-sensei does not have a personality disorder or, as far as his file details, struggles with PTSD. He's going to wake up and function." Sakura was issuing more of a command than reassurance, "It's just…you know…."

"The dogs are safe now. We'll make sure Sensei is okay too." Tama caught her drift.

"Well he's not going to be okay for a while. There's nothing wrong with not being okay when something like this happens." Sato insisted, "So long as we're around we can make it better, however
he wants us to."

Sakura conceded quietly that Sato's concern was surprisingly on-the-mark.

Kakashi cracked an eye open to compliment, "All of you are so caring. It's as if I did something right as a teacher…"

They squawked collectively.

"Ah, shh, not so loud." He winced and tried to wiggle his fingers again. He could drum most of them against his sides and pleased with the progress.

Following that he had to endure a brief medical diatribe from Sakura, blood pressure and pupil response check, mobility check (spoiler: it maxed out at flopping limbs and blinking), and did he need pain meds, food, or reading material? Sato had brought a few Icha Icha copies over, ever the thoughtful nephew.

"I can probably stomach some food. Do I still need this?" Kakashi gestured with his chin at the saline drip.

"Yes, you were low on fluids and chakra. One of those is easier to restore than the other. There were even a few weird burns on you, but Shishou and I took care of those." Sakura filled him in, "I'll have another on-shift nurse bring a meal up. I've got to check on a few other patients this morning."

"Quite alright. I can manage on my own for a bit." Kakashi thanked Sakura before she hustled out with a parting wave. His eyes then flitted over to Tama and Sato, who seemed to have some unspoken, linked energy between them, "Did I scare you?"

"A little. I mean, we know you had a good reason to use the Sharingan, but you pushed it. Asuma said you were upset…" Sato was near the foot of the bed, easily mistakable for Hatake Sakumo to Kakashi's bleary eyes, "So I know why you took some risks. But I can tell you as someone who's fought while in a rage that things never actually end up well afterward."

"I was slightly worried for you…but I have to admit I'm more worried about how an intruder took advantage of those underground passages in the Forest of Death." Tama was honest, "Could someone have learned how to navigate them that quickly by participating in the Chunin Exam?"

"I think it's more complicated than that, how someone could infiltrate sub-passages…but it is a grave concern to our village at present." Kakashi agreed, "Did Kiba-?"

"He's helping his sister Hana treat Akino at her clinic." Tama reported with a small smile, "Her arm is still in a sling."

"Kiba was here and fretting about you, getting all pouty and shit." Sato chirped merrily, "But he said he had to find a more productive way of helping you and the pack. Gotta give him props for that."

"I'm very grateful to him." The man sighed, "Are the boys still with Tenzo?" By boys he meant dogs.

"Yeah. He'll bring them here when he can."

He was sort of listening to what his nephew and student were saying after that. He'd gotten comfortable and dozed off. Sometime later the pair was gone, the room was quieter, and the faint aroma of hospital food wafted in the air.
Kakashi floated through dizzy, prismatic thoughts behind his eyelids. A motley of colors. The faces he had inexplicably seen with the Sharingan. At home, all of the dog hair left behind on the sofa where Ūhei and Shiba often nestled, and how he now could not bring himself to tidy it up. Glowing darkness stretched over a pictogram ring. The scandalous centerfold in the most recent volume of Icha Icha Paradise. The fantastic supermarket sales he had probably missed while incapacitated.

"This'll get cold if you don't eat it soon."

Oh. Another familiar voice. Kakashi pried his eyes open again to spot Asuma seated beside the bed, perching an unlit cigarette on his lip. His left hand was heavily bandaged and his right foot in a splint, but Asuma was otherwise robust. Near the window, Gai was in a handstand performing vertical push-ups to pass the time.

"What time is it?" Kakashi wondered.

"Just after noon." Asuma rolled the tabletop cart over the bed, "Here. Eat."

Kakashi gave his best (read: laughable) effort to sitting up but could only curve and flop like a carp. Gai gave his typical salutations and pulled Kakashi bodily into a seated position. "You're a pitiful sight, Kakashi. Don't make me wait on you— I am already deeply offended that you didn't include me on that patrol." In spite of the admonishment, Gai leaned his rival against the bed's backrest and fastened a cloth bib around Kakashi's neck.

"There was no need to include you on a two man patrol, Gai. The Hokage assigns those anyway." He, remarkably, managed to spoon some onion soup from a bowl and proceeded to spill it all over himself with a wobbling hand.

Disgusted and sympathetic, Gai proceeded to spoon-feed his friend, "Two-man patrols will be insufficient going forward. Intruders are using Tao Arts! Grave robbing! Perhaps mapping the inner workings of our village—!" He noticed Kakashi flinching, "Ah, is this too hot?" Gai blew on the spoonful which was indeed the fix.

"Bit of a kerfuffle between the Hokage and senior advisors this morning too…" Asuma segued, "Seems they have different ideas about how Root should be responding to an incident like this."

Kakashi looked between Asuma and then Gai, who had moved on to cram a buttered roll in his mouth.

"Gai knows." Asuma assured him, "Tsunade told both of us about what my brother is working on."

"Oh good." Kakashi said faintly, noticing both the door and window were shut. As if that were secure enough to avoid listening ears.

"I for one did not find it surprising." Gai opened a juice container and shared, "Some time ago when Neji and Lee were confronted by a nukenin in the Toi Mine…I had my suspicions. During the Chunin Exam as I watched Tenten struggle, it became clearer to me that there is indeed a connection between the offending rogue group and some contact within Hidden Leaf. All three of my students were asked to submit testimony the other day as part of an ongoing investigation."

"Seems only natural that Bi's goons would be on your radar, after what happened to Takaharu." Kakashi supposed, sipping at a drink straw.

"Tell him the other thing, Gai." Asuma suggested.

Kakashi released the straw, "What other thing?"
"Neji was promoted to Jounin rank yesterday." Gai announced, "He and I have been speaking more plainly with one another, and I was pleased to introduce him to the Jounin Council. After the meeting, he told me something that has come to his attention."

"He only told you?"

"Who better to confide in other than one's Sensei?" Gai simmered down to announce, "He believes there to be some level of surveillance over the Hyuga clan."

A slippery piece of watermelon escaped Kakashi's lips, plummeting to his lap, "What?"

"You are a shamefully messy eater." Gai gave the fruit salad another go, this time with a plastic fork, "It's as I said, Kakashi. The Hyuga clan has been scrutinized more closely after the Chunin Exam's conclusion."

Asuma clarified, "By Root."

"Root has no reason to be concerned about the Hyuga clan." Kakashi stated firmly.

"Neji feels otherwise."

"Well, why is that?" Kakashi spoke between mouthfuls of melon and banana.

"He and Tenten heard Hinata-chan's first-hand account of a warning issued by a Hyuga clan elder, requesting that they avoid the suspicion of the Root Foundation. Their promotions and election of Corps positions has been discouraged."

"A clan elder? Just a paranoid old-timer blowing hot air." Kakashi wasn't convinced.

"My clan watches its back around Danzo and his Black Ops because of the rocky history my dad had with them." Asuma contributed, "So what has one of the oldest clans in Konoha got to worry about? Root shouldn't even matter to the Hyuga. Kakashi, why would a clan elder even mention the Foundation unless there was some credible threat?"

"Hmm…" He finished the fruit salad, "Good question. The Hyuga don't care much about anything until there's imminent jeopardy."

"I will pay close attention to this development, though none of it bodes well…" Gai folded his arms and leaned against the wall, "The most pressing concern is whether or not Root has any involvement with Dintei Bi's rogue cell."

"The next most pressing concern is that I'll be having a bowel movement in about twenty minutes." Kakashi estimated.

Asuma grimaced, "Don't worry, we're not sticking around for that."

Perked up slightly by the food, Kakashi looked around the room and noticed a vase of colorful tulips on a bedside table. A large, sealed card was tucked underneath it.

"Which of you was thoughtful? Was it one of my students?"

"Nah. Your nephew thought about buying you donuts but Kurenai talked him out of it." Asuma recalled.

Gai had a better idea of who was responsible, "I have it on good authority that Tenzo-san brought those here this morning."
Kakashi managed to shakily wipe his mouth with a napkin and laid back again, covering his face with a blanket. "Good authority?"

"Hokage-sama noticed the gift and felt Tenzo-san's well-wishing was more than what was necessary. He is already caring for your ninken."

"I didn't ask him to."

"Don't forget to thank him, Kakashi." Gai pushed the rolling food cart away since the meal was over and done with.

"I won't. He's been very sympathetic for my loss."

"You know, I get the feeling it's more than just your loss that's got him buying you flowers and whatnot." While tucking away an unsmoked cigarette, Asuma ventured, "That kid's always got some sentimental gesture for you, at least when you're paying attention."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"You've got a conveniently crappy memory." Asuma assessed.

"Two. No, three years ago." Gai could remember for him, "A book pre-release and signing where you were advanced to the front of the line."

"That's—"

"All kinds of nice dinners. Kurenai never does that stuff for me." Asuma groused.

"Various nights of drinking never at your expense." Gai added.

"And didn't you get that week-long trip to a mountain onsen? I bet Tenzo set that up too."

"He's just a generous kōhai is all." Kakashi dismissed it.

"So are you going to date him again?" Asuma cut straight to the question.

"We never dated." A swift correction.

Gai was pacing and shaking his head in disapproval, "How disreputable to lead him on like that."

"It's really a shame a nice fella like him is hung up on frosty Kakashi." Curious, Asuma plucked up the envelope addressed to Kakashi, "This is even his hand writing, there's no mistaking it. Can I open this?"

"No."

"Bet he wrote something way too nice inside." Asuma muttered an afterthought.

"If I'm frosty, the both of you are equally deluded and nosy."

"Whatever the case may be, Kakashi, you take Tenzo for granted. Such insensitivity could never escape my notice!" Gai gave him a sideways, holier-than-thou look, "I must empathize with you at a time like this, but I expect better from someone of your stature."

Asuma was nodding along and wrestling a smirk.
"Gai. Asuma. Thank you for your input. Your ability to stick to relevant topics is staggering." He tried to tune out any further nagging. Since when was any of this their business?

Sharp knocks at the door interrupted them, and in sauntered Inuzuka Tsume of all people. She held the door ajar and pointed her thumb over her shoulder, "Gents, give me a few minutes alone with Kakashi, would you? My kids and I have had a long morning."

Both of the less-senior Jounin respectfully vacated and Tsume sealed the room after them. She asked when Kakashi tried to prop himself up for the sake of conversation, "Nah. Just lay there if you want. I won't make this too long, since we can both use a break."

"Alright then." He relaxed.

"First of all," The woman didn't ask permission before plopping down at the bed's edge to sit, "My condolences for the ninken who parted from your side. When they shed their mortal cares, our dogs return to the Pure Lands immediately; a straight shot up." Tsume pointed skyward, "It's because their spirits are heaven-sent or so my folks like to say."

Wilted, Kakashi figured, "I guess I'll have to take some comfort in that."

"I hope you will. Second, please know that Kiba and Hana have helped your hurt one, Akino. We can send him home to recover once he clears an overnight observation. If any of the others need anything while you're on leave, they are welcome in my home. Kiba can look after them." Tsume offered, "He's worried about you, Kakashi. Watching this happen to you pains him more than you can know, since he sees part of himself in his teacher. You are realizing one of his fears."

"I hate to do it to him, really." Kakashi could imagine the expression on Kiba's face when he'd gotten the news.

"Ahh, it's just a part of growing up as a shinobi. My boy's heart is softer than his hide…but he's still pretty tough." Tsume's smile curled with pride, "'Now…it's a good thing you're sitting down for what I'm about to tell you next…"

In fact he was supine in bed, but hopefully that was just as good of a way to mitigate any shock. Kakashi watched the woman riffle around a pocket sewn inside of her jacket, and pulled free a modest looking correspondence scroll. "See this?" Tsume held it up to him, "Rin sent me this."

His stomach plummeted.

"To be honest, this is the first time she's communicated with me in years. I could hardly believe it." Tsume exhaled a rumbling breath, "I guess I'm happy. Overall. She's alive. I mean, I'm still mad at her, but I am so much happier than I am mad. Do you know what I mean?"

"I…" His brain was booting back up, "Know what you mean."

She stuffed the scroll away again, "Okay. This could be one of the happiest times of my life. Even Nichiyo can't ruin this for me. Rin is more or less thriving, based on what she told me. She makes stellar income as a traveling physician for a few northern towns. Sesshu is fine, which was a relief to hear. She has great friends and neighbors, a garden, and she said that she's happy. But I can tell she's afraid of something…it's like she omitted some stuff. I can see it in the empty spaces on the parchment...some hesitation. Maybe because she isn't sure what I'll think of what she wants to tell me, but I can get the truth out of her when I write back today."

"…can I-?"
"No." Tsume flattened her palms on her thighs, tensing, "Don't screw this up for me, Kakashi. I am going to keep in touch with my sister and hopefully, with some persuasion, I can convince her to come back home. Seems like she'd be receptive to the idea, what with her saying all of that lonely, nostalgic shit in her letter…"

"Could you keep me informed?" He pitched lower, hoping he wasn't going to be completely shut out.

"Yeah, sure. I'll keep you informed." She conceded, "I know this is important for you too. I need to find out more about her life first, and also make sure she isn't some longshot security risk. The whole village is on red-alert right now, so I can't be an idiot and overlook possible schemes my sister might've gotten wrangled into." Tsume pushed off of the bed, "I am not going to mention you in my letters unless she asks."

"That's fine." Yes, that was fine, there was no use in rushing it, "I really want to see her."

"I bet you do." Tsume gave the tulips a sniff and then inquisitively abducted the get-well-soon card, "Wow. You've got gifts coming in already…" With a sharp nail she tore it open and ignored Kakashi's exhausted flapping and protests, "Sheesh, look at all of this writing! Like a freakin' novel stuffed in here." Disinterested, she flipped the card at him and it landed on his face. Tsume then plucked another piece of heavy cardstock from within the envelope, "You got a little somethin' extra too."

Tsume extracted a rectangular card that had ink paw prints stamped onto it. She sucked in a breath of alarm when she understood, "Whoa, whoa, whoa. This is them, isn't it?"

Kakashi's eyes stuck to the card sheet, somewhat sickened and relieved that Tenzo had the wherewithal to preserve something of Ūhei and Shiba. Though it had to have been done after the fact, he was not opposed to the last-minute memento.

"Here." Tsume set the print down beside the vase, "I'll tell Kiba to come see you soon. When you're feeling like yourself again, the Inuzuka clan has two gifts it would like to give to you as thanks for your mentorship of my kid." She cocked a hand on her hip, "That okay with you?"

"I don't need any gifts." His body was feeling heavy. The weight of everything was smashing him. Threats to the village. Rin's correspondence. The paw prints of his lost dogs. Tenzo. So tired.

The woman sighed and moved to leave, "Oh Kakashi, don't sniff at those who know what you really need."

Chapter End Notes

The next chapter is in progress and will feature Naruto, his post-it notes, Gaara's tantrum over a calculator, and other assorted melodramas. Hey you! Thanks for reading! *clinks drinking glasses*

Chapter 51- Yin
Naruto was not especially fond of wearing the turban, but the sunglasses he could get used to. It was a ham-fisted disguise that probably wouldn't fool the eagle-eyed tattlers in Suna, though Gaara was being very strict about staying "low-key," explaining it thusly, "I've already told my advisory council I sent you back to Konoha."

"What'd you do that for?"

"Because we know some among them are dishonest at best, treasonous at worst. I need to keep you with me for now. If an informant for the Akatsuki noticed you were still in Suna and reported on it… I believe the word havoc describes what we can expect." Gaara was seated at a desk, highlighting each line of dodgy accounting on a balance sheet that the village council referred to at meetings. When councilmen weren't bullshitting with their words, they'd try to do it through numbers.

This was the building his Black Ops teams were headquartered in. It felt safer to coop Naruto up in one of the compact, ultra-modern rooms here than fritter above ground near the Administrative Building. The unidentified mole of the Akatsuki may have sighted Naruto otherwise.

Thankfully, his friend was making the most of it. Naruto had pushed together two long folding tables and unwound a technical Sealing scroll end to end. It was the kind of reading that would give even Gaara vertigo, but somehow Naruto was able to decipher most of the formula twaddle within it. Though it took him a while, and he had to stop to mark parchment sections with sticky notes, Naruto dipped back into the studies he'd begun under Jiraiya. Sporadically, he blurted out his concerns.

"What if—?" Naruto removed his convenience store sunglasses to wipe a smudge off of them, "No one recognizes me BUT a Sensor-type notices my chakra and reports me to the mole?"

"Down here they can't. There are sensory-deprivation barriers set up. And that's why I put a suppression tag on you when we go outside. Shush now, I've nearly found a discrepancy." In pencil, Gaara circled a set of assets that screamed fabricated.

"Okay." Naruto could live with that. He paused to slurp his cup noodle lunch, pacing in front of a complicated section of Sealing matrices. The structure looked gratuitous and could only be formed by prong-seals transmitted by the user's fingertips. It was not a skill he had completely mastered.

"Is it true that I look tanner?"

Gaara looked up from his work, annoyed.

"That Zeriko lady said I look like a baked custard tart." Naruto added. He tossed his empty noodle cup in the corner trash bin.

"You are a custard tart." Gaara confirmed, "Pass me that calculator."

"What? Is your village rich now?" All smiles, Naruto did as he was told and stole a peak at wild numbers on the sheet.
"That's what they want me and everyone else to think as they misallocate funding." Gaara flipped the old tape calculator on and began punching numbers like a cross-eyed bank teller.

Naruto returned to the wonky Sealing scroll section and then proceeded to stare at his fingertips. For a moment's rest, Gaara glanced up and was not sure why his friend was squinting at his fingers but it was most likely a harmless effort.

"Your brother came back with his team from Tide yesterday. When do you think Ero-sensei will be back?"

"I don't know. Kankuro is twice as quick as Sensei and he had less distance to cover."

"Do you think your sister is okay?"

"She's fine."

Silence prevailed again, punctuated by the buzz of overhead fluorescent lights. Gaara ripped a furling tape from the calculator and reviewed it, puffing angrily, then wound up to pitch the curled paper in a sad arc before it fell to the floor.

"Temper, temper..." Naruto scolded his friend. He patted a sticky note to his finger and stuck his own Hiraishin formula to it. Now if only he could visualize a complex prong-seal as depicted in the text and make it manifest the same way. It couldn't be so different.

"What are you doing?" Gaara grunted. He meant the weird hand stuff.

"Sealing studies."

"You are playing with sticky notes."

"I'm trying to figure out prong-seals, you groucher! Gosh. I told you to EAT LUNCH." Naruto barked, "You're so pissy and you said we'd only work for two hours."

"I have to re-do the tape." Gaara admitted, deflating.

"Just go slowly and you won't mess it up."

"I wouldn't have to double-check the accounting if they weren't a bunch of liars abusing our budget."

Naruto nodded, "I know, I know. They suck."

"Just you wait. You'll have to deal with this too, eventually." Gaara warned. He punched the number 5317 into the calculator, ripped the tape, and delivered it via sand granules to his friend on the other side of the room. Naruto read the paper upside-down: LIES.

"Chill, Gaara."

"I am." He cleared his throat, "Chill."

The assertion seemed about as fraudulent as the balance sheet in front of Gaara. Naruto poked his head out of the office door to shout down the corridor, "Can anyone get the Kazekage some lunch —?"

Said village leader hissed between gritted teeth, "Naruto."

"He's hangry." Naruto could not make true eye contact with the pint-sized, masked Black Ops agent
who peeked curiously around the corner, not with his garish sunglasses on. So he improvised with a two-fingered hand motion, pointing from his face to the recipient's: *I see you. You got this?* The agent nodded to him and disappeared.

"Do *not* distract Black Ops units here. They have work to do— they don't run errands for me."

Gaara grumbled as he started his calculations over, "That's what Kankuro is for."

"Actually, that's not what he's for. I'm gonna tell him you said that."

"Don't tell him."

"I'm totally telling him."

Gaara pointed to the asset line he stopped on to save his place and wondered aloud, "Is it possible to strangle someone with printer tape?"

"Probably not, but if you kill me with your sand Baa-chan will turn you into printer tape."

"She would."

Naruto took the sticky note with his Hiraishin formula attached and patted it onto Gaara's back. He then returned to his work at the table and attempted to manifest a prong-seal on the tip of his index finger. A long, silent block of time passed at the end of which Gaara ripped a new tape from the calculator and proclaimed, "I knew we didn't have that municipal account on the books. It never even came across my desk for approval. No one bothered to bid for it. The Tea Country probably has it! Whoever did this bookkeeping had better *chase that account* down for those funds or they are cactus mulch."

"Damn right."

Naruto assessed as he continued staring at his finger. He scrawled some notes on the sheet, marked it in red ink, attached the tape, and shoved the pile back into an accordion folder. Gaara then folded his arms on the desktop and laid his head down. There was new correspondence from the Raikage suggesting a meeting between himself, the Kazekage, and the Tsuchikage. Gaara intended to politely reply that any sort of meeting without the Hokage present would be highly inappropriate, but thanks anyway.

Across the room, the blue shimmer of a prong-seal sparked on Naruto's fingertip. He flashed across the room to Gaara's seat and displayed his handiwork right in his friend's face, "Look! Look! The composition is dogshit and backwards *but look at it!*"

"I can see you did it, Naruto. Most Sealing analysts can't manifest those seals even after a year of training."

"Looks like *shit.*" Though highly critical of his own work, Naruto was laughing triumphantly.

"Shhhhh." Gaara buried his head in his arms to deal with the onset of a headache. Perhaps a quick nap would set him right before tackling more work?

Naruto was more closely examining the scroll laid across tabletops, trying to reconfigure the form of the seal on his finger. The pictogram slowly, painstakingly, was molded into what was under figure 1.B in the text. Meanwhile, the Black Ops agent that Naruto had pestered popped up with a tray of meat buns and grilled vegetables, setting it down in front of Gaara, "Here you are, Kazekage-sama."

"Oh."

"Thank you, Wamu."
"Please don't work too hard, sir. May I ask who this is with you?" Wamu glanced toward Naruto, whose frown lines were intense as he concentrated.

"That is my good friend, Uzumaki Naruto of Hidden Leaf." Gaara informed him as he sat up to eat, "Under penalty of death you may not tell anyone of his identity, understood?"

"Understood, Kazekage-sama." Unruffled, Wamu nodded and then exited the room, making the same goofball gesture that Naruto had given him earlier. The subtle display of a playful personality in a young Black Ops agent very nearly made Naruto blast through the ceiling with joy.

Gaara offered Naruto a meat bun on the condition he not tell Kankuro that he was an errand-running type, but Naruto refused. "I didn't want to share with you anyway." Gaara decided as he stuffed his face.

It took Naruto forty minutes to get the form and balance correct for his single prong-seal, but he ended up with a textbook perfect pictogram, glowing brightly. Naruto marched around the perimeter of the room like a gloating champion as Gaara ignored him in favor of writing a polite letter to other Kages. He'd cleaned his lunch plate and guzzled the juice can that came with it.

Eventually, Naruto took a seat and tried to expand the feat to two-pronged seals. The light in his hand blinked out. He wrinkled his nose in aggravation, "Shoot, I had it. I guess the balance gets tricky the more seals you use…"

The noncommittal grunt that came from Gaara as he composed his letter indicated he wasn't actually listening. In an effort to find something else to do, Naruto wound up his technical scroll, tucked it in his belt, and then crossed back to Gaara. He poked his friend's left arm, "It's this one, right?"

"Which one?" Gaara kept working to not lose his train of thought.

He did not protest or react when Naruto pressed a hand flat to his upper arm and seared chakra into him, searching for the binding seal that held Shukaku. It flushed visibly in response to the contact, and Naruto drew close to examine it, "This seal lock isn't as complex as mine. Does it leak?"

"Not as badly as it used to." He was working on his closing remarks.

"It's had some work done. Don't worry, I won't futz with it." Naruto lifted his friend's arm, "Can he still influence you a lot?"

"No, and I've been sleeping properly since I was a child. Shukaku and I still talk frequently."

"Yeah, you told me about that. This has an Elephant Seal with two prongs attached. I guess the balance is good enough, but how can you really know until you try it?" Naruto mumbled to himself.

Gaara signed his correspondence and then rolled up the scroll, "I am grateful that Sandaime-sama and Sensei took it upon themselves to help me with my seal. It gave me a chance to live normally, and also to learn more about Shukaku."

"It's so weird to hear you talk about your Tailed-Beast like everything is cool." Naruto folded his arms.

"Everything is fine between us." Gaara confirmed, pushing his seat back and scooping up his expandable folder, "We understand each other now." He led Naruto out into the corridor and added, "I have two committee meetings this afternoon, so you can keep studying at my house while I'm gone."
"You're gonna stick a suppression tag on me so no one can sense me, and you still expect me to study? That's tough to do with a tag on."

"I don't mean practice actual jutsu, I mean just read." Gaara clarified.

"Just read..." Naruto repeated, "You really won't let me shadow you at your meetings?"

"Have you looked in a mirror?" Gaara panned the idea, "Absolutely not."

"I look like your average Chunin in Suna."

"You look like the idiot someone's village put up Missing posters for."

They briefly paused to scrap, spinning, wrestling, and bashing each other into plaster walls like juvenile delinquents until a Black Ops lieutenant commander worriedly stepped out of her office and asked, "Is everything alright out here? I know you needed to use our facilities today, Kazekage-sama...but it's been rather noisy..."

"He called me an idiot." Naruto was grousing as he and his friend calmed down. He allowed Gaara to place a medium-strength suppression tag hung on a string around his neck. "I'm not an idiot— I can form a prong-seal and I'm not even a Sealing analyst. I'm not even in the Sealing Corps yet!"

"Hush." Gaara said.

"Wow!" The lieutenant chirped, "Not bad, kid."

"...not an idiot...just outgoing and outspoken..." Naruto muttered his way up the steps of the building to the ground level as Gaara followed after him.

The lieutenant glanced to her left where Wamu, her newest Black Ops recruit, was watching. He pointed his v-shaped fingers from his masked face to hers.

After a bearable de-briefing with Suna's Jounin Council, Kankuro returned home with the expectation he'd crash on the couch and sleep, then maybe order takeout later. The last few weeks had drained him of his usual enthusiasm to be productive or cook.

Instead, he passed the threshold of the mansion and froze as the door shut behind him. The sitting area had two long technical scrolls open across the floor, parallel to each other as if they had been compared. There were hundreds of yellow and green sticky notes on the scrolls, the floor, the wall, on the ceiling fan's blades. Kankuro cupped his hand and called out, "If this is a robbery you fucked up already-!"

"Nah, it's me!" A shout from the adjacent kitchen.

Kankuro shucked his shoes off and sighed. Only Naruto. How long did Gaara intend to keep him? It looked like a schoolkid's bag went supernova all over the room.

He made his way to the kitchen and freaked out a bit harder, seeing that various bottles of oil, sauces, and spices had been lined up in descending order along the counter. If Kankuro's cooking equipment was not in its designated place, any spices mishandled, or bottle caps abused, the latent OCD reaction kicked in. Kankuro quickly barged into Naruto's space with his hands waving, "What are you doing? Aren't you supposed to be studying like a good, non-disruptive house guest? This is my cooking zone, bro."
"Yeah, I know, it's just I needed a change and I don't want to be a useless shut-in whose disguise is too weird to walk around outside." Naruto indicated a binder of hand-written recipes, "So I thought I'd make a marinade I found in here."


"It's awesome."

"I know."

"There was meat and lettuce in the refrigerator so I just thought I'd prepare stuff for ssambap since everyone eats it...then no one would have to come home and do anything."

"Huh." He calmed down considerably, "That's very thoughtful of you, Naruto. How's it coming?"

"I think it's right-?"

Kankuro dipped a spoon in the mixture and tested it on his tongue, "Okay. I realize now that I have underestimated your cooking ability. Go ahead and put the meat in that. We'll let it marinate for a few hours."

"I did good?"

"You did good."

Buoyantly, Naruto puttered around until he found a zip bag and the fillets of beef. He did as instructed while Kankuro ordered his precious cooking paraphernalia. He mixed a few dips while he was at it. Forget ordering out. Making a meal was easier when he had an assistant. Naruto was high-quality company too, as it so happened.

"So do you mind explaining why the hell our living room looks like a bookstore exploded?"

"Gaara only wants me studying here today. My disguise isn't very Suna-ish and he makes me wear this suppression tag."

"Lemme see that thing." Kankuro frowned at the sealing tag, "Yikes, that's heavy duty. How are you not passing out?"

"Nine-Tailed Fox?" Naruto shrugged.

"Oh yeah. I forget sometimes." Kankuro stirred a rich brown sauce, "You can go out if you want, don't let Gaara's worries hold you back. No one will feel your chakra with that thing on. And if you can still use a Transformation technique, just do that if you're bored."

"I can probably use a jutsu for a little while..."

"Great, because I need you to run to the store for ingredients." Kankuro jotted down items on scrap paper, "Get me a bag of bellflower roots, spinach, two cucumbers, the biggest eggplant you can find and some fresh shrimp. Those'll be expensive but I can pay you back and clean them myself."

"Uh. I don't know..."

"Don't make me go back out there. I need fifteen minutes to crash on my couch— I've earned it."

"If I get kidnapped then it's kinda on you." Naruto warned him.
"Guess so." Kankuro agreed as he clapped the note into Naruto's hand, "How much money have you got?"

A pause to check his frog wallet, "4,500 Ryo."

"Eh, that's more than enough. Be back quick or I might worry." He joked and moved to fix himself cold tea.

With his note in hand, Naruto supposed his life would not be in supreme jeopardy if he took a discreet trip down the end of the road to the market. He didn't bother to clean up his study materials and strode past them for the door, set out, and on the front cobbled walkway of the property he stopped in his tracks as a familiar sensation overcame him.

_Naruto-kun!

"Hinata!" He hugged himself ecstatically, "Do you miss me? I'm sorry, I'll be home soon! I've just gotta do some stuff—"

_Shh, not all at once. Can you give me a moment?_ Her smile tugged at his lips,

There's something I want to share with you. Just a small something…

"A small something?" Naruto scratched his head, "Like what?"

When he settled down, he slipped into a portion of her awareness, though not thoroughly enough to see and hear. But he could taste. Naruto batted his lips when he realized he knew the flavor. He knew it better than anything since he had dined on it for over 15 years faithfully. Hinata was eating ramen.

"Oh my god, how are you this good to me?" He whimpered.

She was laughing and blowing on hot noodles.

"How can you concentrate to be with me and eat at the same time?"

_It's not so hard! I am stopping for lunch before my next guard detail mission. Security has been heightened in the village since yesterday._

"You don't say?"

_Yes, an intruder killed several of our ninja in the night and hurt Kakashi-sensei._

"What?!!"

_He'll be alright. Everyone is on edge, though. We are not quite sure how someone was able to infiltrate the village like that._

Naruto rubbed his fists, "If he tries it again while I'm there I'll squash him into pulp."

Now, now. That's why all of our teams are working so hard. There's no need to trouble yourself. He could still taste Hinata slurping ramen noodles in between her comments.

"Man, that hits the spot…they don't have ramen out here that compares…oh." Naruto was struck by an idea, "I was going to buy some stuff! Do you have a second to…if you want to see what I see?"

_Ah, yes! That'd be nice. I haven't been within Suna's walls before._ Hinata paused her meal to flip her senses into Naruto fully.
And to really play up the subtlety, Naruto transformed into Hinata's likeness with an approximated lavender outfit, and then put on the pair of rinky-dink sunglasses he'd been wearing to be incognito. He marched gleefully away from the house and proceeded down the street.

Why do you need to look like me?

"It's just for fun. Variety is the spice of life."

And sunglasses too?

"Don't you like them?"

Umm… She didn't answer that. At least they were good for blocking UV radiation.

"Check it out, Hinata! This is near the center of Suna, and that was Gaara's house back there. If you head a few blocks that way there's the hospital…and over there's the Administrative Building." He pointed east, "The Academy's over there. Shops and museums…"

Hinata took in the sights, Ohh, look at that little dog!

"I tried petting that one the other day but he was all yippy and bitey. His owner's a grumpy landlady."

What a shame.

"See that? That's the restaurant where Gaara likes to eat gizzards."

He eats-?

"Chicken gizzards. I know! Gross."

Naruto-kun…Her tone lilted with slight pain, I wanted to ask you…why you haven't come home yet? Gaara-kun doesn't plan to keep you forever, does he?

"No, no, no, of course he doesn't!"

It's just…I don't understand. Fujita-kun said you were promoted to Chunin Rank and that Gaara-kun decided to keep you behind. He said that after the Akatsuki's attack on Shiogakure, he didn't want you to go anywhere…

Somehow, even though it felt like his heart might stop, Naruto kept marching with the flow of traffic down the street. He wondered if she could feel the butterflies in his stomach. She could probably sense the beads of sweat gathering on the back of his neck… Why? Why was she asking him this? If she were blindfolded and told to throw for the center bullseye of a target with a dart, could she strike the truth about him just as easily?

I just…wanted to know…

"Gaara's actually showing me some of the ropes of his job, and letting me borrow study resources." Naruto bent the truth for convenience's sake, "I want to join the Sealing Corps in Konoha when I get home."

Really?! Her pitch rose in a squeak.

"Yeah, really! I even practiced prong-seals today."
"That's great! I don't even know what that is!"

"I'll show you later. But also…” Naruto admitted quietly, "Gaara was worried. Since several teams from Sand and Tide were lost after the Akatsuki attack, he didn't want me getting mixed up in it… we're waiting for Ero-sensei to get back to Suna. Then I can travel again—you know, we've got to use the buddy system!"

Yes, the buddy system. Sato-kun swears by it. She agreed, Where did Gama-sennin go?

"Uh…just doing some covert spy stuff. I'm not really supposed to talk about it…” Naruto had to let some of it slip, "But we think the Akatsuki is the reason why Hidden Mist is so messed up. He's trying to set up a military attaché down there to get things under control."

Hinata's silent, static tizzy in his head resounded. She then said, I didn't know Gama-sennin did such dangerous things!

"Ero-sensei's not doing it alone. He has help."

Who in the world would be willing to go there?

He bit his lip, "Haku."

Haku-kun went?!

"He's, like, psycho-brave. And he's no stranger to that area. Uh. You know—missions and stuff."

Does Tsunade-sama—?

"Let's not be loose-lipped with this, alright? It's supposed to be top secret. I'm sure Ero-sensei will tell Baa-chan everything she needs to know about it."

Yes, that's true. I won't say anything, Naruto-kun.

"I know you won't."

Did he seem even a little scared? Haku-kun?

Naruto thought before answering carefully, "I think…he's more scared of what might happen if he didn't go. How bad things might get if the Akatsuki start terrorizing other villages and innocent people…how it could snowball and overwhelm us. Those things scare me too. That's why we can't sit back and suggest someone else go in our place. It has to be us."

The weight of those words plunged them back into quiet contemplation as Naruto neared the end of the road, weaving through the dispersing crowds of the indoor market. Hinata did not share her thoughts, but instead wondered if she was over-reaching with her hypothesis: that Haku was not just spying on the Akatsuki because Jiraiya wanted to gain ground in a dangerous location. Haku might have agreed to do it because he cared for and wanted to protect Naruto, and Naruto was quite possibly a jinchuriki. At least she was reasonably sure. If she brought this up while her boyfriend strolled into the supermarket, he might not have reacted well to her guess, whether or not she guessed correctly. It could wait until he returned to Hidden Leaf.

What shall we do first when you come home? Hinata asked. She continued with her lunch as she retreated from his senses in Suna.

"Oh, it's a date! If you've got nothing else going on, we should go out somewhere!" He tried keeping
his voice down as he navigated towards the produce section.

Yes, I can't wait! There is a restaurant where Neji-nissan and Onee-san always go. They serve cold soba for dipping and I think you will like it.

"Pft! Sure. Heh heh! I forgot he's dating Tenten and he goes on dates and stuff!" Naruto pressed the back of his hand to his mouth, trying not to laugh out loud.

He isn't so different from everyone else, Naruto-kun. Oh! And Neji-niisan was officially promoted to Jounin Rank two days ago.

Astounded, Naruto careened into an aisle endcap of canned macadamia nuts, toppling part of the display. "Whaaaaaat?" He hissed under his breath as he frantically cleaned up. A few other shoppers took pity on the clumsy "cute girl" and helped her stack the containers again.

He had to pass a practical test and get the endorsement of other Jounin before Tsunade-sama decided to promote him. Niisan will be staying with his team, but sometimes he can take solo missions or help other squads as needed.

Naruto scampered over toward produce shelves, examining eggplants and remembering that Kankuro had specified the biggest eggplant he could find. He also kept his voice down to complain, "How can Neji move up that fast? I can still wipe the floor with him!"

He was given several recommendation letters from senior ninja. I was given a recommendation letter too!

"WOO!" Revved-up with excitement, Naruto raised a behemoth eggplant above his head while he cheered.

A passerby snickered at Naruto, "Hey girl, is that more action than you get in a month?"

"Shut your goddamn face you bottom-feeder! I can appreciate a good sale, so stuff your innuendos up your ass!" Wielding Hinata's likeness, Naruto's brief tirade made the ratty-looking shopper scuttle away, "That's right! Crawl back into your basement hideout and read an etiquette manual!"

Naruto-kun—!

"I'll break his fucking nose, I swear…" Puffing, Naruto stomped a short distance to collect cucumbers and sprouts, "Talkin' to you like that! Well, to me. But whatever! Thinks he can score points by mouthing off to women. I wanna see him talk shit when his mom's around!"

Shh! Naruto, you're talking to yourself...

"Muttering angrily in public isn't so unusual here." Naruto defended and then laughed softly, "Gaara does it a lot."

…I see. It's alright now. You sure did make him sorry! She highly approved, Is there anything else you need to shop for?

"Just some shrimp…hey wait! So you got a recommendation! Are you going to take a test?" Naruto circled back on the subject as he dropped bellflower roots into his basket.

Not anytime soon.

"Why not?"
My letter was…misplaced. At home. It's fine. And also, my elders want everyone in the clan to exercise a bit more caution for now.

"Caution? Is it because of that attack recently?" He moved towards the seafood displays.

I don't think it involves that. There is an organization in Konoha called the Root Foundation…and it has been monitoring the Hyuga clan since the Chunin Exam.

Naruto kept his voice to a whisper, "The Root Foundation. What do they do?"

Those are Black Ops units controlled by a Security Director and the Hokage has little to no control over that division.

"Security? Your clan isn't up to no good!" There was a memory that pricked at him, though, "You don't think at your final Tournament battle, when I shared my jutsu with you…if that would concern anyone?"

No one has said much about it since! But I do know that it was noticed. What I could do with the Misago Byakugan… It slowly dawned on Hinata, I didn't think…it was about me. Why should it be?

"Maybe it is." Naruto was feeling edgy again. At the counter, he ordered fresh shrimp when it was his turn and thanked the salesman afterward.

Naruto, if that organization had any concerns why wouldn't they just speak to me? I could explain things…

"Hinata, I don't know if they're actually concerned. No one else can do what you can." He dared forecast a less pleasant possibility, "When there are shinobi with unique powers in a village…and higher-ups or a Kage aren't sure they can control them…they'll do questionable things to contain 'an asset,' or Gaara said something close to that once." At the checkout line, Naruto added, quietly, "So yeah. If this is about you, and not all of your clan, then be extra careful."

Okay. Her appetite had faltered and so a third of her noodle bowl went untouched.

"Cheer up. I'll be home soon." Naruto reminded her, "You know how to look after yourself. And Neji's not going to let this slip past him either, obviously."

No, he won't. She was sure that her cousin was not going to abide by Root's unjustified surveillance.

Naruto wrapped up the payment process and marched out with plastic shopping bags, "When I get home, we'll go to that restaurant you mentioned and we can eat that dipping soba if you want. Or get one of everything! Celebrate. And then, you know, find a quiet spot somewhere…"

…I have a few spots in mind.

"Oh, you do?" He felt his cheeks get hot.

I've thought about it. Ah, I have to be getting to my post now, Naruto-kun! Can I visit you again later?

"Sure! I'll just be doing some cooking and studying this evening." Two visits in one day? He was indeed a spoiled man.

Good! I'll try to catch you when you're in the bathtub again.

"Oh, uh…each resident only gets one wash per day in Hidden Sand…"
Did you take a bath already?

"No."

Then it's a date. She was no longer compelled to conceal her mischievous side, Or I'll visit you while I take a bath.

If Naruto had been wearing a blood pressure cuff, the gauge would have exploded and popped off his arm, "Y-You shouldn't be doing things like that, you know. Clearly you're taking advantage of your mind-hop power—"

But I only do these things with you. Hinata reminded him before the link started to fade, And Naruto, you never said you didn't want me to...

He was safely back at the Kazekage's residence, unaccompanied by his girlfriend's consciousness. She already knew it, but Naruto just had to admit it to himself as he stepped inside and shed his disguise: Hinata was right. He was never going to say he didn't want her to.

It was an early autumn day in Konoha when Lee noticed that Tenten was staring into space. She had given up mid-way through a series of low pu bu stretches and sat on the grassy ground, losing all enthusiasm for Wushu basics. As Lee was a creature devoted to his fitness routines, he continued his stretches while watching his dear friend muse catatonically at the forest surrounding their training field.

Gai-sensei had said he would be back after checking on Kakashi-sensei at the hospital. So no, she was not anxious over his return. Likewise, Grandpa Wong Leung had been quite pleasant at breakfast and overjoyed about Tenten's improving Hanwen conversational skills. So she wasn't troubled over that either.

Lee took several toe-fist-kicks in her direction and stopped beside her, "How long has it been?"

"About 22 hours. Am I being a baby about this?" Tenten sighed.

"I do not think you are. It is natural for you to miss Neji."

"I'm acting weird."

"No. To fret about his first solo assignment as a Jounin seems reasonable to me." Lee dropped into a low pu bu extension again, "Hokage-sama has been handing out many missions over the last few days, so it's important that he do his fair share."

Tenten flopped flat to her back, "How long is our security detail today?"

"Six hours. Post 2 in the west ward."

"And we're reporting there in—?"

"Twenty minutes." He glanced at a digital watch clipped to a gear bag nearby.

"Ugh. I'm sorry that I can't seem to find my personality today, Lee. My stomach acid situation is not good."

"Your personality is definitely intact, Tenten!" Lee planted his hands flat on the ground, leaning forward to brace himself and tuck his legs in, "Grandpa's breakfasts can be harsh on the stomach."
She sat up and was fascinated by Lee's dexterous *Crow Pose*, "Whoa, where'd you learn to do that?"

"Sarutobi Kakima-san is a friend of Grandpa's and she invited us to her yoga classes."

"Are they free?"

"For the trial period."

"Oh, what the heck. I want to try it out too." She attempted the pose but could not raise her feet up without falling sideways. "Maybe Hideyasu will sign up for that class with me…"

Since the pose was a bit beyond Tenten's current flexibility, Lee assisted with getting her into a hand stand which she held until Gai returned. He marveled at his pair of upside-down students. Inspired by their hard work, Gai also assumed a hand stand to give his announcement, "Lee! Tenten! Our gift was a success. Kakashi appreciated it very much."

Tenten craned her head up, "Really? A set of resistance bands and a men's multi-vitamin made him happy?"

"Very much so."

She could hardly believe it.

"And the get well soon card?" Lee was dying to know. He had filled it with energy and health-boosting wishes.

"I read it aloud to Kakashi, which also pleased him." Gai confirmed.

Now that Tenten could just not believe. They held their positions and Tenten briefly wondered what Neji would think if he could see his team now. While her boyfriend was away, Tenten was slowly being converted into another whacky fitness disciple.

"Take your guarding post seriously and be prepared to report for rigorous training tomorrow." Gai advised them chipperly, "I expect Neji will be joining us."

Again, Tenten was not so sure about that. They flipped back to their feet and parted from their Sensei. While on the way to the west side of the village, Tenten considered how there was no concrete indication that Neji would return on time. Truthfully, she had no reason to complain. Before he'd set out the day prior, she spent the morning in bed at her flat, getting delicious attention from him. She could still feel him on her skin.

Worrying felt the same as saying she did not have confidence that Neji could handle this new responsibility, so Tenten had been curtailing the fluttery unease in her chest as much as humanly possible. He could handle it. Neji would not have been promoted otherwise. He had not in the least been concerned yesterday morning while he'd been all over her. His was a challenge of freeing up his schedule so he could fill it with quality time and bedroom tumbles, now that he'd figured out how much he enjoyed them. Logical, she conceded. Neji had said he wanted this mission not just because the Hokage's forces were stretched thin, but because he paid upfront for building permits and was just about broke for the time being. Many approvals were still pending. Tenten sighed at the thought of Neji's decisiveness. Wong Leung and Lee still had no idea what they were planning.

At the west ward post, they relieved the previous pair of on-duty Chunin that dropped out the camouflaged lookout in tall trees, thanking them for their hard work. Lee and Tenten leapt up into perch and settled in. There was space enough for Lee to practice minor stretches, keeping his eyes set on the viewing space between leaves. Tenten paid attention for about an hour before intermittent
conversation lulled, and she retreated into her thoughts again.

Lately, there was a surprising amount of nostalgia gnawing on her. Between her independent work at the Weapon Shop, gradual integration with the Hyuga clan, Chunin-level assignments, and occasional alone time with Neji, she'd catch herself wondering what her life would be like if none of this had happened. Better said, if her parents were still alive and anchoring her. Would she have made any of the same choices that led her here? Would her mother or father have objected? Would they have made things easier and more attainable?

She had sort of mentioned this sentiment in passing to Neji about a week ago, "I wonder…what my Dad would have thought of you…"

He tilted his head to regard her and the out-of-the-blue comment.

"What I mean is— I don't think he'd dislike you. I just wonder what he'd talk about or how he'd try to relate to my boyfriend." Tenten explained quickly, "He could be either incredibly friendly and cosmopolitan…or just silent and watchful when meeting new people. Never mean or standoffish, though. It was hard to know how he'd be in social situations when I was a kid. Dad was a mystery."

"I think…" Neji shut his eyes and smiled, "We would have a lot to talk about."

"How do you figure?"

"Around your flat, his journals and books are everywhere. If you read some of them…you'd know that he had a hard time befriending people his age. Much like I do. That he was only able to fully relax around his teammates, which I can also relate to. And that he knew my father to some extent." Neji reassured her, "A person who is so important to you is not someone who could ever be a stranger to me."

Tenten's heart pounded. Ohh yes, somewhere a small voice in her head sang, she'd chosen well.

But Neji had made a good point. If she wanted to know more, her father had left behind ample material for her to browse and learn about him. And so, the past few days she had spent toting around her father's old leather-bound journal, which had entries dating back to childish scrawl in Hanzi waggled over the first pages. Over time, the writing evolved into the kanji used in the Fire Country. Between her daily tasks Tenten could get some reading done.

Since Lee had no objection to Tenten reading while on watch at their sleepy post, she opened up to a page she had marked.

Apparently, her father Takaharu's experience in transferring to Konoha's Academy as a young child had been an even mix of joyful rollicking and enduring bullies. Right away, his aptitude for Ninjutsu and strategy had gotten him noticed by students and teachers alike. Takaharu had been advanced to a grade level above what he had entered, thus parting him from three other immigrant students he'd come to Konoha with. In turn, Takaharu's shyness had made it more difficult to connect to older, envious students whoquestioned such a promotion. The three Sasagainu friends he had left behind grew more distant, two eventually dropped out of shinobi studies altogether, and the last, Chinatsu, seemed to have a much easier time assimilating into Hidden Leaf's cultural identity.

Tenten noted that many entries at this time longingly recalled Takaharu's mother, Ziyi, who had been killed en route to the Fire Country. Though the details were sparse, he had witnessed his mother fight pursuers with help from her family and Leaf escorts. She had also died in his defense before Biao, Tenten's paternal grandfather, could reach them. Her father could not have been more than six years old at the time. Takaharu had been a highly respectful and subservient child to his lonely father once
Biao's insistence that his son learn from everywhere had yielded interesting results. He consumed poetry and literature whenever school texts were not required reading. Takaharu's natural talent for Fire Tao Arts made channeling chakra for Ninjutsu a much simpler task. After school, he would linger around the game tables in the Han Ethnic Quarter where retired ANBU played shogi. He would fetch snacks or clean store fronts there, sometimes. And sometimes when he won a game, an oldster would teach him a jutsu as a reward. They often did so merely to satisfy their own curiosity about a shy, shrewd prodigy who liked to hang with old folks.

Before long, Takaharu's unusually advanced catalog of techniques was a talking point for many Sensei at the Academy. Many wanted to prohibit what they deemed "reckless" studies. Some wanted to forbid the use of Tao Arts, though Takaharu's application of them was no more effective than a common Supplementary Jutsu.

At the very least, an end was put to his visits at the Ethnic Quarter. He was encouraged to spend more time with classmates, which he did to the best of his ability. At the time, Takaharu also asked his father why Tao Arts were a skill independent of ninja skills.

"Because the Tao is a part of this earth and reality, and Ninjutsu invaded the earth." Biao said.

Tenten looked up and over at Lee, frowning at the back of his head in puzzlement. How could Ninjutsu be considered an invasion? It was the foundation of all that shinobi knew!

"Our people are born with an imbalance in the Tao— too sensitive. Too saturated with Yin." The quote read, "To resist it, our ancestor gave us a Fire Nature: The light always inside of us that we can share. So Ninshu has helped us in some ways, and that is why we dedicate ourselves as ninja."

Takaharu came out of his shell more during his first school year, discreetly keeping an eye on Chinatsu in the grade below. His troubles started in the second year, in which Uchiha Fugaku heard a rumor that there was a junior student more skilled in Fire Release techniques than him. This rumor did not sit well among trainees from the Uchiha clan and they sought to set the record straight.

Takaharu was cornered after school on several occasions. Tenten cringed.

Her father wrote that the beatings were just a part of learning how to fit in. He'd never wanted to stand out in the first place. As per his father Biao's warning about "back-alley fights," Takaharu was made to swear he would never raise a hand against anyone from his new village. And so her father did not fight back. He also refused to show off Fire Release skills even when the angry gaggle of students demanded it and taunted him. It was not until the day that Kizo could no longer ignore his friend's black eyes and bruises that he threw himself at the bullies, fed-up, punches flailing. Once his friend was tackled to the ground and hurt, Takaharu decided to fight back.

The end of the page noted that Fugaku began to take the rumor quite a bit more seriously after that day. Takaharu had even earned a bit of respect from the senior student, who thought it was noble of him only to fight on behalf of a comrade. It made his natural strength and talent "all the more
valuable" since Takaharu "had a good reason to use it." A few months later, Takaharu and Kizo passed the Graduation Exam and were thankfully assigned to a Genin team together. The third slot of the team was filled by Sarutobi Seibi, a quick-witted fellow who made comebacks just as sharp as Kizo's jokes. Takaharu noted that some of his happiest days were those spent under the tutelage of their Jounin Sensei, Mitarashi Isogo. He flourished beside his teammates and made many more friends.

And before she really noticed the passage of time, Tenten glanced up to see the sun had sunk lower in the sky. Their watch would be over soon.

"Lee?"

"Yes, Tenten?" Somehow he was still fresh and attentive.

"When Grandpa talks to you about the Tao, does he ever mention Yin and Yang?"

"Oh yes!"

"What does he say about it?" Tenten asked as she marked her page.

"Many things. All kinds of principles of balance. It is a foundational concept for determining Elemental Chakra Natures as well."

"Does he ever talk about or…does he know if people can be more of one or the other?"

"Discerning that quality is a very subtle skill. However, Grandpa tries to make educated guesses based on clues!" Lee recalled, "He says I am perfectly balanced. That is not so common. Most people are close to a 1:1 ratio of light and dark, though it can vary. Some energy disparities are more extreme and are considered special cases."

Tenten muttered, "I might be a special case."

"Grandpa says you are."

"Mostly Yin? Like, maybe not even a speck of Yang anywhere?"

"He might've mentioned that. But it was only a guess!"

Tenten sighed and rested her cheek in her palm, staring out of the lookout. Wong Leung had a lot of insight, it turned out.

"Grandpa says that Neji is imbalanced in favor of Yang, but it is a slight surplus. That is supposed to explain his irritability."

It sounded like an oversimplification to Tenten, but she could not rule out the assessment. That evening, Chouji and Shikamaru turned up to relieve them of their watch. Tenten bade her teammate goodnight as their paths forked north and east, and she continued her journey uptown towards the Hyuga estate. There was an odd swirling feeling tucked in her ribs. An uneasiness. There were parts of her father, parts of both of her parents, and herself that she had been oblivious to. As though she had never bothered to get to know herself, or had been robbed of the opportunity.

At the estate she changed clothes in her tiny box of a bedroom and ventured past Fujita's room down the way. The door was open so she poked her face inside, "Hey! What are you grinning about?"

Fujita looked up suddenly from what was obviously a letter, "Uh. My friend writes for a…satirical
magazine."

That was a good save but it was still untrue. "That's from your girl in Waterfall, isn't it?"

"...yeah." He slouched from his seat on the floor atop a zabuton cushion.

Tenten smiled at him, "Does she actually write for a magazine?"

"Fū submits her joke articles, but nothing's been published so far." Fujita rolled up his correspondence, "We're just pen pals."

She leaned on the doorframe and folded her arms, "Don't sound so forlorn like you're a star-crossed lover or something..."

"I'm not!" His cheeks puffed, "It's just...she recently came back from a mission to the Hidden Star Village and told me about it. Said she wants to see the Hidden Leaf Village too...but the Hokage isn't entertaining any requests from Hidden Waterfall right now."

"Well, Tsunade-sama is up to her eyeballs in security threats. Can you blame her?"

"No, of course not. It's that...if I put in a request to see Fū it'd just get denied."

"Right. Because you need to have a good reason to travel to Takigakure. The leader of that village isn't going to let a rando mingle with their jinchuriki at a time like this. Both of our villages are on edge."

"I know. But if we formalized an agreement like the one we have with Suna, we could look out for one another!"

Tenten was amused, "Maybe. Have you ever acted as an envoy before to try to persuade foreign counselors?"

"...no..."

"Me neither. We're not exactly suited for that kind of job."

"But I want to—!"

"I know, I know. Come on. We don't want to keep Mom and Dad from dinner." Tenten took a backwards step out of the room.

Fujita hopped up from the floor and followed after her down the corridor. He was quite pleased that Tenten was comfortable enough to refer to her adoptive parents so informally. And the evening meal was a cordial affair, particularly since Kayato led off with the tale of organizing costume work for a film depicting the legendary Sanada Ten Braves. Her outfit designs from the Chunin Exam had gotten noticed by a studio executive.

"Wouldn't be the first time!" Hideyasu noted merrily as he worked around bones in a fish fillet.

Fujita poured tea for his mother, "That's great, Mom. Will you have to travel for work?"

"I might. We'll see what kind of contract they send me." Kayato sighed, "But with there being a lot of rogue ninja activity, I'm not so eager to set foot outside of Hidden Leaf right now."

Her husband echoed the sentiment as he nodded and chewed.
"Every twelve to eighteen hours we've been on watch duty." Tenten was referring to herself and Fujita, "But soon Hokage-sama will have to end the security alert. The intruder that snuck in is long gone by now. I don't think they'd double back with there being such much presence on by-pass routes and vulnerable areas. We're turning a blind eye to everything else while in this state."

"Which most certainly is a problem." Hideyasu gestured with his chopsticks, "But the Hokage thinks it is better to defend our own vulnerabilities and outsource external missions to allies like Suna. If any teams from Sand were here as sentinels, this breach would be a grave concern to Suna's counselors. They might think the Kazekage were showing favoritism if he allocated a large portion of his own forces to protect Konoha. The idea is that we should be able to defend ourselves." He took another bite of food, "But Tao Arts have proven to be a unique threat."

"Very few people can use them." Tenten reminded him.

"Even one is enough to stymie several Jounin who can't stop a Tao Art. We can't be overconfident." He held out a plate of spicy eggplant in sauce to his adoptive daughter, "Have you tried this? You're gonna love it."

She gave it a try and was impressed with the dish.

"…hey, Dad?" Fujita was popping mushrooms into his mouth one by one, a bit timid about addressing his father.

"Yes, Fujita."

"What would it take to suggest a formal alliance with a smaller village?" He asked.

"About what it took for Shiogakure to get an alliance with us: a lot of money and trade deals."

"But who pitches the idea?"

"Silver-tongued business people." Hideyasu chuckled.

"Well, it's something I've been thinking about."

Hideyasu exchanged a boggled look with his wife. Tenten sat by and ate, not driven to interrupt her adoptive brother in his mousy quest.

"I think now is a great time to reach out to Takigakure to fortify our defenses against the Akatsuki." Fujita sat a bit straighter, "And I think Kitano-sama is a better businessman than I am, so I want to ask him to help me set up an assembly with Waterfall's leader and advisory council. The Taketori clan would assist us with this sort of thing, right?"

"Whoa, well, first of all…" Hideyasu set his drink down after a sip, "You need authorization from the Hokage to approach another village, which is also reviewed by our village's advisory council. Then they get to decide which emissaries are sent to Waterfall, but since it was your idea I'm reasonably sure they'd send you and our Taketori vassals."

"So, you think maybe it could happen?"

"I don't know!" His father was smiling widely, "But it'd be cool if my kid organized an alliance."

"We already have a good track record with Hidden Waterfall." Tenten backed the claim up, "So even if there isn't a lucrative trade deal attached to it, the additional defenses might be a selling point."
Hideyasu and Kayato tittered proudly.

Fujita steeled his resolve, "How do I submit my request to the Hokage and her council?"

"In a very nice looking entreaty on letterhead parchment. I'll have Arisu-san go over it with you to spiff it up." Hideyasu offered, "Then we'll see what happens. I'll also give Magan-sama the heads up about your idea. I'm sure he'd be happy to work with us and give this project to Kitano."

"Thank you, Dad!"

The two flashed goofball smiles at each other while Kayato shook her head, always tickled by their antics. When the meal wound down and Hideyasu agreed to play a few rounds of *Koi-Koi* with Fujita on the porch, Kayato had a suspicious, motherly eye trained on Tenten as they retreated further into the house, "Seems to me like you don't want to chat and watch me work on embroidery."

"It's not that…I just…haven't been feeling right today." Tenten motioned at her ribcage where the slogging feeling persisted.

Kayato pressed the back of her hand to Tenten's forehead and cheeks, cool to the touch, "You aren't sick— maybe out of sorts, is that it?" She rubbed the girl's back, "Because you miss Neji."

"Nah, it's not really that either." She was handling Neji's absence rather well.

"Oh! I won't tell him you didn't miss him." Kayato laughed softly, "Get some sleep then. You'll have another long day tomorrow."

"Most likely."

"If there's anything you ever want to talk about, I've got a keen set of ears." She gave Tenten a warm squeeze before proceeding towards her work room, "Goodnight, dear."

"Goodnight." Tenten stopped at her bedroom door and watched the wonderful woman disappear down the corridor. Even though she could never get her own mother back, Kayato was a wellspring of love and wisdom Tenten hoped to one day deserve.

There was no need to flip the light switch on. Tenten sealed the door, redressed in sleep clothes, and wrestled a futon out of a cupboard to lay it flat on the floor. Her body felt like lead as she sunk onto the bedding, still cognizant of the internal twinge that had plagued her for most of the day. With her eyes shut, the dimness was calm and cloying. Everything under her fingertips felt unusually plush. Silk pajamas had been a luxurious gift from Kayato, but they hadn't yet kissed her skin like this— on a night she'd been so dog-tired.

Her thoughts circled the drain: Softness. Letterhead. Spicy Eggplant. Red leaves on trees. What was Neji doing? A weapon order was due next week. Her stomach swirling. Her dad's beautiful handwriting. Hand stands. Hand stands.

Sleep was deep and voluminous, a shade of green so dark it was nearly black like the ocean bottom, swaying with strands of deep sea kelp. Tenten could drown in it, but she held still in the pitch and breathed it in. After all, the dark wanted her there. They were made of the same thing.

Fingers touched her forehead so she cracked an eye open, though she couldn't see much.

"I'm here."

Oh yeah. Apparently he was here. *You know, "he,"* Her brain was jogged, *The very important one.*
Her eyes cooperated a bit more. Tenten blinked up in the dimness at Neji as he leaned over to examine her, as if her choice to opt for an early bedtime and not wait up for him was most peculiar. Whatever time it was, she knew it was later at night. He sat on the edge of the futon and waited for some sort of response.

A soft, cracking coo sound escaped her before she could form words, "It's still soft."

"What is?"

"Everything."

Judging by Neji's facial expression, he was happy to see her and amused by her sleep-delirious communication.

Tenten asked in a croak, "Am I awake?"

"In some capacity, you are. I wanted you to know that I'm here."

"Back from your mission. It went well?"

"It went well."

"Hmm." She scrunched her eyes, "Lee made me do hand stands."

"Ah." He hummed. It was almost a chuckle. Neji bent down to kiss her; she was slow and clumsy under his mouth.

Tenten grunted in appreciation. There was no way she could stay awake, but all the same it was great to know Neji was home safe. His kisses definitely tasted like someone who'd been away for a while and missed her. That was nice.

He sat up again and said, "I'll clean up and sleep. Don't leave for training without me, in the morning."

"Don't you want to take the morning off?"

"No. I'm not that tired."

"I am." As if it were not plain to see how worn she was.

"In the morning, usual time." It was a gentle command. Quiet like a night breeze, Neji left the room and shut the door.

Then she was back in the heavy dark. A fraction of an hour passed before her sleep became less restful, and Tenten woke to find her face pressed into the polished hardwood floor. She raised her head slowly to glance around.

Somehow, she'd rolled off of her wide futon and ended up near the wall of the room— it was no typical distance for a snoozing individual to cover. Tenten slept still as a board most nights. She rubbed a spot of drool from her lip and crawled back onto her futon, unconcerned with the random relocation. She slipped back into the dense slumber.

The midnight of her mind pooled and dripped over objects unseen, a tenuous chiaroscuro. It was an interesting, shaded dreamscape. Then, the top of her head tapped something. She was barely awake. It was hard for Tenten to move her sluggish limbs. She raised her hand to examine the object behind her head, feeling cool, flat metal. When she stretched her legs, she could feel the wood paneling of a
wall beneath her bare feet.

'This is weird.' A blip of a thought. The dimensions of her room weren't like this. Though she was living in a shoebox habitation, it wasn't this bad. Had the walls closed in? It didn't feel like she had dreamt it. She'd just rolled over again to get comfortable, and then the room no longer felt right. She patted her hand again on the unknown surface behind her. 'What's this thing? Feels like a bucket or a...I don't know. Must be big. This wasn't here before...'

It was still pitch dark when she opened her eyes, as to be expected of late night. Though, wasn't there a window in her room? Not much good came of trying to move her leaden body, and since there seemed to be no life-threatening peril, Tenten shut her eyes again to drift to sleep. Maybe it was a nutty dream caused by that eggplant dish at dinner time?

A door slid aside with a clack, which was slightly jarring, but she stayed bunched in a ball because comfort levels were peaking.

"Tenten."

Oh great. That voice didn't sound pleased. She wriggled back to consciousness as best she could, blearily looking up the faint light of the hallway on her left, where Neji's silhouette blocked the doorway.

"What are you doing?"

"Sleeping." Why did she have to explain herself?

Something in his voice was sharp with alarm. Come to think of it, it didn't feel like her futon was under her anymore. She was back on hardwood. It helped that Neji bent down to scoop her up and quickly figured out she was in no state to walk due to sleep paralysis. That was another clue. She hadn't been sleep-walking.

"You," He said as he carried her through a dark hallway, "Were in the facilities closet."

"Ah, no." She was waking up more, "I'm in bed. What are you doing here? Bothering me."

"You are on the west side of the house."

Tenten entered into a half-baked state of concern, because she knew her bedroom was in the east wing, closer to where Hideyasu, Kayato, and Fujita resided. Had he said facilities closet? She'd been patting the boiler in the dark, trying to figure out what it was. That's just sad.' Also— what?

"How did I...?" She stopped to yawn. She didn't remember bringing herself to a closet on the far side of the mansion.

At the turn near the front of the house, Neji hesitated to continue eastbound. He was thinking. His shoulder was somewhat comfortable so she rested her cheek on it.

"If you're left alone you might Shadow Step again."

"Pff. I don't do that."

"I know you don't." His voice was low and warm, consoling, "You don't realize what you do when you sleep, but I saw you."

"...checked on me—?" Another yawn, "Before you...go t'bed?"
He back tracked slightly and decided, no, putting a sleepy, shadow-travelling person back where she started just might produce the same result. Tenten didn't seem at all aware of what was actually going on. In his room, which was on the ground floor with southward facing windows, Neji deposited her on the moonlit side of the bed. Hopefully she wouldn't roll in any shadows.

He flopped down in exhaustion beside the snoring woman and wondered what good it would do to keep watch over Tenten. He almost hadn't believed it when he saw it with the Byakugan, before settling down for the night: Tenten disappeared from view in her room, and reappeared in a west-wing closet.

Based on Hinata's descriptions of Huo's ability in the Exam, and Tenten's common lineage with the brute, Neji had always reserved the possibility in the back of his mind. That Tenten might one day use a Tao Art. What he had witnessed, however, was not by any means intentional. Tenten had tapped into something subconsciously.

Neji stretched out his arm to encircle her middle and pressed himself into Tenten's back. This wasn't exactly allowed. If the eyes of any senior member of the clan noticed him cozying up to a person he wasn't married to, he'd catch an earful over it. There were strict lines of propriety in the Hyuga clan, and bedrooms were not spaces for co-mingling. Though, he had no untoward intentions, and only sought to ensure Tenten did not wake up in the morning hugging a hot water boiler. It was just for now.

Besides, he had ran himself ragged on a reconnaissance mission. Maybe overdoing it on his first Jounin assignment was unnecessary. Most people Neji worked with were consistently impressed. He only wanted to feel Tenten breathing slowly and remember why and what he endeavored for. Even in sleep, he could remember.

Neji's waking instincts reacted shortly before morning sunlight brushed his face. He coiled and stretched where he lay and, ah, yes, there she was. Unmoved and tucked into him, Tenten's head was heavy on the edge of a flattened pillow. Where her shirt rode up, his fingertips danced along the skin of her stomach. She didn't smell like a garden or bright honeyed things, but there was something that was so unequivocally her when a lock of Tenten's unbound hair passed under his nose. How long had he known it? The scent was familiar now.

She wasn't stirring naturally like she usually did at this hour. Maybe Tenten had been serious about skipping the early morning routine? If they did, they would probably make up for training later. The shadowy journey she had taken in the night was not conducive to productivity, Neji figured. And also, he preferred holding her and mapping the layout of bones and muscles beneath her skin, tracing his hand over her slight features. He indulged in the exploration for a while, a traveler all through her landscapes, his fingers retreating when she shifted or twitched at a touch. Neji finally spread his hand flat on her hip, and waited for a persistent but unusable erection to pass.

It didn't take any palmistry on his part to know that she would stay asleep if left undisturbed. Since he had learned how naturally generous he was these last few months, Neji elected to let Tenten be. His only selfish concession was a set of cloud-soft kisses along her neck and behind her ear. That would have to hold him over. Then Neji padded a quilt around Tenten before rising up, listening to the crack of his knees as he moved across the room. His hair didn't require much brushing before he dressed, frequently glancing back at the object of his affection. She wasn't going to disappear. Whatever had overcome her in the night had ceased in his presence.

Within the house there was a frenzy of activity as cleaning and meal preparation efforts escalated before noon-time. Based on what a staff member had to chirped to Neji as an explanation, "The
Head of the Aburame clan will be here for an in-house meeting with Hiashi-sama and Hideyasu-sama."

This was news to Neji, "Why?"

"To make amends for some rude remarks that circulated, and were not denied by Taketori clansmen."

"Rude remarks..." Neji muttered, wondering who in the Hyuga wanted to bad-mouth an allied clan leader. The Branch member raced away to prepare a tea room for occupation. He had a feeling he wouldn't be able to access a typical breakfast this morning.

When he rounded the corner, Hanabi stomped up to him, "You'd think the daimyo himself was coming here for an audience. Someone stepped on my foot!"

"You know better than to get in their way."

"I was just minding my own business, I wasn't in the way!" She surmised that Neji was also after a morning meal, so they circumnavigated towards a porch exit, preparing to breakfast in the ancillary house, "Did you go upstairs, Onii-san?"

"I didn't—"

"Don't. There's no need. I already caught her a third time, she's really got no shame..."

Neji was not sure he knew to whom Hanabi was referring.

She cleared it up, "Hinata, that's who. My big sis has been linking her mind with her boyfriend. Constantly! It's so annoying. Every time I tried to talk to her after her mission yesterday, it was Naruto-this! Naruto-that! Can't you tell a rival of yours to bug off for a while, hmm?"

"I would not call Naruto a rival." Neji assessed honestly, "He's my friend."

"Yeah, well I don't think you'd say that if you knew what a relentless flirt he is! Spouting romance that could gag a poet. And my sister eats it up!" Hanabi stepped up to a covered porch.

"A...flirt...?" Neji did not appreciate this update.

"You really ought to watch out for him, Onii-san. He's the determined type. I couldn't handle someone like that— not that I need attention from a boy, pff— no! I don't want to sigh and trade wistful looks, it's way too stupid."

"Hanabi..."

"...I didn't say anything." She retracted the incriminating remark as she sat at a table, "I didn't say anything..."

"You want me to police what Naruto is up to, but it sounds to me like you've got your own entanglements." Neji kept his voice lowered so his aunt Hizome's youngsters, Tsukuru and Hirokazu, wouldn't overhear the exchange as they played nearby with spinning tops.

"I have no entanglements!" Hanabi hissed quietly, "I have a dead-end interest, there's a difference! No harm, no foul! You have an entanglement in your bed right now, Onii-san!"

Neji warned her, "And you won't be speaking one word about it." Leave it to the meddlesome whip of a girl to use her Byakugan and dig up morning gossip.
"You know better!"

"Of course I do."

"Then why break the rules?" Hanabi reached for a plate of croquettes on the tea table and began pounding them back. Ha! She had her cousin cornered, teetering on the edge of hypocrisy.

Sitting straight-backed, Neji clarified the situation, "Do you question my honor? I've done nothing improper. Tenten was Shadow-Stepping in her sleep."

Halfway through a bite of food, a croquette dropped back onto a plate as Hanabi processed the claim.

"I found her in the boiler closet."

"No you didn't."

"It's true."

"But only that horrible piece of trash from the Exam can Shadow Step!" Hanabi was trying and failing to keep her voice down, "He almost killed my sister!"

"Relax. This has nothing to do with Huo. Tenten's family can use Tao Arts too."

"Hmf." Hanabi's emotional eating resumed.

"Tenten didn't go anywhere after I stayed with her."

"What'd you have to do? Tie her down?" The joke was very uncouth, and Hanabi almost regretted it, but she did adore the furious and mortified look on her cousin's face.

Neji needed a moment to gather some composure to threaten the firebrand, "Test me again and I'll have Gai-sensei tutoring you for the next twelve months."

Hanabi cleaned the plate and replied, "I'd rather plunge headfirst into hell, thank you very much."

"You'd get no such mercy from me."

"Yeesh, you're scary. Fine. So don't do anything about Naruto and my sister. See what happens!" She shrugged it off, "And isn't it weird that your girlfriend used a Tao Art? Should we be worried about that?"

"There's nothing to worry about." Neji capped it definitively as the young Branch boys came indoors for the larger spread of food that was served, and aunt Hizome also joined them at the table for a meal.

"Are things a bit busy on your side of the property?" Hizome noticed, "Alright, eat a little and then get lost! This is my family's food! Nyozeka hasn't eaten yet and he has a mission today."

They did as she asked and took a pauper's serving each before politely excusing themselves. Hanabi, somehow, caused no further mischief before she left estate grounds for the Academy.

Neji crossed the lawn back to the Main House and returned to his room through the porch door. As he stepped inside, he could see Tenten rising lethargically into a sitting position. Like a dizzy eaglet in a nest, she blinked at the unusual environment and tried to piece together what landed her in such a nicely-appointed room. An amazing, elated feeling tickled his insides. This was perfect. Seeing her
like this was perfect.

Tenten fussed at the collar of her sleep shirt, "Mn. Mornin'…"

"Good morning." He bent down and balanced his arms on either side of her, taking a sleepy kiss from Tenten while he could get it. The pressure of Neji's mouth on her own nearly fooled her into looping her arms 'round his neck and reeling him in, but Tenten thought better of it.

"You're trying to get me in trouble…" She pushed back on his shoulders and kicked the quilt off, "I got the anti-cohabitation memo, Neji; didn't you? And though I may have fantasized about your bed several times, Hideyasu says don't commit the crime if you can't do the time…"

"I wasn't going to—"

"You're pitching a tent." Tenten pointed out the slant in his bottoms as she crawled away from her sleeping spot, then stood to stretch. Neji frowned at her for drawing attention to his (mostly) involuntary bodily functions.

She glanced around again, "Say…how did I get here?"

"I brought you to my room last night."

A small gasp, "Were you actually trying to put the moves on me—?"

"No." Neji halted her allegations, "You really don't remember?"

"Being kidnapped in the night—?"

"You Shadow-stepped into the facilities closet. That's where I found you." He brought her up to speed.

Tenten stilled at the edge of his bedroom, her expression calcifying with serious consideration. Her eyes shifted left, then right, before she pressed her hand against a shadow on the wall cast by Neji as he stood illuminated by a window. Tenten only devoted a few seconds to focusing, pushing and grunting before she decided, "Well, if I did, I don't know what the on/off switch for it is." Tenten tapped her foot in a shaded patch before she promptly gave up and left the room, adding over her shoulder, "I'll meet you outside in ten minutes."

In truth, Neji would have been more surprised if Tenten had instantly found the means to tap into a dormant ability. The trigger for it was still elusive, though she had not called him a liar or denied what may have happened in the night. She was more casual about her dismissal. And though he did not want to think much about what Hanabi had said over breakfast, he did feel ill-at-ease over Tenten's one-off use of Tao Art. What was the range of it? Could she transport herself unknowingly into danger? Did she make herself more vulnerable when she did so? What if he wasn't around the next time it happened?

He made his bed with military precision, and then outfitted himself with the few weapons and scrolls he needed before stepping out onto the engawa. Neji remembered some of the other curious things Hanabi had mentioned.

Hinata was in frequent contact with Naruto, thanks to the newly named Samanvaya technique she used with the Misago Byakugan. Neji had been aware that she could reach Naruto that way, but never gave much thought to how often his cousin was linking her mind and senses to Naruto's. Apparently, the answer was a lot. He was not upset by this information, nor the implication that Naruto was "a flirt" because that behavior wasn't unlike his usual extroversion, only now he'd
focused that energy on one intended recipient, and, well, 'That's as it should be.' Naruto had no impure intentions for his cousin, of this Neji was very sure.

And the other thing Hanabi had mumbled about—a one-sided affection for someone! And that she excused herself of all wrongdoing because her feelings were unrequited by whoever it was. 'Frankly, someone her age should not feel romantically about anyone.' Even if her Graduation Test was scheduled for the end of the week, Neji would forever see that girl as a child, especially when she acted like one. Maybe his uncle needed to be informed? No. No good could come of it. Hanabi often dug her own holes and accepted the consequences when the backlash hit.

Gosh, this family kept him busy. These days Neji was exceedingly fond of them, and felt disappointed that he'd distanced himself from clan relatives when he'd been younger. The more he opened his heart up, the more genuine his desire to better and protect his clan felt. That ambition had been so half-assed back in his Academy days, to borrow a term from Naruto.

Tenten appeared again wearing her standard red and white cheongsam, weapon holsters in place, and Fujita was trotting out of the house excitedly beside her. He had official-looking Hyuga clan correspondence in his hand.

"Fujita is going to accompany us to the Administrative Building, since he has a proposal to submit. I want to vouch for his idea too before we check in and see if any missions are scheduled…" Tenten explained, trailing off into a yawn as she covered her mouth.

"What sort of proposal?" Neji asked as they walked off the property together.

"I wanted to suggest an alliance between Leaf and Waterfall." Fujita announced.

Neji did not even blink, "We have an informal truce."

"But I think something formal is better! They're a small village…"

"And so they don't have much to offer." Neji was playing devil's advocate unconsciously.

"Lee-kun said that Waterfall's leader wants to develop relationships with the five Great Villages. And it isn't so far away from Hidden Leaf!" Fujita tried again.

"Arguably, Waterfall is closer geographically to Rock." Neji countered, just based on pure observation.

Fujita's face fell. Tenten saw this and discreetly pinched the back of Neji's arm to alert him to the downward trajectory of the conversation. He frowned at the slight pain and she frowned at his frown.

"I don't say any of this to discourage you, but these are things that our council will notice." Neji tried to salvage what he could, "And your motivations to ally with Takigakure seem to be…more personal." He didn't want to bring up that he knew Fujita was enamored with the jinchuriki in Waterfall.

"I guess so. It would take time to see any real economic impact through a formal agreement, that's what Arisu-san told me. And…it might benefit Waterfall more than Leaf, which councilors may not like…" Fujita supposed, "But the overall benefit is still important. Militarily, anyway. No village wants jinchuriki to be taken by the Akatsuki. And villages that work together can prevent that from happening."

Tenten nodded, "At least that benefits both villages."
Neji was still skeptical, "Would the Hokage really want to risk the lives of her ninja to protect another village's—?"

"She already did!" Fujita grew impatient, "The Hokage agreed to the same thing with the Tide Village, so there's a precedent."

"It didn't work." Neji reminded him.

Tenten sensed that her adoptive younger brother was about to blow his lid. She watched Fujita stomp ahead of them, growling, "Onii-sama you don't know everything. There's still a chance! A chance that we can save them! What about our village's jinchuriki? Don't you think we should care about that person too? We've got to do something!"

Neji blinked as the young man crossed the street in a hurry, rushing through the building's entrance to get a head start on meeting with the Hokage. Tenten cleared her throat beside Neji to get his attention as they walked. He looked at her, realizing he'd unnecessarily incensed Fujita.

A smile of concern tilted Tenten's lips, "Why do you have to shit on him, Neji?"

"I…didn't mean to."

"He's young. If he's going to fail, don't hand him a list of all the ways he can do it. Let Fujita make his own list so he can look at it and grow from it." Tenten recommended, "Isn't that what you had to do?"

"Yes." He admitted.

"That's what I thought. I could probably fill an entire Tool Scroll if I wrote down all the things I screwed up." Tenten imagined.

This notion fascinated Neji. Tenten, as the wise and rational individual he regularly depended on, was not one he'd peg for rampant mistake-making. He could think of no example. In his mind, Tenten's record was pristine, but that was probably because love tweaked his recollection of her past errors. Neji watched her face interestedly as she led the way into the Administrative Building, and then up the main stairwell.

When they arrived at Tsunade's office and knocked once at the door, the Hokage barked for them to enter. Neji and Tenten did so and discovered Fujita beside Tsunade's desk, more composed and calm than he'd been before. Tsunade had the entreaty unwound in front of her, tapping her nail on a particular block of information.

She acknowledged the visiting pair briefly, "Just a moment, you two." Tsunade turned to Fujita, "Your reasoning is a bit shaky to say the least, but a few good points have been made. Do you know Waterfall's jinchuriki personally?"

"Yes, ma'am." Fujita confirmed.

"I see." Tsunade reached for a drawer and extracted an official seal from it, "I'll let you present this to the council this afternoon. I have no idea how they'll react but I can say that I have no objection to fortifying bonds with Hidden Waterfall. In spite of the recent attack on the Tide Village, we've made a fortune off of trade with them already. Things didn't go as planned, but the relationship is stable. Stability has value. There are also a few Tide ninja who liaise with our council, who may warm Leaf dignitaries to this idea of yours." She stamped the parchment and rolled up the scroll, handing it back to Fujita, "I hope it goes well."
He bowed respectfully without smiling too much, "Thank you, Tsunade-sama."

"We'll circle back on this tomorrow." She told Fujita as he exited the office. He flashed a stage one complete! face at his elders before hurrying out.

Tsunade then leveled her stare on Neji and Tenten, "Every time I see the two of you I think of what is possible through sheer perseverance."

"Um. Thank you." Tenten said.

"Are there any assignments you have for us?" Neji pressed on.

"Not as a team. Individually, yes. Minor tasks." Tsunade stowed away her official seal again, "The security alert has ended, though we'll still have increased patrols. I've called back two search teams that did not find any evidence of an intruder outside of the village. Thus far." She pointed to Neji, "Can you do me a favor? It isn't exactly a mission."

Neji nodded and Tsunade went on, "Sarutobi Asuma's injuries are healed, for the most part. He asked to postpone Sato's Jounin Evaluation that's scheduled for tomorrow. I want to grant Asuma time off, but I honestly don't think he needs it." She sighed, "Either you substitute for him at the Evaluation, which I am not cancelling, or convince him that he's being dramatic and he can still handle one measly test. I'm already prepared to promote Sato and I have work for him, but I need the certifications over and done with."

Wow. Neji already knew that he did not want to substitute for an Evaluation after dealing with Hatake Sato during the Chunin Exam. Neither was he sure that he could say anything to motivate Asuma, but as a fellow and novice Jounin, maybe he could gently shame the veteran into it? He could try. With that, Neji told the Hokage, "I'll do what I can to convince him, Hokage-sama."

"See that you do. Asuma is on the first floor waiting for his students. Strike up a conversation." Tsunade then beckoned Tenten closer, "You stay here with me, please. I'll send you downstairs shortly."

On the way out of the office, Neji glanced over his shoulder once at Tenten, wondering what she was needed for. When the door shut behind him, the Hokage leaned back in her desk chair and let her confident airs drop. This change tightened the muscles in Tenten's neck and back. She tried reading the village leader's expression and body language while waiting in silence, but Tenten could not decipher much.

"You can sit if you want." Tsunade noted an armchair recently set in front of her desk.

"Is everything alright, Tsunade-sama?" She asked hopefully as she took a seat.

"No. And I don't want to unload everything on you. The Hokage first and foremost should get a grip on the most alarming of threats…but sometimes these things must trickle down. I can't let you be uninformed about what's been going on." Tsunade adjusted her position to rest her elbows on the desktop, "I don't know much about Tao Arts or the ones that use them. Because of the attacks on this village, I've had to better understand why we have the attention of a rogue cell in the first place."

It was good that she chose to sit. She'd be fidgeting if she was still standing. Tenten felt her palms get clammy as she flattened them on armrests, "It's for the same reason my parents had their attention."

"The Sandaime left behind a written record that detailed Konoha's past conflict with Dintei Bi and his followers. From what I understand, they were of a cadet family to the main branch of your clan,
formerly based in the Earth Country. After a coup that deposed the main...and killed most other bystanders, Bi tried saving face with the Tsuchikage by eliminating Iwa's enemies during the war. After a time that arrangement was no longer favorable, and the Third Tsuchikage called for his arrest. Naturally, Bi decided to disappear instead." Tsunade tried to condense the tale, "And he was not unaware that a few survivors took refuge in the Fire Country, which was part of an armistice trade of prisoners the Tsuchikage sanctioned. At that point, he dedicated his time and energy to hunting these refugees."

"He didn't miss a mark." Tenten noted morbidly.

"Could you please not say it like that?" Tsunade grumbled, "You're still here. For good or ill."

"We both know that it probably isn't good when Konoha has already dealt with collateral damage." A withered breath escaped Tenten, "Back when my...parents were killed...I'd already thought about turning myself over."

"You were a child." Tsunade reminded her, "And you were upset."

"I still think about it."

"You were a child. And children think stupid things because every problem must have a simple solution." The Hokage bent forward and curled her fingers, "The martyr attitude can't resolve much when your willing demise would only cause more issues. For one: the weapons you have."

"Clan weapons, yeah." Tenten acknowledged what Tsunade was getting at.

"They're Tao Weapons."

"I...guess?" She hadn't given it too much thought.

"So they are only useful to a certain sort, and are potently dangerous. The Third felt it was more responsible to let you maintain ownership over these weapons as opposed to locking them away or ransoming them. If Bi acquired them, he could do far more damage to any target if they were at his disposal." Tsunade reasoned, "I agree that it is ideal for you to be better armed than our enemy."

"Maybe that's one upside, but I still need to point out that I'm outnumbered."

"Outnumbered? The Leaf Village's forces can rout a band of eleven."

"But Leaf struggles to deal with Tao Arts, and Bi's subordinates rely on ambushes, not full-frontal confrontations. That's why no one's been able to counter them so far. And maybe that method is being imitated by the Akatsuki—"

"No matter their methods, they can't win. They're already at a disadvantage." The Hokage had to have her say, "Nukenin and rogue groups target individuals in this village more often than you realize, and will pick off affiliated villagers as a taunt. Turning you over, or turning those weapons over is simply out of the question. The Hyuga clan would never stand for it."

That touched a very sore spot of Tenten's, prompting her to nearly shriek, "Don't bring them into this." She sat back and apologized faintly, "Please. I don't want them to. It's bad enough..."

"What's bad enough-?" Tsunade laced her hands under her chin.

Tenten boiled over again, "—it's bad enough that Hikune's dead!"
"I know." Tsunade replied evenly.

"I won't let it happen to anyone else. I should've thought more—"

"Maybe you should've," Tsunade agreed harshly, "Thought more. Thought more about the jeopardy you've brought upon one of this village's chieftain clans. And that you have not yet openly discussed this predicament with its leadership. It's not my place to meddle in a delicate matter like that, but I've thought more than once about saying something."

Winded by the gruff reality that the Hokage had flung at her, Tenten sunk into the backrest and tried to breathe. Had she been pontificating about mistakes earlier? What would she have to say on the subject now?

"I don't want you to lead a life of solitude in the hope it spares others from Bi's wrath, because it most likely won't. Nor do I think it is fair of you to imperil the Hyuga clan without it knowing the scope of your circumstances." Tsunade made it clear, "But I want you to take more responsibility. Even if that means you preemptively strike these rats at their source, I'd rest easier knowing you'd do that in the defense of Konoha."

She felt her face get hot, her throat tight, "Of course I would."

"You have two of the three heirloom weapons, is that right? Well, I would prefer it if you had them all." The Hokage sat up straighter, "And that you make those men sorry they ever dared to look for you."

"I don't know where to find the last one..." Tenten swallowed some of her grief, "I never even thought to—"

"I do." Tsunade said.

The young woman stilled in her seat and stared at the Hokage, desperate in her attention.

"I have some intelligence from a reliable informant that the weapon, Chōten, has been tracked through the hands of various owners and is for sale. Not very many realize what it actually is, or what it can do for a particular wielder." Tsunade explained, "One of the Fourth Hokage's contemporaries has been following it. Now that he's pinpointed Chōten, I've asked him to retrieve it for me."

"How soon?"

"Within the next month or so, we'll see how that mission pans out. Though I am sure that what we've heard did not escape the ears of Dintei Bi either." The Hokage rubbed her chin thoughtfully, "So you'll stay here and I'll keep you informed of how it turns out."

"Alright." Unable to handle her restless legs, Tenten stood to fidget, "I might...be able to use Tao Arts. On my own."

"Then learn how. You're better equipped than other shinobi to deal with this threat in every sense. And as you said, this faction may have common interests with the Akatsuki. If we have an opportunity to put an end to Huo, Bihokokuni, and the rest...I intend to take it." Tsunade told her, "It isn't easy knowing how many in this village depend on you to act in their defense. I too have lost sleep over it, Tenten. So please do as I've asked and make certain that the Hyuga clan is willing to stick its nose in this conflict, and if it isn't— accept that."

"I will." The full body sweat Tenten had been fighting dampened her top considerably.
"I have no tasks for your team for the next two days, but if that changes you'll hear of it." Tsunade dismissed her after that.

Tenten woodenly walked out of the office, pondering how the most distinguished role model in her life ground her face into the mud of a crisis she had tried to ignore. She was a sweatball, breathing shallowly, hyper-aware of each person she had encountered in the last 48 hours and how she could not risk inaction. Their lives were still at stake no matter how safe she felt. All because they were bonded to her.

The stairwell was vacant as she took rigid steps down, trying to grasp something that had tormented her father his whole life. Surely she would find it in his journal if she looked— how he tried to find ways to minimize the damage. Tried not to risk the lives of those who knew him. Tenten stopped on a landing before reaching the second floor. If she returned to the lobby and saw Neji there, she might bite her tongue off. If only to avoid spilling the unfortunate truth in a public place, choked on her emotions, Tenten wished to stage some diversion to avoid bringing it up. At least until she had processed her distress.

‘If I’d…really examined the big picture when it started to come together…’ She took several breaths through her nostrils, ‘I would've known that…I shouldn't have started something with Neji. I shouldn't have gotten close to anyone, really, but it felt like if I didn't then I'd have nothing.’ Which was the crux of it, so to speak. Having something to lose was as much of a gamble as having nothing to live for. Youth and teamwork had kept Tenten adequately distracted from the rock bottom reality, but she couldn't unlearn what she now knew.

She turned to the window of the landing and pushed it open, ‘I just need to do something that feels normal. Just for a while.’ The shop. Handstands at the training field. A basketful on dumplings. Any of that would do. Tenten vaulted out of the window, crossed clay roof shingles, and dropped down into the alley, in full retreat.

Below on the first floor, Neji watched as she made a run for it.

Chapter End Notes

Though my soul may set in darkness, it will rise in perfect light;

I have loved the stars too truly to be fearful of the night.

—From Sarah Williams' The Old Astronomer

Chapter 52- Haunt
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter Soundtrack: "Erase" Hyorin x Jooyoung (feat. Iron)

The day after Hatake Sato completed a Jounin Evaluation under Asuma and Raido's supervision, the positive endorsement was given to Tsunade, who then approved the promotion within minutes. I.D. and documentation updates would go through processing downstairs, though Tsunade did not much care about the final print stuff. She accepted a pocky stick when Sato offered one to her. They were examining a cork board on the wall of her office.

"See this? This map is out of date. I'm waiting on one final intelligence report before I dispatch you to the Toi Mine." Tsunade nibbled the cookie stick down, "I want you to do an ink transfer for me. The current map is at the way station there…"

"So like, it's a real solo mission?" He was also eating while speaking.

"Yes, Sato. You're a Jounin now. And the speed of your travel makes this assignment a no-brainer." She explained, "But next week I have something for you and your teammates to look into, if it doesn't clear up on its own near the border."

"Gotcha. Thanks for discharging Kakashi from the hospital this morning, by the way. He's happy he can crash at home. I guess I should tell him the good news…" Sato accepted the map Tsunade removed from the cork board.

"He probably already knows." She reached out and took another snack from the pocky box, then crossed back to her desk, "I suggest you tell Kurenai so that she can pat herself on the back, and then tell your fiancé, of course."

"Tama is gonna be so stoked!" He twirled the rolled up map like a baton.

"I heard the two of you may move to a home on the west side of the village. Don't." Tsunade advised, "The east side is much nicer. Consider the condominiums that overlook the orchards. If I weren't Hokage I'd be living there…"

"I think maybe for frugality's sake we'll start on the west side."

Tsunade huffed, "You're ruining my vicarious enjoyment of your young life."

"Is that what I'm doing?" Sato was mystified by the Hokage's complaint.

She pointed a pocky stick at him, "At least when you marry, make sure I receive an invitation."

"Sure!" He provided smiley reassurance, "We'd never exclude you, Hokage-sama. We're still in the planning phase, but once we hear back from the shrine about an open date for a ceremony I'll let you know."

Tsunade chewed her snack while commanding, "And don't skimp on the cuisine at your reception."
At the current residence of Hatake Sato; one of the flats within the concrete, decades-outdated apartment complex near Konoha's center, Maito Tama had made the bed, dressed, done a spot-clean in the bathroom and hung damp clothing to dry on the rooftop laundry line. She had begun to treat his home as if it were own. Well, perhaps not with the same manic level of care and maintenance required at her parents' house, but things were looking satisfactory. Most of the week she would spend time between the two locations, depending on her mission schedule.

"He'll be back soon, and he said he got an endorsement after yesterday's Exam..." Tama was smiling to herself as she prepared breakfast, rolling omelets in a pan. "Sato is officially a Jounin today! I don't want to fall too far behind. I think I'll redouble my training over the winter and see if I can take an evaluation next year..."

She took the pan off of the stove and listened to a soft scratching noise at the door of the flat. Expectantly, Tama opened the door a crack to look down upon the waifish calico cat that wandered the building and begged for food. Its meow was patronizing.

"No." Tama shut the door slightly when it tried to barge in, "Go to the first floor, back to Miyazawa-san! He's your owner."

Another squeak and stare from demanding yellow eyes on its cute, round face.

"This is an owls-only pet area, Jingle-san. Go home. Shoo!"

The cat sat outside of the door with apex stubbornness, aware that omelets had been cooked. Tama blew out a long breath and exited the flat, scooping up Jingle the cat who did not wrestle or struggle as she was transported down the corridor. Down the stairwell, through the lobby, and back to the ground floor Miyazawa residence, Tama knocked twice. The door creaked open and she handed the cat back.

"She bein' a bother again? Sorry, miss." The man apologized.

"It's alright, Miyazawa-san."

Old man Miyazawa shut the door and scolded his cat's appetite. As Tama crossed through the lobby again, she noticed a lost soul trying to decide which direction to take in the building: a girl about her age with eclectic, colorful style. She was plucking at her copper hair nervously, and nearly jumped when Tama addressed her, "Excuse me, are you lost?"

"A bit! I haven't been here in a while. I think I need the... third floor. Or fourth floor?" She glanced around.

"I can help you," Tama ushered her along, "Who are you looking for?"

"I'm not sure. Bit of an odd guy, though I didn't get his name. A young shinobi, not twenty yet, I guess."

With that description, Tama supposed the young woman was looking for Sai, "I think you mean Sai-san! He's on my floor, a few doors down from me. I'm Tama, by the way."

"Thank you! Tsuchihashi Yuko, of Kusagakure."

"Oh wow, Hidden Grass? What brings you to Hidden Leaf?" Tama led the way as they scaled the staircase.

"Just stupid stuff. Pitekuyo-sama sent me here to deliver something to the Hokage, and I remembered..."
I bought all kinds of souvenirs for my family on the festival night before the Chunin Exam, when I was here last." Yuko sighed in disappointment, "I've been trying to remember where I left it all since that was a chunk of change to waste, and my Granny was annoyed with me."

"I see. Too caught up in the fun? I enjoyed that festival."

"Me too! There are *soo* many cute guys in this village. Lots of beat-faced and fang-toothed fellas where I'm from…"

"I've never been to Kusa, but I guess Konoha does have some gems." Tama kept up the small talk, "Pure probability, I'd say. We have the largest population of all the great villages."

"They should do a study on supermodels per capita here." Yuko assessed, "Since clearly you are one."

Tama laughed off the compliment and directed Yuko down the fourth floor hallway, pointing out Sai's residence, "Here you are."

"Thanks again, Tama-san!" The girl grinned and turned to the door.

Tama pressed on and returned to Sato's flat, washed her hands of cat hair, and resumed the morning ritual. She set out a coffee mug beside the percolator for when Sato returned, munching on rolled omelets as she puttered around. She glanced at the wall calendar, 'Okay. I've got a 3 hour shift at the bakery this morning, some free time, and then a team meeting this afternoon…'

There was a knock at the door. Her imagination asserted that Jingle the cat had become human and wished to haunt her in new ways, but Tama was gladdened to see an average human, Yuko, at the threshold. The girl looked uncomfortable.

"Yuko-san, is something the matter?" Tama had an unusual, serrated feeling in her gut.

"Well, uh…that Sai person…was not who I was looking for. He was strange, but I wasn't talking about a man *that* strange." Yuko amended, "I left my stuff with a young guy: silver hair, big blue eyes, good dancer. I know he's around here—"

Tama understood, "Sato."

Yuko snapped her fingers, "I think that was his name."

"He lives here." Tama informed her, "With me."

"Oh." The visitor's shoulders drooped, "You mean *here*? Where you're standing?"

"Don't you remember this place?"

"Not well. I was drunk—"

"After the festival, did you come here?" The questions started tumbling out.

"I, well, yeah…it was late. He said I could. Did he leave any of the things I bought—?"

"Nothing of yours is here." Tama told her sharply.

"…o-okay." As the awkward, queasy pause prevailed between them, Yuko seemed to have a better idea of why the conversation was shedding its cordial tone, "I didn't know…he was with someone. It didn't seem like it."
"Didn't seem like it?" Tama repeated.

"He was going home alone and instead of me getting back to the plaza inn, he, uh…he asked me. To go with him. I…I know that he'd stayed for a while at the fairgrounds and was drinking, but he was coherent. I didn't force him! I don't do shit like that." Yuko tottered anxiously on her feet, "I think he was just…ugh, how would I know? He was cute and I just met him. There was consent, but believe me, if I had known he had—"

Tama took a few backwards steps into the flat and filled her lungs once. Her vision and sense of balance were wavering, but her hearing was not impaired.

"—he had a girlfriend, I never would've gone near——!"

By the sound of it, Sato had been lucid enough to solicit a stranger right off the street. Not too long after she had gone home, if Tama's estimations were accurate.

"I am sorry! I don't even want that stuff back, it's—"

Somehow, colors in the room seemed abruptly blanched. She'd need more oxygen soon to keep trying to comprehend this information, but Tama wasn't enthusiastic about breathing at that point.

"…please, I'm sorry! If he didn't say anything— I'm nothing. I know that I'm nothing! Don't regard me as an obstacle in any sense! My whole life is in Hidden Grass, I've got no reason to ever come back here…" Yuko's apology rambled and did not have much of an effect.

Tama stepped forward again and stretch her arms in the doorway, eyes half-lidded and serious, "So you slept with him?"

"I…" The Grass kunoichi's eyes welled with tears, remorseful, "…I wasn't even…nice to him. I did. I'm sorry. With someone who's taken…that isn't something that I do…never before…"

Tama found a speck of willpower to take the other perspective, "You were deceived too."

Sniveling, Yuko wiped her nose on her sleeve, "I'm sorry…how'd I…? Why are people such good liars?" She tried to dry her face to a presentable state, "I know it's not worth anything to you, but I've never been this sorry in my life. I shouldn't have come looking…"

"Right." Tama concurred dryly, "Now leave."

In a blink, the girl had scurried down the corridor and escaped down the stairs. The air swirled with silence as Tama stood and sorted the facts. They plummeted through her brain, down an internal shaft to rip through her paper-thin heart, and landed with a soaking slosh in the acidic pits of her stomach.

How cruelly funny it felt to never once suspect a transgression until it walked up to her and slapped her in the face. Maybe it would not have mattered so much if she had not been making love to a liar all week. She could've cut her losses and kept her honor intact. Tama simpered grimly and compared herself to the visitor named Yuko. Did Sato ever think about comparing them? In his boyish daydreams, maybe? During intercourse with his overly trusting fiancé? It was a repellant thing to think.

In the thorny fog that enveloped her mind and zinged nerve endings, Tama found a freeing sensation in walking away from the flat, turning left down the hall to the fire escape, and making her way outside to get to work. She left the door of the home wide open, as shameless and exposed as Sato was.
Some fifteen minutes later, Sato arrived upon a peculiar scene as the door of the flat was ajar and Tama, after he called out, was nowhere to be found. 'Huh. I probably just missed her before she went to work...' He could catch up to her, 'Did she forget to shut this? That's weird.' He had a look around, but there were no signs of intrusion or theft. Must have been pure forgetfulness.

He ate the last rolled omelet on a plate and poured coffee into a thermos, as opposed to the mug that was set out. He intended to travel with his favorite beverage. After tidying up the space and locking his flat behind him, Sato ventured out again, excited to share the news of his promotion with his better half.

There was a mild chill in the air as autumn advanced, and he had half a mind to snap a few shots of the magnificent, crimson maples on the perimeter of a small park he passed. But no, he ought to keep a tight schedule today so everyone could be informed! That was, if the news hadn't traveled through the grapevine already. He was a Jounin, like his uncle. He had a solo assignment tomorrow. It had been a long road to this point.

Light foot traffic flowed along the main avenue, and Sato crossed over to the bakery that had only a single customer buying breakfast at the counter. Sato waited with his standard grin as Tama made change for the customer and thanked him for the visit. When the door's chime signaled an exit, he leaned over the counter excitedly, "Tama! Guess what?"

She said nothing as she turned to stock a bare shelf with a tray of specialty rolls.

Sato carried on with the announcement, "Tsunade-sama promoted me! She has me scheduled for an assignment tomorrow, so if you've got nothing going on with your team this evening let's go out and celebrate! Just the two of us!"

Tama worked without comment. He tilted his head to regard her dubiously, then took a long swig of coffee. She was clearly out of sorts. Had she not been awaiting this news too?

"Also, Kakashi was sent home this morning. When you get off your shift why don't we visit him?" Sato suggested.

The lack of conversational engagement elevated the hair on the back of his neck and arms. Never in over 15 years of knowing Tama had Sato experienced indifferent quiet from her.

"Is something...bothering you?" He set his thermos down, his eyes trained on her back as she worked, "I know I missed you earlier. I got back a little late after speaking to Tsunade-sama. You left the door open, you know." Sato's voice softened, "Tama?"

When the shelf was fully stocked, Tama skimmed a sideways look over Sato and then moved to the back kitchen of the bakery, speaking to the co-shopkeeper, "Ami? Can you make a breakfast run?"

"Sure, let me just wrap this dough up!" The other girl expertly manipulated cling-wrap over a bowl, "What are you in the mood for, Tama-chan?"

"A smoothie. From the place in the south ward."

"Oh, the new one! I've been wanting to go there. Mango flavor?"

"Yes." Tama pulled money notes from the pocket of her work apron and handed them over, "I appreciate it."

Ami dusted flour from her clothes as she walked through the front end of the bakery, animatedly...
greeting Sato, "Hey Sato-kun! Do you want anything from Cosme?"

"N-No, I'm good! Brought my own coffee." He waved off the gracious offer and watched Ami depart, leaving Tama as the shop's lone attendant. Sato moved toward her in the hope a reassuring hug or touch might close whatever sort of emotional gap that had opened up, but Tama stepped behind the counter again to avoid him.

"Is there something you want to tell me?" Tama was a deadly sort of calm, "Now is your chance to do it, Sato. If you want to tell me something."

"Tell you something?" He didn't like this nervous feeling. A prickle of intuition was sticking into his back like a bed of nails.

"If you did something you regret, or don't regret. That you've kept from me. I should give you a chance to explain yourself, shouldn't I? Before we move ahead with everything we've planned…you should speak honestly." The harsh look in her eyes resembled her father Ken's demeanor.

Though the exact subject was unspoken, he knew. Sato knew what this was about, even though it felt impossible to acknowledge it verbally. Because acknowledging it would also commence the destruction of all the excellent things that were in store, that he and Tama could only do together. To willfully dismantle those dreams was foolishness. He couldn't say it. Couldn't break it.

The stifling air of the shop was electrified by Tama's mounting impatience, standing with a hip cocked as she hooked her thumbs in her pockets, her face stone-like, "Can't you say something?"

"I…I'm just not sure what…you're upset about…" His face seemed to say otherwise.

"You've known it all along. Since before the Exam."

The sickening churn he'd fought some months ago after the mistake was back full force, roiling his insides. Sato stared at her, petrified, frozen, helpless like a prey animal.

"If you're not going to admit what we both know, maybe I can recap it for you? That I made breakfast this morning and then returned Miyazawa-san's cat…before I met a person named Yuko in the building. She was looking for someone." Tama's hands came to rest flat on the stone countertop, "She was looking for you, Sato."

"I don't know anyone named—!"

"Damn what you know!" Tama balled a hand into a fist and cracked the surface she was leaning on, "You do know. The girl from Hidden Grass! At the festival! She told me that you took her back to your flat! You didn't say anything about me! She had no idea you were taken before she decided to sleep with you! So what does that say? That when I turn in after a night of fun, you have free reign? You can get away with these things? What else have you been doing—?"

"Nothing! Nothing else!" He was teary-eyed and panicked.

"I don't know how to believe that. How do I believe anything I've taken at face value?" She had to remove her hands from the counter-top before she crushed the rest of it, "Back when I said you could try other things, I didn't mean you could do that after we got together! You know that, right? Not after you chose me. And I know you expected the same of me!" Tama thrashed her head, ponytail swinging, "Was it easy to let me take care of you and hold your life together for years when you were alone, then do things behind my back?"

"It's not like that! That was the worst mistake I ever made! Of course I know what you've done for
me, Tama, I've thought about it every day since—"

"Since you had an easy, late-night lay! God…! That was before we did anything!" Tama paced in short, whipping steps, "…your worst mistake…you said nothing! For months, I was a happy idiot! You said nothing, but what if someone else found out? And told me? Don't you think—!"

"No one else knows and I was never going to say anything because it didn't matter! It was horrible. In every way you can imagine, it was horrible—"

"Then why did you do it?" She was bristling.

"Because," His voice cracked as he admitted, "I thought it wouldn't be. Which was stupid and selfish. I was stupid and selfish."

"You are stupid and selfish, Sato. How can you stand kissing me—? Penetrating me— all of this week? Like you had no black mark on your conscience, and deserved to do those things with me! I didn't work this hard to not be treated accordingly." With longer steps she covered the full length of the counter, furiously adding, "Shame on me for thinking there was equivalency! That I was entitled to you in some way: I know that was my mistake. I've been taught better…but I believed it. You made me believe it and I can't think of anything more unfair than that."

"I owe you everything! I know I do—!"

"Why couldn't you know it before you sniffed out a street tramp?"

It was painful in a way that made complete sense, and so Sato comprehended the value in having such a godawful conversation. Though he couldn't bear the thought initially, it felt like there was a chance to plead his case in some way. That he wasn't a repeat offender. That the shame of what he'd done choked him, truly, and none of this was brittle lip-service. That they could go forward and recover from this; he knew it could be done.

"Listen to me, Tama, please. The whole point of not saying anything was to avoid hurting you, but it happened anyway. So I am. I am every bit of the brainless juvenile who'd do something like that and learn. The result set me straight, and that is something you can believe—you can bet your life on it. I've learned. I'm not the same." He moved slowly toward the counter's end as he spoke, "I'm sorry for what I did. I always will be."

"I guess you're right." She acknowledged in a low voice, "You're not the same."

She'd derived a different meaning than what he intended. When Sato made a move to get closer, Tama hopped up and over the counter, switching to the opposite side to keep her distance.

"I'm sorry, Tama." He felt his shoulders curve, making himself small as tears started again, "You didn't deserve any of that shit. I want to give you everything that you—"

"Give me what I want—?" Tama finished the phrase for him in a disbelieving shriek, "What I want. I don't want this version of you. After-the-fact. I want the "you" from before you fucked someone else!" She got some satisfaction from roaring in Sato's tear-slicked face, "If you couldn't resist it—the need to do it with anyone, and I couldn't have stopped you; why in the very least could I not have gotten an honest admission? So I could've saved myself the embarrassment?"

His voice clattered like marbles, "I w-was too scared to t-tell you."

"Respecting me is the least you could do. You didn't. You whored out your honor and mine, so
what's left?"

His shoulders shook and he was quite certain by then that there was not a speck of pity or sympathy within Tama as she watched him cry. Her feelings were diamond-hard compared to his own; they were backed by righteousness and dignity. Sato had none of those things.

She said finally, "I don't want to be with you."

"N-No— let's talk it over and—!"

"I mean it." The pitch of her voice rose defensively, "I know...what I'm worth. And...I don't think it's this. It's not this. Forget the engagement. Forget everything."

As the words sealed the tomb of what was once a relationship, Sato moved quickly in her direction, "You don't mean that." She stepped backwards as he reached a shaky hand, "We can work it out. I know I'm what you wanted, now. What I should've been before all this. I'm...I'm never going to—"

Another evasive step, "Can't we talk to someone? I'll do anything— please. Just—!

Tama shook her head, trying to ward him off, "Don't come any closer. I want you to go. I can't think."

He was backing her toward the glass windows of the bakery wall, fearful that if he gave up or went still that it would really be the end. One touch. Hold her hand, maybe. If that was the last piece of her he could ever get, Sato was absolutely going to try, "Please, can't we—? I'm sorry...I'm so sorry."

"Don't touch me." He had to overcome a sob to say, "I know you love me. Even if everything is trash, even if that's what I am— I know you do—!"

Her back hit a panel of glass and ruffled the drawn shade. Tama told him, "I do.

He stopped in front of her and bowed his head. She'd said it.

"I do love you. Why should that mean...I can't leave?" Tama said simply, "No closer. Don't touch me."

He shook like an autumn leaf, "C-Can't say something l-like that..."

"Don't touch me." She watched him raise his hand, outstretched toward hers.

"Tama..." Perhaps he should've listened. A bright burst of white and blue clouded his vision and his head spun as he lilted backwards. It'd been a speedy and well-deserved punch to the face, which was about all Sato could perceive before he struck the wood floor. With his guard lowered and emotions at a fever-high, he'd sustained a considerable head injury from the blow.

The next thing he could detect following a 10 second blackout were Tama's hands fisting on his shirt sleeve, hoisting him up— his knees bent and wobbling. Proceeding toward the door, Tama dragged him most of the way there before he was fully conscious. When Sato came to and straightened, she out-muscled his struggle to escape her grip or dig his heels in. No. There was no way she was going to toss him like curbside trash— except she opened the door and did just that. With a powerful arm, Tama swung him out onto the pavement. Sato tumbled and a pedestrian narrowly avoided him as he rolled. The bakery door slammed shut.

Sato sprang up and tried to re-enter the establishment, but she'd flipped the deadbolt. He then rounded the corner through an alleyway to try the back door of the bakery, 'She's not gonna shut me out just like that! There's more to say! It's not over.' His head was ringing. When his hands closed around the large brass handle of the door, Tama was inside pulling against it with equal force.
"Tama, please!" He knew she could hear his shout, "I want to make things right!"

"I don't want to talk! Leave me alone!" Her howl from the other side.

The raucous did not go unnoticed by passersby on the street, glancing curiously down the alley to see who was fussing behind the bake shop. Sato froze when he felt eyes scan him, and then let go of the door handle. In the next moment, Tama had it sealed and there was a tinkling sound of keys, locking it.

If it were worth the public disruption, Sato might've stubbornly camped outside the shop until Tama's shift ended. And though he wanted so badly to make his feelings known and somehow make her understand that forever was ahead and only she was a part of it…her feelings mattered more. She had been clear about what she felt and what she wanted. He hadn't misunderstood.

Sato took a breath to oxygenate before flitting to an adjacent rooftop. The village features surrounding him melded into a thick impasto, indiscernible; his veins screaming fire in his body as he moved, his hearing drowned out by a high-frequency ting. Peppered throughout his mental scramble were the next possible destinations he could travel to. Sato did not put much reasoning into the decision making process, and instead let his legs carry him automatically toward the Aburame homestead in the next ward.

At the property edge he regretted coming to Shino's home to burden him yet again while so distraught and disheveled. Sato dropped down from a tall pine branch and landed between rows of insect-attractant plants. He stopped on the lawn beyond the great house. Shino had better things to do. This was nonsense. Deciding against it, Sato turned to leave and was spotted as Hinata popped up from behind a hedge. She was in gardening clothes.

"Oh! You're early, Sato-kun!" She cheerfully adjusted her sunhat, "Shino-kun and I are planting bulbs for next year!"

Shino also popped up and immediately recognized his friend's distress, stripping the work gloves from his hands. Hinata watched Shino rise and push through the hedge nettle before laying his hands on Sato's shoulders. It sunk in slowly that Sato's unnatural silence heralded something dire.

"Can you speak?" Shino asked as he dabbed a coat sleeve under Sato's wet eyes.

"…I…uh…" Sato tried to clear his warbling throat.

Hinata stood and dusted soil from her hands and knees, toeing through the brush toward her team. Shino sensed what his friend could not articulate, "It happened?"

Sato nodded wearily, "Yeah, it did."

"What? What's wrong?" Hinata underwent a spike of motherliness as she patted Sato's arms and back, frowning, "Why are you crying? Today was your promotion, wasn't it? It's alright, it's alright…"

Sato sniffed and spoke with a cracking voice, "It's…o-okay. Got promoted. It's that…Tama broke things off. With me."

Hinata's reassuring motions stilled as she searched his face, devastated to hear such a thing and maybe, just maybe, he'd misspoken? "Sato-kun, she might just be busy. She—"

"No…s-s…Sunshine." He swallowed and said, "She doesn't want to…be with…me. Doesn't w-
want to...get married."

She still didn't believe it, "Tama-chan does!"

"Not anymore. She knows I...was disloyal. I was, but I didn't...want anyone to know." Sato explained, "I r-regret it. Every day. Tama's the only p-person I love, so..."

Hinata's concerned pats started up again and her eyes grew shiny, "Did you really? You were with someone else?"

"Just once. Never again."

Her hands dropped to her sides and she shared a lost look with Shino, fuddled by the confession. Sato's breathing had grown shallow and he swayed on his feet, "I know...I deserve it. If you two also need some time away from me...I'd understand. I was gonna go—"

He was summarily sandwiched between Shino and Hinata, though it felt more like Shino was barring him from retreat while Hinata clung to Sato's tunic and wept openly.

"Take some time here, for now. Calm down." Shino suggested, "Kurenai-sensei is expecting us later."

"R-Right." Sato experienced an incomplete but undeniable wave of relief that came from the undaunted support of his teammates.

"I'm so disappointed! How could you do something like that!" Hinata's tearful, mild fury made her turn in a small circle, cheeks reddening, "Hurt a person so special to you! And all of those plans! Tama-chan told me about them and now what must she be thinking?" She stopped and wailed softly, "What about you, Sato-kun?"

"I know, Sunshine. I said I deserve it." He had regained a few shreds of composure.

"N-No, I mean, what will you do?" Hinata squeaked, "If you apologize, won't she change her mind?"

Shino pointed out flatly, "This is not something that is easily forgiven."

"Shino's right. I talked to Tama but...this is it. There's nothing more to it." Sato supposed dourly, "I think it's better if, you know, no one bugs Tama or questions her over this. Everything she chooses now is right. I can't...beg or persuade. I lost my chance to a while ago."

"We won't say anything." Shino assured him. Hinata nodded mournfully in agreement.

"I'm sorry to...heap all of this on you guys." Sato apologized.

"Wouldn't you help either of us, in the same situation?" Hinata wondered.

"No offense, but neither of you have this level of bullshit idiocy in you." Sato told her, "Neither of you could do anything to bring this kind of unhappiness upon yourselves. Because Shino is pretty much an angel. And we know, Sunshine, that you and Naruto are solid."

Hinata blotted her cheeks, "But you and Tama-chan were too..."

Sato shook his head, "It only looked that way." He settled down in the grass and laid back, "Feeling...dizzy. I might faint so don't...panic or anything."
"We will observe you while we finish up our planting." Shino then recommended, "Stay with us today."

He nodded wearily and covered his eyes with his arm. It felt like a breeze could blow hollowly through him due to the spiritual hole that'd been ripped open, baring him to the elements. He didn't deserve friends half as good as Hinata and Shino but that, Sato thought, was perhaps the sole reason to move forward. To repay those who were good to him.

That same morning, Kakashi sat on the sofa in his home and wondered if he was going to go into cardiac arrest due to "cuteness overload." That's what Tenzo called it.

Kiba had stopped over and brought a pair of puppies with him, balancing a pudgy, wrinkled pup in each arm. Akamaru trotted into the apartment with his master and began circling with Kakashi's dog pack members, giving salutations through sniffs. When the canine ritual settled down, Kiba sat beside his convalescing teacher and let other dogs sniff the small bundles, "Yup, be nice, introduce yourselves. These are newbies…"

"I didn't actually think your mother meant what she said." Kakashi said faintly.

"Oh she meant it. We had a few litters at home." Kiba was grinning, "Want to hold one? Here." He passed the fat, white puppy with a pink nose to his teacher. Kakashi sank back into the couch and sighed, gently bouncing the tiny dog in front of his face.

"She's cute, right?" Kiba noticed the man's heart melting beside him, "That breed's rare: *Xiasi Quan*. My grandpa and cousins love hunting with them, but they're great for missions too."

"Do they have names already?" Kakashi asked.

"Her name's Tolsi."

Kakashi cooed at the puppy. In the kitchen area, Tenzo stuck his neck out interestedly while working over the stove, "Do I get to see them too? I'm almost finished up over here."

"Oh yeah, sure." Kiba stood and crossed over to Tenzo, "This one's Gattsu." He lifted up a wrinkled ball of flesh with folded ears, tan fur from head to toe, its eyes and nose just as brown. The puppy licked Tenzo's chin and the man stared at the creature.

"We can keep them, right?" Tenzo whispered.

"I mean, if Kaka-sensei wants to. No pressure."

Tenzo looked longingly across the living area though Kakashi wasn't paying him any mind, too invested in the puppy named Tolsi. He continued with breakfast preparations as Kiba returned to his teacher and showed off Gattsu, "This breed is a *Vizsla*. Very athletic and affectionate. Don't let him get bored."

"Uh huh." Kakashi pulled the second puppy into his lap. Though it still hurt to think about Ūhei and Shiba, he couldn't deny the bubbling joy he felt while meeting young dogs again. He wasn't going to decline this offer. He could definitely find the time to train and socialize them, especially since Tenzo was willing to assist.

Kiba rubbed Akamaru between his ears as they observed Kakashi move to sit on the floor, allowing Bull to lovingly lick the weeks-old additions. His dogs gathered around to introduce themselves. Pakkun was also intrigued, "They smell like milk, Kakashi."
"Do they?"

"Yeah, fresh off their Mamas. Bet they can't control their bladders yet, but it's not easy at the start."
Pakkun mused, "Are they staying with us? I'll whip 'em into shape."

"If you don't mind." Kakashi patted the pug's rump, "Kiba, how old are they?"

"About 6 weeks. I figure since you're on leave you can take some time to house break them, teach commands, and all of that."

"It's been a while since I've done this…"

"You'll have help." Kiba gestured with his head at Tenzo, who was setting a table with dishes, "And I can watch them at my house while you guys have missions."

Kakashi's voice was soft, "Thank you."

With the tabletop spread finished, Tenzo set down food bowls for the pack members one at a time as they politely took their spots. He then ventured to the sitting area to get a closer look at Tolsi and Gattsu, toddling across an area rug. As a man who was secure in his emotions, Tenzo didn't hide his eyes moistening as he handled the plushy babes, "I know someday…we'll get mad when they're older and tearing into garbage bags…"

After lollygagging for a while, Kiba set a canvas bag filled with puppy supplies on the counter, "There are some instructions in here too, not that you need 'em. I'll let you guys have breakfast and check in with you later."

Tenzo was flat on the floor, crying joyfully as the pups clambered over him. Kakashi gave his student a friendly wave, "Don't hesitate to bring me more presents later!"

"You're maxed out already, Sensei." Kiba shut the door after herding Akamaru along. Sunlight spilled over the railed veranda and covered stairs of the condo. Down the stairwell, Kiba took up a jogging pace to ensure his ninken's muscles would warm up for training. "Akamaru, you don't think it was too soon, do ya?"

His dog barked in the negative.

"Good. I think he's happy. Looks like they're both happy." Kiba snickered.

He crossed town to check in on Hana at her veterinary office, and took note of the "outgoing" bin at the front counter. Kiba scooped up brown bags filled with pet medications to deliver to nearby addresses. Before he returned to the office, he stopped at a bubble tea shop to acquire his sister's daily pearl milk tea. Hana sighed and thanked her brother when he turned up again, handing over the drink, and adjusted the strap of her arm-immobilizing sling.

"That better?"

She wiggled her shoulder, "Yeah. I can't really restrain my patients for exams with one working arm. It's been a tough morning..."

"Do you want me to help?"

"Mom said she'll come over to help me in a half hour. You have training today, don't you?" Hana smiled at him, "Go ahead. Oh! Did you bring the puppies to Kakashi?"
"Sure did."

"And?"

"And he turned into goo." Kiba grinned, "I think he'll be okay. Will you be home later?"

"Yup! Mom's making a dish we haven't had since...well. Since I was a toddler. It's weird how she's gotten so nostalgic all of a sudden."

"Nostalgic? Pff. Maybe she just wants to eat something she misses."

"I dunno. Haven't you seen her writing letters lately?" Hana sipped her bubble tea.

"Mom. Writing letters?" Kiba laughed, "Yeah. Sure."

"Really! She's been writing to someone!"

"Maybe her secret admirer." Kiba joked on his way out of the office.

He and Akamaru continued their jog through the south side of town and down a grassy path towards the team's favored training field. At the halfway point, he spotted Tama as she stood underneath an elm tree, bracing her hands on the trunk as she vomited. The sight startled Kiba and he hesitated for a moment before cautiously stepping over to her, "Um...are you okay for training, today? You don't have to push yourself, Tama..."

She shook her head as she finished and stood upright, patting her lips with a tissue, "No, no. Sorry, I'm not sick. Just got a bit worked-up."

"Worked up?" He scrunched his nose to shut out the smell.

Tama waved him along to proceed down the path, "I'm anxious. Damn, that's a shame...that was a good smoothie." She looked over her shoulder at a yellowy-orange mess on the ground, "That'll go away when it rains, right?"

"If it rains." Kiba supposed.

"Sorry you had to see that."

He shrugged, "Sakura vomited on me after testing poisons once. And Akamaru barfs sometimes, so, whatever. Are you sure you're okay, though?"

Tama fell quiet and stared ahead at the autumn-tinged forest. It was as if he could hear the buzz of anxiety and grief swarming her like bees. Kiba stared sidelong at her face as they walked, waiting for it.

"I want to...train today. Do what I normally do." Tama spoke haltingly.

"Yup. Sure. Same-old, same-old." He agreed.

"What time is Sakura-chan supposed to get here?"

"She said 3:30 the latest."

"Okay." Tama took a ragged breath.

"What's wrong?" Kiba felt his stomach twisting.
"Nothing's wrong anymore. I set it right." Tama indulged Akamaru when he nudged her hand for pats, "That's why I'm...having a rough time of it."

"Have you been to see Kakashi-sensei yet? He's home now. I brought him two puppies—"

Tama's eyes grew glossy and she held her breath.

Kiba tried to avert any stressful subjects, "Hey, it's okay! He's fine. You don't have—"

"I can't. I c-can't...see...S-Sensei. Not yet." She stopped in her tracks and tried to breathe, "He'll be...angry at us."

"Angry. At us?" Kiba asked for clarification.

"N-No...me and...S-Sato."

"Oh. But...why would he be mad? You didn't quit being a ninja or elope, right?"

And then she went silent like a midnight cemetery, trembling where she stood as she fought off whatever force was weighing on her. Kiba watched with wide eyes and sensed the emotions, though he couldn't pinpoint the source of her distress. As far as he knew, Tama's life had been buttoned up neatly as she and Sato prepared to feather a nest together. He'd accepted this trajectory of theirs long ago.

"No." Tama told him thickly, "We're not together. Anymore. I haven't told anyone...not Sakura or Kakashi-sensei. I'm still trying to...make sense of today."

Kiba waggled a finger as if this were a blatant falsehood, "Come on, that's nuts. What'd he do—?"

"I ended things with Sato." She told him again, her inflection sterile and serious, "Because he lied to me...strung me along before and after the Chunin Exam. He said he only fooled around with someone else once, but I don't know if that's true..."

"He what?"

"Cheated."

"Yeah, I heard that, but how? He wouldn't do that." Kiba went cross-eyed when he realized he was defending Hatake Sato, a person he had never, ever been truly fond of. His response felt automatic in a certain respect, since he'd witnessed the love and affection Tama and Sato shared.

"How am I supposed to know?" Tama marched off of the path toward a log, "All I know is that he did. He admitted it. I think I'm still...in shock. Trying to look back into my memories and find the warning signs...It's...it's..."

He and Akamaru watched worriedly as Tama sat down on the log, holding her head in her hands.

"Maybe I've got bad vision, or...didn't notice...but...there weren't many signs. Or any. I still...see a lot of good. Most of it was good." Tama yelped with a mixture of disbelief and frustration, "It was very good...being with him. So I'm confused and...tired. Just trying to think about...what I'm supposed to do. No one ever talked about how exhausting it is to try to...understand how this feels."

"Well..." Kiba toed over to the log and sat down heavily, "I'm sorry. I think...I kind of get it. Since my Dad did something like that to me and my Mom."

"I remember, Kiba-kun."
"Yeah, except…it's really a different kind of betrayal since he left my Mom flat out…so it was nail-in-the-coffin over for years…but he came back and pretended he didn't have a second family waiting for him another country," Kiba shrugged, "So at least Sato didn't do that. But still. What the fuck is the matter with him?"

Tama shook her head and took deep breaths.

"Did he even apologize? Grovel—?"

"He did. I still need my space."

"I'm not saying that you don't. Standing in the same room as him will incite violence. At least if I speak for myself."

"I'm not…even that angry anymore." Tama admitted, "I…for the most part…believe him. He's sorry. I know that he is. It doesn't make me feel better, but I know Sato was telling the truth."

"We can still wipe our asses with the truth." Kiba reminded her bitterly.

"Not if the truth was what we actually needed."

He sighed in a higher pitch to indicate, yeah, maybe he preferred the truth over lies in most situations. His eyes trolled after Akamaru as the dog sniffed around the brush for a spot to do his business. Kiba folded his arms and said, "So…what do you think you should do?"

"I don't really want to tell anyone else about this for now. Some time to myself would be good." Tama tried to imagine how she would tumble through the next few days.

"People are going to ask questions, eventually."

"I know. I don't feel obligated to answer in too much detail."

"Fair enough." Kiba conceded, "And I won't say anything."

"I know you won't."

"Will you tell Sakura?"

"When I can stomach repeating all of this, I will."

Kiba nodded and closed his eyes, trying to take deep breaths that Tama could match.

After a long silence Tama shared, "I feel like an idiot."

"You're not, though. We all step in it at some point. Some messes are bigger than others."

"I'm rolling in it." By it Tama took it to mean a "shitty situation."

"Nah…but it looks like Akamaru is." Kiba squinted his eyes to see what his ninken was up to beneath the fronds of a beautyberry bush.

Tama made no sound as her shoulders shook in a tiny, lackluster laugh. It was a polite formality to acknowledge Kiba's humor. The things that were supposed to feel good were not registering on her scales. She wasn't able to appreciate those things at the moment.

"You're really not mad at him?" Kiba recalled an admission Tama had made.
"I was this morning— I was furious." She sighed, "But I can't keep that mood up. Some people can, but I can't."

"Yeah, I get it."

"I feel every other emotion there is, though. The ones that make you sick and question your decisions." Tama afforded him a sincere answer, "I might be able to…forgive Sato. I don't need him, but I think it's a waste of time to try and hate him or regret anything."

"You know, that sounds like how I feel." Kiba could relate, "About Sasuke. I forgave him mostly because that's what I needed. And if he reaps some benefit from one less person in this world hating him for what he did; good for him."

"Do you…ever feel like you have to…avoid every person who might hurt you again?" Tama wondered in a small voice.

"Well, I'm no good at predicting it. When people are shits to me, it's almost always a surprise." Kiba added, "So I don't actively avoid anything. I just let it hurt and try not to let it change me." He picked up a sprig of maple and threw it, unenthused by Akamaru's acrobatic leap to catch the stick. His dog then laid down to chew on the prize.

There was only the pipping clamor of nutcracker birds feasting in a hazelnut tree beyond the thicket, while the rest of forest trail seemed to hold its breath. When Tama bent sideways to lean her head on Kiba's shoulder, he wrapped his arm around her back, "Sorry. I probably haven't said much to make you feel better."

"You did." Her nose was stuffing up, by the sound of it. Tears rolled down Tama's cheeks while she sat and contemplated things Kiba would probably never have to think about or struggle with himself, but somehow he still felt the residual sting of it. Her unhappiness and uncertainty.

Time passed and Akamaru eventually trotted up to the human portion of his team, then rested his chin on Tama's knees. Kiba thanked his dog quietly for not being theatrical or attention-seeking. He gave Akamaru a pat on the snoot and squeezed Tama a little tighter.

"S-Sorry that I'm…c-crying like a—"

"Tama. It's fine." Kiba assured her.

"But I need to…stop. We could be training—"

"Managing how you feel and taking a mental break takes priority. Screw training. It can wait! Kakashi's not even around." Kiba asserted, "You don't have to be brave and forge onward every single time. It's alright if you're stuck."

"I'm stuck." Tama agreed with a stuffy-nosed gurgle.

He riffled around his pocket and drew out a crumpled napkin from the bubble tea shop, "Here. You are super boogery right now."

"Yeah. Thanks." Tama sat up to blot her face and blow her nose, "I ran out of tissues earlier."

He watched her from the corner of his eye while rubbing a rectangular pattern over Akamaru's furry head. Once Tama had ordered herself somewhat, she drifted back into philosophical musings, "I was responsible for part of this, I think."
"Careful, you're saying crazy stuff now." Kiba warned.

"Okay. I know that there were many variables that made...Sato do something like that. Logically, it makes no sense to assign all of the blame to one particular thing, but..." Her shoulders rose and fell with a long breath, "I never gave him space. Growing up since we were small kids, always around each other...he didn't have any time away from me. He had no other options, really. Our families made decisions completely independent of our own wishes and goals. So...being denied any sort of free-will choice was an injustice."

"Uh, arranged marriages are pretty standard between shinobi families around here—"

"And most of them occur between two consenting adults, not children with their milk teeth who can't understand the terms of an agreement."

"Why are you trying to rationalize this?" Kiba gruffed, "He betrayed you. It's simple."

"It wouldn't feel simple if you were in my skin right now." Tama told him, "Just because I chose him all on my own never meant that he had to choose me. I knew that, too. No one is ever owed anything, even when we start to fool ourselves into thinking that."

He cocked his head, annoyed, "Even if that's fundamentally true, he did owe you."

"It would have been fine if he grew up and wanted to go his own way. I took care of him when times were hard because I wanted to, not because I was told to, or expected something back." She muttered, "Well. Maybe for a little while I expected something in return, but I realized that was wrong."

"Was it really so wrong?"

"Maybe it wasn't, but I didn't feel good about it once I was grown. Sato is a free spirit, so I decided I wouldn't...restrict him from living how he wanted to." Tama concluded wearily, "People don't always want...what they already have. Don't love what they've always had. There's no novelty to it."

"Pfft. Novelty!" Kiba scoffed, "There was plenty of that."

"Romantic love is all about novelty. The alternative is practicality, and clearly he wasn't into that either." Tama supposed.

"Why do you say that as if he didn't love you? He's an idiot, but he obviously did." Kiba pointed out.

She bowed her head and held her breath. Within that assertion resided the ultimate point: when love was not reinforced by other qualities like commitment, empathy, maturity, good-judgment and so on, it was too flimsy a thing to manage. Cracks spidered in it like a pane of glass. Maybe Sato had developed those capacities to some extent, but not soon enough.

"Let me tell you something," He nudged Tama with his elbow, "Years ago at some festival or another, I saw you for the first time. And learned about you. I've had a crush on you ever since." Kiba's stomach did a small flip when he admitted it, "But that's not the same thing as what you had. Was I interested? Yeah, but I wasn't on your radar. So that made me consider what was truly important: wrecking your bonds for my own gain, or actually seeing you be happy. Then I grew up and my feelings changed; you became one of my best friends. That's working for me."

Tama blinked at him with watery-eyed surprise.
"And I…might've met someone super cool…but she lives in Hidden Cloud." He shrugged in defeat, "Oh well."

Tama swiped her cheeks again, smiling in slight shock, "Kiba-kun, I'm pretty flattered."

"Are ya?" He grinned.

"Yes! But you're one of my best friends too! You and Sakura-chan!"

"I know! It'd be weird now. You and Sakura are my bros."

"We are." Her laughter was soft and hollow.

"Turns out you and I have very similar insecurities." Kiba observed.

"As it turns out, yes." She agreed.

"I just hate that…he hurt you. If I could've walked in his shoes years ago, man oh man, I wouldn't have taken so much for granted. I mean, what's the least Sato had to do? Have patience? Appreciate his fulfilled, above-average life?"

"You're making assumptions."

"I'm not. It's plain to see that he wasn't suffering that much."

"Kiba, what I gave him wasn't a replacement for the family he lost. No matter what, there would be things I couldn't do."

He shook his head, smirking, frustrated, "You sell yourself short. Sounds a bit like brainwashing."

"It isn't. Please don't argue these things with me, because it's all still fresh and hard to think."

"Alright, alright."

And though it was no small feat to reinstate some semblance of normalcy, Tama managed it for the afternoon and distracted herself with Sakura's hospital-work tales and Ninjutsu drills. It crossed Tama's mind that maybe she ought to confide in Sakura as well, but speaking on the topic was exhausting. She preferred to let it wait until tomorrow. The team refined some of their techniques in Kakashi's absence and then parted ways in the evening.

When Tama returned home for a planned family meal with her parents, she procrastinated the announcement until the end of dinner when plates were being cleared from the table.

"So I, uh…just wanted to tell you both…" Tama cleared her throat, mustering courage, "That I am… single. As of today."

Her father slowly set down the page-length coupon he'd snipped out of a newspaper and stared at her. Miako had not heard Tama clearly while she rinsed glassware at the sink, "What was that, dear?"

"I said I'm not engaged to Sato anymore. I, um…" She flinched at her father's fantastical, beacon-like face flashing with expressions, "Just something that I wanted you to be aware of."

Miako had turned the tap off and hurried back to the table, holding her daughter by her shoulders, "Is everything alright? You were planning—!"
"I know. It's…fine. It was a…" Tama held her father's stark gaze, "A mutual decision."

"How very out of the blue." Ken noted.

"Um. A-All of this…planning…gave us time to think." Tama swallowed hard as she tried to soften the context of the break up with a white lie, fearing her parents might retaliate fiercely against the Hatake family, "And we'd rather focus on…our careers. For now."

Her mother was hopeful, "So maybe someday?"

Ken continued to stare.

"Uh…" Tama mumbled, "Maybe not."

Miako's face bunched in astonished despondency. She stood up and returned to wash dishes and stew on the information, tuning out the conversation between her husband and daughter.

"Tama…" Her father was not so easily fooled, "Don't you have more to say?"

"About what?"

"Why you're not getting married." Ken dangled the subject like an expert angler, "Surely Kakashi will be disappointed. This isn't an agreement that is dissolved for such frivolous reasons."

"It isn't frivolous, Dad." Tama straightened her back, "It's just…it's over. That's that. Adults get to make decisions on their own. We don't need you to make them for us."

"I suppose not." He lifted his drinking glass to take a sip, adding, "But you gave no indication that you wanted to 'focus on your careers' over the last few weeks. Picking out property. Furniture. Consolidating assets…"

"Dad…"

"Picking a venue and vendors. Changing your schedule." Ken lightly set his drink down, "Really, you've done quite the opposite. I'm not convinced that this was some choice based on genuine soul-searching and grown-up-talk."

"Dad, you don't know every-!"

"Sato is a cowardly halfwit on the best of days, and each other day a derelict by every definition." Ken's appraisal was razor-sharp.

Miako spun around and tossed a dish towel at her husband, "Ken, don't say things like that!"

Ken plucked the towel from his shoulder, "Won't you excuse us for a few minutes, Miako?"

"You're just trying to make her feel bad!" Miako squeaked.

"She already feels bad." Ken gathered, "Just a few minutes, please, dear."

"Be nice." Miako commanded as she exited the dining room.

Tama sat at the cherry wood chabudai table across from Ken, realizing that this was in fact a showdown. That her father had something to prove. She felt stifled and corned as the investigation had begun. If she'd intended to maintain a falsified cover story to save face, it would've required significant pre-planning to evade her father's analysis. Tama had slipped up on that front. Handing
over the truth to the man was giving him a sword with which he would cut down a family he'd started to disdain long ago. Ken was, among other things, a prosecutor. Tama didn't share his thirst for eviscerating an opponent.

"Don't lie to me." Ken could sense it, "What did Sato do?"

"He got promoted and ignored me afterward." A rubbery excuse.

"I don't think so."

"We haven't been talking the way we used to. I asked to end it."

"You have a reason. A real reason." Ken pressed.


"He grew up so brainless it galled me." Ken admitted as he swayed the ice cube in his drinking glass, "To think my daughter was willing to marry such a careless skunk…but I've always known you weren't foolish enough to settle for that."

"I've always been smart, Dad. That was never contingent upon who I did or didn't marry." She retorted venomously.

"You haven't always been smart, Tama. So I'm glad that you're finally starting to look out for yourself." His insults were uncomfortably casual, "Do as you must, and when you decide to share your true motivations with me for such a drastic reversal, maybe I'll start to buy it. And yet, I don't think I will."

"It's an amicable parting." Another lie she didn't choke on, "So please don't stick your nose in this and bother anyone, do you hear me?"

"I do. And I won't." Ken agreed.

"Good." Tama slammed her hands against the table as she rose. She couldn't lend her mother much reassurance as she passed through the living area, silently fuming, and climbed the stairs.

Arriving in her room, anger escaped her on an exhaling breath and was replaced by despair, moths in her stomach. From every angle of her life, things would fall apart. To hurry and try to spackle the cracks before her friends and family understood the extent of things…Tama wasn't sure if she could do it.

She flipped the light switch, retrieved a large paper bag from a desk drawer, and embarked on a quest to pluck every single last photo on the wall that showcased Sato in some way. When all were collected and no other vestiges of Sato were visible, she rolled the bag's top shut and slid it beneath her bed. *I'll burn those tomorrow.* She thought to herself.

Her movements in the bedroom were erratic. Tama rearranged objects and small, potted succulent plants. Moved a floor lamp from this corner to that corner. The sun had set beyond her room's tall window, and it felt impossible that somehow this day had begun and ended. And another was to come tomorrow. She would have to find a way to navigate tomorrow's daylight hours and interact with society as she imploded. Then the day after that, and the day after that…

Frantic in her silence, Tama moved down the hall and showered beneath scalding hot water. She then dried herself, dressed in pajamas, sealed the door of her bedroom, and laid board-straight in her
bed in the dark. Every hour of the evening and late night passed her by. Sleep never came. Every second was filled with spasmodic contemplation. Milliseconds were a mystery. What to work towards? What was there to distract herself with?

In some ways she felt free, so marvelously free of the pain and humiliation. Yet she became a prisoner of possibility in a brain she could not shut off.

More than a day later, Sato returned from a solitary map-swap mission to the Toi Mine, and was uncharacteristically withdrawn when he presented the map to the Hokage. He debriefed with nary a helpful detail to Tsunade, who would have commanded him to stay and talk more if she hadn't had a council meeting to run to.

So Sato departed from the building and tried to make sense of how differently he reacted to everything in the world. The smells in the air, the temperature, the people he saw on the street. Everything triggered a flight response. There was nowhere to escape to, he knew, but his insides itched with terror while all things familiar became so unfamiliar.

In the late morning he set foot in his flat and felt his face get hot. Sato gulped, shutting the door behind him, pried his boots off, and toddled around half-numb to the pangs of spiritual pain that just refused to end. He would probably get used to it. Every few minutes he thought about Tama and was sickened again, taking time to cool down and reorganize his thoughts. He barely ate and didn't bother making any coffee. Sato bathed himself catatonically.

'Can't quite figure out how to...be myself. It's hard to be someone you hate.' He considered.

In his bedroom he dressed and stared at the bed, realizing there would be remnants of her there. Though desperate and shameful, he was glad that he could still smell Tama's scent on the pillow and quilt. It was then it occurred to Sato, 'Her stuff!' Oh god, he still had it. Belongings of hers strewn about—shoes, hair ties, a brush, clothing in the bureau, little thises and thats. He sought them out like hidden treasures to collect them, stockpiling all into a fabric basket and set it on the kitchen table. He determined that if she never asked for anything back, he would forever keep them. He had to. As proof that she'd been there.

Perhaps this was the sad, pathetic way to react to a fractured relationship. Someone stronger or less attached might've discarded such reminders as part of the cleansing process. Had Sato not loved this person for so long and come to depend on her, he could've done it, he guessed. Tama was so essential in his life that it was unthinkable to erase any part of her that lingered.

He made tea. He opened the window for fresh air, wallowed for a time, poured himself hot bancha once it was ready, and collapsed into a seat at the table.

'This is your life now. You're just you. There's no one else. No one is going to care what you think or how you feel because it's your fault. You wake up, you take missions. Do as you're told. It's what you wanted: to be distinguished. A high-ranking shinobi.' Sato reminded himself as he sat, his hands loose around the tea mug, This is what you get. Mom would probably want it this way if she'd learned what I'd done—for me to eat shit. Dad did this to her, I think. He might've fucked things up and so she managed on her own with me. I don't know if Dad actually died...he could have...just been awful.'

He sipped slowly and drowned in thought until his screech owls, Aree and Aroo, flew indoors and perched on the back of an adjacent chair to greet him. His eyes grew teary at the sight of them. They were fond of Tama. He couldn't direct the birds to stay away from her in any concrete sense, but he'd try to advise them on the change. After half a cup's worth of tea, Sato bent and folded forward onto
the table to rest his head, near where the basket of Tama's belongings sat like a holy relic.

He shut his eyes and drifted. Since he had not slept adequately in over 24 hours, he'd grown drowsy. The toots of his companion birds were soothing. They fluttered around the space and made themselves at home. Sato's fingers slid on the outside of the porcelain mug. Once enough time passed, he wouldn't remember what it was like to touch her. Or anything. If they never spoke again, he'd forget the sound of her voice. He would see Tama around intermittently in the village, and that very well could be the grand extent of it from now on. All that wrongdoers were entitled to were memories, if that.

The sound of a chair sliding back brought him out of his funk, and Sato jerked his head up in surprise. Kakashi took a seat at the table and propped his chin up in a lazy palm.

"Kakashi! Aren't you supposed to—?"

"I'm still quite fragile, though I can get around a little now." His uncle informed him, "I heard something I didn't like."

"...you did."

"It was your doing."

"It was."

The man's heavy look stilled him for a long while, and Sato had nothing constructive to say. No explanations, excuses, or lamentations. He sat useless and hunched over, fiddling with a tea cup. At length, Kakashi placed something in front of him: a business card.

"That's for a therapist uptown." Kakashi clarified, "Go and get your head right. You have a lot of work ahead of you, and I won't have you screwing anything else up."

"Thanks, Kakashi..."

"To say I'm disappointed doesn't quite cover it. I'd gotten my hopes up. As she's my student, you could say I've grown fonder of Tama, maybe just as much as I care about you." He glanced over the basket of stuff imperiously, aggravated but composed, "This isn't going to blow over like it never happened. I don't know what Gai is going to say. What Tama's parents will say. Never mind what you have to deal with: I've got to explain it somehow when anyone asks me, and do you honestly think I want to?"

"No...of course you don't."

"Don't you dare date anyone else or have fun. Work your ass off. This is the time."

"I know, I know."

"If I had the strength I'd yank your earlobe clean off your head." Kakashi threatened.

Sato smiled tiredly, "I'd let you."

"Don't smile."

He smiled anyway, "I'm glad you're doing better, Kakashi. I'm sorry about all of this, more than you could ever know."

"More than I could ever know...I hope so. I still have to see Tama for team meetings and somehow
not be a reminder of the misery she needs to overcome. Again, I won't thank you for that."

"Do everything you can for her."

"You can be sure that I will. As for you…" Kakashi sighed, "I want to be fair to you too. You'll suffer enough when you wake up in a decade or two and still feel shocked. It'll be terrible. So I don't need to actively make anything more terrible for you, now do I?"

Sato weakly shook his head as he sat up, sipping cooled tea.

Kakashi then asked, "Your mission?"

"Went quickly." Sato assured him.

"Good. Get up so I can introduce you to the Jounin Council. We're meeting in twenty minutes at the Standby Station."

"Does anyone else…know?"

"Kiba knows. He's the one who told me. Tama is still too hesitant to approach me yet, but I'll speak with her soon." Kakashi lead the way toward the door, unaware of his nephew's flabbergasted reaction behind him, "As far as I can tell, none of this is common knowledge otherwise. Keeping it discreet will help. Heaven help you if Ken comes knocking…"

Stumbling in the genkan, Sato pulled his shoes on again, "Ken. Right…oh god…and Kiba too?"

"He was surprisingly mature and level-headed while explaining to me. Tama confided in him the other day."

If he had been feeling emotionally gruesome before this, now Sato could hardly stomach the wretchedness of knowing that Kiba had been there to pick up the pieces. A person who had always been able to "sniff out" Sato's deficiencies, and wanted to compete for Tama's affection in the past; surely Kiba would be a sparkling prospective companion. By next week, he'd probably be asking Tama out on a date. The mangy dog. Sato hardly noticed his automatic, reactionary punch that dented the wooden frame of the door with his fist on the way out of the flat.

Kakashi *tsked* at him, "Your door won't shut correctly if you break that."

It still shut with a whining squeak, but it didn't look nice. Sato trudged after his uncle, simmering and despairing. He couldn't bring himself to talk again until they were well on their way and approaching the central ward of the Leaf Village. At the intersection of the most popular business and dining streets, Pakkun marched up to Kakashi. Behind him were the floppy puppies, Tolsi and Gattsu. Sato inhaled sharply at the sight of them.

"Oh yeah." Kakashi decided to announce it, "I am very lucky to have these two in my pack now. How was the walk over, Pakkun?"

"Difficult. Had to dodge snacks and belly rubs, but they're focusing pretty well." Pakkun reported.

Sato bent down to pick up the white puppy, "You got new dogs! That's great, I uh— I know you're still sad, but *look at them!*" He rubbed Tolsi against his cheek and appreciated the small creature's joyful licks.

"If you don't mind putting her down for now, I want them both to walk the rest of the way with us. Build up some stamina." Kakashi watched his nephew set the dog down, "Training's gonna take a
while." The group carried on up the street and Kakashi shared the names of his new dogs, a status update of how he was doing at home, how long he would be off from missions, etc. It cheered Sato up somewhat.

Inside the Standby Station there was a serene hum, and veterans were either welcoming or disinterested in the addition of Hatake Sato to their ranks. They gathered in an assembly room that was a skosh small for their purposes. Sato thanked the few Jounin that acknowledged and encouraged him, watching from the corner of his eye as Kakashi issued commands to get his two wiggly pups to sit still without fussing. Pakkun assisted him.

Sato made small talk with his uncle, "It's good that you've got some time off to train them, Kakashi."

"Yeah, the timing works out. In fact, mission inactivity isn't so bad. I can do other things." Kakashi motioned for Gattsu to sit, stay and then awarded a treat for good behavior, "I played a board game for the first time in a few years."

"A board game?"

"That and some card games. I changed all the light bulbs in my house, finally. Vacuumed."

"Well, don't you have to do that often anyway to keep up with the dog hair?"

"Yes, but I enjoy it more when I don't have to rush chores. It's amazing what you can do when you get some time back. Naps have also helped me recover at a better clip, and Gai’s team gave me these multi-vitamins that I think actually work."

Sato palmed his face.

"I'm even going on a date later." Kakashi noted, bemused.

In a hushed voice, Sato hissed, "A date? With who?"

He didn't get an answer. The assembled group of shinobi asked for silence as Sarutobi Kakima called the meeting to order. A second later, a disheveled-looking Hyuga Neji slipped in through the door (sweaty and fresh from training with Lee and Wong Leung) and he took his place without being admonished. Gai was not present. Sato wondered about it. The conference rehearsed most security threats all were aware of, but covered the prioritization of village perimeter vulnerabilities, adapting routines, and asked if any present would consider applying for the vacant positions in the Sealing Corps yet to be filled. No one volunteered, but there were murmurings of consideration.

A meeting of Jounin: it was a duller affair than what Sato expected. Or maybe it was that every aspect of his life had become duller now. The official business was adjourned and many shinobi carried on smaller conversations amongst themselves. Kurenai took a few minutes to converse with Sato, gush over his promotion and Kakashi's sweet new dogs, but then hurried along for a cross-training assignment she had.

Afterward, Sato gazed out of the second floor window and felt a wave of penitence wash over him, 'Why was this...so important to me?' He couldn't quite remember, 'I would gladly give this up if it meant I wouldn't have hurt Tama. I'd give this away in a second…'"
"...ah... thanks, Neji." Sato felt a lump in his throat. It was weird when grumpy Hyuga Neji actually had kind words for another, more so how brotherly and sincere those words felt. "I should congratulate you again, too. You worked much harder and I still... kind of feel... I haven't caught up to you."

Nearby, Kakashi had his ear trained on the conversation, but was mostly perusing the tabletop spread of snacks for the committee and pocketing the ones he preferred.

Neji seemed surprised by the comment, "I don't think you were ever behind me, Sato. I was never ahead of anyone."

"Pff, are you sure about that?"

"Maybe I could learn certain techniques quickly, but my cooperation with others was lacking. I wasn't reliable." Neji assessed.

"Even if not socially reliable, you were still pretty cool." Sato granted him. And holy shit the other young man smiled at the remark and it was so, so strange in a good way.

Neji went on to say, "I try to attend most of these meetings, but when I'm absent—"

"You want me to find you and bring you up to speed?" Sato correctly guessed, "Can do."

Neji thanked him and then glanced down, noticing a brown puppy sitting on his foot. He looked up again and genuinely did not know what to do.

"Sorry, here... ah," Kakashi scooped up the tiny dog, "Gattsu likes shoes. He likes sleeping on them, more specifically. It was a long walk over here and I think he's tired." He picked up Tolsi as well before bidding his young companions farewell, and moseyed on out with Pakkun at his side.

Sato explained to Neji that his uncle was still barred from missions until he made a full recovery, and until then he had puppies to keep him gently occupied. Though not much of an animal lover himself, Neji did concede that Kakashi seemed entirely in his element. Dogs were his thing, Sato confirmed. Sato probably could have chatted about Lee and Tenten if he tried, but social interaction was grinding on his exposed emotional nerves. He politely excused himself, left the building, and meandered towards the address on the business card Kakashi had given him.

When he arrived at a quaint brick building set apart from the bustle of Konoha's center, Sato nosed into an empty waiting room. A receptionist immediately noticed him from her place at the desk, "Hello!"

"Uh..." He pushed the door shut behind him, "Hello."

"Walk-in? Do you have a referral?"

"Uh, yes. And... kind of?" Never in his life had Sato formally sought counseling. The sole encounter with treatment had been during his Academy days, when social workers spoke to him in the aftermath of his mother's death.

"Okay. Just please fill this form out for me and let me see your I.D." The secretary handed over a form on a clipboard with a pen, "You're in luck! We had a cancellation this morning, so Dr. Iwao can see you for an evaluation right away, if you'd like."
"I…” He wasn't sure if he truly intended to go through with it, "…sure." Sato took a seat on an upholstered, vintage sofa and slowly tapped out the characters of his name, birth date, address, and so forth.

Below were check-box questions with optional lines beside them for further details. The extent of the intake sheet made him very fidgety, "Is this going to…cost a lot?"

"Hm?" The secretary was wiping her glasses clean with a cloth, "You're a ninja. That's this office's designation, so charges and fees are billed to the Shinobi Health Association. There's no need to worry, I am going to make a copy of your I.D for the claim. Non-ninja patients have to present other insurance cards or pay out of pocket here."

"O-Oh."

"It's alright. People have a lot of questions when they haven't been here before."

His attention skittered back to the intake sheet.

Please list your current medications and allergies, if any.

Please specify your rank in the standard shinobi forces and years of professional service.

Do you have any secondary jobs outside of shinobi work? ( ) yes ( ) no

If yes, please describe.

When was your last physical? Have you sustained any life-altering or debilitating injuries due to missions? ( ) estimated date of physical ( ) yes ( ) no

If yes, please describe.

Are you having any problems with your sleep habits? ( ) yes ( ) no

If yes, check where applicable: ( ) sleeping too much ( ) sleeping too little ( ) poor quality sleep ( ) disturbing dreams ( ) other

Are you having any problems with your appetite or eating habits?

If yes, check where applicable: ( ) eating less ( ) eating more ( ) bingeing ( ) restricting

How frequently do you undergo physical or specialized training?

Have you experienced significant weight change in the last two months? ( ) yes ( ) no

Do you regularly use alcohol? ( ) yes ( ) no

In a typical month, how often do you have 4 or more drinks in a 24 hour period?

How often do you engage in recreational drug use? ( ) daily ( ) weekly ( ) monthly ( ) rarely ( ) never

Do you smoke cigarettes or use other tobacco products? ( ) yes ( ) no

Have you had suicidal thoughts recently? ( ) frequently ( ) sometimes ( ) rarely ( ) never

Have you had them in the past? ( ) frequently ( ) sometimes ( ) rarely ( ) never
Have you ever undergone a previous counseling session or psychiatric evaluation? ( ) yes ( ) no

If yes, how long ago and how many sessions?

Have you ever been diagnosed with a health condition or mental disorder? ( ) yes ( ) no

If yes, please describe.

Are there any medical diagnoses in your family? ( ) yes ( ) no

If yes, please describe.

Are you currently in a romantic relationship? ( ) yes ( ) no

If yes, how long have you been in this relationship?

On a scale of 1 to 10 (10 being the highest quality,) how would you rate your current relationship?

In the last 6 months, have you experienced any significant life changes or stressors? If yes, please explain.

Have you ever experienced any the following?

Extreme depressed mood ( ) yes ( ) no

Extreme anxiety ( ) yes ( ) no

Rapid speech ( ) yes ( ) no

Dramatic mood swings ( ) yes ( ) no

Sleep disturbances ( ) yes ( ) no

Phobias ( ) yes ( ) no

Panic attacks ( ) yes ( ) no

Frequent pain or injury ( ) yes ( ) no

Inability to perform on missions ( ) yes ( ) no

Hallucinations ( ) yes ( ) no

Unexplained losses of time ( ) yes ( ) no

Unexplained memory lapses ( ) yes ( ) no

Alcohol or substance abuse ( ) yes ( ) no

Body image problems ( ) yes ( ) no

Eating disorder ( ) yes ( ) no

Self-harming ( ) yes ( ) no

Repetitive thoughts (e.g. obsessions) ( ) yes ( ) no
Repetitive behaviors (e.g. frequent checking, hand washing) ( ) yes ( ) no

Homicidal thoughts ( ) yes ( ) no

When he came to the "Family Mental Health History" chart, Sato could not fill it out beyond any self-evident details he could share about his uncle. He had no other family to mentally profile, at least not accurately. The time Sato spent on the intake sheet's questions made him visualize the quantity of challenges he had thus far dismissed. He'd been doing fine, he thought.

What was he doing this for, anyway? He could manage. Yes, his life was far from stellar at the moment, but Sato could not stomach the idea of taking up a doctor's time with problems that he ought to sort out on his own. People with real problems needed this. Those who were victims of the universe and freak accidents, those suffering from true health issues: they needed support! Not some loser who was responsible for the breakup of his relationship.

If anything, Sato thought as he handed the sheet back to the secretary, this was an appointment that Tama could probably use. Right. Because he may have single-handedly burned her sanctuary of expectations to the ground and laid waste to her trust, happiness, self-esteem, and those other positivities she had in abundance. He robbed her of those things. So what was he doing here? Sato replayed the question in his mind as he sat on the charming sofa. What was he doing here? As if he were entitled to this extension of help?

And as far as he knew, society at large, at least in the Leaf Village, hardly ever discussed mental health and the population's management of it. Every now and again he'd hear terms like "psycho," and "manic episodes," and "anxiety," and "clan killer." Things like that. It was no secret that shinobi's minds went sour fairly regularly and for a myriad of reasons, but those headlines tended to get flip, unsympathetic responses. For such a pervasive problem, there weren't very many who actually understood what any of it entailed. Himself included.

"—you now."

Sato caught the tail end of the secretary's statement, shaking off his thoughts.

She repeated, "Dr. Iwao will see you now."

"Oh." He was a squirrel all the way to the office door on the right, unreasonably nervous.

On the other side of the door was a short woman of indiscernible age, wearing a sport coat and slacks somehow tailored to suit her miniscule frame. Her dark bobbed haircut and tiny eyes might've been intimidating if not for the granny-like smile gracing her face. "Don't hesitate, you have one foot in already..." She waved her hand to usher him along, "I just made tea if you would like some."

"...no, thanks." Sato observed the space of the orderly, stylish room and sat again in a cushy seat beside a potted sansevieria plant.

The woman resumed her preparations of biscuits and hot tea on a tray, leaving them on a low table in front of her wing chair. Her eyes scanned the intake sheet, darted up to him, back to the sheet, then back to Sato. Clearly, two and two were being put together in her head as she got the snapshot of the situation. Sato's fingers curled against the soft fabric of his chair, antsy, swallowing and trying to stay calm. Why would this person of all people make him feel like running? What could she do? There was no threat here.

"A biscuit?" She tried to offer him something again.

"No, thank you, Doctor Iwao."
The doctor shook her head, "I prefer Sumiko-san, but if you're committed to formality Doctor will do." She plucked up a cookie and crunched on it, sitting back in her chair, "This is your first time here, Hatake-san."

"Uh…” When she addressed him so politely it felt weird, felt like she was talking to Kakashi—someone worth respect!

"Sato, then." Sumiko guessed.

"Yeah, that's better." He nodded.

"We can use this visit to get to know each other and find out if you would benefit from future counseling." Sumiko told him, "But from first glance at this sheet, I think you might have a lot to unpack in one session."

"I don't know how to get it off my chest, honestly." Sato admitted, "I don't want to talk about it."

"So, you don't want to talk about what's on this sheet?" Sumiko smiled understandingly, "Then I welcome you to talk about anything else. We can even talk about me, if you want."

He looked at her quizzically.

"The point is that you can let your guard down a little here. Open up." She explained, "I'm a shinobi just like you. And I've been licensed in medicine for over twenty years. Confide in me—I might be able to relate to what you've been through."

"I hope not." He muttered.

"Try not to be hard on yourself. Not in here. This space doesn't perpetuate judgement or shame." The doctor informed him, "That's not to say counseling is easy—good counseling never is. It's work. Working on yourself. But I like to think that even when patients are challenged while they're in my office, they walk out and feel better as they go about their days."

"That…kind of sounds…like something I need." Sato admitted.

Sumiko was nodding and sipping from a tea cup. He still struggled to bring up any subject, good or bad, to begin some kind of meaningful conversation. She set her cup down on the tray again and shifted in her wingback while watching him, reading minute signals of discomfort.

"How about I start?" The doctor offered, "You should know who you're talking to, after all. I am Iwao Sumiko, Jounin, former Deputy Chief of Konoha's Medical Corps, and though I've put my most exciting days behind me I now happily serve as a psychologist for the standard forces. I also have a separate psychiatric practice upstairs in this building with another doctor." Sumiko laced her hands primly as she balanced her elbows on the chair's arms, "Why do I do what I do? Because the Second and Third Great Shinobi Wars may have spared the physical bodies of my friends who fought, but many lost their minds or their will to live on. I couldn't bear seeing anyone else hurt with no resources to turn to in our village. I've made sure they and many like them now have somewhere to go."

"Wow." Sato said faintly, "You said…the Second War too?"

"I did."

"Didn't…Tsunade-sama fight in that one?"
"She did. I was in the Academy graduating class that followed after hers." Sumiko wore a cat-like smile, "She's a woman after my own heart: trailblazing medicine, being a leader…I adore her. Can you tell?"

"That's really great." He meant it, somewhat star-struck.

"What else?" The doctor rubbed her chin, "Iwao is my married name. My husband and I have been together for seventeen years. We have no children. He serves in the Torture and Intel Corps, but plans to retire at the end of this year. We both love gardening and designing jewelry. While I sometimes get carried away with part-time home decorating with my best friend, my husband is usually off in bars with his pals and protégées. He's trained two Genin teams in his time. I'd say I admire him, but I think just a bit more highly of myself since his smoking habit led to heart and respiratory issues I warned him about. It annoys me that he didn't take greater care of himself." She was cheerful in her memoir, "My life is quite ordinary and tranquil now, but I like that. The old days were tumultuous and full of failure. Those times molded me into who I am."

"Yeah, I know about days like that." He relaxed a bit more on the settee, shoulders loosening.

"They don't last forever, Sato." Sumiko told him, "No matter how ugly it can get, we stumble through it to still waters again."

"The waves I'm riding are pretty choppy right now. I was on still water a few days ago…"

"Why don't you share a bit about yourself? The basic things that weren't on your sheet, for example." Sumiko suggested, "I know you're related to Kakashi because he came to counseling here for several years."

"Yeah, he, uh…referred me to you. He knows that I've been…" Sato sighed and began, "So I'm his nephew."

"You are indeed."

"Where do I start…? Um. My family? Mom was really cool. I never…got to know my Dad, because he either died or left us before I was born." The chair's padded back felt more and more comfortable as he settled and spoke, "But Mom handled it. For some reason, whenever tragedy struck, like when my Grandma passed away or when Grandpa killed himself…then when my Dad disappeared…my Mom was sad about it but pushed on. Like, she was really iron-clad. Sweet and friendly, but I remember how nothing could get her down."

Sumiko was nodding, "Kakashi spoke about his sister that way. He envied her resilience."

"Yeah, I'll never forget how she could survive those things and see the silver-lining. She and my Uncle would butt heads a lot, but I know that Kakashi cared about her. He was just scared of everything, back then. When I was a little kid, I remember times when he was too freaked out to even hold my hand."

By then, Sumiko had fully invested her attention in the tale.

"Now I know why…he's like that. But he's better now, I think!" Sato amended, "So…when my Mom died while I was still studying in the Academy…we were all shocked and not handling it well. She'd been sick for a while, but we talked ourselves into thinking she'd…always be with us. I had to push myself to go to school every day and keep working. Kakashi didn't help me much. He was kind of checked-out."

Sato watched the doctor nod in silence with a placid expression, then went on, "When I was a baby,
though, Kakashi and my Mom agreed to a matchmaking deal with the Maito family— one of my uncle's good friends...well, anyway— I was engaged to...to..." Suddenly he couldn't speak. It felt like there was tar in his mouth.

"That's alright, I can see this is stressful for you." Sumiko encouraged him, "Did this family help you after your mother passed away?"

"Yes." Sato confirmed, "Well. Not her parents, but...Tama did a lot for me."

"How old were you?"

"About eight."

"And how old was Tama at the time?"

"Eleven?" He tried to recall.

"How responsible for such a young age. So your basic needs were met thanks to Tama." Sumiko understood, "Not your uncle or her parents. That must've been difficult, regardless. Did you receive counseling at that time?"

"I didn't."

"Did any member of the SHA offer it to you? Or a social worker offer it to you?"

"Not that I...recall." Sato had no memory of mental health guidance beyond the kindness of Academy teachers.

"Hm." Said Sumiko archly while jotting a note on her spiral pad, "At that stage of the SHA's development, the child services department should have provided you with mandatory counseling for at least three months. It doesn't surprise me how many of our shinobi were slipping through the cracks then...nowadays it's improved. Still imperfect, but the department functions much better than it once did. Excuse my interruption. Please tell me more about Tama, if you can, and tell me about your shinobi studies."

"Um. So...I lived in the same place after Mom died and Tama helped me figure out...how to afford things...and clean and shop and feed myself and just...take care of myself. It was hard and I used a lot of shortcuts, but I kept it together. She paid for the things I couldn't. Taught me a lot...kinda...kept me human when I didn't know how to be around people. So it got better. And I had fun again." Sato explained, "She was my best friend, but I also made friends at the Academy. They're still my friends today. We joked around in school, played, graduated, and now we work together and hang out outside of missions, even."

"Not everyone is fortunate enough to maintain those bonds for so long." The doctor noted.

"Yeah, we're pretty lucky! Even some others who weren't my friends then...are now." He smiled slightly, thinking of Neji, "And I have a great Jounin-Sensei and my teammates are always there for me, they're just—the best. I don't know how they put up with all my bullshit, but somehow they do and I just love 'em so much..." Sato's smiled dropped and his eyes grew teary, "I love...Tama too..."

"Your sheet says you are no longer in a relationship. If something happened, do you want to talk about it, or would you like to talk about something else for now?" Sumiko offered.

The weight was back, squeezing his chest and throat. A full minute of silence passed while Sato
slowly inhaled, exhaled, and tried to get his bearings, tried to think of a place to start…

Then bit by bit, he spoke. About the past and the present, the chronology of events sometimes crisscrossed, yet he covered the times when he'd been reluctant about being Tama's companion, all the way up to his maturation and realization that he had been attracted to her and was acting on those desires. Other events and challenges were sprinkled into the tale, however he centralized his distress around the fact that he'd stupidly risked infidelity, said nothing about it as they progressed their relationship, and more recently watched it fall apart as the truth came to light.

Sumiko had offered some limited commentary throughout, but waited for Sato to conclude recapping the most excruciating events. When there was a lull and she could see he needed a break (he was finally eating from the plate of biscuits she was picking on), the doctor told him, "This isn't so unusual."

"Hmf?" He said, crumbs sticking around his mouth.

"It isn't, Sato. This type of event isn't rare. It's unfortunate, yes. Agonizing, no doubt. But you aren't the first shinobi to speak on being on either side of this issue. The fact is thus: maintaining a relationship as a shinobi is far harder than we realize. The burden of our work and missions is taxing enough, but relationships can capsize under the pressures of what we do. Our personal time is limited, and how we spend it on others is constrained by numerous obligations. I am not saying this as if it excuses your actions, but overall there is a trend—a correlation, if you will," Sumiko got somewhat scientific about it, "Based on my experience and studies I've conducted, myself and other counselors in this field from many villages have noticed that most relationships that shinobi are in tend to suffer—even if they stay in them all their lives. They struggle just a bit more than non-shinobi relationships and families." She poured herself the last bit of tea in the pot.

"Okay. So it's not surprising." Sato granted, "But it still sucks."

"It does. You know the value of what you lost. Not everyone I've spoken to who went through relationship failures feels remorse, but rather anger or resentment. Sometimes they think of revenge or killing. Those types require...very carefully structured therapy," Sumiko shared, "But not you, Sato. You have empathy for those you've hurt."

"Hurray, I guess." He wasn't proud of how he understood the feelings of others, since he'd been trying to avoid or suppress those feelings, after all. "Sumiko-san, it just pisses me off that I didn't realize it sooner. If I understand now, why didn't I understand then? I mean, I thought I did, but I filtered it all through a smudged lens. Couldn't see I was being immature...I didn't care how Tama would feel about what I did, because I...thought I'd get away with it. In the moment I was so sure."

Sumiko continued nodding.

"All I thought about was what I felt. That it'd be easy to do, and the opportunity was right in front of my face. So I took it. Like I was still some jerk kid looking for handouts, like my life was still so hard! Oh, poor me." Sato ground his knuckles into the chair's cushion, "At the time Tama didn't want to take things too far, so I became impatient and acted like a jackass."

"You also mentioned you were impaired at the time." The doctor added, "Which did not govern your decision, but made it easier to overlook your inhibitions. Alcohol hardly ever improves these situations."

"I haven't had any since."

"And that's a sensible decision, but you rely on other substances." Sumiko noted.
Sato looked at her like she had suggested joining a Satanic cult, as though her comment was completely off the mark.

"Let me clarify," The doctor backtracked, "Earlier you talked about what your diet is like. You avoid alcohol, yes? But you consume a lot of sugar. More so than that, you depend on coffee. Caffeine is a stimulant." Sumiko spun her pen around her finger, "You have been depending on that stimulant since your mother died."

"Uh. Well…yeah. But it's just something I picked up…"

"I won't tell you that you abuse substances to the point of self-destruction, but you use them to regulate yourself. To function. It could be a method of foisting control back from depressive behaviors that would otherwise stall you." Sumiko observed, "Some people who are depressed can conceal their emotional suffering with coping mechanisms, happy demeanors, and creative talents. It's how they maintain their status quo in society, which is not wholly supportive of or understanding of mental illness."

"Well I don't want to say that I'm mentally ill. Because I'm not. That's just an excuse—"

"For what? It isn't an excuse. It's a state of health, quite simply. It isn't the stigma that this village makes it to be." The doctor countered, adding, "Many shinobi are depressed and many have been diagnosed with various disorders. Most of them carry on well with their lives thanks to therapy and medication."

"Who wants any of that when you can lead a normal life without it?"

"Most can't lead a normal life without it. There's nothing to be ashamed of. Some even quit being shinobi, if it becomes too much. The decision is theirs." Sumiko pointed her pen at Sato, "You don't have to be normal to have value, Sato. You don't have to perfectly fit the perceptions of others. If some of your happiness and functionality is manufactured and they know it, what does it really matter? Most will never know anyway."

A heavy breath escaped him. He understood what she meant. For quite a long time he had wanted to look a certain way, appeal in a certain way to others. Sato would even point out the flaws of his peers at times, mostly in jest, to defend what was supposedly right with his image. He mentioned this to the doctor.

Sumiko nodded, "It doesn't have to rule you or own who you are. Your mental health needs to be managed just as your physical health does, and you know that a band-aid doesn't mend a broken leg. Some pains require lengthier, more thoughtful treatments."

"I guess so…but I feel like if I come here for counseling I'll just be talking about Tama most of the time."

"Then if that is what you need to do, that is what we'll do." She told him.

"But is that right?"

"It is if that is the subject that de-harmonizes you— puts you out of touch with yourself. You might find there are other things that need to be addressed as well, if you're willing to explore them." The doctor took a few last notes for herself, "Don't tell yourself that you don't deserve to get better, or need to ruin another aspect of your life as penance for how you've done wrong. Treat pain with care, not more pain."

"I want to try to do that…" He agreed.
"Would you like to begin routine counseling here? Say, twice a week whenever is convenient for you?"

"I guess that'd be good. How do I—?"

"I'll send a confidential request to the Hokage to forward me your mission schedules as she arranges them. We can mold your appointments around your activity."

"Okay." Sato sat up a bit straighter, "Thanks. And thanks for the biscuits."

"You're welcome. My husband makes them."

"That's talent. Those were good."

"Weren't they?" Sumiko stood from her chair, "I'd say this was a fine start, Sato. We send out a messenger pigeon with reminders of upcoming appointments, so be on the lookout. Once I have Tsunade-sama forwarding me your schedule, we'll begin."

He followed the woman to the door and somehow felt lighter. He thanked her, learned the secretary's name was Eri, thanked her too, and then left the office when Doctor Iwao concluded her pleasantries. For the first time in three days, Sato felt like there was something ahead that he could work towards. Something that wasn't a black, desolate landscape.

There was no excuse good enough to avoid lunch out with Sakura and Ino, so Tama put on a fake, cheerful face and followed them to their preferred cafe. If all she had to do was survive forty minutes of chit-chat and bourgeois food, well, it couldn't be any tougher than fighting Huo had been.

"Yeah, so I've started some part-time assignments at the Sensory Corps and Intel Department. It's been pretty enlightening." Ino recapped as their milk teas arrived, stirring her straw, "Sometimes we have guest brains that come in for hacking."

"Excuse me, what?" Sakura said, her lips fiddling over her drink straw.

"I mean, when we retrieve particular information from a target using... more sophisticated techniques." Ino actually meant brutal or invasive, but they could read between the lines, "We use more resilient test subjects. Tougher nuts to crack, you know! Some members of ANBU come in and try to resist us in practice sessions."

"Did you beat an ANBU brain?" Tama was intrigued.

"Well, one came in and he was... I asked him to work with someone else. He's got a steel brain like Sakura's." A noisy sip before Ino went on, "So I worked with that guy we met at the Tournament Festival."

"Sorry, I can't remember." Sakura was smiling, "That was a busy night for me."

Ino bumped elbows with her, "I bet it was, Forehead."

"You mean Sai?" Tama gathered.

"Yeah, the one Sato introduced us to." Ino confirmed. The group paused to give their orders to a waiter, then continued kibitzing. "He wasn't so bad." Ino recalled, "Not the strongest brain, but I think he gave it his best shot. He was on patrol during that recent fiasco in the Forest of Death, so I saw a lot of that... and he was kind of..."
"Kind of what?" Sakura prompted.

"Kind of brave. I mean, I saw some fucked up, unexplainable stuff when I fished around his head." Ino swirled the contents of her iced drink, "It was just a little embarrassing that I noticed—it just floated to the top... that he thought I was cute."

"Well it's a feature you make way too obvious to miss." Sakura gave her that, "But stop blushing about it, Pig. You're taken."

"I know! I was flattered, that's all." Ino tittered.

Tama was curiously quiet as she sat by and listened, sipping her drink.

"So, have you picked out any houses yet?" Ino was aware of Tama's efforts as of last week, "You said that you and Sato were shopping around."

"No, no houses." Tama told her, "Neither of us are quite ready for home ownership. The expense of it, anyway."

"But I thought Kakashi-sensei was offering you some kind of assistance with that? Like a gift?" Sakura remembered more of the discussion, "You really didn't find anything?"

"We're just not ready." Tama tried to leave it at that.

"Hmm." Ino arched a blonde eyebrow, "Suddenly not wanting a house, even if it's presented to you on a silver platter? Haven't heard that one yet."

"It's fine. Rent for a while and get situated." Sakura tried to endorse the unlikely choice, "Have you made any other plans?"

Her tongue felt cotton-like, speech fluffing as Tama tried to remain poised, "No plans yet, but I'll let you know when I have something to report."

As Ino was predisposed to taunt the truth out of a target, she couldn't help herself, "No plans you say... How about the latest and greatest, hm? Have you done anything spicy with that cutie of yours? You were telling us last week."

Tama bit down on her straw and refused the bait.

"No? We haven't seen Sato in a while." Ino noted, a faint edge of hostility in her tone, "Aren't you going to bring him around when you have time off?"

Sakura sensed the accusation Ino wanted to make and tried to intervene, "She doesn't have to, Ino. Their schedules—"

"He was promoted to Jounin, shouldn't we be celebrating?" Ino carried on, "Tama, shouldn't we? Say something."

"Ino, leave her alone."

"I..." Tama tried to clear her throat, "Don't want to talk about it."

Sakura's shoulders drooped upon hearing such an admission.

Ino leaned forward in her seat, eyes flashing angrily, "Of course you don't want to talk about it, because he's fucked something up. I can tell he hurt you."
There was a shiny film in Tama's eyes, but she confessed nothing. Sakura reacted with silent, wide-eyed horror and baited breath. No. Not those two, Sato and Tama, who she adored seeing together as if they were peas in a pod.

"How bad?" Ino tried to evaluate the extent of the damage. Tama's ragged breathing was not reassuring, so Ino handed her upset friend a spare menu to hide her face from public view as it reddened.

"Very bad, huh?" Ino ascertained sharply, "Is it splitsville?"

When Tama nodded Sakura's jaw nearly dropped. Ino was genuinely taken aback by the answer. Though they didn't say so aloud, both girls viewed Tama's healthy relationship as barometer for their own relationships. The heartache of their friend was all too relatable.

"Please, I...just want to have lunch in peace." Tama's words were thick, trying to calm down over the final sips of milk tea, "I'm not doing great, but I don't want to make a big production of any of this, do you understand? I refuse to say anything until I know neither of you will."

"We won't!" Sakura whispered. Her head nodded in time with Ino's to reassure Tama that it was safe to confide in them.

And so, over picture-perfect dishes of lunch entrées they spoke in hushed voices, and Tama retold the story to the best of her ability. Questions were answered, curses were uttered, small gasps timed perfectly to scandalous admissions; and then Tama concluded with, "I just don't think Sato wanted what he always had. It's better if he goes his own way."

"That is so wrong! It is just completely wrong-!" Sakura disagreed softly, "He loves you! He's loved you very much for a long time! Men make stupid mistakes—"

Ino railroaded the soft sentiment, "It is not up to any man or woman who has been cheated on to forgive those mistakes, Sakura. That opens the door for the perpetrator to make those mistakes again and be forgiven again." She violently rearranged her plate with chopsticks, "That isn't what it means to be a good partner. Tama should value herself! And people should suffer their stupidity."

"Ino, stop." Sakura hissed.

"You can't let him get away with it." Ino warned Tama, "Don't go easy on him by letting him ride off into the sunset! Destroy him."

"I'm not letting Sato get off easy. It's just that I don't think I need to fire any parting shots." Tama explained, "It's done. I don't need a fight. I'm feeling good about taking the high road."

"High positions are tactically suited for dropping heavy things." Ino was using her imagination.

"Please, respect my wishes and leave this be." Tama commanded, "The both of you hear me, right? I just want my friends beside me. I know it'll get easier."

When Tama motioned to put money notes on the table to pay for her share of lunch, Ino puffed up, still upset, "No. Sad ladies don't pay for therapy lunches. Put that away, we've got it…"

By the next afternoon, Sato was pleased to get an update from the counseling office that his next appointment was Friday at 1:00PM. He'd have a mission between now and then, he estimated. The idea of emotional respite in therapy had grown on him since speaking to Doctor Iwao.
His day was fairly average. Team training excluded Kurenai as she was busy moving items into her new house, which they then visited later in the day. She seemed wholly unaware of Sato's breakup and made a few uncomfortable, innocent, forward-looking comments about his marriage. Sato was able to change the subject. The house had recently been remodeled and Kurenai had plenty to say about it. He, Hinata, and Shino stayed for dinner which pleasantly surprised Asuma: "It's like a little housewarming party." He joked. Sato barely touched his food.

He went home in the dark, slept, and woke before dawn the next day. Sato was feeling slightly more motivated. He trained in the southern forest swathed in red leaves, directing new techniques his owls could use, and worked himself hard long past sun-up. When it was about time for breakfast he obeyed his empty stomach, and walked to the nearby convenience mart in town called Cosme. Sato opted for a pre-packaged hardboiled egg and rice ball, as opposed to his sugary standby foods. Then he asked for the mysterious green health smoothie advertised on the order board. The barista gave him a funny look while jotting his name down on a clear cup.

Sato ate and sipped his way across the village, destined for the dance studio to perk himself up with one of his favorite pastimes. 'I've got an hour before the first class of the day starts, so I can pop into the loft and brush up on some routines.'

On the studio's ground floor, the hawk-faced owner stopped him at the bottom of the stairs, "What are you doing here?"

"I have an unlimited membership, remember? I come here all the time to practice between classes." He felt uneasy having to explain himself to the woman who saw him almost every week.

"You don't need your unlimited privileges anymore. I heard what you did." The woman tapped her foot as she addressed him, "If you continue to practice here, then Tama may stop coming to teach classes."

If horror were like instant coffee, Just add hot water! Then Sato supposed only a stranger's comment was needed to immediately trigger fear and paranoia. He took backwards steps out of the studio and back onto the road, into daylight. 'No way. How did that lady know?' He walked briskly, 'Maybe that barista heard something? He acted weird while making my drink…'

But if two or more non-acquaintances had heard of his extremely personal and painful breakup with Maito Tama, there was a possibility that others were aware. Scuttling up the street, he couldn't help but notice people's glances at him.

'How could they know? Tama wouldn't air dirty laundry like that! It's unlike her.' Sato neared the Administrative Building, his thoughts abuzz, 'She wouldn't do that even if she's mad as hell at me.'

Upstairs in Tsunade's office, the Hokage was mercifully oblivious to Sato's struggle. Distracted with the council's draft of an official agreement with Hidden Waterfall, Tsunade simultaneously briefed him on a solo reconnaissance mission he had the next morning, "There's always a chance you'll run into a counter-operative where I'm sending you, but if not this intel retrieval should go smoothly." She sniffed at him, "Sato, do you hear me? What are you frowning about?"

"Nothing, nothing! I won't let anyone get the better of me, Tsunade-sama."

"Good. Those are your orders in that scroll I gave you. If you see an intern on your way out, tell them to bring me something— anything to drink. I am not ready for this council meeting and honestly they are not ready for me, so it could get messy." Tsunade dismissed him.

He did as instructed and flagged down a Medical Corps intern who happened by, who dutifully
agreed to fetch the Hokage something from the office kitchen. Sato trotted down the stairs, bouncing back and forth in his own head, *Tsunade-sama seems to be acting normally. Who could've—? No. Kakashi wouldn't let Kiba tell anyone. Kiba wouldn't bother telling anyone, since I know he hates wasting time on me."

In the lobby, he noticed Chouji passing out fresh cinnamon rolls from a box to building occupants. He was waiting on his team to gather. Drawn to the heavenly smell, Sato smiled automatically at his friend, "Can I get one too?"

When Chouji stared at him like he was an empty glass jar, the reason why was not lost on Sato. His expression grew solemn when he amended, "Sorry. Maybe there isn't enough to go around? Save one for Sunshine, though, because those are her favorite."

"Sure." Chouji agreed faintly.

"Get one to Tama too." Sato suggested, mostly due to heartache, but the remark seemed to positively blow Chouji's mind as the young man snapped the box shut and goggled at Sato.

"Are you actually talking about her?" He set the box on a counter, pointing a finger at Sato's chin, "Should you be doing that?"

"I don't…see why I shouldn't." A hint of frustration crept into Sato's tone, "Everyone's acting weird."

"We're acting weird—?" Chouji scoffed.

"Hey! Why is it that folks in this village think it's okay to talk about someone's personal life when it's got nothing to do with them?" Sato growled quietly, "I can barely get anything done today. Can you pass that along? For everyone to knock it off?"

Movement in his peripheral vision indicated there was another visitor in the lobby, moving fast, but they both heard her coming. Arms waving and heels clicking on tile, Ino raised her voice to shriek reprimands at Sato, *Hatake! You lousy piece of—!* Chouji promptly pulled her away before she could take a swing, evacuating the kunoichi down at adjacent corridor as her clamoring persisted. Others in the lobby regarded Sato curiously after the interaction, but he booked it out the door.

'I get the feeling…' Sato thought as his stomach sank, proceeding toward the Jounin Standby Station, 'Ino did it. No one's shouted at me so far…she probably found out and told literally every being with ears she had contact with.' He ground his teeth, *Too bad we always had that in common: being huge gossips."

Society in Konoha was rather free and progressive, at least Sato could believe that on a good day. However, none of the great villages or small settlements in between had overcome the cultural cornerstone of *mentsu*. Face. The concept of one's prestige and honor incumbent upon the opinions of others. And the preservation thereof. In one day, it seemed to Sato, his loss of face had taken an epic nosedive the likes of which few in Konohagakure could ever boast. Perhaps it started with sneers as a few learned of the unfair "smearing" of the Maito family, and what prestige it had cost them. Upon learning who the responsible party was in this damage of "face," Sato now found himself in a gossip chain that relentlessly sought to scold and humiliate him.

And best of all? This type of ridicule was incredibly normal. *At least around here,* a little voice in the back of his mind noted, *You can always run away if it gets too bad— if it wrecks work and your social life— don't let it!* But being fresh off of his Jounin promotion and new duties to the village, Sato wasn't swayed to leave and neglect the needs of so many. That would lose him *even more face.*
In the Standby Station he did not at all feel like himself. His hair was on end, his stomach in knots, and Sato all but tip-toed up the stairs to the next floor. Another young Jounin brushed Sato on the way up the stairwell. Sato recognized the man to be Runruna Mion, a contemporary of Tama’s. Mion scowled at him, "Out of my way, lowlife."

He barely reached the top of the stairs. Sato stood there alone after the encounter, reconsidering his plans for the day. Was it wise to show his face in a public meeting? Word of his transgression had spread like wildfire. 'No. I can't shirk my duties. I can't be intimidated.' He moved down the hall and slid open the door of the assembly room. It shut softly behind him. Within, the space was stuffed with elite shinobi and visiting Corps members who intended to give a presentation to the group. Sato took a place against a wall.

On the opposite side of the room, Kakashi and Neji could be glimpsed between the pack of bodies and flak vests. The puppies were sitting obediently at Kakashi's feet. Sato would have preferred migrating in their direction for comfort's sake, but roll-call had started and he didn't want to draw attention. As it was, attention was already drifting his way. Asuma was close enough to squeeze over to Sato and take the spot beside him, "Oh boy, kid."

"Pretend I'm not here, if you want." Sato mumbled. He kept scanning the room in search of familiar faces. Gai was absent again, which was not a good sign. Sweat begin to pearl on the back of Sato's neck.

"Kurenai's running late today." Asuma mentioned, "I'll try to do some damage control until she shows up."

Sato wondered in a whisper, "How many people know?"

"The better question is: how many people don't know?" Asuma advised him morbidly.

Perspiration begin to slick on his skin, and Sato held still, trying to remain calm as sets of eyes settled on him and stuck. He folded his arms and stared off into space, as if none of this mattered to him. As if they couldn't hurt him.

"What a view! Looks like this lot has got an abundance of judgmental assholes who forgot how to mind their own business." Asuma said it loudly enough to force a few gawkers to turn away, "For fuck's sake…I thought we'd all graduated from the Academy, but it doesn't look like it."

"Is…Gai…not here?" Sato was afraid to ask.

"I saw him briefly this morning and it did not look good. Gai was probably going to or from his brother's office." Asuma guessed.

Sato reminded himself how to control his bowels and facial expressions. It would have been too much to hope that this gossip-storm had missed the Maito family and its patriarchs.

Even more unfortunate was that Shiranui Genma stood from his seat and looked quite fed-up about something. He faced Sato while chewing on a senbon needle, "You can sit this meeting out."

"I'm already marked on the attendance list." Sato tried to brush off the veiled threat. He vaguely knew that Genma had been an old teammate of Gai's, and that he was probably aware of the turmoil going on in his friend's family. A seat away from Genma was Ebisu, the third member of Gai's old team, who was discreetly listening to the exchange.

Genma drew closer, rather formidable with his shoulders squared and pinpointing stare, "Marked
down or not, you aren't needed. In fact, you're not really needed at meetings here in general…since disrespectful punks who sleep around and wreck homes don't have constructive input to give."

Asuma wore a warm, genial smile, "Mornin' Genma. Can I interest you in shutting the fuck up?"

Genma smiled back, "Hey Asuma, did you hit your head and forget not to defend a little shit who breaks vows with one of Konoha's most respected families?"

"It's not your place to judge him, Baggypants."

Sato interjected, "Look, I don't know what you've heard, but that wasn't what happened. It was a lone mistake, and frankly…it's not up for discussion."

Nearby, Ebisu agreed and fiddled with his sunglasses, "You aren't welcome here."

"Hey!" At the head of the room Kakima was shouting, "I'm still taking roll so shut up back there! I can't hear."

The standoff was neutralized when Kakashi popped over like a magician, nudging Genma and Ebisu back to their seats. He muttered to them about patching things up with Gai later. They seemed to simmer down.

It was then Sato looked across the room again and met eyes with Neji, and realized he had probably only had Neji's respect for two full days before spoiling it. In that moment Sato felt so desperately hopeless that he turned around without a word and exited the assembly room. He remembered as he hustled out of the Standby Station that he used to joke to his friends who goofed up, This is why we can't have nice things! And indeed, this was why.

The world outside was a swirl of color and undefined shapes, all lit in useless sunlight and filled with meaningless, accidental things. When Sato noticed Sakura and Kiba across the avenue with their pitying looks directed at him, he knew there was no way back up. To escape the freefall of shame. It was forever down, down, down from now on. He was too ashamed to make an emergency, drop-in visit to Doctor Iwao's office.

Sato conducted the rest of his day robotically far away from acquaintances, refused to sleep, and took off for his mission at dawn the next morning. In the southern reaches of the Fire Country Sato happened across the low level counter-operative that Tsunade had mentioned might appear, and ragefully pummeled the interloper in a skirmish, leaving him to bleed unconscious in forest nettle. Sato completed his report by night and took no breaks. When he returned to Konoha the day after that, the shattering isolation had fully set in. He'd stopped eating and sleeping. He sipped water from time to time. Never in all his days had Sato been so passionless.

Back in the village he submitted his report by messenger hawk and skipped a debriefing with the Hokage, returned home to shower off, and then curled up in his bed. It felt so soft. 'It's kind of like you're still here, Tama. I hope no one's giving you grief.'

A messenger pigeon was tapping at his window, hoping he would fill out a form to reschedule his counseling appointment. Though Sato could hear it, his mind had traveled back to the past in search of the white, electric-glass wall he'd found in death. The anguish he was feeling was a callback to that mysterious place; he'd forgotten all about it until now. That Akatsuki fellow…killed me. I think I've…overstayed.' Sato supposed, 'I don't want Sunshine to feel bad about…working to save me, but she shouldn't have.'

If he had remained dead, he never would have gone on to destroy the honor of so many people close
to him. Sato was convinced of it, *'If taking responsibility for a mistake that cannot be undone means death...it's not that hard to die. At least, not as hard as it is to live on.'*

He didn't like romanticizing the idea of death. He **wanted** a reason to justify sticking around, but Sato struggled to pin down his positive contributions. He rested and then re-dressed, heading back out into the village. He would talk to them—his friends. He'd explain what was going on, that he and Tama would be fine while apart, and how the **loss of face** was hurting him. That he was thinking of leaving and going back to the white place. Could they please make it stop?

It turned out that Shikamaru didn't even humor him when Sato showed up to greet the team, and Chouji had to restrain Ino again as she fought to take a swing at Sato's head. He took the hint and his leave. Likewise, Sato was shunned by most people his age that he approached that day. He wandered through town after realizing how futile an effort it was.

At the sloped grass bank of the river that cut through the west ward, Sato sat down and rested his head on his bent knees. If he couldn't have the person he loved, why couldn't he at least have gotten to keep his friends? Why had there been collateral damage?

The autumn breeze kind of felt good. Sato blinked, sighed, and then gazed across the stream to see Neji's team on the far side. It looked like Wushu practice with Lee's grandpa Wong Leung. He felt his heart drop into his stomach when they noticed him too. Exhausted, Sato rose to his feet to trudge away and find another spot to self-reflect. He glanced back over his shoulder when he heard a sound. A bolt of fright ran through Sato—Tenten was running full-charge across the river after him. *'Oh my god—! I mean, I know people are mad! But is she really gonna attack me—?'

He could have tripled his pace if he had energy or a speck of food in his stomach, but Sato only managed a lilting run in what he hoped was a safe direction. Tenten's shouting behind him was indistinct. *'I can't take much more of this.'* Since when had his life been reduced to running away from friends? Nothing could be more contrary to his nature.

Both Lee and Neji crossed the river as well. Tenten had summoned a rope-bola from a tool scroll, pitched it, and tripped Sato as it wound around his ankles. He fell with a **pa**ff sound to the grass, breathing heavily and supposing, *'Well, might as well let them...'* Sato rolled to his back to look up at the sky, sorrow replacing his momentary fear, and Tenten then came into his field of view. She bent down to undo the knotted bola around his legs.

"You can beat me up, if you want." He wasn't going to resist.

"I don't want to beat you up, Sato. I needed you to stop running away," Tenten corrected him and extended her hand, "Are you alright? We've been worried about you."

He was speechless as he took her hand and let the kunoichi pull him to his feet. Her teammates caught up and took their places beside Tenten. Lee's eyes were watering. Neji seemed rather composed, wearing the same expression Sato had glimpsed in the Jounin Standby Station.

"I'm not alright." Sato admitted.

"We noticed." Tenten acknowledged, "Everyone's heard about what happened. Ino went around talking about it."

"That's what I thought." He said in a small voice.

"Though we may be disappointed..." Lee told him, "None of us can tolerate the unconscionable behavior that's been directed at you. It is appalling. It is heartless!"
Sato sort of stared at Lee and detected that, yes, his words were sincere. But Lee was always sincere. And Lee was very good at empathizing with other people.

"I wanted to talk to you at the Station." Neji spoke up, "But things escalated and then you left. It's disgusting that those who claim to be veterans and mature adults feel entitled to punish you when your personal life is not theirs to discuss."

"Right. They don't know me so well...you guys, on the other hand..." Sato's voice was soft, "Maybe it's in your best interest to stop associating with me too."

"No." Neji said flatly, "We don't subscribe to crowd mentalities."

"You deserve to be supported!" Lee insisted.

Sato regarded them with shiny eyes.

"For the record, we care about and want to support Tama too, but we can't take sides and write you off like you're worthless. Friends shouldn't have to take sides." Tenten determined, "And it'd be arrogant for any of us to say we haven't each done something to hurt people close to us. Well, Lee never has, but he's a special case."

Lee nodded in mopey understanding while Neji gave Tenten a strange look, "You've never hurt anyone."

Sato watched the young woman stare back at Neji as if she were hiding some terrible secret, and it felt like he'd glimpsed a ticking time bomb that he shouldn't have. From Neji's perspective, he was one to freely admit he had done wrong and hurt others, but he was heretofore unaware that his girlfriend could have possibly broken faith at any point. Tenten's face indicated otherwise. Sato gulped and looked away.

"We will not tolerate your mistreatment, so please depend on us if you are ever in need!" Lee offered.

The comment snapped Neji and Tenten out of it, both nodding to back up the claim.

"I, uh...thanks. Thank you...so much." Sato took a breath, "All I've wished for is...for Tama to get all of the help and affection she needs since she left, though I didn't know...it might be at my expense. What I really want is for her to be okay. It doesn't matter what happens to me."

"It matters." Tenten reminded him.

"Right." Sato mumbled.

"I'll be at the Station tomorrow." Neji said, hinting that he would be willing to fend off any unfriendly Jounin at the next meeting.

He thanked his friends once more before taking his leave, and Sato walked up a series of streets, stopping outside of Doctor Iwao's office. He hadn't rescheduled his appointment. Did doctors ever wonder what became of their troubled patients when communications stopped? Perhaps she had heard the rumors too? Perhaps not? He kept walking and decided to skip counseling. All that he had come to want lately was sleep. Not to talk, or work, or eat, or connect. He could vaguely remember when his body wanted things. When his spirit had once craved things. Now it did not.

Sato returned to his apartment via the open window, and thought maybe he should shut it since the days were getting cooler. But that would keep Aree and Aroo out. He wouldn't do it. He unclipped
his weapons and tool pouches, dropped them on the dining table, and crossed to the sitting area rug. Sato went down on his knees and then curled on his side on the carpet, as it was the nearest, most accessible comfy thing. He ended up lying flat on his back, which felt good in an odd way. He slept. He missed that afternoon's training session with his team.

The sound of knocking woke him at night, and Sato heard Sai's voice beyond the door: "Sato-san, does this cat belong to you? It keeps scratching at your door." He couldn't raise his voice even to tell Sai, No.

It didn't much matter. There was a tinkle of identification tags on the cat's collar, and Sai discovered the cat named Jingle belonged to Mr. Miyazawa on the first floor. Sai walked away to deliver the cat, "Ah. Never mind." Sato heard him go.

He did not move. Sleep took him again.

Then it was morning, and he felt someone shaking him awake worriedly, "Sato-kun?"

Sato cracked his eyes open to see Hinata half-panicked, requiring Shino's assistance to pull him upright into a sitting position.

"What are you doing? We haven't seen you...we had to check on you..." Hinata's voice was fluttering.

"I'm tired." Sato said.

Hinata sat and hugged him, though Sato quite resembled an unfeeling, inanimate sack of feathers at that point. He sat blankly while Shino moved around the flat and collected what few things could comprise breakfast. He then returned with a tray and sat beside his friends, encouraging Sato to eat something since his face was looking sunken with the starting signs of starvation.

Sato could not bring himself to move, and so Shino pinched his friend's cheeks to open his mouth and stuff a sweet bun in. Sato chewed as slowly as a tortoise. But they waited, item by item cramming the bun, a hardboiled egg, and steamed sweet potato in Sato's mouth. Hinata relaxed upon seeing he was willing to eat; just lacking the motor functions to facilitate it. She got up and made tea.

And though it seemed that "Sato" had disappeared from his body, they stayed by his side and pushed him through another impossible day.

Chapter End Notes

Why yes, there was a lot of commentary on depression in this chapter and the socio-cultural pressures that can intensify it. Breakups can be hard, though living in a shinobi society can be even harder. I bet you readers can relate to most of this; either you've been hit by the emotional truck, or you've been there to help the one hit by the emotional truck.

Thanks for reading, peeps! I'm working on a NaruHina Fluff day submission mini fic for May (it's 100 percent humor) so you can be on the lookout for that next. Will try to submit more chapters of Harbinger prior to the end of July. I might get a little distracted at that point due to wedding shenanigans, so I want to give you some story goodness to hold you over until I'm back.
Brain hugs,
tigerowl

Chapter 53- White Shadows in the Mist
To avoid triggering the fifth trip-wire trap they had encountered in the forest, Zabuza motioned for Haku to stay back as he followed the ankle-high metal line. He stalked over moss and bramble, eyes scanning cautiously until he came to the branch it was wrapped around, and then undid the knot slowly. He pointed to an extra bit of line and directed Haku, "Hold that taught."

Haku held the wire and watched as Zabuza slackened the trap, wire sagging as its affixed projectiles slipped down to the ground. As with previous disarmed trap locations, Haku marked their path by sinking a needle into the bark of tree; a red tassel at the senbon's end was conspicuous.

"We are barely a mile in…" Haku noted, "How big is this place?"

"Huge. You're on the main island now. Kirigakure's close."

"And you're certain a patrol won't be here?"

"As certain as I can be when I really have no fucking idea." Zabuza told Haku as he marched on, "Patrols find the traps here to be an inconvenience, so they'll stick to the perimeter. They don't wander further in unless they detect something unusual."

"Your informant said we could be looking in here for days."

"Yeah. No one knows where Mangetsu dropped dead exactly." He snarked, "And we're not leaving without the Master Scroll."

"Not even if there's a confrontation? I don't want to risk my mission to oust the Akatsuki here." Haku didn't like the do-or-die conviction of his companion.

Zabuza grunted, "If there is, run if you want."

The elevation was noticeably higher than other regions of the island, stippled with the white birch trees that thrived in taiga climate. In the troughs of land where winter's snow had long since retreated from summer, small marshes and bogs were teeming with life. Birds and insects sang under the
green, leafy boughs of birches. A hidden bittern's cry in the reeds drummed like drops of water in a glass jar, and Haku wondered at the odd *pip-plumb* sounds until Zabuza told him what it was.

As they undid the next trap, Haku noticed a portion of human skull peeking from beneath a patch of moss. It was not a rare sight in the boreal forest. Bodies and remains were littered throughout; some in undignified, exposed poses, and others melded with the earth as if they'd returned home.

Another mile into the *birch haunt* Zabuza said aloud, "It's weird how this place comes back."

"Comes back?"

"It's a battlefield. I don't know how many times it's been burned down, but the birches come back the fastest. Then everyone forgets and avoids it, the bodies decay, the forest grows, the snow falls again." The man noted, "Like we didn't matter."

Haku marked their place again, "Maybe it's trying to get a message across."

"'Round here, no one's listening."

Some morning mist had yet to clear, and so Haku willed it away with his Blood Limit. Haze thinned low on the slope as they hiked on, over another hill and down towards the next furrow of fresh water. The woodland soil must have been quite fertile. Between the trees there were mugworts, blue bead lilies, daises, and strawberries growing wild. He watched Zabuza pick some of the edible plants, then pull down his neck gaiter to eat them.

"Have you fought here before?" Haku asked as he plucked a strawberry for himself.

"Once, when I was young. Then I did patrols with the Black Ops in this area when I was older."

"Hidden Leaf doesn't leave battlefields looking like this." By *this* he meant cluttered with skeletons.

"Because Leaf moves on from its wars and buries the dead. Mist never stopped fighting." He tilted his head to regard Haku, "And do you really think...Leaf doesn't have its blemishes laying around somewhere? Even if you haven't seen them?"

"Maybe it does." Haku supposed.

"When all of this bullshit is over, this place will move on. It won't burn again. Teams might do work in here to clear the snares and mines. They won't send stupid little Genin dipshits for those tasks, maybe some bomb-squad specialists..."

"You really *can* imagine a peaceful village."

Zabuza pulled his neck gaiter up again, "I've always been able to do that. I just can't figure out what I'm supposed to do in a village like that."

"I can help you." Haku offered, "Figure it out."

"I doubt it."

"You have plenty of other skills. Mist's new leadership will come to depend on you, even if you aren't in the top echelon of administration."

"You're assuming that they haven't *thrown me in prison* in that scenario, Haku."

"I am assuming that, yes."
"Don't project too far into the future. Just focus on—" His sentence cut off when his foot stuck on something.

For a terrible, gut-wrenching moment, Haku feared that Zabuza had crossed a trip-wire and was about to be crushed or blown to pieces…but instead he'd treaded in a sticky substance. The swordsman could not free himself from the transparent, shimmering thread stretched over moss and twigs. What was more, Haku had never seen Zabuza's eyes go so wide in fright in all of his time knowing the man.

"What?" Haku chirped.

"Get out of here now." Was Zabuza's lone command.

Haku immediately took off.

It was unfortunate that they'd gone so far into the dense birch forest. Trying to follow the marked trail in reverse at great speed was risky, and he also guessed that Zabuza was not going to be able to escape with him. They had come to an agreement days ago that there would be no hard feelings if one had to abandon the other. In that event, they would come up with some way to stick to the plan and improvise.

Haku stepped lightly over the surface of a pond while in retreat…and then caught on something, tumbling abruptly underwater. He lost a gasp of air in his surprise, frantically looking around the pool for what had tripped him. No shinobi or traps were visible; only the thin glimmer of thread. Silk. It was woven between aquatic plants and sunken logs. It was everywhere. Hardly noticeable to the naked eye.

A force acting on the threads wound around Haku's arms and trunk, reeling him ashore where he sputtered and coughed. From a place unseen, the thin but powerful silk pulled him over the mossy hill and down the embankment again. At the bottom of the slope, he could see Zabuza was wrapped in sticky silk and suspended from a low tree branch, upright, struggling and cursing. The Seversword was pinned flat to his back in the snare. Haku's segment of silk went tight and suspended him next to Zabuza.

He had to ask, "Zabuza, what kind of jutsu is—?"

"Don't say anything. Don't admit anything." He had to coach the captured novice beside him, "I'll handle it and you keep your mouth shut. Don't say anything about Leaf, got it?"

"A Mist shinobi?" Haku presumed.

"One of the worst." Zabuza confirmed, "And we're not getting out of this."

Haku took a breath and tried to calm the fluttering in his stomach. This very well could crush their share of Jiraiya's strategy to interfere with the Akatsuki in Hidden Mist. Though he never believed he could avoid capture forever, Haku wasn't exactly sure what to do now that it'd happened. He was even less sure of what he thought when a stout woman in her sixties appeared from between the columns of trees. Each step she took was considered and light over the ground, the hallmark of a kunoichi. Her clothing was head-to-toe camouflage that matched birch bark; salt and pepper hair trimmed short and practical.

The old timer stopped in front of the pair swaying from silk line, squinting her black eyes at them. She poke a single finger where Zabuza's stomach ought to be beneath the bindings, and an angry snarl escaped him as he swung to and fro. Haku looked boggle-eyed between the two.
"You're dead." The old woman grinned a sharp-toothed smile characteristic of the Water Country.

"Looks like you died decades ago, you old fuck." Zabuza snapped.

"I make death look good, then." She was still smiling with glee, "You're as churlish as ever, Zabuza." She slid her sharp gaze over to Haku, "And this is?"

"None of your business, badger." Zabuza spat.

Haku recognized the not-so-endearing term and spoke up accidentally, "Your grandmother!"

She laughed.

"I mean, not me— I meant you. You're Zabuza's grandmother." Haku recalled, "Honesuki-sama."

The reverent address of the old kunoichi made Zabuza wretch, a paroxysm of rage and disbelief swirled into one as he struggled and simultaneously wanted to beat the ever loving crap out of Haku.

"It's good for you to know who your executioner will be." Honesuki nodded and folded her arms behind her back, "Yet I don't know exactly who I've caught in my web." She shrugged a shoulder and spoke quietly to something sitting there; a black diving bell spider, "Iehisa, do we know him? From any records?" She got some answer in the negative from her trained animal.

Honesuki migrated away from Zabuza and stopped in front of Haku, "What are you doing so close to Hidden Mist? I've got no background on you."

"Not only do I not want to tell you," Haku tried to keep it cordial, "But it's a long story and you probably wouldn't believe it."

"Young man, I've heard my share of crazy stories that turned out to be true."

Haku was curious about the Mist kunoichi, "Your spider helps you with this technique-?"

"Stop fucking talking to her!" Zabuza roared, "She's the enemy. She's in on it."

"In on what?" Honesuki growled.

"You're a nanny for the Akatsuki, you traitorous old bitch. You've let them have the village."

"What an accusation!" Her tone elevated with offense, "You want to blame me for the frauds holding my home hostage? You think I enjoy tip-toeing around and bowing my head to these scoundrels? They kill anyone and everyone who defies them. Why would I stick my neck out and offer it, then? Would you do that, Zabuza?"

"I thought you were a warrior who'd fight to the bitter end, Granny." He taunted.

Haku kept track of the valuable details revealed in the back-and-forth. For one thing, Honesuki had not denied the presence of the Akatsuki in Kirigakure. Rather, it seemed she had confirmed it and the hardships such occupation caused.

"I stayed to fight for it. I didn't run away like you did." Honesuki reminded him.

"You were complacent with the shadow regime that marched in and took over."

"I have to stay alive and play the long-con to win this. I can't declare my opposition for all of the world to hear." She lifted a long knife from a holster at her hip, turning it over in her hand, "I will not
"die in vain. All of my hard work…means something."

"So…you aren't supporting the Akatsuki?" Haku fished for particulars.

Zabuza barked at him to shut up.

"Zabuza," Honesuki treaded back to her grandson, "Do you have any remorse for abandoning your village? If not for besmirching the name of our family and our traditions, is there anything you regret?"

"No. Go on and carve me up with that knife. You've probably dreamed of this day."

She poked him gently in the stomach with her tip of her weapon and then stowed it away again, sighing, "I've dreamt of it, alright. But if I kill you here…no. I should turn you over. Then the regime won't question my "loyalty." I can work well beneath their suspicions."

"You're the one who suggested a rebellion in the first place! And you'd turn me over before I can—"

"I never started a rebellion or suggested one, you impudent grub!" She was pacing, "I wasn't going to do anything until I knew you were prepared to commit with me! And you sulked off to be a nukenin, you useless boy! Forsook me twice!" Honesuki riffled around her hip pouch and lifted a tool scroll in the air, "But I knew you'd be back to come looking for this."

Haku gasped at the sight of what he assumed to be the Master Scroll for the Seven Swordsmen's blades. The old woman waved it in Zabuza's face. He went dumb and still at the sight before he started to tremble in fury.

"You are so amusingly single-minded." Honesuki grinned again, "You want the other swords in here, don't you? Should've come long ago to collect this, like I did. I was certain I would see you again if I kept watch over the haunt."

"Give that to me."

"Over your dead body."

Haku held his breath.

Zabuza was thrashing, "There's no point in stopping me. I'm going to free the village-!

"Lies! All lies! You selfish runt. You want this? Eh-hee-hee-hee! How funny! How deserving." Honesuki cracked up, "Say you're sorry. Beg for my mercy. Say you're sorry for dishonoring my only son— your father. Apologize to him so his ghost can hear you!"

"I've got no apologies for that fucking weakling!"

Honesuki leapt and turned in a clean roundhouse kick that knocked Zabuza down from his suspended thread, leaving him bound face-first on the ground. Infuriated, the old woman tearfully stomped on his back, "You—! You embarrassment. You ingrate. My whole world and all of my joy, in spite of the hard times— you always found a way to spit in my face! I wanted to give you everything!" She was crying. She was grinding Zabuza's face into the mud, fit to suffocate him.

"Honesuki-sama please!" Haku called out to her, "I need him! Gama-sennin and I need him!"

She stilled, "What?"
"We have a way...a way to help your village and stop the Akatsuki. I'm responsible for it, and for Zabuza." He took a chance and confessed, "My name is Haku."

"Feh!" She chuckled with teary eyes, "Why do you need my grandson? He's awful."

"He is awful, but I also think he's the only one who can help me do this."

Honesuki lifted her foot and rolled Zabuza over, mud-streaked as he gasped for breath. She crossed back to Haku and frowned, "What does a pretty doll like you have to do with Jiraiya of the Legendary Three?"

"I'm one of his students."

"Doesn't look like it. You're too young. His students fought in the Third Great War."

"I am, please believe me. I grew up in the Hidden Leaf village after I left the Water Country. Sensei trained me and my teammates as Genin. We were each unwanted rejects in our homelands. We were kept as wards of the state under the Third Hokage's mandate."

She sniffed, "Cheeky little liar."

"It's not a lie. The current Kazekage was one of those teammates, and the Fourth Hokage's son as well. They're my best friends. We're working together."

Zabuza sputtered on the ground, surprised by Naruto's identity, "Fourth Hokage's—?"

Honesuki tightened the silk line around her grandson to squeeze him back to silence. She kept her attention on Haku, "So you have friends in high places, is that what you're telling me?"

"Yes. And we know what's going on in Kirigakure. We have to stop it before the same happens to all of the great villages."

"It might be too late, boy."

"It isn't."

"I thought I had friends in high places too before they were killed. I'm down to my last hope with this Mei girl running around in the wilds...hoping she's been getting my updates." Honesuki's shoulders slumped, "If you are who you say you are, then I'd be stupid to deliver you to the Akatsuki. No one expects a collaborator like you."

"I—"

"Or...you made this tale up out of desperation, and you're just a greedy apprentice hoping to get your hands on one of Mist's legendary swords." The old woman deduced.

"I honestly don't care about those weapons." Haku told her, "Burn the scroll. It makes no difference to me."

"I might." She was amused as Zabuza wriggled and yowled behind her on the forest floor.

"I would rather be talking to Mei, and learning about how I can help." Haku clarified his intentions.

"Give me some proof. I want to believe you." Honesuki offered, "I want to know that I can expect other great villages to join us in the fight for Mist's freedom."
"I…" Haku puzzled for a moment, "I think in the back pocket of my bag we have an agreement…"

Honesuki regarded him with a sandpaper stare before circling behind Haku, "No tricks." Her knife cut through her spider's iron-strong thread. The woman reached for the travel bag on Haku's back, riffling around, "Eh? Why is there hay in here?"

"That's for my rabbit. The other zipper—"

"Ah, this must be it." Honesuki discovered the contractual agreement that Jiraiya had presented to Zabuza, and it contained both men's signatures, "Well, well, this is a rarity. My hateful grandson discards me, but accepts the terms of the Toad Sage? I could scream." She rolled up the document, "What a complex ruse this would be if it were untrue…"

"Believe me, my Sensei takes pride in what he writes. We would never fake anything like that—"

"Yes, yes, I know— those books, a pervert—" She waved away the explanation and then bent down to wipe her sleeve against Zabuza's muddy face, "So you threw in your lot with outsiders out of desperation, Zabuza? I really do find that astounding for a stubborn ass like you."

"No one's tried it yet. It could work." Zabuza defended the decision.

"I'm still not going to let you go." Honesuki warned her grandson, "You've done so much harm…I don't know if I can entrust such an important mission to the likes of you…"

She reached for the knife at her hip and lashed out with a single stroke, severing all of the spider silk that had imprisoned Haku. His feet met the ground and he shook his aching limbs out.

"Haku. You were born in this country, hm? Is that why you are romanticizing the idea of freeing the Mist Village?" Honesuki wondered, "That's a dangerous daydream."

"No, I…want to protect my friends. They're jinchuriki. This isn't only about your village or its inhabitants, not for me. I'm sorry to say." Haku admitted.

"So you are selfish…but for love." Honesuki deduced, "And he is selfish because of hate. I think it is you who I can trust."

"I hope that you will, Honesuki-sama."

"Let me tell you something, Haku, if you don't already know." She was unruffled by her spider, Iehisa, crawling over her cheek and up to the top of her head, "The one who created the fake Mizukage, the fake Yagura-sama…he rarely appears, but when he does his panderers call him Tasū. That's what he wants to be called. Quite an alias, isn't it?"

Tasū meant many or numerous. Haku did not like the significance of the codename.

"I don't know what role that masked man plays in the Akatsuki…though he is wise and tactically skilled. He spoke once to my Sealing Corps committee to keep us in line. I knew then I couldn't cross him." Honesuki went on, "His voice and presence…he…seems middle-aged. Not yet old, but I could tell that he's not of my generation or of yours. Something in-between in years. Would you know who this person is?"

"I don't. I was hoping you could tell me." The hair on the back of his neck was on end.

"I've been searching for answers too. Who is this person? How did he gain so much control? I still don't know how he disposed of Yagura-sama so quietly…" She looked Haku in the eye, "Make sure
"I will, thank you, Honesuki-sama." Haku was compelled to bow to her for sharing something so critical.

"Now, we will be going." With unlikely strength for her age, the kunoichi hoisted Zabuza to his feet, "This ungrateful man will be punished for betraying his bonds. And you, Haku...be sure you tread carefully in this land. Take this." She handed off the Master Scroll to him, "Find those who are worthy of wielding these weapons, and please help my village."

He held out his hands and accepted the tool scroll, sharing a helpless look with Zabuza as the old woman dragged him away. Haku tried to imagine Honesuki turning in her grandson to appease the Hunter Corps and fraudulent leader of Hidden Mist, hoping to distract from the fact that she was funneling information to Terumi Mei. But of course, that cover would only last Honesuki until the Intel Division tortured more information out of Zabuza, 'In which case she'd be incriminated anyway...'

Haku caught up to them after a short sprint, "Honesuki-sama, you shouldn't turn Zabuza over. Any Intel specialist will see what you've been doing if they use—"

"They won't see anything in his mind that I lock down with my Sealing Jutsu. He won't even remember this meeting in the haunt when I'm through with him." Honesuki shot down Haku's concerns, "No Intel officer is going to find a damn thing about this day in my idiot grandson's head. I'll even make him forget about you."

"But what if they notice an interfering Seal and question you?"

"No one is going to notice, they're all amateur scanners. All the talented Genjutsu specialists and Intel Admins were tortured and killed by the end of last year." The old woman gruffed, "So don't worry about me, boy. Go save us. Don't waste any more time here."

"I..." Haku stopped in his tracks, "I...can't let you take him."

Honesuki violently dropped Zabuza, ignoring his Ow-fuck! Bitch-! growls when she rounded on Haku impatiently, "Do you not understand that this is personal? I want him to pay for what he's done to my family. To pay for his absence! He could have helped me save this place long ago!"

"He has a chance to do it now!"

"Oh heaven, strike me where I stand! I let you off the hook, Haku! At least surrender him to me without whining. Is it the Seversword you want? Yes of course, we'll get it off his back and you can return it to the Master Scroll..."

"Keep your fucking mitts off it, hag!" Zabuza barked.

"I'm responsible for him. He's my subordinate." Haku explained, "Give me this chance. I know you don't believe in him, but could you try to believe in me? You don't know me, and I hardly know you...but he isn't exactly what he once was; we're both familiar with what Zabuza was like."

"And you really think you'll get him in line? Rehabilitate him somehow?"

"I've been trying." Haku said the words so, so wearily, "And it's been...well...I haven't given up yet."
"But you might." The old woman wrinkled her brow as if to say, *I already have.*

"He still made a promise to Gama-sennin. I'm going to make sure that he—"

"Does it have to be spelled out for you, Dewdrop?" Honesuki interrupted him, "This is *my pound of flesh.* I am turning him over personally to Commander Nigai of the Hunter Corps. That'll teach him a lesson."

Zabuza had to chime in angrily, "That psycho's got nothing on me—"

"It isn't *about you,* Zabuza. It's about saving my skin and convincing the regime that I'm not out to undermine them." She kicked him in the shoulder while he lay on the ground, "I am not turning you loose."

"Please," Haku's voice was tinged with desperation, "Give him to me. You can seek recompense some other time."

Honesuki's unfriendliest stare locked onto Haku, sizing him up, and signaled to Zabuza that his companion had pushed his luck too far. Before he could issue a verbal warning, the old woman pressed down on her grandson's head with her foot, silencing him in mud and moss again.

"I may have been too lenient." Honesuki decided, "I've heard quite enough."

Haku's next attempt to appeal was cut short as Honesuki drew her long knife and charged, startling him back into a pre-spun web of silk between trees. After the trap threads tangled around him, Honesuki sliced a gash down Haku's front as if she were cleaving jungle foliage. His Water Clone splashed apart.

The old woman clucked her tongue, "Huh. Well, he's quick..." She looked over her shoulder at Zabuza, "You stay here. I'm going to cut that boy's tongue out."

Somewhere beyond the next knoll patched with greenery and bramble, Haku rolled open the Master Scroll, breathing shallowly while trying to make sense of it, *'If she's serious, she just needs to trap me in spider silk again...I need Nuibari. The real sword!’*

Preceding the calligraphic list of weapons was a space for the blood of "keepers." It had never been Haku's intention to assume such a role, but he could think of no other way to awaken unresponsive tool seals on the parchment. Haku cut open the tip of his forefinger on the edge of a kunai, dabbing the characters of his name on the scroll, *'I hope this works. I didn't actually ask Zabuza about the process. I thought he'd be the one handling it...’*

"Dewdrop!" Honesuki called out into the forest, "Are we done here? If you've decided to run away, I'll take my grandson and return to Mist."

Over the space reserved for *Sewing Needle,* Haku swiped blood and tapped, gladly surprised that the Longsword appeared in a puff of smoke. He closed the Master Scroll and tucked it into his belt, *'This is it. It's not the ersatz weapon I've been made to practice with.'* Haku was mildly concerned over the fact that Nuibari felt *alive* in his hand. Restless and humming. Some presence within the needle was searching him and trying to understand him. When it nipped for a few crumbs of his chakra, he allowed it, *'Let that be our introduction...’"

Haku stood and formed hand signs, conjuring a silent curtain of snow in the hope that it would expose hidden spider threads. Snowflakes began to cling to the network of silk, which greatly displeased Honesuki as she crested the hill, "Eh? You want to give me grief, boy? That will be your final mistake..."
Though it was unsportsmanlike to do so, Haku pitched Nuibari at the woman which (to his surprise yet again) accelerated with some enigmatic, supernatural physics to pierce Honesuki's upper arm as she tried to dodge. In the next moment, Nuibari's other freakish features manifested, as it made a full turn of its own accord, mid-air, with hardly any instruction from Haku, to stick a bit of the woman's calf as it sailed back to Haku's waiting hand. Honesuki stumbled with a screech and cut herself free of the sword's wire with her knife.

Haku moved between the birches back in Zabuza's direction, keeping the kunoichi in his peripheral, 'I didn't think it could do that…' Ever curious, he slashed at exposed spider threads with Nuibari's piercing edge and snipping them apart, 'Maybe any chakra-imbued weapon can cut these… so Zabuza can—'

He side-stepped a paper bomb explosion that Honesuki intentionally set off. She was running amok with the years-old traps scattered throughout the wood, flanking Haku at a slower pace. Clearly the old woman could not move very fast, but neither could he, Haku thought as he struggled his way out of another lattice of spider silk.

Honesuki cackled as she pulled back on a thread, dragging Zabuza away while Haku cut himself free, "Honesuki-sama, stop!" He threw Nuibari again and sliced through the leash. Still face-down on the ground and wrapped from neck to toes, Zabuza was wiggling and giving indiscernible orders. Haku found it easy to ignore his ornery associate when he crossed blades with Honesuki, starting a shoving match and kicking up bead lilies.

"I thought you said you didn't care about Mist's swords!" She had some strength, pushing back against the youngblood as their weapons sparked.

"I don't!"

"And here you are using one to fight a defenseless old lady!"

"In what way are you defenseless?" Spittle flew from Haku's mouth as he shouted, both tiring of the bout and hopping away from each other.

Honesuki sheathed her knife and formed hand signs, using a Sealing jutsu Haku did not recognize. When he pitched Nuibari at her, it stuck Honesuki in her shoulder…though it gave her the opportunity to close her hand around the Longsword. At the touch of her Sealing technique, Nuibari shuddered and then disappeared in a puff of smoke.

Haku stared like a shell-shocked rabbit as Honesuki dusted her hands, "Ha! Every summoned tool has a weakness! They are tethered to seals, and all I have to do is neutralize them…then pop! Away they go." She twirled her trusty knife in her palm, "Summon that needle again, I dare you! I'll just send it back to the scroll!"

Blood splotches soaked Honesuki's fatigues. Snowflakes clung to the webs stretched between the boughs behind her, a picturesque refraction of light. Haku backed closer toward Zabuza, hoping he would have a split-second to tear the man free so they could make a run for it. As Honesuki leapt and coordinated another spider silk snare with Iehisa, Haku snapped his hand fan out of his sleeve. A gust of Wind Nature propelled Honesuki and her threads away with one swing of the fan, 'Now is my chance!' He came within an arm's length of Zabuza when the silk bindings around the man suddenly began to strain and then shred.

Haku had nary a moment to duck when Honesuki willed a cable of spider threads to collect the Seversword from Zabuza's back. The blade soared toward her and nearly took Haku's head off. He glanced back over his shoulder, shocked to see the old woman arm herself with the hefty
weapon, 'Maybe that's where Zabuza got his fortitude from…'

She lashed out, puppetting the sword in a centrifugal swing by her threads, hacking the thin trunks of birches and all else that got in the way. Haku and Zabuza dove in opposite directions to avoid the reckless attack. Zabuza was sloughing off the last tatters of spider silk on him, his face muddy and scratched.

Haku wanted to reason with him, "Zabuza, don't try to get the sword back! She's trying to bait you —"

The rogue ninja rushed ahead anyway.

A fair amount of snow had accumulated, and so Haku took it upon himself to freeze the ground until it was slick. Though Zabuza managed to keep his balance as he pitched forward down the hill, righting himself in the air to land on a tree branch…Honesuki skidded on the ice and toppled backwards. Her whirling of the Seversword sent it spinning violently, cutting through the tree Zabuza landed in. Haku sucked wind several times in fright at the near-misses, all landing in a heap with a crash.

He hurried forward to find the grandmother and grandson in a tug-of-war, sliding in the snowy haunt, howling at each other. Honesuki had stubbornly attached additional threads to Kubikiribōchō while Zabuza pulled back on the hilt with all of his might. The two fell apart with startled cries when the sword disappeared.

Nearby, Haku was scowling, kneeled down over the open Master Scroll. He had returned the Seversword to its storage space to remove it from the equation.

"Don't try to play peacemaker, Dewdrop!" Honesuki roared at Haku as she got back on her feet.

"Just give it up, you fangled-toothed bitch!" Zabuza was still irate, as expected.

Impatient with the two of them, Haku unleashed a gust of Wind Nature with his fan, putting more space between them. He then tried to direct Zabuza, "We have what we need, so let's go."

He didn't have any time to see if Zabuza was protesting the order: Honesuki had changed directions and charged at Haku, prepared to drive her knife into him, "I told you that this—!" Haku swung his fan reactively, hoping to fling her away, but a shimmering Sealing technique the woman had prepared nullified the Wind Element in his attack. Honesuki pounced on him, knocking the breath out of Haku as they fell to the ground, "—is personal!"

Thank goodness he timed his dodge well— Haku tilted his head so the stabbing motion of her knife only nicked his ear. She nearly had him dead in the face. He kicked her up in a half-somersault to toss the woman away, feeling new sticky threads mat him down the ground. Honesuki rolled in snowy bramble and flowers, tiredly pushing to her feet again, panting, "Get in my way and I'll kill you! I don't care who you are! Some liar or savior…I'll-!"

A gigantic, webbed hand flattened her. Haku shrieked in spite of himself.

He hadn't expected it. He looked up slowly to see a red, house-sized toad that was curious about the elderly kunoichi it had pinned underfoot. It took Haku a moment to realize it was Gamakichi—nearly full grown. He was gawking at the summon, his mouth flapping uselessly in an attempt to form words.

"Oh, hey Haku." The toad recognized a familiar face, "What's this old lady's problem? Ouch. She's sticking me with something."
"That's Honesuki-sama…um. Why don't you let her up now?" Haku suggested, realizing, though it pained his brain to make sense of it, that it was Zabuza standing on top of the giant toad's head. Not Jiraiya or Naruto.

"Alright." Gamakichi lifted his hand, "Sorry about that, Granny."

Flabbergasted, Honesuki scuttled backwards to collapse on a mossy tree stump, then stared up at the fantastic creature. She had been looking for proof earlier, but at the moment she couldn't mentally negotiate such undeniable evidence that the Legendary Toad Sage had gotten involved with her grandson after all.

"Hey new guy." Gamakichi spoke up again, "Get off my head."

With an unfriendly grunt, Zabuza returned to the forest floor and plucked Haku up by the scruff of his tunic, "Stand up. Don't look so shocked."

"Sensei actually let you join the Toad Summoning Contract?" Up until this point, such a detail had escaped Haku's notice.

"With provisions, yeah."

"Provisions?"

"Basically, if I do anything either of you disapprove of, its license to get me killed." Zabuza recalled, "It's not like he didn't tell these things," He gestured up at Gamakichi, who was understandably offended, "About me and what to expect."

"Right, so quit disrespecting me and call me by my name. Gamakichi." The toad insisted, "Who the heck are you again? Jiraiya-sama said something about a hostile temp…"

"Momochi Zabuza."

"Ah, that's right."

Honesuki wobbled to her feet and Haku took pity on her, knowing that however much this situation overwhelmed him, she must have felt infinitely out of sorts. He apologized and set a hand on her punctured shoulder, "I'm sorry, Honesuki-sama. I didn't want to hurt you like that. We weren't lying, but that didn't seem to matter to you…"

She turned her head curiously to watch a healing light glow lantern-soft over her injury, "…how unusual."

"I'm sorry for all the trouble."

"Hmf. And I had thought you were another common assassin." Honesuki muttered, "Are you a healer by nature, Haku?"

"Not exactly. But I've admired my teachers and try to make the most of what they've taught me."

She shook her head and wore a rueful smile, "You are a contradiction."

"I think I might be, yes."

"There are worse things to be." Honesuki waved away his efforts, "These aren't serious. I'm mended for now." Her glittering eyes settled on Zabuza, "And you…hardly deserve the honor of using such
a summoning contract…but I wouldn't want to step on the toes of Gama-sennin and muck with his plans, now would I?"

"You've just got to make everything difficult." Zabuza folded his arms, giving her leery side-eye, "If you've got beef with me, badger, then save it for after we settle things in Kirigakure. I never said I wasn't willing to hash it out."

"You mean let me beat you senseless?"

"I didn't say that either. Fuckin' putting words in my mouth…"

Honesuki sighed wearily, "Leave. Before I change my mind again."

Gamakichi was dismissed in a cloud of smoke, and without a word of farewell Zabuza turned around to stalk his way through the birch haunt. Haku followed after him and willed the snowfall to stop. He could only hope for an uneventful journey off of the island, preferably with no other ninja encounters or traps triggered.

Since he couldn't help but wonder what Honesuki intended to do now, Haku turned back to see her standing still, observing their retreat. There was a thin-lipped smile on her face. A thankful expression.

"You weren't at the Jounin Council Meeting this morning." Kakashi said as he stopped beside a park bench, where he'd finally found his wayward nephew, "Too many truancies there won't be excused unless you have missions scheduled."

"I do have one. Tonight." Sato defended in a strange, faraway voice.

"Well if it's tonight, then you could have showed up for a morning meeting." His uncle reasoned.

Slumped on the bench, Sato said nothing as he gazed out at the autumn molt of the forest.

Nearby, Pakkun and Bull were coaching Kakashi's new puppies through rigorous command drills. When Tolsi and Gatsu successfully responded to sit, roll-over, etc. the pups were rewarded with rope toy tug-of-war and tennis balls to chase. Kakashi's ears were trained on the dogs behind him, but kept his eyes on Sato as it seemed more and more apparent that the young man was now a shell with hardly any internal substance left.

"Kurenai thinks you're not eating." Kakashi observed off-the-cuff.

The statement did not need much clarification from Sato. He had a withered look about him. He sat without speaking to his uncle, his eyes half-shut.

"Can you try to…not worry?" Kakashi recommended as he took a seat on the bench beside Sato, "Tama seems to be alright, for now. She's spoken to me. I'll be catching up with Gai later too. He's been preoccupied…" Kakashi didn't want to get into the specifics of how Gai had been running defense to deter all of the torments Maito Ken had cooked up for Sato.

Kakashi acknowledged, "I know it's hard. Please try to keep your appointments with Dr. Iwao."

"I don't want to see her."

"You need to go."

"I don't need anything."
"I used to say that, but I didn't get better by skipping counseling appointments. That only made things worse."

"All the things you went through…” Sato said softly, "Were not of your own making. Your pain wasn't this."

"Are you sure it wasn't? That I didn't cause some of my own problems?" Kakashi challenged the idea.

"It's not the same, Kakashi. You don't understand." 

"Even if what you're going through isn't the same experience as mine, don't tell me I don't understand." The man cautioned.

A long quiet prevailed as red leaves drifted down in the sprawling park. The line of dogs marched the pebbled hiking path, Tolsi and Gattsu obediently mimicking the senior pack members. Kakashi could feel it like electricity. There was pain, so much pain beside him. A renouncement of all things glowed off of Sato, as if he couldn't believe he was existing this way. As if his brain were constantly re-setting and trying to evaluate a horrific reality.

Sato spoke again in a nearly inaudible voice, and Kakashi asked him to repeat it.

"Living was a mistake." Sato said as if he were an enlightened monk, blackened by truth.

"No, it wasn't." Kakashi protested, "Call it anything but a mistake."

"You saw." Sato reminded him.

"That day—"

"I was gone."

A small shake of Kakashi's head, "You weren't."

"It was raining when I died. Far away. I wasn't here…I'm not supposed to be here. To ruin everything."

For the first time in years, there were fearful thorns prickling in Kakashi's stomach. His eyes moistened. He understood this. He understood what Sato was saying. But he couldn't let his nephew actually believe those words, which were a pure byproduct of despair.

"What makes you think…things would have been any less miserable in your absence?" Kakashi handed him a counterpoint.

"I just know it."

"You really don't, Sato."

"I can't take it anymore." The young man muttered.

"You have to keep going. Time will pass and it won't be so heavy." Kakashi knew the encouragement was probably insufficient, "I'm here if you need me."

When Sato slowly rose to stand, his uncle quickly added, "This time I am here. I know I wasn't before…and I didn't do…couldn't do most of the things you needed me to. That hurt you too— I hurt you."
Sato's blue gaze slipped towards his uncle, tired and curious.

"We can both agree that I was a no-show and my reasons weren't good enough. Not when Rin needed me, or Tenzo...not for you or Semi. I stayed away from everyone who needed to depend on me." Kakashi admitted, "I even ignored my Dad's pain because I believed what people were saying about him. Until he was gone."

"You were a kid." Sato reminded him, "It's hard to get things right when you're a kid."

"I might've saved him."

"Kakashi, if Grandpa couldn't even hold on for the sake of his own children, don't think for a second anything was going to stop him." Sato had an erudite take on the situation, "It never meant he didn't love you. It was that the things he couldn't change were insurmountable."

Kakashi stared, seated on the bench, and watched his nephew trudge away eastward through park grounds. Perhaps to meet with his team, or train, or hide, or end his life. Kakashi was paralyzed as he watched because he understood, in a ferly rush to the head; that Sato had become a mouthpiece for his long deceased father. The grandson had suffered the same missteps, and was grappling with his next course of action.

Once Sato was long out of sight, Kakashi fought off the pins and needles in his limbs to finally stand. He wasn't sure if he would see his last surviving relative later. No. That was no way to think. He could do something. He could literally do any one thing, one bit more than nothing to possibly dissuade an exit Sato might be contemplating. Heart pattering, Kakashi formed the strings of a plan while on the move, beckoning his dogs to keep up as he left the park.

"Bull, take Tolsi and Gattsu home. Make sure that Akino is comfortable." Kakashi instructed before the massive dog gamboled off with his puppy companions, "Pakkun..."

"You want me to watch him?" Pakkun presumed.

"Please make sure Sato doesn't do anything rash today."

"Kakashi, if he's serious he'll have ways of avoiding me."

"I don't know if he is serious or not. Just tail him for the rest of the day until he joins his team."

"Fine. What are you gonna do?"

"I'm going to get some help." Kakashi decided, "Do some things that I couldn't do for Dad."

Ten minutes later, Kakashi intruded upon the limited clearance area of the ANBU headquarters, politely greeting his contemporaries as he strolled into the subterranean command center. Though retired officially from ANBU, he was always warmly welcomed when he dropped by. As it so happened, there was a potluck of warm lunch trays in the break room, most of which had been provided by Captain Kegon and Lieutenant Commander Kakima, but Kakashi avoided the feast.

Rounding the corner into the locker room Kakashi loudly demanded, "Tenzo."

The other four occupants of the tiled space startled, Tenzo less so, and then evacuated the room when Kakashi shooed them away. Some dressed and some relocated to the showers.

Damp and shirtless, Tenzo's eyebrows were raised, "What are you doing here?"
"You're off duty?"

"Just now, yes. I have to do some shopping—"

"Hurry up." Kakashi plucked the jumper from Tenzo's hands and pulled it down over the man's head, dressing him, "My nephew is in crisis."

"So what has that got to do with me?!"

"I need a sidekick. An assistant. I want to violence-proof Sato's flat before he gets back to it."

Stammering, "You w-what-?"

"I think he's suicidal."

"So have a watch assigned to him! Contact the SHA!" Tenzo adjusted his clothing, flustered.

"I will, but I want to take immediate precautions."

Sighing, Tenzo rested his head against the metal of a locker before fetching his bag and shutting it, "Kakashi, you can't eliminate every risk. What would work better is to make sure Sato sees a counselor, or is under observation in a facility."

"I'll talk to Iwao-san later, maybe she'll do a house visit. Come on." Kakashi led the way out, ignoring how Tenzo longingly looked toward the break room's smorgasbord.

They departed from HQ together, heading southwest through the village, scaling the apartment complex's side to enter Sato's flat through an open window. The home seemed to be in order with the exception of a decorative pillow and blanket left on the area rug. Kakashi examined how the space had been lived in: cabinets and refrigerator were lacking in food. Tea canisters sat on the kitchen counter. No dishes in the sink. No trash in the bin. In the bathroom and bedroom, all seemed to be untouched, including a made bed that looked like it had not been slept in for days.

Back in the dining area, Tenzo was fiddling inquisitively with a box of girly items, "What's all this?"

"Leave that. That should stay here." Kakashi recommended, pointing to photo frames hung on the walls, "Can you take those down?"

"All of them?"

"All of them."

Befuddled, Tenzo crossed the room to do as Kakashi asked. Meanwhile, Kakashi ransacked the utility closet, pilfering tools and cleaners, abducting cutlery and knives from kitchen drawers. He stuffed most of it in a plastic bin, searching for bottled medications to steal as well.

"Are you really doing this?" Tenzo could hardly believe what he was partaking in, "Kakashi, these are his things. You can't just take them."

"He'll hurt himself."

"With a butter spreader?" Tenzo doubted it.

"I'm taking it. The photos can come out of the frames, leave them here."

"He wouldn't break this glass—"
"Tenzo…" Kakashi held up a hand to shush him, and his friend frowned at the gesture.

Once the living area was preposterously altered, Kakashi moved on to the bedroom and confiscated any bit of fabric or bedding that could possibly suffocate an adult. Though there were only a few spare weapons and tool scrolls in the room, Kakashi took those also. He collected all on the kitchen table and examined the pile.

"Now what?" Tenzo wondered, carefully extracting photos from frames.

"We move this to my place."

"Really?" Tenzo sniffed.

"I have the spare closet. I'll keep this there."

"This is ridiculous, Kakashi. He isn't going to do anything!"

"I'll be back shortly." Kakashi left with the most untrustworthy items first, while Tenzo continued to ruminate on what the hell he was doing here.

He had the gist of the "Hatake Sato situation," since Kakashi had sort of filled him in on the incident a few days ago. Maito Tama had been involved. Gai's family was involved. And by now most of the village had perpetuated a rumor (or five) that may loosely have been based in truth, but took on multiple iterations to slander and isolate Sato. The young man was now persona non grata.

Kakashi had tried to contain some of the tumult, but the social anguish of his nephew had reached critical mass, by the look of it. 'It must have made him think…about the White Fang.' Tenzo supposed, his heart sinking, 'He's scared. I haven't seen Kakashi this scared.' Kakashi was taking no chances. He wanted to reduce self-destructive opportunities his nephew might seek out in a dark hour.

'But how does this really help? Sato is a shinobi! He can go anywhere to off himself. He has his own weapons on him, or can steal weapons from others. He can take a trip from a cliff by the Naka River…Frankly, none of this does a lick of good.' Tenzo understood that in fact it had little to do with what Sato might decide to do. It had more to do with what Kakashi was in control of.

After several return trips with Tenzo's help, most of the "unsafe" items were transported across town to Kakashi's home. Tenzo humored the harebrained precautions, choosing not to critique Kakashi's large oversights and rationale gaps. His emotions were swinging like a pendulum. Though his eyes were open and seeing, Kakashi was staring into the past at his father's face. When he blinked at the present, he would see Sato's. That much, at least, Tenzo could guess.

The project ate up a chunk of time in the early afternoon. Then came a knock on the condo's door, riling up Tolsi and Gattsu as the pups charged about the place, barking. Biscuit the dog herded the youngsters away from the genkan so Kakashi could answer.

Tama was on the other side of the door, concerned, "Sensei?"

"Oh." Kakashi's brain recalibrated, "Tama-chan."

She peeked into the living area where the dogs sat in a huddle of self-control, no jumping or woofs, and Akino the hound was convalescing on a large, cushiony dog bed in the corner. "Kaka-sensei, you're an hour and forty-five minutes late for the training evaluation you scheduled. Did you…decide not to oversee us today?"
Tama did a double-take, noticing a mish mash of knives, pill bottles, cleaner jugs and sprays, and various other household commodities crowding Kakashi’s dining table. The man stood awkwardly with no explanation as it dawned on her that none of it belonged to him. As if that were not evidence enough, Tenzo hopped through the open dinette window with an armful of cords and heavy, blunt objects, "This is the last—!" He spied Tama at the door, "Of it…" He too stood awkwardly.

Ah, Tama thought to herself; this was worse than she thought. She had quickly sought out Ino days ago to rip her a new one and rebuke her friend's breach of confidentiality (knowing Sakura had said nothing at all). She'd also fretted over how Sato's welfare and her own welfare had plummeted, and that the begging-for-forgiveness/too-little-too-late encounter with Ino (and her subsequent, scathing forgiveness of Ino) had not changed anything. More than she wanted to, Tama had to think about Sato as his life was very publically demolished. There had been no grace. No privacy. All of that pain was out in the open. That had been the last thing Tama wished for.

And now as Kakashi sputtered out a feeble excuse, "Sorry, Tama…I lost track of time today. Got caught up—" Her eyes welled with tears as she understood. This was some sort of preventative measure that could indicate Sato was not a very willing participant in life anymore. She had not wished that on him either.

"No, no." Kakashi noticed the tears start, "Why don't you come in for a minute and rinse your face? There are fresh towels in the washroom. I'll be done in a minute and then I'll accompany you to the field…"

Tama nodded in silent grief as she floated into the home, squeezing her eyes shut as she passed Tenzo, and hastily closed the door of the half bath behind her. She twisted the cold water tap on and tried to breathe.

Here was the terrible feeling again. She'd gone more than two days without it, almost felt normal before it started to creep back. It trickled back as she noticed the village-wide whispers about Sato and his infidelity. Though Tama corrected accounts where and when she could, and scolded those who were out of line, her time at home had been absolute hellstew. The breakup rumor had gotten around to Maito Ken's ears.

Though her initial lie to her father had been an attempt to save some face, it had only amplified Ken's rage upon discovering that his daughter had been wronged. He accused her of trying to cover up the perpetrator's tracks. As if she were some accessory to the crime, she chuckled darkly as she splashed her face with water.

Her father had gone ballistic. Smashed childhood portraits on display. Overturned furniture. Punched holes in walls. He hollered at Miako when she came to Tama's defense (like most mothers do). Ken had embarked on an epic, four-hour tirade to make sure his daughter understood what all of this meant on the macro-level, what it meant about respectability, honor, damages, and served as proof that she was just like her stupid grandfather. That Sato would pay. That Kakashi would hear of this. Not at any point had Ken stopped to ask if she was alright, or lend any type of emotional support. He'd never been good at those things anyway.

So time with her team and taking missions had been a godsend, getting her away from Ken whenever possible. Tama felt guilty that her mother was often at home, dealing with the worst of Ken's tantrums. 'She's done nothing to deserve that…and I know Mom actually cares about how I feel.' She shut the tap off and blotted her face with a towel, 'All of this has been too much…and I don’t want to think about…what Sato might do.'

As she had explained through gritted teeth to Ino during their last conversation: This painful time would be so much easier to navigate if no one else was involved or talking about it. Didn't you even
think about that, Ino? How this might come back to hurt me again?’ Trembling and tears had ensued, and Tama could only take pity on the remorseful blonde kunoichi as she apologized.

Kakashi’s home was slightly less conspicuous when Tama exited the bathroom, only able to afford Tenzo a parting wave as she walked out of the house. Her Sensei gave a weary look to Tenzo before following.

The day was a blur and eventually, after spending time with his students and confirming with Asuma, yes, Sato had safely left the village with Kurenai, Hinata, and Shino on a mission, Kakashi was wiped out. He sat at a solitary picnic table, chin propped up in his palm while indulging on a skewered, grilled saury. He chewed the fish and relished the sunset. He was too high-strung. He'd only just started to calm down.

'I have to walk the dogs.'

A bite of his snack.

'Huh. Tenzo probably already walked them. And fed them.'

Dipping the fish in a sauce cup.

'Maybe he shopped and cooked too? No. I don't deserve that treatment after what I put him through today. Tenzo must think I'm insane. Of course clearing out Sato's flat isn't going to make much of a difference...but he did it with me anyway.' Kakashi slumped sideways, splaying over the picnic table as he continued to eat, 'It just feels like that day with Dad all over again. I can barely think straight. If Sato dies, then what? Do I retire? Set up a charity? Should I join a monastery? A cabaret? I'd want to quit everything and give up.'

"Kakashi." A somber voice addressed him.

Kakashi raised his head and saw Gai standing at the table's opposite end. He chewed and swallowed another bite before addressing his friend, "Gai...I wanted to talk to you."

"I know. I apologize for not reaching you sooner. I've had to..." Gai trailed off.

"Deal with your brother." Kakashi imagined.

Gai nodded and took a seat with a heavy sigh.

"I'm sorry." Kakashi started there, "Can we still be friends?"

"Why would you ever say such a foolish thing! As if our friendship were contingent upon the lives and actions of others..."

"Well, maybe it is? I could've stepped in more to stop my nephew from making dumb mistakes."

Gai shook his head, "There's no use in dwelling on what's done."

"You're right." Kakashi took another bite of fish.

"I wish things had not turned out this way, however..." Gai plopped his chin into the cradle of his hands, resting his elbows in a triangle shape on the tabletop, "I am far more concerned about the well-being of Tama-chan and Sato-kun. The attention and negativity centered on them is truly outrageous. Tama-chan assured me she did not start those rumors..."
"Someone else did." Kakashi acknowledged, pulling his mask back up and dropping the empty skewer in a tray.

"Terrible." Gai clucked his tongue.

"So, did Ken try to do anything?" Kakashi went to the hot-button subject, "He must know."

It took Gai a few moments to fortify himself, staring into space as he recalled the last few days of pandemonium and trying (and failing) to mitigate most of Ken's punitive reactions to Sato's pre-Tournament fling. He said, "Every person close to my brother is enduring his wrath right now."

Kakashi was inquisitive, "Everyone? As in, his wife and daughter too?"

"Oh yes. He has not been gentle or considerate of them at all. My father would roll in his grave if he saw Ken treat his family so poorly." Gai confirmed, "I am accustomed to Ken's outbursts, though…he has been in rare form. To think someone so concerned with honor would behave so dishonorably…"

Gai shut his eyes for a long moment before going on, "I intercepted him on numerous sabotage attempts. He went to the payroll office to demand a freeze of Sato's wages, then to branch tellers to try to close any accounts Sato had. When he was denied there, he filed formal complaints at the civil disputes office, which I counter-appealed. I stopped him from harassing the Hokage as well. He has since contacted every retailer, sales professional, legal counsel and realtor in the village he is connected with…demanding they provide no services to Sato."

Wide-eyed, Kakashi listened to the account of full-throttle treachery Ken wanted to enact.

"An attorney from the legal office did present a legitimate civil action complaint that Ken filed, demanding restitution for all expenses of Sato's that the Maito family covered over the last nine years."

"What? Ken was keeping tracking of all that?"

"Kakashi, he's an accountant." Gai reminded him.

Distressed, Kakashi held his forehead and dared ask, "How much money was he asking for?"

"530,000 Ryo." Gai recalled, "That included betrothal and miscellaneous expenses, as repayment for damages."

Before Kakashi could try to do mental calculations to figure how long it would take to get that kind of money, or take on a shitty loan to cover it, Gai allayed his concerns.

"I paid it in full." Gai told him.

"You can't be serious."

"I felt terrible." Gai admitted, "I just cannot stand the idea of there being any bad blood between our families. And that burden was one my brother manufactured specifically to make you and Sato suffer."

"I'll have Sato pay you back right away. It was his name in those court documents, not yours, Gai."

He shook his head again, "There's no need to rush, Kakashi. I am sure Sato has enough on his mind now, apart from the monetary demands Ken might make. So far my brother has not asked for or
done anything else, to my knowledge."

"Pardon my language, Gai, but your brother is a fucking creep." Kakashi announced, rising up to sit tall and stab the snack skewer vertically into the wood of the table.

"I know." Gai agreed, "But he is my brother."

Kakashi sighed, "We'll get that money back to you, I promise. I never wanted this to be hard on you either…"

"Nothing in the world is perfect." Gai acknowledged as he folded his arms, "Disappointments and obstacles have not stopped me. I could never be like Ken. Moving forward and maintaining bonds is something I must do."

"I will too."

"I have not seen Sato-kun since any of this happened. Is he alright?"

"…I can't say that he is. I'm trying to keep an eye on him and make sure he reports to Jounin Council meetings. It's a bit of a rough crowd there. Genma and Ebisu were giving him a hard time."

"I shall speak to them."

"Thanks, Gai."

"And you, Kakashi? Are you alright?" Gai was as thoughtful as ever.

"I…" He puffed his mouth and thought on it, "I think I am. I was a bit manic today, worrying over Sato…but I'm about through it. I've almost gotten my strength back since being discharged from the hospital."

"Good, good…"

Gai mentioned he had seen two young dogs running around with Kakashi's pack and, ah, yes, they'd have to be introduced! That was something worth celebrating, at least.

Afterward, Gai bade his friend "Until tomorrow…" and set out for home. As the sky darkened, Kakashi also made his way back through the ward. How strange it was to think on the days when he'd been younger, and refused Gai's extensions of friendship time after time. Back then, he never could have imagined having someone so kind and principled to call a friend. Today was a day to count his blessings, Kakashi thought to himself.

At home, he discovered his dogs snoozing peacefully in various spots throughout the house, each fed and cared for. In addition to that, Tenzo was napping on the couch with Pakkun curled up on his stomach.

This was different. Usually, coming home in the evenings did not feel serene or half so crowded. The chaos of the dining table where Sato's repossessed household items accumulated had been quelled, cleaned. Kakashi puttered around briefly before crossing to the sofa, and lifted Pakkun like a bowling ball to relocate the dog to an unoccupied cushion on the floor. The pug hardly even stirred. Then, Kakashi scooched his bottom onto the free space of the couch, and tapped a tune along Tenzo's brows to wake him.

"Buh…oh…Kakashi." He yawned and rubbed his face.
"Thanks for taking care of everything."

"It's, uh…no problem." Tenzo wrestled back his awakened faculties, "I could tell you needed help today. You had an irrational freak-out."

"I did."

"And your nephew?"

"Safe, I'm told. He's on a mission with his team now."

"That should keep him out of trouble, then."

"No accidents or unacceptable chewing?" Kakashi wondered of Tolsi and Gattsu.

"Nah, they behaved. I think they're going to need more toys, though."

He looked fondly over at the sleeping bundles of fluff tucked against Bull on the floor.

"I know that you can't help worrying like you did today…but try not to let it take control of you. I don't think Sato wants to leave you alone." Tenzo shared some insight, "This isn't quite like your Dad…at least I don't think so. Your nephew has you and his team and other forms of support. He can pull through."

"I don't want to have a Panglossian outlook just yet. He's not out of the woods, so I won't let my guard down."

"Fair enough, but try not to steal anything else out of his flat. Okay?"

"I can do that." Kakashi found an errant thread on the seam of Tenzo's sweater. He plucked it off.

Tenzo wore a contemplative look, "…can I ask you something?"

"Ask away."

"This is going way back. Back to when you'd just retired from ANBU."

"Hm, quite a while ago." Kakashi could reminisce a bit.

"I was starting to move up in rank, remember? We trained a lot then. I didn't have a lot of friends in those days, so I tried to go to all of those team-building nights and stupid outings."

"Yes. Do they still hold those? Sai should go to them."

"Not as often, but I've brought him a few times." Tenzo digressed, "Anyway, you went to functions like that too."

"As I was steadily growing more sociable then, yes, I did. That was when I hung around more with Gai and Asuma."

Tenzo was nodding, "That was the time. You actually showed up at Obon."

Kakashi thought back to that summer festival long, long ago, "Oh yeah, I did."

"You never used to go, you said. But I hadn't been to it either even after getting out of Root, so you said you'd check it out with me."
"Ah, right."

"It was great. Then you went to some of the team-building events."

"Mm-hmm." He wasn't exactly sure, but that sounded like something he might've done then.

"The bar in Nabezo was pretty popular for get-togethers."

"That's a great place." Kakashi was amused by memories that drifted back, and then he slowly remembered something unpleasant, "Ah. Is that what you want to talk about? All of this context…"

"Well, it's not like it was ever discussed. Years went by." Tenzo sniffed.

"I thought I was in the way." Kakashi said simply.

Tenzo seemed absolutely flabbergasted by the comment and sat up, jostling Kakashi in the process, "You thought you were in the way?"

"Hm. That's…what I thought at the time." Kakashi explained, "People were getting to know you, so when you had attention—"

"Like I cared about that-!" Tenzo was expressive with his hand gestures, "Kakashi, we were together every day! Almost every night! What happened? What was unclear?" His nostrils flared, "I told you how I felt."

"Try to understand I took everything that everyone said back then with a grain of salt." Kakashi reminded him, shifting to lean back into tufted cushions, "You were still young and learning how to participate in those social circles. I didn't want to hold you back."

"I was with you by choice. You weren't holding me back."

"After all that chatter at those dumb parties they made it sound like I was a thief. Like you didn't stand a chance…"

Tenzo tossed his hands up again, "They were all drunk, chain-smoking idiots who could barely stay upright in chairs and you listened to them?"

Kakashi admitted, "I didn't want to, but I couldn't ignore what was said. As I recall, one particular night you had that Intel Corps girl, Suniti, all over you. I wasn't going to make a scene or start a bar fight. I thought it was fair to let you try what you wanted to, back then. I didn't interfere."

"Try—?" Tenzo held his head, "I wish you had interfered, Kakashi. That woman was a mess."

"But she was…" Feebly, Kakashi pointed to spots on his friend's face, indicating where the Intel Corps clerk girl had planted wet ones on Tenzo. At the time (and his memory was shoddy) it had looked like a standard fling that began in a bar between consenting, boozy parties.

"That was harassment!" Tenzo clarified for him in a shriek, "It was a nightmare trying to get that drunkard off of me, and you couldn't tell? That I needed backup? You thought that was something I'd go for?"

"I…uh…didn't want to rule out the possibility and rudely interrupt."

"I'm gay." Tenzo was visibly frustrated, "Surely you had figured that out? It took that sloppy clerk most of the night to understand! And you just left me there!"
"Oh. I didn't know you had it completely worked out at that point—"

"You really can be stupid, Kakashi." Crossing his arms and shaking his head, Tenzo added, "Yes, it took some time for me to understand. Leaving Root and entering ANBU made me question plenty of things, so when I finally realized that you weren't just a mentor or role-model to me, I actively tried to spend more time with you. I tried to find ways to reach you."

"Hm." Kakashi sat back in silence and reflected on the matter. If he were truly honest, he'd known how Tenzo felt even then. But the slightest possibility of Tenzo's wavering interest in him (which in fact was not disinterest at all) had squirreled him into retreat, as Kakashi was wont to do with most delicate things.

He hardly ever committed to anything or anyone in his personal life. Not because he didn't care, but because the act of and consequences of caring scared him witless. Then it seemed his chance with his subordinate-turned-something-else had come and gone. Yet it seemed that chance had not in fact expired. It'd been put on hold for several years.

"I know it's not the same for you." Tenzo granted in a softer voice, "Things aren't so defined for you. How you feel—if it's love or amusement. If it's a man or a woman. Whatever it happened to be, you never stuck with it. So I knew I was gambling when I got my hopes up." He caved tiredly and let his head sink into the backrest, "I couldn't take it personally. If friendship was all you wanted, I was never going to resent that. I was grateful."

Kakashi's long, chicken-headed silence did not give much direction. His eyes slid over each of his snoring dogs, then to the dimly lit street lamp beyond the window. His gaze settled on Tenzo, who had begun to crack under the weight of anxious embarrassment. The lack of a prompt answer from Kakashi erased his last shreds of confidence.

"Now that that's out of the way..." Tenzo cleared his throat, "I've had enough excitement for today. I should go home." He pushed off of the sofa and was a skittish mess all the way across the room, then fumbled in the genkan for footwear.

"You're just going to leave it on that note?" Kakashi was perplexed.

"I...yes." He was nodding while doing an awkward shoe dance.

"Really?"

"I don't think what I said was particularly damaging." Tenzo mumbled, "Just let it be clarification since you...clearly misunderstood what things were like back then." He added that there were now eggs, milk, and yogurt in the refrigerator. He'd gotten a few kilos of rice too, which had been running low. And also, "I'll see you...tomorrow."

Kakashi had moved to the refrigerator to investigate the new perishables, "Don't you want to hear what I have to say before you go?"

Tenzo was hesitating at the door, "I'm not sure."

"Come on, it's not so bad. Did you eat? I'm going to make omurice."

It wasn't as if a deeply appealing dish had been offered, nor much reassurance on Kakashi's part, but after 30 seconds of agonizing, Tenzo took a seat at the island counter to watch the food preparations. The rice cooker was going. While chopping an onion, Kakashi told him, "You should get a full disclaimer."
"Disclaimer?"

"So that you don't misunderstand me, since you're concerned about misunderstandings..." Kakashi began, "I do not think I am a wise choice of companion."

Before Tenzo could say anything to disagree, Kakashi made a waggling motion with a chef's knife, "Hold on. That was my honest opinion. You know better than anyone what I'm like. And it's not the Copy Ninja of myth or stereotypes that abound, not a hero or gentleman, well, not exactly. While I can dedicate myself as a shinobi, that isn't the case in the other aspects of my life."

"Kakashi—"

"I'm a bit of a fuck-up." Kakashi admitted.

Tenzo's face fell, sympathizing, "I wouldn't call you that."

"That's because you're nice. But really, you've seen first-hand that there have been things I can't handle on a personal level. I don't like people very much. Getting close to them is…" He shuddered, "I'll always think about what it's like to lose the ones I cherish. It sours the feeling."

"Then is it worth not building new bonds at all?"

"I've had time to think about that and, no, it's not worth it. That doesn't mean I find it easy, trying to get close to others. It took a long time for me to truly appreciate my students." Kakashi confessed, "It took even longer to genuinely care about my generational peers, who've always stuck by me. You've been the easiest person to get close to."

A bit too frazzled to smile at the admission, Tenzo sputtered and took over chopping the onions when Kakashi pushed the cutting board in front of him. Kakashi then went about cubing chicken breasts with a different knife.

"But you can't look at these improvements and good qualities in me without also looking at the bad." Kakashi cautioned him, "I didn't do much of anything when I saw my Dad in pain. Then he killed himself, so I decided to become a law-bound prig who treated people like shit. Obito died because of me. When Rin told me that she loved me, and I didn't feel the same way, I was very careless in my treatment of her. Once Minato-sensei was gone, I didn't do nearly as much as I could have to look out for his child. I fought with and belittled my sister pretty much all of our lives, abandoned her kid when she died…" He concluded with, "My track record is…eh…"

"It's not the best track record." Tenzo allowed.

"I also read a lot of porn."

"Well, that was never a secret."

With the chicken chopped, Kakashi added oil to a pan to heat on the stove, "There are plenty of things that scare me. For some reason, everyone around here seems to think I'm an unstoppably courageous caricature. At least friends know I can be an asshat and a flake."

Genuine laughter erupted from Tenzo, "This…is the most self-aware you've ever been…maybe…"

"Do you see those things in me?" Kakashi wondered.

A small nod. Kakashi sighed and turned to add onions to the pan, stirring lazily.
"Kakashi…"

He glanced over his shoulder to Tenzo.

"I see much more than that in you." Tenzo told him with a straight face.

Kakashi turned back to cooking, "Thank you." He added the chicken to the pan, "Just imagine: if you hadn't been commanded to kill me while you were still with Root, we never would have become friends."

"I guess not. I would probably be dead by now." Tenzo smiled ruefully, "Danzo had me on assignments until I would collapse."

"And he never let you have a haircut." Kakashi recalled.

"What? You didn't like my glorious, waist-length hair?"

"Of course I did. Every hairstyle you tried suited you, I noticed."

Aghast, "I…think you're complimenting me."

"Jeez, relax." Kakashi clucked as he added rice to the final mixture, "Get me some eggs."

Tenzo did as he was asked and procured the carton for his culinary host. Beaten eggs were poured into a second pan, spread wide to provide an omelet base. Judging by the speed and dexterity with which the meal was prepared, Tenzo figured that Kakashi ate this dish pretty often. The delicious aroma had woken a few of the dogs, who were lollygagging opportunistically.

When the rice filling was stuffed into the omelet shells and patted into the traditional shape, Kakashi even went through the trouble of designing a ketchup face on the finished product. He handed the plate off to Tenzo, "Here."

"Oh, uh…what did you draw on it?" Tenzo took a seat at the table.

"It's your face."

"I don't look like this!"

"You do. See? Those lines are the under-eye bags. I thought it was pretty good."

Tenzo aggressively tore apart the omelet mound with a spoon, annoyed, "My eyes are not that bad…"

"Hey, aren't you going to thank me for the meal?" Kakashi also sat down with his plate.

"No. I didn't even want to stay here. I poured my heart out unnecessarily and now I'm embarrassed." Tenzo took a bite, "And you just go on and on with the self-deprecation."

"Ah. You're welcome anyway." Kakashi was smiling as he pulled his neck gaiter down to eat.

"What sauce did you use in the rice?"

"Barbecue sauce."

"It's strange but good."
"I'm glad. I was eating saury earlier, but that wasn't quite enough." Kakashi shooed his dogs away with a foot, citing the fact that they had all been fed. He chewed merrily while they watched.

"Thank you for the meal." Tenzo muttered belatedly.

"Hmm." Kakashi was studying his face from across the table.

Tenzo was trying to eat in peace, maybe even preserve some of his dignity in light of the fact that Kakashi sort of held him hostage (by way of food). He'd much rather be across town in his sad shoebox of a home, curled up beneath a blanket and regretting that he'd bared his heart like plated omurice.

It had been stupid to say anything. He'd been thinking back to some five or six years ago, when they'd been younger and less jaded. He'd thought of those times when Kakashi had kissed him; that perhaps he hadn't read into it too much. That it wasn't just some initiation for Tenzo as he got a foothold in social circles— maybe Kakashi had meant it? But when years had gone by and nothing had blossomed, those memories diluted and the motivations seemed more uncertain than ever.

Moping while he ate, Tenzo cleared his plate and tried not to collapse forward onto it and die of shame. Why did he always try so hard? It'd become a joke to some of their friends. Tenzo knew that his devotion was pretty easy to spot.

"Stop acting so put-upon." Kakashi chided him, "I had to give a disclaimer."

"By saying all those awful things about yourself? Why do I need a discla—?"

"I love you." Kakashi said.

Beside the table, Biscuit and Gattsu had become energized by some bright change in human mood, circling restlessly, sniffing. From his cushion on the far side of the room, Pakkun was telling his dog compatriots to quit it and give "the two-leggers some space." Tenzo hardly even noticed the doggish behavior peaking in the house. He was staring dumbly.

Kakashi took a final bite of food before confirming, "You are the only person that I want."

"I…I…" Tenzo pressed his lips shut, red-faced, startled.

"I still think you could choose better, and I can't guarantee I will get any of this right." Kakashi gathered up the empty dishes, "When have I ever?" He transported them to the sink to clean up.

"You can…I mean…you've done more good than you realize." It was taking some gargantuan emotional strength for Tenzo not to completely lose his cool and clam up, "Especially for me. I have to credit you with most every decent thing in my life. Don't try to…minimize that. I don't want to look elsewhere…"

"I know. I won't." While scrubbing the dishes, Kakashi somehow remained calm and Tenzo was goggling at his level-headedness.

What was he supposed to say? He didn't want to rush serious words and seem desperate or pathetic, even though there was a chance he already did, Tenzo considered. His head was fuzzy. Palms a bit clammy. Why was it that knowing someone loved him changed everything at a molecular level? He would have to renegotiate everything; breathing, sleeping, laundry, his life's purpose. He needed a glass of water. He needed to roll up like a pangolin and take a few minutes. Did Kakashi really feel unruffled while acknowledging something that had taken years to manifest? How did he do it?
This was no flirtatious crush of his bygone late teen years and early twenties. His feelings were accepted and returned. What did other people do in this situation? Tenzo wondered. Did they bellow victoriously, stutter like fools, or cry in silence? What was standard procedure? He had no personal experience or references to go off of.

At some point during his contemplation, Kakashi's dishwashing wrapped up and he moved around the edge of the counter. Tenzo had to snap out of the mental survey his brain was conducting. Kakashi was aspectant to him, not a half step away. His face was still uncovered, expressing that he was waiting for some kind of confirmation from Tenzo.

"Eh-hem." Tenzo cleared his throat again, "Sorry…I'm…a bit overwhelmed."

"Looks like it."

"…did you really mean all that?"

Kakashi assured him, "The only time I fib is when I'm making up excuses for tardiness."

"Oh."

"So, be clear about what you want. You're the one who brought up this subject, but I expect you hoped to gain something from it."

"I don't know. I don't know…what needs to change. From the way things are now." Tenzo admitted, breathing sporadically as he noticed the shrinking barrier of air and space between them, "I haven't done this before. Maybe you've dated someone, so you should lead, or…"

A flat response, "What do you think I know about dating?"

"I…er—" Tenzo watched one of Kakashi's hands reach, settling on the back of his neck.

With regards to being in a functional relationship with another adult, Kakashi wagered he knew "Close to nothing." And he optimistically added, "That won't stop me from figuring it out, though."

Tenzo managed short breaths, "Me too..." The world was a dizzy place.

Tenzo suspected the dogs were observing, naively detached from the spectacle of Hatake Kakashi leaning forward and winding his arms around the fidgety dinner guest. By their standards it was not unusual or unexpected. Nor did they think much about the two meeting lips, a slow act of remembrance and reacquaintance. Eventually, the dog pack settled down again since the opportunity for dinner scraps had passed, and the humans were plenty distracted with loving pecks.

Night trawled a veil to darken the home where no lamps had been lit. Kakashi noted that he was overdue for sleep and had a check-up scheduled for the morning to assess the reinstatement of his mission activity.

Goodnight was the idea. And it still was the idea when Tenzo lingered, caught up in his try-hard franticness and disbelief that he could solicit kisses when he wanted. He could stay. He could speak his mind. He could feel. Kakashi did discourage him from "Writing any more of those mushy sentiment cards," though, "People are nosy and try to read them."

"So what?" Tenzo lived for such things.

"Those words are for me, not them."
“True…” Tenzo yawned as he curled up on the side of a bed he hadn’t seen in a long time. It was good to know the hold of another again. The hold of the only other. To know it and not have to forget.

The next morning felt surer than all the days before it.

Chapter End Notes

And napkin spread by fays;
Drifting meadow of the air,
Where bloom the daisied banks and violets,
And in whose fenny labyrinth
The bittern booms and heron wades;
Spirit of lakes and seas and rivers,—
Bear only perfumes and the scent
Of healing herbs to just men’s fields.
—H. D. Thoreau

Note: Thanks for reading and happy Pride Month. : )

Chapter 54: United Front
United Front

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter Soundtrack: "Back & Forth" by Electric Guest

Naruto did not think it unusual when one of Suna's Sealing Corps commissioners dropped by the house to tutor him, per Gaara's invitation. He did not even think it particularly offensive that she, Maki, came over 15 minutes earlier than anticipated. He'd been awake for a while that morning, eating a vegetable-heavy breakfast and sampling exotic teas that Kankuro had brewed.

However, Gaara appeared quite annoyed that the commissioner showed up earlier than expected and had been invited into the home by Naruto, and consequently Maki beheld the Kazekage trudge into the kitchen in his pajamas, half-awake, taking a droopy-eyed swig of oolong before he even noticed she was standing there at the dining table.

Gaara sprayed his drink in surprise and yelled something incoherent, mostly at Naruto.

"We've got some baked carrots and stuff, if you're hungry." Naruto offered the guest to partake of the breakfast spread on the table.

"Thank you, Naruto-san, I'm fine." Maki detected that Gaara was overcoming his startlement, "I apologize that I arrived sooner than we agreed upon, Kazekage-sama. I just thought I should start the lesson as soon as I could, since the Sealing Committee might have an unscheduled meeting today…"

"…it's alright." Gaara sat down and accepted that he was underdressed and eating mushy carrots in front of someone who ought to have the most professional view of him possible.

Naruto was more personable, "What was your name again?"

"Maki." She was smiling.

"Yeah, that's right. Kankuro told me." Naruto remembered cheerfully.

"He is a very good friend of mine." Maki confirmed.

"Yep, he said that too. So you're a Sealing Commissioner? Isn't that the highest position in the Corps?"

"Short of the Director's position, the leader who oversees everyone in the Sealing Corps, yes. I preserve the most complex Sealing Techniques that protect our village, and that may be required for delicate missions." Maki politely helped herself to some carrots with a spare set of chopsticks.

"And it's okay for you to teach me a bit more about Prong-Seals?" Naruto was hopeful.

Maki glanced at Gaara again, who was bunched up in his seat and chewing sleepily, "It is if the Kazekage says it is."

"Yes. I want him prepared before he applies for a position in Leaf." Gaara granted.

"You seem better prepared than most applicants I've seen anyway." Maki estimated, "I've heard that Gama-sennin has been teaching you."
"He has been. He would've given me extra pointers today, but he went to check on a tip with Old Granny Chiyo first thing this morning. He said he'll be back by lunchtime and then bother Suna's council again." Naruto relayed the whereabouts of Jiraiya, since he and Temari had returned to the Sand Village.

When Temari did saunter into the room wearing a pretty dress with her fan tied in a sash at her back, her jaw dropped at the sight of Gaara, "Hey, why aren't you dressed? We have company!" She turned to Maki, "I'm sorry, he's usually ready—"

"No, no, I was early, Temari-sama!" Maki was contrite.

Gaara sighed theatrically to interrupt their chatter, "I have a few things to take care of this morning at the office. I'll be going there shortly."

"Right." Temari rested a hand on her hip, "And I'm heading south for an escort detail coming from the Land of Waves. I should be back in a few hours since he'll meet me half-way."

"Half-way?" Gaara scrunched his face curiously, "Who are you escorting again?"

"I'll be back by lunch. Don't get into trouble." Temari pecked the top of her brother's head affectionately, "See you later, Naruto, Maki." She waved farewell before trotting out of the room.

Naruto noticed, "She's energetic…"

"She's hiding something." Gaara assessed flatly over a final sip of tea.

"Maybe it's not my place to comment…" Maki contributed, "But why is it when a young woman is happy it's immediately considered suspicious?"

"If you lived with her you'd know." Gaara defended.

"She looked so pretty in that dress…" Maki muttered, as if she were rethinking her own practical, muted outfit.

Naruto paused in his chewing, "What if she got a boyfriend?"

"She's sworn off that sort of thing." Gaara recalled.

"As far as you know."

"…I'm going to get dressed." Gaara did not entertain the subject, "You can begin your lessons in the sitting room now." He retreated sleepily upstairs to change.

And so a rather pleasant morning commenced, at least in Naruto's opinion. He and Maki settled in the living area to go over the fundamentals of prong-seals, how to manifest them, their purposes, and in Naruto's words, "The best way to balance a bunch of 'em on your fingers…"

"Well…" Maki smiled dubiously, "I'm not sure exactly how to describe how it's done…to make multiple seals at once…it's like balancing a stack of plates on my head."

Naruto stilled and stared at her as he sat on a floor cushion, thrown by the suggestion.

"What I mean is that it's tricky that way, managing individual properties simultaneously to create a complete technique. You know that I didn't mean you should practice balancing plates on your head, right, Naruto-san?"
"Uh…no— I wasn't thinking that!" A swift denial.

Maki's lessons got clearer, and Gaara eventually reappeared downstairs in his staple Kage attire.

Then came the knock at the door. Gaara exchanged a wordless, quizzical look with Naruto and the tutor before answering and signing for a very strange-looking package. Maki's face grew slate serious when she asked Gaara, "The postal service delivered that directly to you? Shouldn't the Intel Corps clear it first, Kazekage-sama?"

"I don't think it's a bomb or poison." Gaara gave the puffed envelope a shake and heard something rattling inside.

Naruto was intrigued, "Want me to open it?"

"No, you're several degrees more fragile than I am." Gaara tore the perforated top off of the package and out slid a battered-looking VHS tape with a label reading: *Friends from Kumogakure.*

"Ohh, the Intel Corps should definitely check that." Maki muttered.

"Why's Hidden Cloud sending you something outside of an official channel?" Naruto wondered, getting enthusiastic with his theories. "Gaara, whoa! What if it's a bribe? Or like a dirty movie—? Maybe a kidnapping or ransoming thing—!"

"I doubt it." Gaara crossed over to an entertainment cabinet and turned on a dusty tape player.

Maki's worrying persisted, "What if it's a broadcast of a Genjutsu technique—?"

"Maki, those never work. Illusions are transmitted through live chakra, not these stupid recordings…"

Naruto sidled up to the television screen, far more excited than he was concerned. A front-and-center recording began, showing a peaceful courtyard with mossy stones surrounding a tall kunoichi in Cloud's black and white fatigues. Beside her was a bulky, dark-skinned man dressed similarly, standing with his arms crossed.

"That's Nii Yugito." Gaara informed his companions, "The jinchuriki of the Two-Tails."

"—!" Naruto's eyes went wide as he sat and vibrated with anticipation.

Maki chose not to speak over the recording as Yugito commenced a greeting.

"Kazekage-sama, I pray that you've been well. I hope you and your Tailed-Beast are having an easier time understanding one another. I put in a request with the Raikage to pay you another visit, but A-sama forbade me from leaving the village." Yugito extended her hand to the man standing beside her, "This is my comrade, B, and the guardian of the Eight-Tails. He is also under orders not to travel outside of Kumo, or associate with the jinchuriki of other villages."

Killerbee explained gruffly, "My big bro's being a punk about this!"

Yugito nodded, "Yes. We need to be able to communicate with each other. The Akatsuki can capitalize on our dividedness, and continue targeting us as individuals."

"—we are not messin' around! I don't normally do recordings for free, and I don't shrug off orders! This is some rebel shit—"

"B, please."
Killerbee coughed into his fist and settled down.

"When last we spoke, you told me that you are close with the Nine-Tail's jinchuriki, Naruto-san. Make sure that he is aware of what we are trying to do, Kazekage-sama." Yugito went on, "I am horrified that we lost Utakata-san so abruptly, after he was able to open up trade and discussion channels with the great villages through the Tide Village. We also believe that the Akatsuki has extracted the Three and Four tails thus far. As our villages seek to sequester us more for safe-keeping, we all know that it leaves us more vulnerable. It is unlikely that any council would ever agree to a coalition of jinchuriki banding together to defend themselves, in fear of what kind of result our combined defeat could entail…"

"No way we'd lose. They've got no sense of vision, only trust in division…" Killerbee did not agree with the assessment, "My dudes…we could even wear matching uniforms."

Yugito seemed to be mentally collecting herself after the suggestion. Naruto was squealing at the screen, as he evidently liked the idea. Gaara told him to pipe down.

"I am suggesting we take the lawful route first, petitioning our leaders to consider an emergency meeting of all Kage and jinchuriki." Yugito explained, "And if such a request is rejected or hung up indefinitely in bureaucratic traffic, we can organize ourselves in secret. Though I'm no fan of vigilantism or treason, we must consider the bigger picture. If we lose the fight against the Akatsuki, that organization will wield a force that will eventually crush all of our villages. Our way of life will be lost."

Gaara was muttering, "…Yugito. Do you really think my council is going to entertain an idea like that?"

"Like I said: rebel shit." Killerbee was grinning, "We'll do what we've gotta do, even if our leaders are fools. Ya hear me? I already sent a new rap to Han and the Five-Tails. We go way back. No way he's skipping out on our team—"

"B, there is no team yet."

"Yet? How do you hedge your bets?" He turned from Yugito to the camera again, "Yo, Sand-Tail, Gaara! There are no leaders younger than you—who see as far as you! I know you've got this. You and your pal—I know you're in this fight with us." Killerbee added, "Next we've got to find the Seven-Tails and extend our invitation…"

"Fū!" Naruto craned his neck to look back at Gaara, "We've got to tell her!"

"Tell her? What would we tell her?" Gaara sniffed, "I'm the Kazekage. Before I resort to unsanctioned, harebrained co-ops with other jinchuriki, I have to try to organize this the right way."

"But you just said your council won't listen!" Naruto barked.

Maki's eyes darted between the two of them. She was taking in way too much information.

"Naruto, I need to make the case to my advisors that their fear of confronting the Akatsuki now pales in comparison to their fear of facing the Akatsuki at a later date, with all of the power of the Tailed-Beasts behind them. Not everyone will agree. Maybe a majority vote could be reached."

"Yeah. And well…I don't know if Baa-chan would like this idea either…"

"I have to advocate for something like this properly. Even if it were approved, I don't think Suna's council would be enthusiastic about me parading around on an inter-village Counter-Ops squad and
shirking my responsibilities here.” Gaara imagined, "And if, in the worst case scenario, I died while supporting such an effort…it'd be prudent of me to recommend a candidate as my successor."

"Why do you have to think of that morbid stuff?" Naruto groused.

"Because I don't want my village hurled into chaos in my absence.” A perfectly reasonable wish, to which Gaara tacked on, "I should put thought into who can lead Hidden Sand after me. I don't think my brother or sister would be interested, though they can handle most everything I already do."

Maki reminded them, "Uh, you're missing the video."

Gaara and Naruto snapped their attention back to the screen, watching Yugito give her closing remarks.

"We will be in touch soon, Gaara-sama. We won't give up on our villages seeing reason, and we will *never* stop resisting the Akatsuki.” Yugito urged him, "Please, correspond with A-sama when you can. He is a proud and stubborn man, but his eyes are also trained on the future. He can't ignore this threat."

Beside the kunoichi, Killerbee began an impromptu rap:

*How many times did I tell my bro-*?

*That the war ahead is the one ya don't see!*

*Idling over grudges— shit from long ago*

*While the biggest sacrifices are made by jinchuriki!*

*We'll love and bleed, build and feed our homes*

*'Til they let us go*

*Careless! Black-out! They don't see a Red Dawn*

*Like we do.*

*We're not pawns*

*We're born free!*

*Clapped in shackles*

*Lost shinobi.*

The man then pointed a finger at the camera, "Are you feelin' me? We'll meet up soon."

When the footage ended in a crackle that seemed to suggest the video had been edited, Naruto slowly about-faced to address Gaara.

Naruto confessed quietly, "He's amazing. That "B” guy."

"Amazing is not the correct description for him. His spoken word poetry was unnecessary." Gaara disagreed as he extracted the tape from the player.

"You never really did appreciate performance stuff." Naruto nodded and folded his arms, "But that's
fine, he and I can hang—"

"There will be no "hanging out" until I have this sanctioned. If I get this sanctioned…"

"Gaara, don't you feel a bit hopeful? Seeing jinchuriki much older than us— more experienced—!"
Naruto's joy propelled him back up to his feet, "We've got a shot too! And they want to help us!"

"They do. Most other jinchuriki are reasonable, empathetic people." Gaara acknowledged, and he then turned to Maki, "Can you keep this to yourself for now, Maki? At least until I make any formal announcements."

She pantomimed an imaginary key locking in front of her smiling lips, then rose from her seat on the couch, "Who would I tell? I don't pedal in gossip. Besides, this is for you to figure out. I've always been willing to fight the Akatsuki, so I look forward to a more united front resisting them."

Gaara sighed, "We all do."

Naruto was a ball of eager energy, "So how do we draft an agreement? Oh! Should we make a tape of our own too? I'm stoked meet 'em—"

"You are going to stay here and study."

"Fine! But then afterward—!"

"I am not drafting this proposal until I've handled everything else waiting for me at the office." The Kazekage was striding toward the door, while Naruto and Maki waffled behind him uncertainly.

"Actually…I was thinking of bringing Naruto to the Text Office on the first floor of the Administrative Building." Maki explained, "I can show him how to use chakra paper to practice balancing multiple prong seals at once."

Gaara halted in the doorway, "You didn't bring that with you?"

"Well, not enough of it."

Gaara repeated, "I don't want him going outside without a suppression tag."

"Relax already, I've got my disguise. Ero-sensei is back in town anyway, and he said we'll be leaving in about a day…so just tell anyone who asks that I paid you another visit." Naruto fitted a pair of ratty sunglasses to his face, "No one's gonna ask."

Grumbling, Gaara allowed the two to accompany him several blocks through town to the Administrative Building, and they parted ways at the Text Office before he continued upstairs.

Maybe there was no point in fretting about Naruto being noticed in Hidden Sand. He'd been nervous while Jiraiya was away in the Water Country, but like a faithful boomerang the perverted Sage was back. Jiraiya was also making himself useful and investigating Suna's peripheries, intent on sniffing out any hint of enemy treachery. Gaara felt that they were in much safer hands at present. As it stood, Naruto needed to cram any study time he could now that he was set to leave for Leaf.

In the Kazekage's office, he flipped the light switch on, and even heard an errant comment from Shukaku in the back of his mind, Quit stressing out.

'That is easier said than done. Why don't you try handling my job?'}
Heh! I've been unemployed for hundreds of years! Or rather, if you count me supplying brute force chakra to your village, then my work's been uncompensated for that long.

"Hush." Gaara said out loud as he took a seat, reaching for the stack of correspondence and documents in the inbox tray. There was sealed envelope with a return address he recognized right away: the Haruno household. Gaara opened it immediately, discovering a large photograph with a note attached.

Hi there Gaara!

I'm sure my daughter will be writing to you soon to explain her latest accomplishment, but I thought I'd send you this snapshot we took today at the celebration brunch. Sakura completed her hospital residency as a Medic-nin and can now choose a fellowship! Like a real physician! She studied until her eyes crossed, but at least in her Medical Corps portrait she looks presentable. Please enjoy this copy and celebrate with us even though you're far away. We very much look forward to your next visit, and hope all is well with you.

Fondly,

Haruno Kizashi

How strange it was to feel a constricting pang in his chest, as though being acknowledged by a father, even if it wasn't his own father, was the most meaningful thing in the world. Gaara inhaled and then examined the photo, which depicted Sakura in all of her blush beauty, donning a white doctor's coat over her red qipao. Her smile was a vision of spring. The commemorative degree plaque in her hands was gold-plated and well-deserved. His heart was fluttering and Gaara could not help but smile at the face he was missing so much.

'I would have liked to have attended her graduation ceremony at the Corps, but it's unthinkable for me to leave Suna right now...' Gaara thought as he slid the photo into a spare transparent frame, settling it on the corner of his desk, 'We have more catching up to do. Lots of celebrating to do...' His thoughts drifted onward as he worked on auto-pilot, 'Her father does seem to like me...'

Gaara free associated from there, 'Both of her parents like me. I think...I...don't think they would object if I asked.'


'If I can marry Sakura.' Gaara concluded the thought.

Psh! Who needs permission? Isn't that something humans just decide to do?

'There are traditions that should be respected.'

Or else they won't like you anymore. Right? Who cares! Parents will always nitpick something or get ruffled.

'Did your father ever get upset with you?'

Well...not really. When he was around me and the others we were pretty docile, and he was a patient teacher.

'But you'd never want to deliberately disappoint or disobey him.'
Within the inner workings of Gaara's seal, Shukaku tittered and crossed his arms, **No, but we didn't get to be with him for long! So it didn't matter. I'm sure me and my Tailed-Beast siblings have done plenty to disappoint him since—while he sits in the Pure Lands watching, shaking his head at our stupidity and weakness.**

'I've learned one thing about you, Shukaku,' Gaara told the Bijuu, 'It's that you aren't weak.'

**Heh! You know, I've really grown to like you, Gaara. Keep up the flattery.**

'Quiet down, now. I have work to do.'

The conversation ebbed. Fluttering sensations tickled Gaara's insides until late in the morning. Between his readings of proposals and reports, his thoughts reached for Sakura. He tinkered with the idea of what it would like to be a part of her family, and what it would be like when she was a part of his.

Gaara stopped for a cup of tea before reviewing the print copy of a slideshow to be presented to Tide's Council, explaining the extent of Suna's responsibility in the Tide Village's repairs and so forth. The head of Sustainable Gardening and Resources department stopped by with his update on the desert greenhouse, and was eventually booted from the office when several teams of Sand Genin showed up to accept mission assignments.

Once all of the youngsters were given something to do and sent away, Gaara sagged back into his seat and sighed. He glanced at the clock on the wall that reflected the hours of early afternoon. How did time escape him so easily these days?

Maki knocked once before poking her face past the door, "Gaara-sama, I have a committee meeting to get to! Naruto-san did wonderfully today! He's a quick learner."

"I knew he would do well. Where is he?"

"Still on the first floor in the Text Office. He's made himself comfortable and is practicing with two Prong-Seals now." Maki reported proudly, "The office manager likes him already. You can let Naruto stay there, or ask Wamu-san to escort him back to your home."

"Thank you. I think I'd rather pay Naruto a visit downstairs and find out what he wants to do today." Gaara pushed up from his chair, "I appreciate your help, Maki."

"Anytime!" She hustled away.

Shortly after that, Gaara did find his friend downstairs in the building and got a sense of what Naruto's daily goals were.

By the time Kankuro and Baki frittered into the Administrative Building and made the climb up to the Kazekage's office, the Kazekage was no longer seated at his desk. They did discover, however, Jiraiya settled in and scribbling a letter to his book editor whilst smoking a pipe.

"Hey! This is a no smoking area, put that out!" Kankuro crossed the room to crack a window and fanned tobacco smoke with his hand, "Gama-sennin, what the hell—? Where did Gaara go?"

"Out." The pipe stem hung precariously off of Jiraiya's lip.

"That's not helpful." Kankuro crossed his arms and stood beside the desk.

Jiraiya held up a finger to pause the exchange or risk losing his train of thought as he wrote, "No
way I'm going to allow a whole chapter deletion just because my editor felt I got *redundant!*

Baki, who was still at the entryway of the room, cleared his throat to remind the Toad Sage that maybe he was a bit too comfy within the stronghold of Sunagakure. And, uh, Sand ninja were within their rights to ask where the hell the Kazekage went.

"Sorry. I just got back from some reconnaissance in the desert, AND I had to rip my editor a new one for insulting me." Jiraiya set his pen down, exhaling another line of smoke, "Gaara said I could relax in here while he and Naruto went out for a bit."

"Okay, but if he said you could relax I'm sure he didn't say you could smoke too," Kankuro reasoned.

Jiraiya was not apologetic, "Didn't say I *couldn't.*"

"Twisting things for convenience much?" The young man growled.

"Take it easy, Painted Cheeks. You know when this will be a non-smoking building? When I *walk out of it.*" Jiraiya sassed, "Because once I leave, I'll be tempted to watch my students duke it out in the desert. And frankly I'm not excited to see the outcome of Gaara and Naruto brawling because they're like my kids, and I wince a lot. So I'm wasting a bit of time—"

"Brawling?" Baki repeated the concerning word.

"Maybe not exactly brawling." Jiraiya allowed, finally extinguishing his pipe because he was still a rule-abiding man at heart, "Gaara accepted Naruto's challenge, so they're going to have a contest of strength just outside the village gate. Supervised by some high-level ninja of Suna, of course, for safety."

Once that information passed Kankuro's ears and was processed, he was the first one out the door, making haste to locate the two supposed warring parties.

Beyond the sunken Buddha effigy outside the walls of the village, Naruto stretched theatrically. He *was* ramping up for a fight after all, but Gaara clucked that he didn't have to be such a ham about everything. The shadow of the statue stretched long over them, and several Jonin of Sunagakure gathered (at Gaara's request) to keep an eye on things from a vantage point on the next dune over.

"If you know what's good for you, you'll stretch too." Naruto gave him a toothy warning.

Gaara's rebuttal was standard, "I am well aware of what is good for me."

"Bet Sakura-chan would tell you to. You 'ol stiff."

Boggled by the statement, Gaara reconsidered his stubborn position before folding down into a runner's leg stretch. Desk work had definitely tightened him up. One false move and Naruto could probably break him in half like a board.

And it was that notion that was so distinct— that Gaara could tell behind Naruto's smiley, rambunctious exterior there was a profound talent that could trounce any unwitting opponent. It was a feeling that stood Gaara's arm hairs on end. That there was something unspoken and formidable in Naruto. He could look at his friend and just *know it."

"So, uh…are we supposed to set up any rules?" Naruto rubbed his chin while he thought on it.
"Don't cause any destruction to my village." Gaara counted off sparring parameters on his fingers, "No unnecessary risks, no summoning creatures for help, no juvenile tricks…"

"What about slightly humorous tricks-?"

"None of your tricks."

"Come on, I'm not going to embarrass you in front of all the citizens who respect you here!"

"I will need that in writing." Gaara said flatly.

Naruto paced back and forth, "If you're gonna patronize me like that then I get to make some rules too: no bad attitudes, no condescending—"

"Naruto, those aren't sparring limitations—"

"-no interrupting, limit two time-outs each if we need 'em, and let's wrap this up before the sun goes down, because that's when the shave ice places closes and I want to try the blood orange flavor…"

Sun down? How long did Naruto expect to fight? Gaara rolled his head on his neck and decided he didn't need that answer.

Naruto clapped his hands, "Great! Anything else?"

"No." Gaara confirmed.

They charged.

Jounin watching from a few dozen meters away flinched at the abrupt crash of the two ninja that meet in a volley of Taijutsu combinations. It was clear right away that Naruto had the advantage of dexterity and brawn, marching Gaara backwards, careening around with blink-and-you'd-miss-it speed. But Gaara's sand was a pest. It fluttered in defensive tendrils around the Kazekage, staving off multiple hammer-arms, round kicks, and classic one-two punches.

"So your sand is quicker these days, that's nice!" Naruto gave him that, "But man you need to lift and do some high intensity training, Gaara, you hit as hard as a baby blanket-!" More sand began to angrily surge, so Naruto added, "And I'll get you an agility ladder so you can work on physical speed—"

Not standing for any more cheeky banter, Gaara popped the section of sandy ground up from beneath Naruto like a geyser to send him whizzing through the air upwards of 30 meters. The chatterbox shinobi tucked into a ball to somersault down like a show-off, softening his landing with several backwards flips.

And if Naruto was not mistaken, it seemed as though Gaara had sped up, maintaining a fortified defense that was starting to make Naruto's close-quarters efforts null. All of the environment was a traitor. Naruto realized it as the ground slipped in different directions like the trick-floor in a fair's funhouse. The subtle motions of sand nearly tripped him half a dozen times when he came too near the Kazekage. With his approaches hampered so, Naruto could no longer get a good whack at his friend, 'Crap, and his sand shield is faster and sturdier than I remember. I guess he's not gonna let me punch him anymore! Bet he was just curious to see how hard I can hit…'

Gaara had quite a time trying to accurately nail his friend with a Sand Bullet, his effort becoming a veritable barrage while Naruto kept his distance, slipping between projectiles. It would have been more efficient to coagulate the scattered remains of sand he attacked with, but it hadn't taken Naruto
long to assess what Gaara's working range was. If an imaginary circle extended around Gaara, he
being the hypothetical point at its center, then Naruto wizened up enough to tread just beyond the
radius within which Gaara's attacks were at their most bothersome. Any further, and he'd be
dithering chakra away at a foolish rate just to have a hope of catching Naruto in a Sand Coffin.

But Gaara did have that option in his back pocket. Something had to give, after all. Either Naruto
would take the risk to get close enough for a direct strike, or Gaara would expend chakra in a burst to
extend his range and speed.

'Since traditional means aren't serving him well, Naruto is going to use a more advanced jutsu to
—' Ah, Gaara had called it. In that same instant, Naruto let fly his Hiraishin anchor knife, sailing for
Gaara before it stuck like a dud in a wall of sand. Except, what Gaara had seen was a falsified
transformation; a distraction, he realized as he detected a blip of movement from behind. Naruto had
snuck around, hurled the kunai, and reappeared in a flash to successfully land a sucker-Rasengan that
viciously bashed Gaara's spherical sand shield.

What a gimmick… Gaara chewed on the inside of his mouth, aggravated that such a plain ruse had
cought his blind side. And what was worse: his retaliating Sand Coffin boosted with chakra wrapped
swiftly around Naruto…only to snare a Shadow Clone that Naruto had seamlessly replaced himself
with.

Hah! Gaara, he's zipping all around you like a fly! Shukaku was highly amused.

Withholding a retort to that comment, Gaara stretched his awareness out of his working area of
effect, sensing a tremble of sand as Naruto retreated while out of sight, but whoops— Gaara shifted
the underfoot patch of dune and may have rolled his friend's ankle to slow him. Naruto's yelp was
the giveaway that Gaara had guessed correctly, and the Kazekage rounded about with a hefty
column of sand that collided with Naruto like a battering ram. Or, it would have collided with him, if
Naruto had not flashed away to safety.

"Phew! Nearly had me!" Naruto was jubilant on top of a rock pile.

"I did have you. You may be able to use the Flying Thunder God technique, but your application is
 sloppy." Gaara had to point out that Naruto had been grazed by the last jutsu, dusted with sand and
limestone chips.

Naruto was shaking the debris off, "My application would have been fine if you didn't try to trip me
with your shift- ing-ground bullshit."

"How do you expect me to slow you down? I can't move like you do."

"Maybe you could if you weren't so dang conservative with your chakra!"

"I don't need to match your speed to win. I just need to outlast you, and I have no doubt that I will."
Gaara's smile was a small crescent of defiance.

The taunt dripped down Naruto's spine; competitive irritation sent him off speeding, and in between
each breath he may have heard the faintest murmur of his inner spectator—the Nine-Tailed Fox,
saying nothing as he watched the contest with perked ears.

He was not as liberal as he could have been with Shadow Clones, but Naruto wanted to convey
that he too could operate with limited resources. That he could grind Gaara down. A few Shadow
Clones proved to be a worthy, chaotic distraction as Naruto dipped back into his friend's blind spot,
which was still defended by Gaara's ever-present sand shield. But it was a maneuver twice repeated,
so Gaara felt it coming, and he buffed apart the clone onslaught before meeting the real Naruto's Fireball Jutsu with a fireball of his own, exhaling a sphere of flames just in time.

The techniques would have canceled under ordinary circumstances, but Naruto's spite goaded him into plunging an excess of chakra into the jutsu— growing the flame and intensifying the heat. It overtook Gaara's countering Fireball Jutsu, to his surprise, and Gaara could only resort to cloaking himself in half a dune's worth of sand to protect against the about-faced inferno. Even if the momentary euphoria of overpowering his Kage-level friend was cheap, Naruto still feasted on the ego trip as his Tailed-Beast muttered about it being a truly "childish escalation."

Following the brief gloatfest, sandy walls rose high to enclose Naruto in a tubular space, only offering a distant exit ahead and no escape to the rear. It occurred to him, 'Crap, Gaara's willing to use more chakra now…he couldn't reach me that quick before…!'

Airflow in the trap was rather good, Naruto noticed, surprised that he wasn't being smothered, 'What's he-?' At the far end of the tube Gaara exhaled another fireball, which Naruto might've called modest by their standards. But— the Kazekage added a Wind Jutsu, another foundational technique by most counts, but it combined with the rolling ball of fire to create a furnace. The residual, stomach-clenching fear and sheen of sweat clung to Naruto as he promptly flashed out of the sand trap into open air. He had only thought to mark a rock pile earlier with his formula, and as such it was easy for Gaara to anticipate where Naruto would reappear.

Before Naruto could chastise Gaara about creating a literal oven (though he was still silently in awe of the ingenuity of it), Gaara swept a huge, bulky arm of Shukaku's that he had manifested. By a hair's breadth Naruto avoided the arcing blow, flipping up and over to reach a better vantage point. Better being the hypothetical word as Naruto ended up in prime position for the gigantic, sandy tail that Shukaku had also loaned his host. Gaara thwacked Naruto with the tail like a home run ball. POW. He rocketed through the air and struck the broad cheek of the sunken Buddha's face, gouging an unsightly crack in it.

Onlookers gasped audibly from the lookout. On the ground, Gaara hung back and wondered how Naruto would respond. He seemed to be hobbling dizzily, correcting his sightline of the desert as his eyes spun in his head. It had been a serious blow.

"...that's enough time." Gaara estimated, though he'd only given Naruto five seconds to recuperate. He knew who he was dealing with. It was why he felt no remorse sending in two Sand Clones to position themselves. Gaara's precognitive inkling assured him that Naruto had a trick up his sleeve, and indeed he did— Sage Mode markings appeared on Naruto's face.

Three Shadow Clones had been hidden away behind the effigy well in advance to collect Nature Chakra. Naruto released one of the clones before engaging Gaara again, frustrated that his friend had no trouble controlling partial transformations of the One-Tail's body, 'How!? How does Gaara do that? In an instant he can change his shape with Biju chakra and flick me like a bug…'

The pair of Sand Clones harassed Naruto, drawing his attention away from Gaara as he occasionally lashed out with Shukaku's tail and limbs. To avoid the sandy onslaught, Naruto employed the help of a single Shadow Clone, weaving away on light feet, anticipating the motion of sand tendrils. Naruto propelled himself off of his clone's back, feinting in multiple directions to scramble his attackers, wheeling and coordinating with his Shadow Clone.

In the beat between two Sand projectiles that missed, Naruto seized his clone's wrist, spun, and hurled it at the nearest Sand Clone…a move which impacted the surprised replication before the Shadow Clone detonated. Gaara's other Bunshin, momentarily distracted by the kamikaze explosion, met its end when Naruto flashed behind it with a Sage Chakra-fueled Rasengan, demolishing it and
gouging an enormous pit into the shifty ground.

And Gaara's counterattack came on cue, a flutter registering in air that Naruto's Sage Sense warned him of a few milliseconds before it closed in. He ducked below the swing of a large tanuki paw, racing around Gaara's defenses as he spun another Rasengan to life in his palm, *I'm not messing around!* At the last second, Naruto flashed away from the double hammer-fist smash Shukaku's arms tried to club him with— too slow. Gaara couldn't even see Naruto reappear or bear down on him with the Big Ball Rasengan from above...but thankfully his Sand Shield rose up to buffer the blow. The defense was incomplete, Gaara realized, as Naruto plunged downward with momentum and clipped Gaara in the mouth with a rebellious kick.

Tumbling back, the two scuffled for a few ragged breaths, Naruto's Taijutsu superior, painful, and clobbering Gaara even as Sand Armor absorbed Frog Kumite punches. When the Sand Shield closed in to snare Naruto he was gone again in a flash, earning crows of surprise and awe from watching Sand shinobi. Though only for two paltry seconds, they had seen their Kazekage get absolutely pummeled within his own defenses!

Naruto had retreated to the top of the Buddha's head to tap another meditating clone, maintaining his waning Sage Mode, *'Heh! I bet Gaara hated that. He can protect himself if I hit hard or if I move fast, but not when I can do both!'* Oh yes, Gaara had hated it.

He was stock-still, concentrating on raising a vast area of sand that stretched just beyond the effigy but short of the observation deck. He was going to enclose Naruto in a vault to impede further retreats, at least, that's what Naruto thought Gaara was trying to do. Deserting his perch, Naruto charged at Gaara as he exerted himself to raise a wide desert dome. Gaara's defenses would be reasonably lowered at this time, a fact that occurred to Naruto as he came within several meters of his friend, partly aware that was exactly what Gaara wanted. The dome was a sham— it began to rain down in a meteor-shower of Sand Bullets. Naruto flashed out of harm's way and danced around the fusillade.

Then it seemed to Naruto that something in the air was wrong; was not tingling his Sage Senses the way it should have when he was simultaneously knocked askew by a generic Wind Jutsu and into the path of a Sand Bullet. Naruto hurled his anchor knife to flee while making sense of the miscalculation, *'What the—? Gaara's trying to throw me off—!'* He had noticed two of Gaara's own Shadow Clones dedicatedly stirring up the area with Wind Jutsu, distorting air flow and whipping up a veritable sandstorm, *'If he's figured out how I can feel things coming at me in Sage Mode, he's going to keep mucking around!'*

By then, Naruto was struck twice more due to the same gimmick, and sand bullets accumulated to trap him in a Sand Coffin. Naruto resorted to defaulting back to the rocky outcrop he had marked for the Flying Thunder God technique. He flashed right into a waiting Shadow Clone of Gaara's as it exhaled a Wind Jutsu at him, and Naruto backpedaled in shock as he rushed through hand signs. His Fireball Jutsu ignited the windy breath and turned it back on Gaara's clone, incinerating it as the air cleared of Sand Bullets and debris. *'Gaara's quite the trickster now, I guess...that was close—' A wheeze of air escaped Naruto as the fingers of Shukaku's manifested hand caught him from behind, and shot him like a basketball pass back to the ground.

It was outlandish how far the Biju limb could be extended— long and flexing with pure energy, a cloak that glowed around Gaara as he employed more of Shukaku's strength. The other Tailed-Beast arm came down as Naruto hit the dirt, smashing the young man beneath the sandy paw of the beast. Gaara folded his arms and huffed. Whenever it seemed like he'd caught Naruto, his dear friend kept
slipping away with the Hiraishin. What trouble it was to hold him still. Admittedly, Gaara was more surprised to see Naruto hold his ground and lift the Tailed-Beast's heavy hand off of him, pressing up with Sage strength to rise and stand once again.

Wobbling, Naruto dashed away from the limb when he tired, and dissolved his last meditating clone to top off his Sage Chakra.

"Naruto," Gaara issued a warning, "I don't want to hold back. Senjutsu may not be enou—"

Naruto was incredibly ruffled at that point, "Don't think for a second I can't handle you, because I can!" Spittle flew from Naruto's mouth, "Why insult me and go easy on me?"

Maybe it was better to call this off. Gaara had detected that Naruto had clear limits—that Sage Chakra wore off after a few minutes, needed to be replenished (AND Gaara was too noble to tamper with Naruto's hidden clones as they meditated.) Gaara had also seen that Sage strength could lift one of Shukaku's arms, but that, the One-Tail sniggered, was a miniature baby-weight expression of what his true body and power was. To push Naruto further could quite possibly hurt him. If not physically, it would certainly scratch up his friend's pride. Not to mention Jiraiya would be displeased.

But Naruto's eyes were fiery, odd and golden like a toad's, and his mouth drawn into a resolute grimace. He wanted this chance to test himself.

Knowing that, Gaara withdrew his extended, nebulous Tailed-Beast limbs into a glowing chakra cloak. The aura was a blend of black and red, buzzing like static...until Gaara took a slow breath and let go. Anything that divided him from Shukaku at that point dissolved away, mental barriers down, his spirit at peace, and the Tailed-Beast did not take advantage of his trust. He gave Gaara everything he had in a flush of energy so great that a gale rolled over the dunes and whipped watching Sand ninja on the lookout. Naruto shielded his eyes from the gust and observed the aura fine-tune itself into an amber light, ruddy red at the edges.

He could feel it. All of it. The insane density of Biju chakra blaring off of Gaara made Naruto's stomach sink. What was more unsettling was that the volume of chakra had not disoriented the Kazekage or clouded his consciousness—he was lucid and in control. '...how? How can he? Why isn't the One-Tail taking him over? I would've been tipped over the edge, stupid-mad and gone by now if that were me...' Naruto ground his teeth while he thought.

Gaara was on him in an instant, propelled by a new burst of speed—his Sand Armor having shed off completely. Naruto dodged the punch because he could feel it coming, and Gaara's blow shattered apart the rocky outcrop. The two reeled from inertia before turning back to meet with bulldozer blows, punches and blocks aquiver with force, hooking into each other. Sand tufted up in bursts as it was displaced by their stomps and kicks. Naruto slid his palm up Gaara's punching arm for a lock, a muscle-memory move from the bout against Huo that Hinata had shared with him. He dropped his elbow on Gaara's free arm before driving his knee into the Kazekage's stomach...and Gaara tottered for a moment before shaking it off. It had by no means been a weatherable blow, but Naruto refused to be discouraged.

Frog Kumite gave him an incremental advantage as Naruto handily dodged many of Gaara's swipes, paying him back for a few of his careless blows. He had half a mind to point blank mash a Rasengan into Gaara's face, 'Let's see how he likes that!' Naruto dodged another jab and stepped right into the abrupt extension of a chakra-arm from Gaara's cloak. As before, he was batted like a line drive straight into the lookout with a crash, frightening the daylights of spectators.

Naruto's head was ringing. 'Oh. He. Got me good on that one...ow.' His mouth felt dry and his
vision spun, 'I jumped into that whack. Ugh. Gaara can transform on a dime, kinda like Fū could...' Slowly, aching, Naruto rolled to his knees on the metal slats of the observation deck as Sand ninja gathered round. How he would've killed to use a combo attack with Gamakichi or Kinji against Gaara, but that option had been ruled out. They had said they would use only their own strength.

"Holy hell! You okay, kid?" A concerned Jounin was clucking at him, "What do you have to fight the Kazekage for? Are you nuts?"

Naruto staggered to his feet and waved off the concern, "Hey, I grew up beating Gaara's ass so this isn't that different..."

"He launched you just now...I mean, you're good! But why push it?" Most present were skeptics.

Something warm was running down the side of Naruto's head. He patted the sore spot and discovered a steady stream of blood. Ah. So this warranted reevaluation. Friendly contests typically excluded head gashes and other bodily damages. He waved at Gaara below to get his attention, "Hey! I'm gonna...call a time out for now."

Gaara held up the fingers of his left hand to count, "One of two we allotted. Alright. Are you injured —?"

"—don't act all concerned when you toss me around like a ragdoll, ya bastard!" Naruto barked and took a cross-legged seat on the lookout. Trying to relax was a chore. There were many sets of eyes on him. His muscles were wound like springs. Sage Chakra was slipping away, and it seemed fair to top himself off while he took a breather.

The wound on his head was rapidly sealing up too, which Naruto had counted on. It was an odd introspective moment as he wondered why he had a propensity for healing that he took for granted. 'Huh. Has it always been me? Is it the Fox? I don't know. It hurt like a bitch, but it won't in a minute...' Naruto frowned to himself, 'Gaara's on another level. He hasn't really fessed up to it when we spoke or wrote letters...but he's so strong I'm just not sure...'

There was a rumble from his subconscious, So you admit defeat?

'I'm not defeated yet, Fox. Anyone worth their salt takes a second to not fuck around with a possible traumatic head injury. Did you see what he did with the One-Tail's arm? What the hell?!

How could I have missed it? That graceless thrashing was an underhanded ambush. Though it would've helped if you didn't walk straight into it!

Below, Gaara stood at the foot of a dune, his arms folded as he glowed. His eyes were shut. Maybe he was conferring with his Tailed-Beast as well? Naruto huffed in annoyance when he stood up, patting his head to find the cut had scabbed over. 'Okay. Now I've got to watch for when he pulls that Bijū-team-up crap. He is a Kage, I get it! Gaara was never a pushover. I might've gotten more practical experience fighting in the wilds, but he said he worked on accepting himself and understanding his Tailed-Beast...'

Naruto hopped over the rail to resume the contest on the ground, still puttering in his thoughts during the last few seconds of the ceasefire, 'I know I've probably...been way too stubborn...and I just can't forgive it all...'

Forgive what? The fox gruffed.

'What you've done. If it weren't for you, I'd still have my parents! You nearly killed Ero-sensei and
tried to blow up the Toad Valley while I was incapacitated—"

Why would I ever want your forgiveness for those things? I own what I did!

'Asshole. I...bah! What do you think Gaara had to do to forgive and understand the One-Tail? I don’t know how they managed it. I honestly don’t think I'll ever...get it.' Naruto felt his stomach twist as he confessed, 'But I think I need your help for this one.'

Ha! Kurama was amused by the entreaty, What do you need ME for? Can't you beat him on your own?

'Well, Gaara's not trying to beat me on his own! He's got assistance!'

And you don't. The Fox sneered.

Naruto exited his internal conference and locked eyes with Gaara, "I'm good to go."

"There is blood all over you..." Guilt crept into Gaara's tone.

"I'll change my shirt after this so I don't offend." Naruto shrugged light-heartedly. Red had also stained golden locks behind his ear, and a patch below on his neck.

"...I—"

"Hey! Don't get all cowed and mopey about bashing me around, you know I don't break easily." He didn't want Gaara to pity him or hold back.

Without further ado, Naruto flashed behind Gaara and successfully anticipated the projection of a huge chakra tail, bounding over it to get a clear shot at the back of Gaara's head. His round kick was lined up perfectly, but Gaara dipped to evade and counter with his own aerial kick. They were airborne for a short scuffle before a blast of sand hurled Naruto back, and Gaara took aim for another Shukaku-tail-swing. It was then Naruto planted his feet and grappled with the chakra appendage, twisting for leverage. In a burst of Sage strength, Naruto hurled Gaara by the tail like a discus.

When Gaara landed lightly, assisted by two radiant chakra arms, Naruto felt the corner of his eye twitch. He dodged a volley of sand bullets and thought, 'He's not really breaking a sweat. It'd be shitty of me to stick a prong seal on his arm to throw Gaara out of balance...but what else can I do?' He rolled and flashed away from a high tail thwack, thinking again for Kurama to hear, 'Maybe he will defeat me, and I've just got to digest that. Heh, but you know what, Fox? Gaara and the One-Tail smashing us tarnishes both of our reputations, doesn't it?'

Don't lump me in with you!

'We're a package deal, like it or not!' Naruto danced closer to his target, sending Shadow Clones ahead of him to create an opening for a Rasengan.

Never in a million years could Shukaku beat me. Never! Kurama insisted, He is beneath me in every way!

The pontificating was cut short when Naruto did connect a Rasengan, which Gaara had to hastily buffer with a Sand Shield...and one of Shukaku's glowing limbs simultaneously reached out to rob Naruto of his tool pouch. More specifically, where his Hiraishin anchor knife was clipped on his belt. In a desperate bid to retrieve it, Naruto charged a second time to make a grab for the tricky chakra appendage. A wave of sand pummeled him in response. Gaara then stowed the anchor knife in his
overcoat pocket, stuffed with a nullifying seal to dampen Naruto’s formula.

Tumbling, Naruto took stock of the moment that Sage Mode expired, and also determined he could not teleport to wherever Gaara had the Hiraishin anchor. Naruto sensed that the single Shadow Clone he’d left behind the lookout was still not done gathering Natural Energy. And, another chakra arm was lashing down from Gaara’s cloak, flattening Naruto before he could sidestep the heavy blow.

His senses dimmed. Naruto was somewhat cognizant of the fact that he was pinned and rather oxygen-deprived. He also, for some reason, heard an argument. The Nine-Tailed Fox was railing angrily at someone.

You’re a filthy, single-digit crook looking for vindication! Kurama spat. You infant! You spineless groveler! As if you gain anything by serving a human!

Hee hee! You're upset. Shukaku was pleased. Naruto realized that this was much like the instance Fū had established contact between Biju, and created a space for them to communicate.

I'm no servant. Gaara and I help each other because we want to, Shukaku added smugly, Although it is very satisfying to grind you into dust, you fat-bottomed egomaniac.

Ego—? A breathy, infuriated inhale followed, Who ARE YOU called fat-bottomed YOU CORPULENT GREMLIN?!

Gotta have a big ass to fit Nine Tails, Kurama. A gleeful retort, Does the truth hurt? I don't mind that I'm big-boned.

YOU—!

Naruto interrupted, 'Are you kidding me right now? I might be dying or at least I'm being smothered and you're linking up to call each other fat!'

Kurama's insecurities reached a fever pitch, Keep out of this! He KNOWS he's inferior to me! Says YOU, the fat Biju-baby trapped under my fist! Shukaku cackled gleefully, Heh! Gaara and I have this in the bag! You're both way more pathetic than I expected.

For a moment, Naruto had to pray because it felt like Gaara wasn't at all participating in this pointless quarrel, remaining in the surface world and waiting for something. As if this moment were intended to incense the Nine-Tails and mobilize him in some way. Well, it might've worked. Naruto also might've stopped breathing and hallucinated it all. But he did distinctly feel the typical, black crackling chakra of the Nine-Tailed Fox sizzling through him, full of rage and suppressing his will.

'No...can you just...take that back?' Naruto thought tiredly, 'We can't use that. It makes me stupid. Makes us both stupid and blind. Gaara is himself—you saw. Clear and calm and glowy.'

We should rip their ribs out so I can pick my teeth with them!

'Psh. Great idea.'

Take my chakra now! Crush that insolent—!

'I already told you I won't!' Naruto pushed back, 'This can't be the only way. You're not listening to me. Listen to me! Work with me! Don't push me away with that hate. That chakra doesn't help!'
It grew still as the Fox considered the idea, anger and buzzing energy retreating in increments, *Why should I…*

'You want to beat them? Me too! Let's actually work together this time.'

**Why should I trust you? Why should I reject how I feel-?**

'Because maybe it'll change something and it won't suck. You don't have to feel like you're in the blackest pit in the universe, I know you can feel other things! I try to. Try not to let the dark stuff swallow me.'

The idea seemed to have stuck. Kurama ventured, *If it's just this time…if you don't double-cross me—*

'Why would I, idiot?'

**You said you can't forgive.** The Fox reminded him. *And how can I forgive?*

'Maybe that is the fucking million Ryo question here! Truce?' Naruto brazenly extended his hand past the bars of Kurama's cell, 'Give me your best self in exchange for mine? If that's too hard, just think of something that doesn't make you feel like a rageful psycho. How about that?'

*Moonlight.* Kurama said in a small voice.

Perhaps it was a breakthrough, perhaps a fluke, Naruto wasn't sure. He felt an inexplicable reversal, as if the Nine-Tailed Fox had settled into a serene memory that took all of the bristle and bite out of him. And it felt…so familiar. The mutual feeling, whatever it was, soothed Naruto in the same instant. Chakra that Kurama exerted had a cleaner tint to it, almost overbearing in its Yang element, and Naruto made a point not to fuss at or reject what the Biju was suddenly willing to share.

That rising energy lent itself to Naruto popping up, fresh as a daisy, and tossing Gaara and his glowing loaner-arm over to the next dune. Distantly, he could hear Kankuro's voice from the lookout behind him (who had just arrived), bellyaching over Why the hell did they need to do this shit and scare the Sensory Corps with super-chakra levels?

There was a flood rushing through his veins, radiating in a chakra cloak that Naruto knew was still not as pristine as Gaara's. Prickles of anxiety, regret, and desolation still flowed from Kurama, but not at the deafening levels that Naruto had put up with before.

He closed the distance between himself and Gaara, lashing out in a whirlwind of Taijutsu, intent on snatching his stolen anchor knife back. After a flurry of punches, a chakra limb from Gaara's cloak caught Naruto's face in its palm and pushed him back childishly. Gaara clucked for Shukaku to *quit messing around.* Naruto still needed to get a feel for it after being out of practice with Kyuubi chakra.

'How do I make a chakra arm thingy?' Naruto demanded loudly in his head, *He keeps grabbing me and I've had enough!*

**You need more of my chakra, but I don't know if you can handle it yet—**

'—we're gonna find that out!'

Though Kurama did as he was asked and flushed alarming levels of chakra into Naruto's system, he shared his doubts, *Whatever you do, don't slide into the gaps…*
Naruto joyfully sent a dozen Biju-chakra-bloated Shadow Clones ahead, all with Rasengans charged, to mob Gaara as he heard the Fox muttering about "gaps."

'Gaps between what?' Naruto wondered.

Us, you imbecile. This Seal still divides us. Our feelings, thoughts...many things divide us.

The Kazekage was busy defending himself and walloping the clone cavalry. And just as soon as Kurama had roughly outlined the potential problem while freely loaning his Yang-hued chakra, Naruto felt an anvil of a headache escalate with his stretching chakra supply. Tinnitus zinged his eardrums, blood pressure rocketing, as everything that was still so incompatible between Tailed-Beast and jinchuriki began to physically manifest.

Pay attention! Kurama barked. Naruto ducked beneath one of Gaara's hooking blows while avoiding the cascade of Sand pillars. Though it was only a moment of synchronization, the Fox and Naruto retaliated in unison, thinking of the same counter and thereby bringing the miracle to life—a chakra arm extended off of his own cloak, hand balled into a fist, and clocked Gaara directly in the snoot. Some sand softened the blow as Gaara skidded backwards, but his chin was definitely going to bruise. Naruto was astounded that he'd actually done such a thing. He was also feeling quite bleh.

Wide-eyed and delighted, Gaara regarded Naruto's dizzy steps, bearing the pressure of an expanding, refined chakra cloak. He'd known that his friend could get the hang of it. Practice was still key, of course. Naruto did not have the luxury of Yugito being around to walk him through the steps. But Gaara had hoped that some encouragement from one Tailed-Beast to another might get the Fox's attention. It seemed as if the Kyuubi was too proud to let Naruto lose to what it considered a junior, weaker Tailed-Beast.

Behind them on the lookout, Sand shinobi were quite riveted by the rare spectacle of two jinchuriki exercising control over Tailed-Beast chakra. Apparently, one competitor was alert and poised while the other was a hobbling mess with a half-assed, amber chakra cloak that would blink red in frustration from time to time.

Kurama could not help but backseat fight, Keep your eyes open, keep light on your feet! Naruto, move it!

'Light on my feet?! I feel like I'm gonna puke!'

And to think I didn't even give you all of my chakra...it would've flattened you. We are only two-thirds of the way through my reserves.

'...are you shitting me?' The wild abundance of chakra wreaked havoc on his focus, and Naruto could not for the life of him crack through Gaara's steady defense. The rage state creeped on the peripheries of Naruto's consciousness, as it only seemed natural for Kurama's influence to stir his darkest feelings. 'Not gonna lie...I'm a little too woozy for this. But! I've got a plan.'

Are you planning to pass out and let me take over this duel?

'No! Restraint ain't your middle name, so forget that!'

Then whatever it is make it happen. I'm not going to lose to these bottom-tier potbellies, are you?! Kurama was a competitive fiend, but in many ways Naruto could relate.

Naruto grinned as he and Gaara met again in an exchange of hand-to-hand blows, sheering dunes apart, and then Naruto feinted left with a Rasengan spinning in his palm. 'Fox, watch this! I'm going
I seriously doubt that—

Gaara's priority was stopping the Rasengan, which was what Naruto had been hoping for. Behind the Kazekage, Naruto had snuck his final Shadow Clone (charged with nature chakra and in Sage Mode) up from behind to pickpocket back his pilfered anchor knife. Before Gaara could utter an obscenity and catch the blasted thing, it loosed the tool and flashed to Naruto's side in the same moment Naruto passed off the inflated Rasengan to a chakra arm from his cloak. In those precious seconds Kurama acknowledged he was having his mind blown a little as Naruto loosed the anchor knife back at Gaara, reappearing above him, and crushed the Kazekage beneath a Biju-chakra Rasengan. The ground quaked. Kankuro was howling swears from the observation deck.

Well. Kurama sniffed, trying to play off the brilliant move, His nuisance shield must have caught that...

The Sage Mode Shadow Clone had closed in to drive its own Rasengan down on the crumbling Sand Shield, hammering the dome down into the ground like an abused nail. Such a follow up was borderline gratuitous and Gaara had not even reacted to stop it. The Shadow Clone dissolved in a puff. Afterward, Naruto fretted nearby and hoped he had not seriously injured his friend, That might've been too much...

I'd say that was just enough. It was sublime.

Naruto restrained a laugh, 'Not what I'd call it, but okay. Wow. Did we just get our shit together?'

There was some hesitation before Kurama conceded, How weirdly satisfying.

From beneath the leveled mesa of sand came a tremble, and as Naruto and Kurama mentally congratulated each other on one small step forward, Naruto looked up in disbelief as Shukaku's true towering form rose up. The sight took him back to Konoha's invasion, when the same bulky beast had revealed itself during Gaara's impairment during the Chunin Exam. This time, however, the debut was intentional. Kurama railed in aggravation inside Naruto's stupefied head.

Before Naruto could come up with a game plan, the hulking Biju lunged at him. Further disconcerting were the confounding physics employed as Shukaku abruptly surrendered control and shrunk back to Gaara's small size, mass and velocity rearranged as Gaara shot down like a comet for a pencil-dive kick that struck Naruto frontside and pulverized him into the ground.

Black out.

Naruto! Are you awake? You're a fading mess— your soul was kicked out of you—! WHAT A DUPLICITOUS MOVE, I'LL CHEW HIS FACE OFF FOR THAT!

The clamoring kind of woke him up, but Naruto could hardly breathe.

That rotund trickster SLOB. I will RUIN HIM!

'Shhh. Please. Oh god, did he kill me?'

Not yet, so let's kill HIM!

"Erg..." Naruto came to and noticed that Gaara had divested him of all weapons this time, not just Naruto's anchor knife. He was dusting his hands.
"Are you ready to surrender?" The Kazekage asked.

"…pff. No. That…was the dirtiest move I have ever seen." Naruto sat up, chakra cloak still glowing as he gurgled in pain.

"It's an original."

"Careful. The Fox wants to chew your face off now. Or he wants me to chew your face off. I dunno, but don't pull that crap again." As Naruto staggered to his feet and dusted sand from his clothes, he wilted at the sight of his defiant friend expanding again to Shukaku's full size just to taunt him.

Naruto groaned as he made an effort to dodge, his head and body still ringing from the impact, but it wasn't long before Shukaku plucked him from the ground like a delicate flower. Pinched between the Tailed-Beast's fingertips, Naruto harnessed what strength he could to wriggle, trying to pry himself free. Eventually, he was imprisoned in a closed fist.

"So stubborn…" Shukaku chortled, "Surrender! We can wait. We've got all day."

"You're asking for it, tubby! You want to throw down with the Fox?"

"I know you won't let him out. With your type of Seal, you probably can't undo it on your own." The One-Tail estimated, "Which makes you a wee little ant lipping off at me."

Naruto thrashed, "Gaara said this was a one versus one kind of fight!"

"Clearly it isn't, since you both used assistance. Weenie whiner."

"What did you just say?!"

And the squabble carried on for a surprisingly long time. Gaara sort of lost count around the one and a half minute mark. On the horizon a small blot appeared, approaching Sunagakure.

Meanwhile, during the fisticuffs outside of the Sand Village's perimeter wall…

Temari's return trip had been pleasant after catching an ocean wind to propel her back over the desert mainland, aloft on her fan. She had told Gaara that she was on an escort detail requested out of the Land of Waves, which was mostly the truth.

She had just neglected to mention that it was Haku who had met her there, and asked to be ferried to Hidden Sand to see his dear friends. She had thought it a welcome surprise, 'So why spoil it? Those two are going to absolutely lose it when they see Haku!' She was smiling to herself, nestled beside her passenger who also appeared to be in high spirits.

"Are you sure Momochi isn't going to pitch a fit while you're gone?" Temari inquired for a third time.

"I'm…relatively sure." Haku sighed, "I agreed to go to the Keiseki House auction, and since I would be travelling northwest anyway…I decided to leave a few days early so I could see Gaara and Naruto." He granted, "Zabuza wasn't thrilled about my idea, but at least he didn't threaten me or anyone in Nanakusa when I said I was going."

"Because maybe he has to trust you'll be back to help out down there. That paranoid snaggletooth." Temari scrunched her nose.

"Right. It wouldn't make sense to go back on the plans we made with Jiraiya-sensei."
"It'll suck to see you leave again," She rested her head on his shoulder, "But I'm glad you took this chance."

Her displays of affection were small and covert these days, but Temari had been handsy since she located him waiting on the porch of her beachside cabin in the Tide Village.

Haku had to admit that he too was beatific and very welcoming to such attentions. He understood when Temari decreed that she was not going to give any indication to her brothers that they were dating again, at least not until Gaara adjusted to Haku being around. That requirement did not impede them, however, on the flight to Suna. Squished together, Haku kept an arm wrapped around her waist, his front pushed into Temari's side as he tried to guess the perfumed scents in her hair. She was humming, eyes gleefully shut, relishing soft kisses along her ear and neck.

The doting stopped abruptly and Haku shifted, trying to squint over the distant dunes as an object came into focus, "Do you see that?"

"See what?" The fan's conductor was alert again, scanning for landmark desert features.

"That." Haku emphasized a dark, shaded mass interrupting an otherwise flat and unremarkable landscape, "I've never been to the Wind Country before, so I don't—"

"No. No, that's not normal." Temari confirmed for him.

The nervy sensation racing up his arms and continuing up the back of his neck assured Haku that he wasn't overreacting. Apart from the distant eminence ahead, the air felt ionized with an excess of chakra. Soaring fast for another one hundred meters, the pair could finally see the definite shape of a Tailed-Beast. Or as Temari correctly identified in a low voice, "Shukaku."

Haku gave his head a shake, "This is…the most aggressive case of déjà vu I have ever experienced."

"You and me both."

Right. Because they had been here before. Not here, in the Wind Country, but Temari and Haku were simultaneously recalling the Invasion of Konoha in which the One-Tail had been unleashed, and together they had flown towards the danger in the hope of freeing Gaara. There was a marked difference this time. Haku blinked hard as he watched the giant tanuki suddenly shrink down in size, and the force of Gaara's drop from mid-air mashed Naruto into a dune with a reckless kick.

A frustrated rumble escaped Haku, "They're fighting! I can't believe it…"

"For the record, I swear they were on friendly terms when I left." Temari vouched for Gaara and Naruto.

"Don't they know better? What if they accidentally hurt nearby villagers, or damaged the city? The two of them!" The young man was bug-eyed as he further concluded, "Did it cross their minds that two tussling jinchuriki could broadcast vulnerability to the Akatsuki? Or informants? Why do I always—?" Haku flexed his fingers, wishing he could slap sense into his friends, "Why do I always have to do this? Their safekeeping shouldn't be my burden alone."

Temari patted his arm, "It's not. Let's remind them not to take for granted all of the people looking out for them, hm?" She too crackled her knuckles, "So they don't pull this shit again."

"What made them—?"

"Probably to spar or test their strength." Temari was reading his mind, filling in the blanks.
"They aren't out of control, are they? Gaara said in his letters that he's reached a sort of equanimity with his Tailed-Beast." Haku wondered.

"Eh...it doesn't look as destructive as it could be." Temari pursed her mouth, trying to gauge why the One-Tail was full size again and trying to pluck Naruto from the ground like a clover, "There's no Nine-Tailed Fox running around, which is a plus. How do you want to break it up?"

"Not the way I had to last time..." Haku thought back to using a tremendous Water Jutsu to get the One-Tail's attention, long ago, "Would you mind flying me overhead? If Gaara is still in control, then he'll hear me. I'll talk him down."

"Are you sure about that?" She arched a brow.

"No. I'd appreciate if you stayed close in case—" He gestured a squashing motion with both of his hands.

"And if that fails and you do get pancaked," Temari hypothesized, "I'll just get a team from the Sealing Corps to neutralize them, then straight-jacket them in a Black Ops padded room. They play bad ASMR recordings in there that Old Lady Chiyo specifically made to punish people."

"That is..." Haku mumbled, "A unique torment."

"Be careful." Temari smiled at him, arcing her fan over the rounded head of the Ichibi.

Haku dropped down and slowed his descent with a surge of his hand fan, cushioning the landing on the sandy, heavy brow of the beast with wind. He hopped down again to the Ichibi's blunt muzzle to stand on its nose. When he waved his tessen in front of the Tailed-Beast's eyes, they rolled to the corners in a cross-eyed stare to get a look at Haku.

"Enough! Shukaku, let go of Naruto!" He snapped the fan shut and pointed it like a regent, "Of all the foolishness to get up to in my absence, Gaara—I'm worn out and I just got here!" Haku opted for yelling directly at his friend, "Cease the antics and do as you're supposed to, as Kazekage!"

The response was immediate, and a sizzle of Bijū chakra boiled off of Shukaku as he retreated, pulling in and condensing himself back into Gaara's body. With that matter settled, Haku plummeted and was able to catch Naruto by the wrist, controlling their fall with wind gusts from his fan. Naruto looked particularly disheveled and dazed, the soft glow of a chakra cloak fading away from his body when they touched down to earth.

"Naruto, are you alright?" He patted his friend's cheek, and then let Naruto fold backwards from a sitting position to be completely supine as he gurgled, eyes fluttering shut, desperate for rest. Haku thought to himself, 'How did he get to this state...?'

Then, he glanced over his shoulder to see Gaara standing a few meters away, gaping at Haku and somehow equally mournful over Naruto's debility. He was stonewalled with disbelief. Shocked and a little heartsick, swamped with dozens of questions. Haku had the courtesy to snap the Kazekage out of that funk when he crossed the way to brace Gaara with two hands on his shoulders.

Gaara blinked like a bewildered housecat, "You're here."

"I am. Take a breath. And then tell me—" Haku's tone was gentle but chiding, "What in Heaven and Earth were you thinking? Fighting Naruto like that? Look at him!" He gestured his head back toward their collapsed friend, "He's a mess. You have more sense than this!"

"We agreed...to. It might've..." Doleful and ashamed, Gaara folded his arms behind Haku's back to
cement a true hug, and to lower his guard for the first time in ages, "Escalated too much. He didn't want to surrender or let me go easy…"

Haku gave him a squeeze, "That sounds like him. Is Jiraiya-sensei aware?"

"He didn't object when we told him."

"Ah. Then a word with Sensei is also in order. I had business on the mainland and I wanted to see you." Haku's expression grew considerably warm, eyes bright, "I hope my interference didn't—"

"Was more welcome than you can imagine." Gaara visibly relaxed.

"Good! I have today and tomorrow to catch up with you." Haku took a step back, "But first…" He didn't hear the soft patter of swift footfalls when he said, "I want to ensure Naruto isn't badly injured…"

"HAKU!" Naruto had caught him in a running bear hug from behind after waking (mostly fine) and since Haku had not steadied himself for it, the two went face-first into a sand drift beside Gaara.

After the running tackle Gaara blinked slowly again, hoping that this was reality. He was overwrought with emotions; surprise, joy— visceral nostalgia over missing his friend who was several centimeters taller than he, mature and lean in the same ways he and Naruto had grown up.

It was happening. If Temari landing nearby and looking very smug was not confirmation enough, Sand shinobi who had been gathered on the observation deck near the Buddha statue were trotting over to assess the situation. Among them, Kankuro was voicing some complaints.

"Haku—whoa! Sorry! Didn't mean to wail on ya!" Naruto contritely helped his friend up, giddily switching between dusting sand from his friend and hugging him. He pushed Haku in and out by arm's length a few times to reconcile how different he looked.

Gone were the days of soft edges and youth, as Haku's features were now tempered with something sharp and cogent. Looking at him felt like laying eyes on winter's first imposing storm cloud— quiet, drifting, and never to be underestimated.

In spite of that, Haku was still smiling an eyebrow-waggling smile, positively elated. Naruto's excitement was as infectious as it had always been. All of the old feelings, the sensations from when they had last parted, took their places again in the hearts of the young men.

"The both of you should know better than to brawl with Tailed-Beast chakra out in the open like that." Haku reiterated in his mother-hen tone of days past.

"Don't call it a brawl," Naruto wanted the term to be more flexible, "It was an exercise. You know—Gaara was trying to teach me how to handle Biju chakra!"

"I really wasn't." Gaara panned the assertion.

Naruto silently mouthed what the fuck? to Gaara as if Haku could not read lips, and Naruto tried to minimize the amount of trouble they were in again, "Well, you can't tell me I didn't learn anything from that mollywhop shit you do with a big Ichibi arm— that was pretty lame—!"

"It can't be called lame since you told me not to hold back—"

Haku raised a hand to halt the soon to be runaway train of bickering, "Fine. No more. If you're quite done here, I'd like some shade and something to drink. It was a hot crossing."
Puppy-like, Naruto brightened again, "How long are you here for?"

"Two days is all that I can spare. Then I have work to do in the Land of Mountains." Haku explained as they moved toward Temari and Kankuro, who were speaking amongst themselves nearby.

"Why didn't Temari tell me she was going to bring you?" Gaara was still stumped.

"She didn't?" Haku looked from the Kazekage to his girlfriend.

Temari shrugged a single shoulder, "Doesn't look like you hated the surprise."

"If you lie about an assignment, how am I supposed to know how to find you if something goes wrong?" Gaara contested as they walked. Kankuro clandestinely rolled his eyes, which Naruto also felt so profoundly in his soul, as Gaara once again set out on his overprotective (little) brother campaign.

"I didn't lie, Gaara. And I told you where I was going." Temari contested.

"And neglected to mention who your client was."

"You didn't question that omission this morning. I could have said Whoever-the-fuck's face from the Tide Village and you would've bought it." And really, Temari was quite right about that.

Then came the part where Gaara got very annoyed and forgot how happy he was that Haku was there, and he fumed in silence in his sister's general direction. Her demands for autonomy and independence were not out of line, but Gaara couldn't help but consider Temari slightly more danger-prone than others after Momochi Zabuza had nearly desanguinated her.

"I for one voted for full transparency. I wanted you to know I was on the way." Haku stood between the two grumbling siblings, "As it worked out, Temari is fine. It wasn't that treacherous of a route."

Kankuro had motioned for the ninja who had occupied the observation deck to leave and resume their regularly scheduled duties. He also threw in his two cents, "Gaara, you can't be mad at Temari for trying to do something nice for you. If her neglecting a mission detail is what you consider stupid, then you stomping around in Shukaku's form beyond the village perimeter was way stupider."

Gaara inhaled to retort, but Naruto interrupted with, "Gotta call it like it is!"

A mutter from Gaara teetered on the edge of defeat, "Naruto. You saw what it was like after Temari was attacked."

"I did, but she made it here fine today. And she has her—" Naruto regarded Haku and Temari from the corner of his eye, and remembered he ought not to out them as a couple, "Uh. Eh-hem. Haku was with her which, you know, benefits pretty much anyone who could possibly ever be in danger in the, uh, you know— platonic way."

The facial expressions of those listening contorted thusly:

Haku: *Oh. And there you go talking yourself into a corner again, Naruto.*

Temari: *Don't be so goddamn obvious. Have you ever been nonchalant in your life?!

Kankuro's small smile of realization: *Shit, they're dating aren't they?

Gaara: Platonic. Absolutely platonic.*
"Anyway, you'll be fully aware of the next time you see me." Haku salvaged the conversation.

"Do you plan on making time for us in the future during your continued assignment in the Water Country?" Gaara's interest took a turn in the preferable direction.

"I would like to, but I deal in no absolutes. When I have a lead, we have to pursue it as quickly as possible and get information to Jiraiya-sensei. When I have no leads…it feels like we're twiddling our thumbs. So it isn't easy to judge how best to manage my time, especially when…” Haku wilted, "I would much rather see the both of you."

"Hmm." Said Kankuro archly towards the rear of the group, supposing what Haku had meant but not said was "the three of you." No one really paid attention to that input.

"Well if you're waiting on the whatever-it-was auction to start, it was smart for you to come here!" Naruto folded his arms behind his head and then promptly dropped his arms, realizing how sore they were, "Ow. Erg, ow…"

"You usually heal well enough on your own..." Haku recalled as he pressed a healing hand to the back of Naruto's head as they walked, "Though, I don't know the specifics of that ability."

"I'm mostly fine." Naruto guessed, "Overdid it a little. Hey, thanks! You've been practicing healing jutsu a lot?"

"As often as I can."

"You know Hinata-chan's gotten pretty good at it too, for an informal dabbler. Not the way Sakura-chan can, but it's still handy!"

"It is! Oh! How have they been?" The nostalgia was making Haku bubble over.

As Gaara tuned in his ears on the conversation beside him, his frustrations began to ebb. A few steps ahead of him, Kankuro and Temari conversed purely through eye gestures at one another.

Temari's flicking eyes and crinkling nose indicated: Gaara's just wound up. He'll feel better soon with his best friends here.

A pressing look from her middle-younger brother, You're not actually dating one of Gaara's friends right? Like, didn't you swear off of that?

A narrowed, impatient stare, There is no rule that says I can't.

O-kay, I don't know Haku well enough to give an opinion on this, so… Kankuro shrugged silently.

After a very talkative march through the gates of Suna (mostly Haku and Naruto catching up), at the gate's interior there appeared to be a response team of Black-Ops ninja speaking with Baki and Jiraiya. When Gaara's gaggle drew near enough, the masked Commander of Suna's Black-Ops division respectfully stepped up to the Kazekage, "Sir, may I have a word?"

Gaara gave a harried look to his friends before parting from the group to speak quietly with the Commander. Meanwhile, Jiraiya moseyed over with a closed-mouth, furling smile on his face, "Well, well…” He gently nudge Haku and Naruto's shins with his foot, marking how they stood side-by-side, "Long overdue, isn't it?"

"You could say that again." Naruto's eyes scrunched shut in a Foxy grin he just had to let out.
"It's good to see you again, Sensei." Haku was also jubilant and accepted a fond pat on the head from Jiraiya.

"How very nice of you to stop by, Haku. I know you had that auction coming up, so I suspected you'd make the most of a trip to the mainland. Hopefully Zabuza is not running amok while you're gone." Jiraiya wagered, "Most likely not, since he knows what hell I'd rain down on him."

"Ah, right." Haku added, "Though he won't…because I have in my possession a crucial element to his plans. Our truce is a shaky one, but I don't think he'd risk losing the Master Scroll."

Jiraiya shook his head and hand simultaneously, recalibrating, "Wha-what? You? How'd you get your hands on it? Honestly I was skeptical of that goal…"

"What's a Master Scroll?" Naruto wondered.

"I can explain later." Haku assured him, "It's a bit crowded here…" His eyes skirted back to Gaara, who had finished a hushed discussion with the Commander. The Kazekage returned to his jumbled family/friend group.

"I have a few other matters to attend to. I'd prefer it if you both stayed at my home until then—Kankuro will escort you." Gaara looked from Haku and Naruto to Jiraiya, "Go with them?"

"Yeah, yeah. Don't worry so much." Jiraiya waved a nonchalant hand, "I have some updates to write for Tsunade today, so I'll stick around."

"Good." Gaara rested a hand on the side of Naruto's head, where the gash had once been, "I'm sorry. Maybe I shouldn't have pushed you the way I did."

A shrug, "It was kind of awesome."

Gaara wrestled a smile, "It was. I won't be able to do much to show you how to interact with your Tailed-Beast, at least not until you've come to understand each other more."

"Well, it was sloppy, but we sort of figured something out…so I won't be as close-minded as I was. I'll keep working on it…I know I have to." Naruto confirmed, "And I think the Fox knows it too."

"He does." Something in Gaara's face suggested he might have peeked into the subconscious conversation between Shukaku and Kurama after all.

"Did you get in trouble for that stunt? The Commander doesn't usually step into broad daylight to speak to you. I'm guessing he wasn't thrilled about mountains of chakra and liability wrestling outside of the village?" Temari ventured.

"He was…appraising me on best practices. I don't disagree with him." On that note Gaara added, "Temari, I want you to join me in a debriefing with Chiyo-sama. She has some thoughts on our investigation we need to discuss, and I guess I should mention the video to her too…"

"A video?"

The only person who seemed to light up at the thought of the recording was Naruto, but Gaara delayed the explanation. He assured his friends that he would be home as soon as he concluded his responsibilities, and Temari made no fuss as she dutifully accompanied the Kazekage for a meeting with the village's elderly puppet master. Kankuro ushered the remainder of the group along, "I'm thinking I need to pick up a few extra things for dinner. Never counted on the extra company…"
"Sorry for the short notice." Haku apologized, "My visit wasn't supposed to be short notice."

"Temari has her own definition of what notice is, and at what intervals it's acceptable."

"Accurate." Haku could certify that.

There was a small market on the way, so the gaggle stopped there briefly for Kankuro's additional dinnertime ingredients, and they then proceeded to the Kazekage's mansion. Once through the door's threshold, Jiraiya automatically reached for his pipe pouch, but Kankuro spun a plastic bag in his face to halt him, "Nuh-uh! Not in here, Toad Sage. Gaara's office is one thing, but our house is smoke free. End of discussion."

"Not even if I sit by a window?" Jiraiya playfully pushed his luck.

"Put it to you this way: if you accidentally burn our house down, or give us lung cancer, can all of your book royalties pay for that?" Kankuro inquired.

Naruto leaned into Haku and whispered, "He's savage. I'm really starting to love him." Haku nodded discreetly.

Jiraiya put his pipe away and announced, "Dibs on the couch."

"You two." Kankuro gestured to Haku and Naruto before they settled in to relax, "I'll bet you want to catch up, but no freeloading is allowed. Help me cook this. It's gonna be a big meal."

There was no dissent with the request because, as it turned out, Haku was already an avid cook dating back to his single-digit years and Naruto was a sous-chef in the making. They agreed cheerily and left Jiraiya in the sitting room to half-nap, half-compose his correspondence to the Hokage.

Sleeves rolled up, hands were washed, and Kankuro commenced his directions. Meanwhile, Naruto asked of Haku, "So what's it like being totally independent of a village? Is it nice to come back to something familiar?"

"Of course it is. For one thing, not every person and lonely street corner is suspect. I can't let my guard down when ambushes are so routine. Even Nanakusa isn't very safe." Haku halved mushrooms with a knife, hardly thinking about the task, "And I've wanted to take a break for so long...to not have to think about the people who've come to depend on me there, or being on the front line of threats."

"Signing up to be a spy doesn't give you much opportunity to take a break from that, no?" Kankuro supposed while mixing premade dashi with a bowl of other liquids.

Haku looked sidelong to Naruto, who was concentrating on slicing salmon into perfect filets, and then said, "I had a good reason to take on the role."

Kankuro was smiling to himself, "I know you did."

"But when it's all over, and we've got a solid counterattack effort in place for the Akatsuki, what do you want to do instead?" Naruto wondered, "You said you wanted to settle down, but you still need to make money. Gaara said he's already thinking about retiring and moving back to Leaf someday."

"Gaara said that?" Kankuro warbled, "He'd go back to Leaf?"

"He's thinking about it. But really, he's never going to completely move his business out of Sand is he? He'd be like a commuter. Hm." Naruto thought out loud, "Gaara should invest in one of those
"Pff. He has other things to think about. Retirement! He's too young and strong to talk retirement!"
Kankuro protested as he worked.

"Retirement sounds nice." Haku agreed sunnily.

"We've still got so much work to do." Naruto pointed out.

"We do, but there's no harm in planning ahead. I suppose it'd be easy for me to join the Medical Corps, or join an Advisory Council to lend expertise on Water Country affairs."

"You can make a living from either of those!" Naruto chirped. He'd moved on to other vegetables in need of chopping.

"I would probably…stay in Suna, though." Haku imagined in a soft voice.

Kankuro stilled at the stove, and Naruto's chopping knife froze. He stared in disbelief, "Would you really?"

Haku nodded, "To be with Temari."

Kankuro sighed heavily and dropped his shoulders; though not disapproving of the romance, he did not foresee the future of his sister's relationship working out so splendidly.

"That sucks. I mean, for me. Because I'd want to see you. And I haven't been able to in so long."

"That sort of relocation would have to be sanctioned by the Hokage, and there's no guarantee Tsunade-sama would allow it. In her eyes, I've been working in Suna all of this time. I'm sure it would be a test of her patience. The only other way I could think of is…" Haku trailed off, because if he said such hopeful things aloud he was sure to doom them.

Naruto decided, "I am going to actively not stress about it. And I'll assume you'll be hanging around with me in Leaf as I hustle in the Sealing Corps and get my Tailed-Beast-stuff figured out."

"That sounds perfectly reasonable. And as you said, I also hope there is investment in fast-transport between Leaf and Sand." Haku concurred with Naruto's earlier imaginings.

"You're both overlooking the major possibility of there being no peace or stability in the coming years." Kankuro brought them back to earth, "Assume that's what will happen. There won't be any rest, or travel, or corps work, or settling down. You'll be conscripted to fight all of the time, if it's war."

"A war." Naruto repeated hollowly.

"You weren't there in the Tide Village…to see what I saw." Kankuro turned his back on a simmering sauce to look at them, "Our best laid plans are going to be waylaid by this— by the conflict with the Akatsuki."

"We can stop them." Haku was insistent.

Kankuro shook his head, "On one front, maybe on two fronts, we can stall them…but they have eyes and ears everywhere. They're watching every village and needling weaknesses. When the time
is right, they strike, and it'll be hard to anticipate their movements even though there's an active spy
etwork trying to keep on top of them. Even Obito got his ass beat by Pein, and he's one of the
greatest ninja I've ever met."

"Jiraiya-sensei mentioned that spy." Haku acknowledged, "He said Obito was a sensitive asset."

Kankuro carried on with the topic, "That's because he's—"

"Wait, wait, wait— I didn't actually fill Haku in on this yet!" Naruto interrupted, "I meant to, but uh,
I don't know if Ero-sensei explained—"

Haku arched an eyebrow, "Explained what?"

"That Obito is an Uchiha, from the Hidden Leaf Village." Kankuro loosed the truth like a wrecking
ball, "And he's been a spy for Jiraiya for a hell of a long time."

Slowly, Haku pushed away a cutting board with various piles of vegetables, staring unseeing at the
wall of the kitchen as he thought back to childhood— witnessing the aftermath of the Uchiha
Massacre. It had left a deep and frightful impression on him as a newly settled refugee in Hidden
Leaf; knowing that a respected and powerful clan could be gone in a single night. And now there
was talk of another older, independent Uchiha whose primary concern was thwarting the Akatsuki?
It was going to take a moment to digest the idea. It was both heartening and terrifying.

"Way to go..." Naruto muttered to Kankuro, handing off fish fillets to be baked.

"What? He might as well know what you, Gaara, Temari, and the Old Perv and I know. None of us
are going to mishandle such delicate information." Kankuro reasoned.

"...if there is such a person...who's so reliable and respected..." Haku was thoughtful on the matter,
"He's taking the Akatsuki very seriously as a Leaf ninja, and so should we. With that said, I can't
help but wonder how he feels about what happened to the Uchiha clan. Something like that would
be incredibly distressing, if I were in his position..."

"He...doesn't know about it." Naruto muttered, drawing two sets of anxious eyes.

Kankuro shook his head, frazzled, "He doesn't? I was talking to Obito in Tide, and he said that his clan
doesn't know he's alive. So which is it? One or the other?"

"Both." Naruto supposed, "Ero-sensei told me he's been keeping it a secret— what happened to the
Uchiha clan. But, it sounded like Obito ended up stuck outside of Konoha a long time ago...so he just...missed it all."

"There is tremendous risk in employing someone who isn't privy to such awful information. His
sentiments about Hidden Leaf might change, or his prioritization of the Akatsuki may fall by the
wayside if he chooses to hunt for the perpetrator of his clan's demise: Uchiha Itachi. Look to Sasuke
for an example." Haku outlined the frailty of the arrangement, "If Jiraiya-sensei lied about something
like that for so long—"

Naruto tried to interrupt in a soft hiss, "—he wasn't lying, he—!"

"A relationship with such an important spy can dissolve instantly. He'd be within his rights to sever
all ties, if he were angry enough. Think about it." Haku's reasoning earned a few troubled nods,
"What foolishness. Sensei was right about Obito being a sensitive asset, but he could have
compromised the trust this man has put in us and the Leaf Village. It could all fall apart."
"Okay. I get why you're saying that, but I've met him. Naruto countered, "And he's not a fucking asshat like Sasuke was. Obito is a real grown-up who can think things through, even when times are hard. My Dad was his Sensei, so I've got to endorse what values he holds as a shinobi. Plus, he's a good dad—I've met his kid, a cute kid! Even if he's upset and learns about what happened to his clan, would he really toss everything else aside and forget about a child who's depending on him? No way."

"Hmm." Kankuro considered it, "Probably not."

"Then there's that." Haku conceded, pointing his hand in Naruto's direction, "His priorities may realign, but perhaps not in a drastic or damaging way. All the same, honesty is key. Things will have to change."

"Tell your Sensei that." Kankuro advised with a smirk.

Naruto and Haku sighed simultaneously. Jiraiya just couldn't make things simple.

"Good. At least that may not work out as catastrophically as it could, if our estimations are accurate," Kankuro had the fish baking and was dropping diced vegetables to simmer in an aromatic broth, "But I can't forget what Obito said, about what the Akatsuki may be trying to do."

"Take Bijuu away from the great villages, and any other village that has one." Naruto stated it as if it were so straightforward.

"But why?" Kankuro pressed him, "Have you thought that much about it?"

"They could organize their own state, with that much power." Haku dabbled in the hypothetical.

"Why would they bother?" Kankuro scoffed, "None of our villages would be a match, by then. It's more likely they'd impose a direct rule over every village and reorganize things. That's an optimistic scenario..." He closed the lid on a pot, "But I think what Obito said is closer to the mark: they might have someone in mind...someone they want to make into a jinchuriki for all of the Tailed-Beasts."

Naruto leapt from his seat, "That's just—! THAT— It's fucking insane! One is hard enough to handle! Who'd wanna subject themselves to that pressure?"

Kankuro stewed on the same thought as he gathered table settings. While Naruto muttered about the absurdity of such a theory, Haku spoke quietly again.

"Let's be rational. Why would Obito draw such a conclusion? He's the spy who works most closely with the Akatsuki, isn't that right? Then his intuition is valuable. By that measure, we need to consider how such a goal is achievable. The level of Sealing technique required for such a thing...is unimaginable. I couldn't contemplate a combined effort of all experts in every village sealing such a volume of Bijuu chakra into one person. If the Akatsuki indeed intends to do that, then we have to assume they have the physical capability to do so. What does this mean?" He inferred in a grave tone, "That we are dealing with an enemy who wields a power that is inestimable; not typical to most shinobi alive."

"No fucking shit." Naruto agreed breathlessly.

"Furthermore, a power like this would not have gone unnoticed in any of the Great Villages. We can guess that such a person has deliberately concealed his or her identity, and stayed on the fringes of shinobi nations. This individual will have enough knowledge to select and attack targets, to execute plans...but this individual does not reveal much about him or herself to avoid any village detecting a rogue threat. Of course, such a person needs to delegate certain efforts to others, hence the creation
of the Akatsuki." Haku rambled in his assertions, "Akatsuki members willingly support this mystery organizer. Is it a leader's charisma, or coercion? Is it camaraderie? Fear? Why would subordinates agree with such a goal? Do they hold any stake in the future they have planned?"

"This is seriously…some fucked up conjecture for kitchen-talk." Kankuro admitted, "I mean, yeah, it makes sense for the one responsible for that end-game to be an unknown. But how can that be? How is it possible for someone to escape notice like that? I just don't get it! How can you be that powerful, but no one is aware?"

"Kinda stands to reason…” Naruto disagreed, "That someone's gotta be aware. Like, is it that Pein guy everyone talks about?"

"I really don't know. He was strong and frightening, but he wasn't a god." Kankuro recalled, "We knew how to beat him. We figured it out. Hell—Obito hit him in the head with a shovel, okay? And it worked."

Naruto laughed nervously at the visual.

"Maybe it is. Maybe it isn't…” Haku rubbed his chin, frowning.

Naruto helped set his end of the table before taking a seat, leaning on his elbows to stare at Haku, "You've seen some shit, haven't you?"

"I have. I was near the Mist Village recently, and I am aware that the Akatsuki controls it by way of a shadow regime. Authority has been completely corrupted there and holds the village hostage."
Haku explained, "And Honesuki-sama…told me something…”

The name rang a vague bell for Kankuro, who had a running list of famous foreign ninja in the back of his mind, "Who's that again—?"

"She said that on a few occasions an individual named Tasū appeared to suppress uprisings and give orders to the regime. He keeps his identity a secret and prefers to use an alias. To her knowledge, he had no affiliation with Mist or an enemy village. Though his involvement with the Akatsuki was unquestionable. So, is this a subordinate who, unlike other Akatsuki members, is not a defector or bingo-book criminal? Could it be the unknown?"

"We could be completely off-base about all of this." Kankuro reminded him, "Might as well set up a cork board, tacks, and some string to link all of our evidence before we make further assumptions."

"Even if we're wrong about the goal, it's still sketchy that a complete rando is suppressing a whole village." Naruto acknowledged, "The other Akatsuki members don't really hide who they are, right? This matters. Did you tell Ero-sensei about that? About the "many" guy?"

"I meant to." Haku recalled squirrelishly, scratching his cheek.

"It's makin' me nervous." Naruto mumbled.

"It should. The prospect is daunting, and like I said, if we've got our hands full with an enemy like that—" Kankuro reiterated, "We are going to war. I'm not talking just the handful of concerned folks who repudiate the Akatsuki. I'm talking every village. A huge force needs to intervene in one burst. Or we're dead."

"How would we…ever get village leaders to believe any of this?" Haku's voice was faint.

"Tch. One of Pein's incarnations would make a believer out of any of them." Kankuro grumbled.
"Well…Gaara said it's going to be hard to convince other Kages. They believe what they want to believe, and they're reluctant to put their asses on the front line." Naruto recalled.

"Sounds about right." Kankuro was checking on his simmering vegetables.

"But then we got that video earlier today." Naruto perked up as he recalled the delivery.

"Yeah, Gaara mentioned that…" The puppet master glanced over his shoulder, hoping for an explanation.

Haku also gave Naruto his undivided attention, and the blonde man took a deep breath before stating, "If the leaders of the great villages don't wanna wrap their heads around this…we have options."

"Oh no." Haku smiled a small, concerned smile, waiting for the other shoe to drop.

"So…Yugito and B in the Cloud Village, the shinobi who have the Two and Eight-Tails…sent Gaara a weird video tape that we watched today…"

Kankuro's disbelief sputtered in the background, "—! How was that not processed by the Intel Corps? What the—"

"AND," Naruto went on, "They said we need to be prepared. In case our villages are unwilling to respond, at least jinchuriki should be willing to work together! If there's a threat that wants to combine all Tailed-Beast chakra, why not combine ourselves as a group? See?"

"How perfectly reckless." Haku said, but he was nodding and totally getting it.

"Oh come on! You saw what Gaara could do, since he's got his Tailed-Beast relationship figured out, and those older jinchuriki— Yugito and B, have got it down! And Fū does too! And I'm working on it." Naruto championed the idea, "What I'm saying is that our best defense might be a planned and organized offense."

"You are using two words I respond very strongly to." Haku cupped his chin, zeroing-in on the words planned and organized.

"Pfft. Okay." Kankuro moved the hotpot to a small butane burner on the table to maintain the heat, "If you all team up without the permission of village leaders, the Akatsuki won't be your biggest problem. You'll all be court-martialed for treason and insubordination. That could mean prison time and being stripped of your shinobi credentials. Or worse."

"However," Haku chimed in, "A backup plan could save countless lives. Naturally, no one wants to disobey village leadership, least of all jinchuriki looking out for their homes. If Kage or other decision-making bodies stymie efforts to respond to the Akatsuki, and other villages are attacked…are you saying there's no merit to a force of jinchuriki reaching an accord to act in the best interest of their villages?"

"In lieu of a Kage's mandate? That's still treason." Kankuro had since moved on to scooping rice into bowls.

"Look, it's not our number one option." Naruto conceded, "But I've got to believe that working together is a smart fallback, since, you know, those Akatsuki shitheads have no problem combining forces."

Kankuro was amused, "Heh, well, let's see what the Toad Sage has to say. I don't think he'd support
a coalition of jinchuriki jeopardizing themselves, or possibly subverting orders from their village leadership in order to form a crackpot team."

In an attempt to dismiss the poo-pooing of the *jinchuriki team idea*, Naruto gestured to the waiting meal on the table, "Are we going to eat, or what? This is some heavy stuff to discuss, so I say we change the subject before we sit down for a meal. Gaara and Temari are going to be here soon, right?"

Before Kankuro could share his estimate aloud, Haku, nearest to the dining room's doorway, heard a scuffle of returning siblings at the front door of the house echoing, "I think that's them now…"

"As I thought. Okay, for now, case closed." Naruto commanded.

"Are you trying to sound like my Dad? Because you're getting pretty close to his level of frantic evasion. If memory serves from my childhood…" Kankuro had entered a perpetual state of snarkiness that was eerily reminiscent of Gaara's behavior. Naruto noted the phenomenon.

The flow of traffic from the innards of the house scooped up Jiraiya (who had mostly been dozing) and transported the Sage, along with Gaara and Temari, into the dining area where the others were waiting. Most of Gaara's muted complaints about the day's work and criticisms fell on deaf ears as the family settled at the table.

"Where's Matsuri?" Kankuro asked as he took a headcount.

"When I saw her after the briefing, she told me was going out with a few friends tonight for dinner and the cinema. And I told her to make them pay for her, since kids in this village have been such asses toward her until now." Temari pulled up a chair, "She'll be home later."

Haku then mentioned as Jiraiya sat beside him, that he had a few new details to share based on reconnaissance in the Land of Water. He didn't want to outright drop the *bombshell* that he may have a rough idea of who was coordinating the Akatsuki's efforts, and what the group's overarching goal could be.

Kankuro returned with two extra seats for himself and Naruto, who squished themselves at the end of the crowded table. It turned out to be a charming ritual, for none of them were used to dining with so many companions and it was, as Naruto put it, *pretty fun*. When Naruto and Gaara once again brought up the proposition made by the two jinchuriki of the Cloud Village, Jiraiya listened as he spooned sukiyaki broth and vegetables into his bowl.

"I've already drafted a request for the Raikage, and by tomorrow I expect to have something written tomorrow for the Tsuchikage and the leader of Hidden Waterfall, Shibuki." Gaara explained, "I hope they'll see the value in a cooperative effort, even if they want something temporary as opposed to formal alliances. Jinchuriki that are prepared and unified with their villages backing them are going to greatly impede the Akatsuki's strategies."

"Hm." Jiraiya took a noisy sip of broth, "Hidden Waterfall, eh? That's the Seven-Tails."

"Yes, she resides there." Gaara confirmed.

"They'll be quite open to suggestions, I'm sure. Waterfall can use the extra protection. As for Iwagakure...they've already lost one jinchuriki, so I don't know what Ōnoki-sama plans to do to protect the Five-Tails. And the Raikage..." Jiraiya sighed heavily, "Is famously stubborn."

"I know." Gaara concurred flatly, "At least he responds to me. Sometimes he doesn't even grace Tsunade-sama with replies when she communicates with him."
Naruto made an agitated sound at the thought of anyone disrespecting Tsunade while Temari chimed in, "Why would the Raikage keep alienating the Hokage at a time like this? If she's extending an olive branch despite all those past grudges, is he just too dumb to accept it?"

"I don't think that he's dumb, but I do think that A-sama would prefer Kumo having a position to leverage its power against Konoha again. For example: he might like helping Leaf better if Naruto were kidnapped by the Akatsuki, say, to send Cloud's forces to aid in a rescue or counter the Akatsuki. That nets Cloud a weakened rival village and more bargaining power for future agreements, and also the combined effort is intended to beat back a worrisome enemy of the Cloud Village: the Akatsuki. So yes, he's probably waiting for a crisis. What can he gain by proactively striking deals?" Jiraiya put it into perspective.

"Jerk." Naruto grumbled.

Gaara added while chewing sauced beef, "I get the impression that is exactly what he's waiting for. But it shouldn't be about what he can gain. The Raikage ought to think of what might be lost."

"What about the Tsuchikage, then?" Kankuro wondered.

"Ehh…he's not much better." Jiraiya shared his time-tested opinion.

"Quite a hostile environment for Kage who want to get anything done." Temari griped.

"Okay…so if Leaf and Sand are friendly, and Cloud and Rock are friendly…and Sand is neutral to the other two but Leaf is kinda…" Naruto made a sour face, "Then another representative can help talk things out. Like the Mist Village—"

"The Mizukage is dead as a puppet struts around in his place." Haku reminded him.

"Yeah, but you and your rebel posse are working on prying the Akatsuki out of there, and then someone decent can take over, right?" Naruto restated the general idea, "Who are the contenders and do you think they can negotiate with other village leaders?"

"Well…" Haku looked up at the ceiling briefly to think about it, "To my knowledge, the most likely contenders for the position of Mizukage after a coup in Hidden Mist…are Terumi Mei and Momochi Zabuza."

Temari laughed viciously after hearing that.

Haku cleared his throat to quiet her and went on, "I have never met Mei and only know so much about her, but she is favorable. She possesses two Kekkei Genkai, is said to be ethically upright, a sort of folk-heroine throughout the land. As for how much clout she has with inter-village dignitaries…it can't be very much. But if she has a good personality, she can make an impression with the other Kage." He sipped his tea and compared, "If Zabuza were preferred by councils in Mist, and I don't know if that will happen…his ethics are slowly recovering. He will be more concerned about the internal welfare of Hidden Mist than external threats, although he has much knowledge about the Akatsuki and its connections. He might be a better negotiator at a Kage Summit…but he would be deeply disliked by citizens and shinobi who continue to associate him with the Demon of the Hidden Mist persona."

"Either way," Jiraiya interrupted, "There isn't much time. If Mist isn't back on its feet soon, there's no point in waiting on it to join talks with other Kage. The great villages will have to sort out their issues on their own."

Gaara nodded in total agreement.
"Seems like it." Naruto yielded.

Temari motioned for Naruto to pass an untouched bottle of sake, "Would you mind?"

Naruto handed off the bottle to her, and the woman wordlessly offered a drink to Jiraiya in an effort to not be rude. The Sage shook his head, "No thanks. I've been reducing my intake these past few weeks and I think it's for the best."

"That's admirable, Gama-sennin. This is just a hard topic for me to listen in on while sober." She admitted while pouring, "Kankuro, want some? Haku?"

Gaara snapped out of his deep thought processes again when he heard his sister address Haku, "You're going to exclude others at this table?"

"Gaara, you don't drink." Temari was not amused, "And Naruto, I didn't think you were interested since this was sitting right beside you."

"No, no. You're right." He confirmed while slurping noodles.

Both Kankuro and Haku did accept pours from the bottle while Temari and Gaara engaged in a vexing stare-off from opposite sides of the table. Jiraiya, who was the oldest peacemaker around for miles, waggled his chopsticks at Gaara, "You are making my dinner unnecessarily tense with your over-inflated brotherly responses. Sit back and eat, Gaara."

Jiraiya sort of knew the tension had something to do with Haku and that, perhaps, Gaara did not like these subtle indicators that Temari was displaying a preference for him. Haku had a remarkable poker face, though. He sat there eating and conversing with Naruto as if none of this was happening. As if he hadn't a clue how Temari and Gaara were feeling. 'But of course he knows he's at the center of their tug-of-war and Haku's not thrilled about it.' Jiraiya thought to himself.

The youngsters seemed to settle down when Naruto recaptured the conversation, and discussed the plans he had for when he returned to Konoha. Haku was tickled by the idea of Naruto joining the Sealing Corps, though Jiraiya cautioned that administration would most likely give Naruto a hard time during an entry interview.

"Whatever you do," Jiraiya warned him, "Don't let them trip you up and make you lose your temper. They're going to push your buttons on purpose during an interview. Sealing Corps members are required to keep a level head so that they can act during emergency situations." He added before a bite of salmon, "And they will be particularly rude to you, Naruto, since they're aware that you are a jinchuriki."

"Aren't there anti-discrimination and equal opportunity laws to prevent that sort of crap?" Naruto grumbled.

"Yeah, but good luck getting a legal team to take the case. It's not fair that the deck is stacked the way it is, or that you'll have to work harder to get your foot in the door while others cruise on in," Jiraiya explained, "But you can do it. I know you can, because I've seen what happens when you set your mind on something." The man boasted to the rest of the table, "Do you all know that Naruto set the record for becoming a Sage in the least amount of training time? No one has accomplished what he has at the same rate."

That got them going. A positive mood was restored to the table, and Gaara and Haku twittered praises over Naruto's remarkable feat. When the meal concluded, Kankuro and Temari generously waved off the other dinner guests to relax while they cleaned up. Kankuro settled at the sink to scrub
a mountain of dishes and bowls while his sister frittered around, boxing up what scraps remained. The young man glanced over his shoulder a few times, curious about Temari's recent decisions and the subtle changes he'd perceived in his elder sibling. She was light-footed and efficient, wiping the table down, pleasantly quiet.

"So, is this it?" Kankuro wondered.

She looked back at him, "Is what it?"

"Are you gonna settle? It seems like you've made up your mind." Kankuro elaborated, "About Haku."

"I…" Temari waffled for a moment before retorting, "Kankuro, just mind your own business, alright?"

He laughed softly, "It's okay, you know. He's an improvement over the previous five."

Her sigh carried a hint of relief in it.

"Don't forget that I'm taking some time off tomorrow. I've got a few things to get done in the morning, then I am free and clear." Kankuro reminded his sister, "But if you need anything…"

"I'm not going to bug you on your day off." She couldn't help a smile as she moved to dry the mounting stack of cleaned cookware beside him.

As the dark of evening settled on the house, Temari exited the kitchen and stretched her arms above her head, listening for the echoes of where houseguests had ended up in the mansion. It sounded as though Gaara had taken his friends upstairs, and Jiraiya must have settled down in a guest room for the night. Also, she could hear scratching at the front door. It reminded her of the rare begging scratches neighborhood dogs attempted, and she crossed the living area to go shoo the beast, 'Maybe it smelled leftovers…' And when she leveled her face with the crack of the door, she saw Haku's white rabbit sitting patiently.

"Oh!" She opened up to allow Pua in, "Did we forget about you? Shoot. Haku says if you aren't fed you thieve like an unstoppable monster."

"Ramen." Pua confirmed, hopping into the house.

Temari watched in bemusement as the white rabbit tracked across the floor and stopped at Haku's travel bag, sitting forgotten beside a console table. Pua took the bag's zipper in her teeth and tried to tug it open.

"Uh, hold on a second there…" Temari pulled open the pouch so that the animal could munch on timothy hay Haku kept for her, "Good girl. Do me a favor and don't eat anything else in the house, alright? I've heard about your appetite."

Pua just stared up at her with big, glassy eyes, nose a-wiggle as she chewed, and Temari sighed. That look made no promises.

"Just give him a 'sec." Naruto motioned for Gaara to sit down.

Gaara said as he sank down on the edge of his bed, "You did it too…"

"Yeah. It's a gigantic, old house. Of course Haku's gotta go look at all the rooms for
the *oooh* and *aah* show." Naruto was cross-legged on an area rug, smiley and content.

"I guess I just don't feel as fascinated by this place since…" Gaara supposed in a softer voice, "Sad things happened here."

"I'm sorry you feel that way…but for *us* it's something cool. To us it's exciting that this is your old *and* your new home, technically, like—we get to see this other side of you." Naruto tried to give it a positive spin.

When Haku returned he asked, "Whose room is that with all of the sea glass and shells on display? That's something."

"Matsuri's. She collects more with each visit to the Tide Village." Gaara plopped flat to his back to relax.

"Huh. I should do that too, when I'm there again. What a beautiful effect." Haku sat at the foot of the bed, cupping his chin, "The rest of the house…sort of lacks character and warmth."

"It *was* my father's house." Gaara snorted.

Soft noises of understanding echoed from Naruto and Haku, who took the simple statement as the overarching explanation of why Gaara could never fully appreciate his birthplace. While Naruto lounged on the floor, patting his full stomach and yawning, Haku glanced around and drank in the details of the room. Gaara watched as Haku reached to an adjacent desk and lifted an inconspicuous scroll up. How typical—since time immemorial, there never was a scroll that did not attract Haku's curiosity.

And so Haku predictably asked, "What's this, Gaara?"

"A classified communiqué full of unpleasant things that I cannot ignore." Gaara told him as Haku was part of the way through unwinding the parchment, but froze at the word *classified*, "Go ahead and read it. I don't intend to keep anything from you and Naruto."

"Is this a report from Konoha?" Haku vaguely recognized it as his eyes scanned the text.

"It is. Some recent trouble that is non-Akatsuki related…near as far as we can tell."

"An attack…wait." Haku frowned, "What is a *Tao Art*?"

"Oooooh—" Naruto sat up and looked to Gaara, "Can I answer this one?"

Gaara shrugged with his face, mashing his pillows to get more comfortable.

Haku gave Naruto his attention as the explanation began, "Tao Arts are…not Ninjutsu."

When a silence persisted for a few seconds, Gaara decided to interrupt it with a patronizing slow clap to applaud Naruto's assessment.

"Fucking *stop that.*" Naruto groused, "*I wasn't finished!* What was I saying? Oh. So, I've seen a couple…well, *Hinata* saw a guy using Tao Arts while I was overlayed with her, when she used her ability to link with me; you know I told you about—?"

"Yes, yes—when was this, Naruto?"

"At the most recent Chunin Exam in Hidden Leaf. The semi-finalist was a ninja from Hidden Rock…he had these abilities that didn't need Hand Seals or have the same kinds of *limits* that our
jutsu do. They were different...like they were a part of him, expressed at-will or whathaveyou..."

Naruto recounted the experience and it even got Gaara's attention, "He could still use Ninjutsu, sure, but the Tao Arts were way obvious, just—not the same. Ninja Arts can't counter them...we were lucky to be quick enough to get the jump on him, and he was tired..."

"His name was Huo." Gaara added, for Haku's benefit, "He is mentioned in the report as an escaped detainee...and he most likely rejoined the band of terrorists he was working for. As I too watched Huo's fights at the Exam...I can say that he is not to be taken lightly."

"Terrorists?" Haku crinkled the scroll in his hands.

"A rogue group headed by Dintei Bihokokuni. They splintered from Iwagakure after refusing to answer for their war crimes before the Tsuchikage...and are deliberately trying to sabotage Leaf and Rock...We have wondered if they could be partnering with the Akatsuki for certain endeavors. Tsunade-sama and I have been trying to determine just how involved these groups may be with each other, and what sort of intelligence may have been leaked to the Akatsuki in light of a recent ambush in the Leaf Village." Gaara pulled another pillow to his chest and hugged it, "As if we needed another enemy to think about."

Setting the report aside, Haku tenderly rubbed his temples and shut his eyes while supposing, "I never gave a thought to those who may willingly aid the Akatsuki."

"It fucking sucks." Naruto agreed from the floor, "You know that Ero-sensei and I ran into him once? That Bi guy?" He drew Gaara and Haku's flabbergasted stares as he went on, "He hated my guts—mistrust me for my Dad. But he didn't want to mess with Ero-sensei...though I think he seriously thought about it. We were just travelling, minding our own business when he showed up out of nowhere...but I guess that's because they move through shadows with their Tao Arts."

"Through shadows?" Haku repeated incredulously, "How can they be tracked, then?"

"With a terrible amount of effort Black Ops units have been able to trace their whereabouts, but you can understand why pinpointing this group is a nightmare. They know better than to stay in one place, and maintain their distance from adversaries with relative ease." Gaara summed it up, "Though their numbers are few, maybe no more than a dozen...they are a particularly dangerous wildcard."

"How is there an ability like this? Why is it distinct from Ninjutsu?" Haku had to get to the existential crisis-type questions, as was his specialty, "What if there are other abilities in the world we are yet unaware of? How do we—?"

"Okay, stop, because you know we can't answer any of that." Naruto held up a hand to put the brakes on Haku's guesswork, "It just is. It's a problem."

"Can anyone else in shinobi nations use Tao Arts?" Haku posed a logical follow up, "That could help at least discourage these types of criminals."

"Not anymore." Gaara recalled, "Many were hunted down and executed by Bi's cell, according to what Tsunade-sama shared with me."

"Alright. So can Tao Arts be learned? By people like you and me?" Another thoughtful follow up from Haku.

Naruto laughed from the floor, "Wha—? How? We don't even know what they are or how they work!"

"Someone must know."
"No one in these lands could really explain it. Techniques like that come from nations far to the west, most likely in Han and Joseon." Gaara shot the idea down, "Unless shinobi are willing to travel abroad to study other abilities in this world...we are going to have to solve these issues on our own."

"What a complication." Haku shifted to sit cross-legged on the bed's edge, elbows to his knees as he held his chin in his hands and thought, "Why is there so much we don't know about? Every time I think I have a grasp of what's going on, there's another revelation to saddle my brain with. I'm tired of having to think about it all."

"Well, that's our life now. Just tryin' to keep up with all of the madness. It helps when you've got other people working on it with you...but...I really..." Naruto sighed and stretched himself wide on the floor, his eyes trained on the ceiling, "When I left Leaf to train, I never thought I'd have to face stuff like this. To really have to open my eyes to what's been going on. I didn't count on it. Didn't ask for it. But what kind of a shithead would I be if I tried to ignore it or let it be someone else's problem?"

Gaara raised his hand in solidarity, agreeing, "That. Exactly that."

Haku chuckled darkly, "Is this merely a part of growing up, or is this a torment unique to us? That we just happened to be the fools clued into the truth and dangers creeping in this world?"

"Oh it's just us, I'm thinkin'." Naruto lamented, "For some damn reason, it's us. Because I'll tell ya, Teuchi-san at Ichiraku Ramen sure as hell isn't thinking about dealing with this stuff. Which is good, I guess."

"Then if we are meant to combat the threats and injustices in this world," Gaara put a point to the line of thinking, "We had better not mess this up."

The young men collectively sensed a portent of calamity ahead, and though they may have been blind to it when they were younger, they were each absorbing the obligation in those quiet moments. That responsibility, by whatever probability and means, had fallen to them. To defend their homes and future from hegemony, devastation, and evil, unknowable forces.

"Hmm." Haku was the first to snap out of his processing, "The stakes have been raised. There is much to be done and dealt with, however...I'd like to remind you both of what we promised when we first met each other."

Sheepish, Naruto scratched his cheek, sitting up as he asked, "Uh...what did we promise each other, again? I mean, it was a long time ago!"

"That we would protect each other." Haku clarified.

"Pff. Well that's a given!" Naruto simpered.

"No, it's not." Haku disagreed, "Not anymore. The context of our lives is very different. We don't all live in the same place and do the same things. We have different needs and wants than we did. Gaara, for example, is a village leader. It would be unfair to ask him to compromise his commitment to Suna for our sakes."

"I do have a degree of flexibility in my decisions, when it comes to you both." Gaara said from his place surrounded by cushions.

"Even so, these times are turbulent. Within reasonable means, if it doesn't jeopardize a village or critical mission...we should prioritize each other." Haku suggested, "If anything were to ever happen to either of you, I would drop everything. You know that. You are my family first. That's the way it
has always been.”

It seemed like a silly thing to reiterate, after all, it was so fundamental—such a part of who they were! Naruto didn’t think it bore repeating, but it made his eyes shiny regardless. Haku reached out a hand which Naruto took automatically in his own. He didn’t have to say he understood what Haku meant. They both felt it. To Haku’s left, lounging in pillowy comfort, Gaara did not stir but had heard the proclamation.

"You too, Gaara." Haku motioned with his other hand.

"I’m comfortable. Don’t make me move, you know that I agree."

"Yeah, if things go sideways…I’ll always put you guys first." Naruto cleared his throat, tacking on, "Gaara, the deal isn’t sealed if you don’t hold hands. It’s like a magic bonding-thing."

"That is utter," Gaara over-pronounced his words, "Non-sense."

"Here, then." Haku wrapped his hand around Gaara’s ankle, which was nearest to him since the lazy Kazekage was not willing to sit up and enter the friendship circle. At least they could tap Gaara’s energy somehow, and that seemed to satisfy Haku and Naruto.

The sentiment pressed down on Gaara’s chest like an anvil, and eventually he grumbled and scooched nearer, lending his hands to them as well. There. Another sacred pact—this time forged as young adults, hoping that someday in a bright and distant future they could look back on this moment and thank each other for it.

In the back of his mind, Naruto could hear the Nine-Tailed Fox muttering, If vows and holding save the world I swear I will shave myself bald. This naïve pledging would make me die of secondhand embarrassment if I, you know, had the ability to die independently right now.

‘Oh would you shut your face, you lonely asshole-!’ Naruto mentally scoffed.

Your love alone can’t save them.

A sharp retort, ‘I’m not going to bother taking advice on that subject from someone who hasn’t actually loved.’

Who says I haven’t?

‘Alright then. Go ahead and tell me about your loved ones, Fox. I’ll listen.’

Tell you—I...ERG. You are the biggest blister in my life, Naruto.

‘Just shut up and listen. Do you feel them?’

Feel who?

‘THEM.’ Naruto redirected Kurama’s attention to the internal space that jinchuriki and Tailed-Beasts shared, where the fox finally noticed Gaara and Shukaku were also present.

How dare you goons eavesdrop! This is between me and my blister.

Gaara pointed out, ‘I believe it makes more sense to call you Naruto’s blister. Better said, Naruto has been an annoyance to me lately. So you are my blister’s blister—’
'Okay, time for you to shut up too.' Naruto requested cheerily.

**Wait, then what does that make me?** Shukaku had gotten confused.

'You're my friend. Relax.' Gaara soothed the One-Tail, who settled down as both Naruto and Kurama clamored at the notion.

'Wow. Way to downgrade me, Gaara! I'm willing to put my life on the line for you and you—'

Gaara interrupted Naruto's blathering, 'It was a joke. You are my best friend. There is nothing I wouldn't do for you and Haku.'

'Ah.' Naruto simmered down, 'Okay.'

'And you,' Gaara addressed the Kyuubi, 'Need not be excluded from this. Shukaku and I saw how strong you and Naruto could be together. Your life may not seem so bleak and empty if you were willing to forge new bonds.'

*As if I'd consider the dithering words that come from Shukaku's container, you condescending polyp!*

*Don't*, Shukaku growled in warning. *Mouth off to Gaara. You'd never know a good thing happening to you even if it came up and punched you in your shitty face, Kurama!*

*Aww, do you want to hold hands and make friendship bracelets with them, Shukaku?*

Naruto stepped between the quarreling beasts, waving his arms like a baton-wielding ramp agent, *Enough. Goddammit. Enough. Thought it'd be worthwhile to link up and have a sincere talk, BUT NOPE. I guess what we figured out earlier today didn't matter, Fox.* He paused to apologize to Shukaku and Gaara, who nodded coolly to Naruto before retreating from the dim, conscious space.

*Kurama.*

The Nine-Tails started in surprise upon hearing Naruto speak his name.

*That's your name, isn't it? The one your father gave you. Gaara told me.' He stood alone in the watery dark, 'Gaara's like a brother to me. And Shukaku is supposed to be like a brother to you. If you insist on pushing everyone else away, as if you know better than them or whatever...then the end of the world is going to be pretty dull for you. Just sitting around without all of the dumbasses you didn't need. That sounds fun.' Naruto's expression of disappointment put a twinge of regret in the fox's stomach, and he watched as the young man faded completely from view.*

In the upright world within Gaara's bedroom, Naruto blinked and shook his head. He laughed in delight to see he'd only zoned out for a few seconds, and was still holding hands with his friends.

Haku gave him a perplexed smile, "What's funny?"

"We talked to our Tailed-Beasts for a second!" Naruto confessed, "It's easier when we're close together. Could you hear it? You were touching us, so I wonder if you could get there too. Maybe?"

"No, I didn't experience anything." Haku withdrew his hands and tucked them in his lap, "But I think...I can still feel a little of what you feel."

"How?" Gaara was gathering his pillows again, "You aren't a jinchuriki."
"I don't know." Haku rubbed his chin and thought about it, "Call it intuition. Or empathy. I've always been able to feel some of what you and Naruto feel."

"Yeah, that's about right. And Hinata can do that too, but literally with her powers. Some people can tap the frequency." Wagging his fingers beside his head, Naruto tried to illustrate.

"Some can. Though it may take a miracle to tap the frequency of the Nine-Tailed Fox." Gaara sniffed, "He's an insufferable brute."

Naruto sighed heavily.

"Naruto can do it." Haku encouraged.

"I don't know if I can. I've been trying to crack that nut for years, and he's still obstinate." Naruto twitched his nose, "I don't know if there's anyone he likes or is willing to listen to. I mean, sometimes at night I can feel him get calmer, but never when I'm trying to talk to him. It feels like something else is going on."

Gaara narrowed his eyes at the suggestion, "Something else?"

"I don't know. Maybe he thinks about when he was small, or when he was happier. Not that I'd know how to remind him of those things…"

"Maybe it's not you." Gaara muttered.

Before Haku and Naruto could further speculate, Gaara switched gears, "I want to sleep. You should both get some rest too. We can continue catching up tomorrow."

"I like the sound of that." Naruto stood and stretched, hearing his joints crack back into place, "So should I share my guest room with Haku? There aren't any spare ones left right now."

"If Matsuri weren't coming home later, I'd set up a futon in her room, however…" Gaara once again leveled a solemn stare on Haku, "I don't want you on the second floor."

Haku didn't know how much more assurance Gaara needed, "I just want to—"

"You sleep downstairs, on the couch." Gaara commanded, "I'd put Jiraiya there, but he'd be complaining all day tomorrow and I don't want to hear it."

Naruto also tried to placate his suspicious friend, "Haku can share a room with me—"

"No. Not on this floor. Period." Gaara said as he made no attempt to hide how he was keeping Haku very separate from wherever his sister went to sleep at night.

"That's fine." Haku rose up, "I don't mind. I'm exhausted and it makes little difference to me." At the door of the room he wondered, "Are you free in the morning for training, Gaara?"

An intriguing question to which he answered, "I can be."

"Please try to, if you can. If you're willing to test your strength against Naruto, why not me as well?" His smile was deceptively docile. Haku bid them goodnight before setting out down the corridor.

"Oooh, don't fall for it. I think he's super strong now." Naruto whispered.

"He's gone, he can't hear you. Stop whispering."
"Sorry. I mean, he's still the Haku we love, but there's something scary about him now."

"He doesn't scare me." Gaara said.

One thing Haku liked about the first floor of the house was that it was sufficiently dark. He preferred to sleep in dark, quiet places. It was about the only thing that helped his busy brain shut off. He had nestled on the wide sofa, adjusted pillows and a throw blanket and then clapped his hands softly, "Pua." She hopped up on cue.

"How was your trip out here? Did you eat?"

"Maybe." The rabbit meant this as an affirmative answer.

"Say: Yes." Haku corrected her, "I know you can say it."

"Y-y…ye…"

"Yes." He repeated.

"…yes."

"Good." Haku balanced his rabbit on his stomach and rubbed her ears, "I'm proud of you. You've learned so much…" He paused to yawn and Pua mirrored the gesture, revealing her long teeth.

He began to doze off, feeling the rustle of Pua's movements and nibbling on his shirt, doting on him in rabbity ways. Haku patted her absentely, "Sleep now. I can't play. Tomorrow we can play…"

Before long he was snoring and Pua bunched herself up on his stomach to rest.

Deeper into the night, Haku stirred when he felt rustling again, and assumed Pua had begun chewing again out of habit. When he sleepily tried to bat at the rabbit with his fingertips, he felt a human hand instead. He snapped a wary eye open.

"It's just me." Temari assured him.

"Oh. What time is it?"

"Just about midnight now. Why don't you come upstairs?"

"I was told not to," Haku informed her.

"By Gaara?" Temari sniffed, "He is just…" A sigh, "It's fine. This house is mine. Matsuri went upstairs and was surprised to see you down here. You can stay in my room."

Haku's chuckle was rough with sleep, "No, I can't. That…constitutes blatant disrespect of your brothers."

"I am the eldest and I set my own rules. No one gives a damn about any of the other guests staying here—"

"That's because they know I am the one interested in you, which makes a difference." He reminded her after a yawn.

"How nice of you to care about what they think. But if you'd rather stay down here, that's okay. Only if you want to, and not because of what my brothers said." Temari conceded, "My bed has the space and honestly…I just like feeling you there."
He could understand that; there was something irresistible and calming about falling asleep next to the object of one's affection. Since Haku had done so himself when Temari had last visited Nanakusa, he couldn't say that he thought she was being silly, irrational, or suggestive. He shifted to sit up and gently moved a snoozing Pua aside, "Alright." He watched Temari blink at him, half-surprised, "Just until dawn, and then I'll come back here before anyone else wakes up."

"Hm." She was amused, padding softly across the floor as he followed, "Are you sure you can wake up in time?"

"Yes. It's a skill I've picked up."

And while all of the house was snoring and unaware, the pair scaled the stairs with catlike treads. Temari felt a pang of triumph as she watched Haku toddle past her into her room, half-asleep, and then crumple frontways onto her bed and shimmy beneath the quilt like a flounder into seabed sand. She was about to pull her pajamas off when she thought better of it, 'No...this is a safer bet in case I have to explain myself later to anyone who gives me grief about a co-sleeper...' She sidled in beside Haku, sweeping long strands of hair away from his face, and pecked his lips. He was asleep again.

'Well, if you can wake up just as easily as you fall asleep, then it definitely is a skill.' She thought. The surge of excitement and satisfaction kept Temari awake for a bit longer before she too batted her eyelids shut and drifted off. Her dreams were the marvelous kind that rediscovered flight and joyful things, the kind of dreams that no one could ever remember when they woke again. All glistened back into light the next morning.

Upon waking up, she acknowledged that it was a good sign that Haku's space beside her was empty. That had been the deal, after all. She ran her hand along the mattress and pillow recesses left imprinted by his body. Ah, how nice. Just as she thought: his presence lingered around her like it always did. Echoing ripples of love. She smiled and rubbed her eyes, sitting up to toss her blanket off.

'I want to get used to this. I know he won't be here with us for long...' Temari fished through her closet for a dress to change into, 'When all of his spy business is over...I wonder if Haku would stay in Suna with me? I haven't asked. Maybe I shouldn't ask. He has his own home and friends to return to, so should I be keeping him from that?' She wilted as she pulled her outfit on, trying to project a future in which she did not selfishly dictate Haku's decisions, 'I don't really know what he wants. He loves me, I know that. I'm just afraid to ask where he sees himself down the line...'

She fussed at her reflection in a wall mirror, dabbing ointment beneath her eyes and along her nose, patting tinctures onto her face to protect against the desert's dry heat, and then tied her hair in its usual style. Temari huffed at herself afterward, 'If someday Haku and I part again...I think I'd rather just stay alone. I need to make my own way. There's plenty to keep me occupied.' And though she did believe those words to be true, she still felt the potential for disappointment gnawing at her stomach.

The aromas of breakfast food carried through the house. Temari collected her weapons holsters and fan before venturing out and hurrying down the stairs. In the sitting room, she discovered Jiraiya and Naruto sitting at a low chabudai table, cups of tea steaming between them as Naruto held up his hand in an attempt to manifest a prong-seal for his master. Temari greeted them in passing and received distracted salutations in return.

In the kitchen, Matsuri was alone at the table set with omelets, soup dishes, and other elements of a morning meal. She brightened at the sight of Temari, "Good morning, Temari-sama!"

"Hi, Matsuri." She slid into a seat across from the young kunoichi, "You were out late last night."
"The movie ran so long! And it was sad." The girl pouted, "I wish I could get my money back."

Temari snickered at her, "What did you think when you saw Haku sleeping on the couch when you came home?"

"I thought…he was a pretty girl." Matsuri admitted haltingly.

Temari cackled even more as she helped herself to food.

"He was very nice! I realized this morning that he, um, wasn't a girl." Matsuri explained, "And he made this breakfast for everyone! Naruto-san and Gama-sennin already ate."

"Yes, I saw. They're goofing around with Sealing practice in the other room." Temari tipped the tea pot over her cup, "So where did Haku go?"

"He went out with Gaara-sensei a short time ago." Matsuri reported.

"Hm."

The girls munched. Temari cut up an apple and shared it with her companion. Between crunchy bites she inquired, "Did Gaara assign you any missions?"

"I have to be to the armory in 20 minutes for an appointment…Then I will be on surveillance duty at the outpost this evening, and I might accompany a team for a mission tomorrow." Matsuri recalled, "But I'm most looking forward to the weekend."

Temari guessed, "You'll be going to the Tide Village, then?"

"Yes," She wiggled in her seat, "Menma has been recovering from his injuries, so I hope he'll be able to do more when I get back. Rebuilding efforts are nearly complete…"

"It's kind of hard to believe how many times that village has had to rebuild. None of the Great Villages have had to deal with that kind of stress since the last war."

"That's true. Large villages like ours can forget what hardship and violence are like after long periods of peace." Matsuri moved her place setting to the sink, "That's why Inari said he doesn't want to take any crap from other villages. Tide may be small, but it is very tough!"

"Like someone I know." Temari gave her a fond look, 'I'll see you later?"

"You will!" The girl gave her role model a swift hug around the shoulders before darting out.

With most of the dishes empty and a single piece of apple remaining on the plate, Temari decided it was time to pack up. She called out to Pua to come over and dispose of the remaining apple slice. After what felt like an age the rabbit did not turn up. Temari rose from her seat, "Pua? Eat this apple. Where are you?" She glanced about and wondered if the bunny had accompanied Haku out.

Stalking past the sitting area and into the wide living room, Temari did notice the white rump of the animal sticking out of a shelf hutch on the floor. Temari crossed to the sofa to see what had preoccupied Pua and oh, oh no, the nicest throw pillow they had was in absolute tatters. The rabbit had torn it apart with her teeth to steal stuffing out of it, and was arranging the fluffy fill into a nest in the hutch.

"What are you doing, you destructive little marshmallow!" Temari snatched Pua up in her hands, prying fibers from her mouth, "I loved that pillow! What's compelled you? You don't need to make
yourself at home here since you'll be hitting the road again tomorrow." She frowned at the rabbit's sweet face, "I could've gotten you a shoebox or something." Beneath her fingertips something felt off. With great care, Temari gave the rabbit a soft *squish* around her middle, trying to figure out if she was ill or had ingested anything she ought not to.

'This feels like...a bunch of grapes.' Thinking on it as she palpated the rabbit, Temari deduced possibilities, 'She doesn't seem sick. Didn't eat anything that I saw...what if...?'

"Oh. Great." Temari had a hunch of what the problem was as she arranged Pua in a football carry in the crook of her arm, and kicked the tattered pillow's remains into the hutch. She stormed out of the house and circled around to the back of the property, correctly assuming that Gaara had taken Haku to the courtyard there.

There she could see Matsuri concluding her pleasantries with Gaara and Haku, who looked as though they had paused their sparring to speak with her. With a wave, Matsuri was off again, and before the young men could resume training, Temari marched forward to interrupt them.

"Good morning," She greeted them both before setting her eyes on Haku, "Haku, did you intend to take Pua with you to that auction in the Land of Mountains?"

"I did." He confirmed with a wary lilt in his voice.

"Well, have you noticed that your rabbit is knocked up?" Temari held up the animal who was otherwise ignorant of what conversation was being had.

The revelation crashed over Gaara first, who flinched at Temari's words; just the mere suggestion seemed to send his mind swirling, free-associating other worries. Pregnancy betokened responsibility, and by God, he really did not need another stressor. Even if it wasn't his problem, or the fact that the single mother in question was a rabbit— it was still a sort of mental attack on the Kazekage. While Gaara stood in dubious silence, Haku reacted with acute, mortified disbelief, reaching out to take Pua into his hands, "What do you mean? She isn't—"

"Squish her middle a bit."

Haku's mortification escalated as he did so, "Nothing seemed unusual!"

"That is the quintessential thing a man would say right about now. Your rabbit is pregnant. So think twice about taking her on a mission." Temari leveled with him coolly, "I'm no animal expert so I don't know how far along she is or what she needs. But I can tell you she destroyed one of my favorite cushions in an attempt to make a nest."

"I..." Crestfallen, Haku locked gazes with Pua in his first moment of true parental concern, "Did you...really bring this unto yourself?"

Abruptly, Gaara scoffed beside him, "Are you actually asking an animal that?"

"Forgive me, Gaara, but until your pet does something like this *I don't need your input.*" Haku sidelined Gaara's remarks, turning in a small circle as he held Pua in front of his face, "What have you done? We have work to do! Hold still." He tried feeling around the rabbit's abdominal area with a glow of green chakra, as he would on a human patient for a *System Survey.* There definitely seemed to be stowaways with beating hearts in there, just from a cursory check. He groaned in frustration.

"Anyway," Temari turned to her brother, "Do you have any assignments for me today, Gaara?"
His miffed look suggested that Haku's irresponsible pet ownership was grating on his nerves, but he pulled himself together to tell Temari, "I'll be going to the office in a short while and you should come with me. I have a few Chunin-level prospects who will be taking a Jounin evaluation in an hour and a half, if you don't mind overseeing them. Baki will be taking them out for a mission if they pass their initial practical." Gaara added, "I have no mission for you at this time, so you can take the day off." In between the lines she also read: *You're welcome.*

"Great. Thanks." She was pleased. Temari plucked Pua from Haku's hands as he muttered at his rabbit, complaining about how Pua had *gallivanted with a common buck rabbit in the forest." Let me take her for now. If you two were training, do you mind if I stay to watch for a bit?"

"I suppose not." Haku tried to shake off a sullen haze, "This is…so unexpected…and inconvenient."

"Pregnancy in a nutshell." Temari confirmed with a shrug.

"I never thought to get her spayed." Haku admitted, "Though in part that was because there are hardly any trained veterinary professionals in the Water Country."

"It's too late to fret over it now." She crossed to a stone bench behind the house to take a seat, keeping Pua in her lap, "This isn't the end of the world. Don't get hung up on it."

"It is my opinion," Gaara said as he and Haku faced off once again, "That this reckless disregard and proliferation, though by your rabbit, reflects poorly on you."

A mildly insulted gasp, "I've been working. Risking my life and limb for missions-!"

"You'd probably be a terrible fa—"

"I would be a neurotically attentive father, *do not* conflate pet ownership problems with parenting!"

Nearby, Temari was rolling her eyes as they argued.

Gaara's famous temper was right on schedule that morning, "Why are you even thinking of that sort of thing?"

"You've thought of such things too, Gaara!"

"My relationship *is stable.*" As if it were fair to create a comparison, or that in saying so Gaara didn't think it would make Haku angry. But *oh look,* it did.

"—my relationship *will be fine.*" Haku dared to say it.

"So you admit it." Gaara's nostrils were flaring.

"I don't need to admit anything."

Tufts of sand shivered around Gaara as he warned, "You do."

"Uh— how about you don't bitch about relationships while I'm sitting right here!" Temari barked a reminder at her brother, "What is with this hot-and-cold *tough guy* act? Haku is your friend!"

Gaara turned to bark back at her, "You haven't been very forthcoming either, Temari—!"

And then he whizzed backwards, suddenly propelled by a burst of Wind Nature that Haku hit him with. Gaara landed on his feet, stamping like a bull, and set his eyes on Haku again. The knave had his new war fan outstretched, poised for Wind jutsu.
Where before the contest had been cordial, Gaara let frustration get the best of him and allowed Shukaku to drip chakra into his limbs. He sped across the courtyard like a beast, divested of his sand armor, and crashed into Haku with terrible Taijutsu. Temari contained a yelp of fright, observing the tumult of kicks, fists, and light steps. An airy leap and low bend saved Haku from a crushing blow of Gaara’s that gouged a hole in the ground. He kicked Gaara away and spun his war fan in his hand, conjuring a small dust devil of wind.

Gaara rounded on him and charged, determined to give Haku at least one good smack— to get his point across. Instead, he dropped to the ground flat on his face, straight and still as a wooden plank. Two senbon needles had sunk into the back of Gaara’s neck.

Blinking rapidly, Temari was not sure how Haku had done it. No one had seen him handle throwing needles, however she suspected the ruse was a sleight-of-hand, distracting Gaara to be faced in one direction while Wind Release propelled the needles (cast airborne and unnoticed) to their intended target from behind. The task of aiming correctly with a Wind Nature did concern Temari. What if Haku had missed and seriously injured Gaara? Of that she was still unsure as her baby brother laid there unmoving. She did not need to direct Haku at that point; he was already crossing back to help Gaara.

This, Haku could admit, was not a friendly sparring session. Far from it— he had used techniques he would use against an enemy or assassination mark. A roiling guilt ate at Haku’s insides as he knelt down beside Gaara, ‘What did I need to prove to him, anyway? That I can end a battle before it even starts? None of this was fair…and I know he’s been upset since I arrived…” He murmured an apology to Gaara, ‘I'm sorry. Let me remove these—'

A gritty, bestial claw seized him, wide enough to wrap full around his shoulders and neck as Haku looked on in pure bewilderment. Gaara may have been paralyzed by the attack, but Shukaku could express portions of his body through chakra alone. And, it seemed, the Tailed-Beast perceived Haku as a threat. As sand whipped wildly around Gaara's immobile body, Shukaku's manifested arm squeezed its captive.

Pua pelted frantically hither and thither in the yard as if to distract the menace that had taken her master hostage. It wasn't working. Temari descended upon the mess without an ounce of hesitation as she set her hands on Shukaku's limb, trying to pry it free, "Gaara! Snap out of it! You're not in danger-!

Tilted, black and gold eyes peered up at Temari, "What do you know about danger?" Perhaps it was Shukaku who had done the talking, and maybe too had coiled sand around the kunoichi in an attempt to pull her away from her not-yet-publically-acknowledged boyfriend.

Where Gaara's feelings ended and Shukaku's began was an unknowable front, a confluence of frustration. It was not hatred for the two people sloughed in sand— it was a determinedness to part them. To prevent future heartaches or losses, all the likelier if they were bonded again.

From what little Shukaku could see through Gaara's eyes, prostrate on the ground, the Biju did see the desperate, haptic response of the captive, barely able to move— as Temari's hand reached and found Haku's, fingers sliding far enough to secure around the other's wrist. It was an emergency of touch, ruling out jutsu or violence completely, and their eyes stayed trained on Gaara all the while. Though Shukaku's education on bonds of love was limited, even he recognized the triptych of devotion before him. None of these three silly humans had any good reason to jilt each other, and nary a speck of true anger for one another.

So the Tailed-Beast retreated in a sudden and complete *pop*, chakra vanished, and sand slipped away from its hostages as if to sulk. Haku coughed violently before folding over, immediately plucking the
needles from Gaara's neck to unchain his stunned pressure points. He rubbed the skin there and between Gaara's shoulder blades, "Are you alright? I'm sorry, I'm sorry—"

Gaara was but a few inches off of the ground as he regained mobility when Temari pulled him into a sitting position to hold him in a tight hug, "Gaara? I never thought I'd...have to worry about you being out of control again..."

A raspy answer, "I really wasn't."

Gaara moved to sit properly and couldn't help patting the two, who were dithering worriedly over him. Never mind that he could have crushed them with his sand, they were more worried about his defensive response and aggressive use of Shukaku's chakra.

"Gaara, forgive me. I never should have done that." Haku shook his head ruefully, "It made you feel unsafe."

"Haku..." Gaara told him flatly, "It was not fear so much as a matter of pride...Shukaku didn't like me being flat on my face."

"Ah, well..."

"My reaction was about as careless as your needlework. Stop apologizing." Finally, Gaara had worked up the nerve to explain himself clearly, "I've been frustrated. The two of you acting secretively— why not tell me if you're seeing each other? Even if you know I don't want you to?"
He punctuated his feelings with, "Doing this means you might hurt each other again, which is the last thing I want."

Haku looked at him owlishly. Gaara's reasoning was quite sound, though he lacked the propensity for communicating his true feelings about matters right away.

Temari leaned back from the embrace with her brother, a resigned smile on her face, "I hear what you're saying, and I need you to know that I want to date him. I decided to. He decided to. Please try not to panic. Things are much better now."

There was something in Gaara's gaze that whisked her back into childhood, remembering the wateriness of her youngest brother's eyes, lit like a shallow sea, tightrope-walking to build trust with the one he was looking at. He had to digest her decision now that it was made plain.

One of the rear, ground-floor windows of the Kazekage's mansion opened once Naruto figured out the latch, and he began to climb out, "What the heck is going on out here? Ero-sensei and I felt a big spike of chakra!"

"Naruto, stop." Temari stood and crossed the yard to shove him back inside, "Don't leave the house like that— it's embarrassing—"

"—is everyone okay?" He was indoors again but still a-flutter with questions.

"Everyone's fine." Temari lowered her voice to whisper to him, "Those two just need to talk. You know?"

"Psh. About time." Naruto sniffed. He sealed the window again to return to his practice at the tea table.

The nervous rabbit had scuttled under the courtyard bench and Temari bent down to pet some reassurance back into the animal. She called over her shoulder, "I'm going to head to the office a bit
early to see about that evaluation. Why don't you guys say what you need to say, then Gaara, "She eyed him, "You'll meet me there?"

"I will." He agreed.

Temari set out from the property and Gaara sighed wearily as he watched her go. Haku stood beside him, contemplative.

"Gaara…why is it…" He rubbed his chin, frowning in thought, "That long ago when Temari first wanted my companionship, you thought nothing of it?"

"It seemed harmless then." Gaara rubbed the tender spot on his neck where needles had pricked him.

"And now—?" Haku wondered.

"Your absence hurt her. She changed." He didn't like explaining something he thought was obvious, "Haven't you noticed? I was the one who had to watch her struggle, and watched her go through phases of self-disparagement and pointless flings. I wanted to let you leave to do what you had to do…but at the time I didn't think of what would happen to her." Gaara snapped, "You didn't either."

These were the fumes of all that had gone unsaid over the last two years, omitted from their written exchanges back and forth. It had never gotten too blunt or bitter, but the implication had been laced through the words of Gaara's letters. To hear it aloud with his whole heart felt like a judge's gavel striking him right atop his head, miring Haku back in the guilt that had built up in him like plaque.

"If that weren't enough, maybe you could understand the anxiety I have for my sister's well-being, after she was nearly killed by your associate." Gaara poured another boiling pot of facts on his friend, "None of this is about me, understand that. I do not resent you, but I fear being put in a position where I will feel that way, if you cause Temari any hardship again. I want our friendship to be untouchable, and that is most easily facilitated by you not being in a relationship with her."

To finalize his point, Gaara's face capped it off with a There you have it look.

"I…do understand." Haku's acknowledgement was soft. His eyes drifted down to the ground, thinking, and Pua hopped over to rest on his booted foot.

"All of those things…I am responsible for. If not for me, she wouldn't have…" He waffled and cleared his throat, "I don't know exactly why she wanted to try again."

Me neither, Gaara's face said as he listened with his arms crossed.

"It did become very evident to me that…I operate in a morally ambiguous, crime-riddled field with little chance of career advancement…and most of this time my absence has been covered by lies, or the pain of friends who look out for me. My behavior was accordingly dismal." Haku shut his eyes and waved a hand, "And I failed miserably at what I originally set out to do. With that track record, even I wouldn't like me. I want love, but so what? Since the day I left the Water Country, I had a feeling I could never have such a thing. When I watched…them…die— I didn't know how I could ever do better."

Gaara held up a hand, "Leave it at that. I didn't invite you to self-immolate."

"You didn't." Haku smiled at him, "You can leave it to me. Believe me, I've struggled with this too. It might be misguided or ill-fated, but still, Temari asked me to try again. So I did. And I don't want her to be hurt, above all other things. So help me God—I would pull the sea aground if she needed me to. My other goals stultified long ago and she is, by far, the most important thing to
me.

The flagrant honesty was a bit much and **curses**, Gaara thought, his squared jaw was softening and so was his heart. Yes, the risks and inconveniences were evident to them both, but Haku's self-awareness, though morbid, was a winning feature in Gaara's book.

"Just," Gaara turned away from his friend, "If it can't be helped...please. Don't fall short or disappear." A command, "Be there."

Haku wasn't precisely sure, but it sounded as if Gaara changed his mind. He was stilted and wanted to ask for clarification, but he figured he presumed correctly once Gaara made a dismissive motion with his hands. The Kazekage's irritation had evaporated.

"Look after Naruto today. I'll return by the afternoon." Gaara said before he left to assume his leadership duties.

Boggled, Haku motioned for Pua to fall in step and they rounded the house to enter at the front door, and discovered Jiraiya and Naruto hooting in delight as two prong-seals on Naruto's fingertips blinked as three prong-seals. Naruto lost his concentration and stopped when he noticed Haku, "Haku! Wow, I'm getting good at this! So what happened out there?"

"Well..." Haku joined them at the chabudai table, sitting on a cushion, "We had a bit of a spat."

"Meaning you and Gaara, or you and Temari were fighting?" Jiraiya furrowed his brows, "Because with those two, I've found them to be equally temperamental."

Haku nodded to his teacher's point, "True. I meant with Gaara."

Naruto's mouth formed a surprised "o" shape, listening with a riveted look.

"He's been...acting...a degree more passive-aggressive than I'm accustomed to." Haku began.

Jiraiya and Naruto nodded in unison.

"And I thought that perhaps it was because he realized Temari and I are seeing each other." He went on, "Which was correct. I finally got him to explain why it bothered him so much."

"So it's basically that you were in violation of the **Bro-Code**." Naruto surmised.

"No, not quite that. If it were, he would've objected years ago when Temari and I first went out." Haku tipped the contents of the teapot into an unclaimed cup, "He was concerned that I would be negligent again in some way that could hurt her. Which is a perfectly reasonable thing to think."

Jiraiya fished for more details, "Was that part of why we felt Tailed-Beast chakra coming from the back yard?"

"Our sparring did get...a little intense."

"It was fast though! Like it was there and then poof, he cooled off." Naruto recalled.

"Maybe because I didn't try to fight, then." He hovered his tea cup beneath his chin, "I just...tried to show them how I felt. That I won't abandon anyone, not in favor of any other person important to me."

"Huh. Who knew that would've worked a trick on a fella gassed up on Biju-chakra?" Jiraiya chuckled before sipping his tea.
The three gradually turned their attention to a ripping sound, and watched in stupefaction as Pua began to tear apart another cushion with her teeth in pursuit of stuffing.

"Is...something wrong with Pua?" Naruto asked.

With one hand Haku scooped the rabbit into his cross-legged lap to bar her from any further destruction, and with his other hand he palmed his face.

Chapter End Notes

I am alive! My apologies for such tardiness—I got married, worked on my graduate studies, and moved to a new home since the summer, so I've been preoccupied. Resuming a more regular update schedule is my goal, so please look forward to more juicy reading. I hope this chapter pitched some fun surprises at you, good reader.

Chapter 55- Keiseki House
See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter Soundtrack: "Bakara" by Polo & Pan
& “Kokubo Sosho Battle” by Amon Tobin

"Tie it this way, like this—"

"The inner tie has to be done first, Naruto." Haku set about knotting strings to close the unusual top he had put on. Naruto twiddled with the jeogori, quite stumped about how it was meant to be fastened. No instructions were included in the satin bag Haku had retrieved it from.

It was the morning of Haku's departure, post-breakfast, and prior to attending the auction he had been told (by Zabuza) to establish a convincing disguise first. He neglected to tell his friends that the opulent hanbok that had been loaned to him had come from Koseki Inagawa, one of the most notorious gangsters in the Land of Water. As it happened, no one had asked. When Kankuro peeked in on their progress, he just marveled at the garments and imagined what it was like to walk around looking like a real aristocrat.

As it was described to Haku, his sale at the auction would go much better if he blended in with the affluent crowd. So there he and Naruto were upstairs in Gaara's home, trying to discern how the outfit was meant to look. Hell. None of them could even put on kimono correctly without assistance, never mind jeogori or baji from another country.

"It's really bright." Naruto noted as they finally started to figure it out, patting and tugging the attire into place.

"Bright colors are worn by the upper class." Haku recited a tidbit of what he'd learned at Inagawa's hideout.

"So you've got to pretend to be rich?" Naruto gathered.

"I suppose so."

"What if they figure out you're a ne'er-do-well, former farm-kid?"

"Perhaps I might give subliminal peasant signals, but how could anyone guess an agricultural background? That was long ago!"

"Rich people can smell that stuff!" Naruto insisted superstitiously, "They can look at you and know you've never been spoiled, and that you've worked at least one hard day of labor in your life."

"Oh please, Naruto. No one is going to realize." Haku batted his friend's hands out of the way to tie a final belt.

Naruto stood back and titled his head. The outer collar of the jeogori was an eye-catching turquoise that contrasted ocean blue and black of the top. Other features were subtle; flowing jacquard sleeves of white silk, embroidery sewed at the shoulders of the vest depicting snowing clouds above deer, pheasants, and rabbits. Once dressed, Haku pulled on boots and asked Naruto, "What else does the
list say?"

He glanced over the checklist of how to prepare. "Talk to an appraiser…"

"No, no, before that. Appearance-wise."

"Oh! Put your hair up. Like, way up on top of your head in a top knot, with some of it loose. See? There's a sketch here." Naruto fished around the clothing bag, "Here's the fastener."

"It says that?" Haku's hand wavered over his long, customary ponytail.

"Yeah, it must be some bougie style thing."

Sighing, Haku shook his hair free and pulled it smooth again, preparing to tie it as recommended.

"It also says put on a horse-hair hat." Naruto kept reading, "What the hell is that? Did one come in the bag?"

"Just this, I'm afraid."

"Oh, here's a headband." Shaking the bag to determine it was finally empty, Naruto gave the last piece of blue silk to Haku, "You're supposed to wear it like the picture." He held up the paper again and watched as Haku replicated the style as best he could.

Haku had transmogrified into a handsome, patrician-class man from a fairytale land. He then stuffed the clothing pouch into his travel bag, felt around for the precious gems and baubles he was meant to sell, and fetched a few additional knives and senbon quivers to hide in his outfit for protection. The Master Scroll was clipped to a holster on his leg, trousers hidden beneath long robes, and his tessen was hidden in his left sleeve.

"Okay, so my biggest question is…" Naruto began as they exited the guest room, marching down the hall to head downstairs, "Why not just wear hakama like every other guy does at fancy outings? That's standard around here!"

"Exactly. I don't want to seem as though I am from a shinobi nation. A hanbok is foreign enough to at least outwardly diffuse suspicion, and from what I understand…this will be a very international, multi-cultural event."

"Meaning—?"

"People from all around the world will be there. Not just the great nations, or the Kingdoms of Han and Joseon, but the other far continents as well."

Naruto squinted an eye, wary, "What do foreigners want that's in the Land of Mountains?"

Haku replied with a full-body shrug as he had asked himself that question at least 20 times already. What indeed? Why would any person from the other side of the world come to an auction such as this, if Haku were merely dropping in to sell stolen riches and jewels? That couldn't be what they were after. He had a gut feeling about it.

Downstairs, Jiraiya got one look at Haku and assessed, "That is one whacky getup. What's with the colors?"

"Rich people love colors." Naruto declared. He and Haku blew raspberries at the thought while Jiraiya shook his head.
"Just seems a bit weird since it's not a common fashion in our area, or practical for, you know, stealthy ninja missions."

"It's more practical than you may think." Haku stopped in a slant of sunlight that shone through the sitting room window, "Do I look like a ninja?"

"Well…no." Jiraiya conceded, "Not to burst your bubble or anything, but Keiseki House is going to have a lot of people that aren't ninja who are still quite dangerous. So just as you are masquerading around…beware other revelers who might want to get the jump on you or anyone else."

"I will attend with the utmost vigilance." Haku confirmed, "Where did Gaara go?"

"Pretty sure he evicted your rabbit after she started going after the sofa cushions too. Notice the stuffing everywhere." With a hand, Jiraiya gestured pretty much all around the room.

"Ah." Haku followed after Naruto through the egress of the house, and sure enough Gaara was outside, having gently corralled the pregnant, nest-obsessed rabbit in a ring of sand.

The Kazekage moodily glanced over his shoulder, "Why did it take you so long to get changed?"

"I apologize for the mess she made." Haku contritely plucked up his rabbit, "I can replace—"

Gaara held up a hand to interrupt him, "It's fine. Just get her away from here. Until the destructive urges pass."

Naruto was chuckling, "Won't be too much longer now, I'm guessing. Are you taking Pua with you?"

"I am. I'll probably need her on this mission…and I expect she can handle it." Haku said with dubious certainty as he looked Pua in her whiskered face, as if to ask: Can you? Jiraiya snickered disbelievingly from behind him.

"You really can't stay any longer?" Naruto tried to weasel out additional quality time with Haku.

"Not without risking my entry to this auction, and Zabuza would be hideously uncooperative and belligerent if I did." Haku forecasted.

"How is that different from any other day?" Gaara asked. Without looking, he raised his hand to accept a silent high-five from Jiraiya.

The sigh that came from Haku could have propelled a sailboat. The gaggle proceeded towards the village gate together, chattering about was on their agendas for the next time they met.

Jiraiya tossed in a cryptic footnote for Haku, "Oh, did I mention—? You ought to be on the lookout at this thing, uh…I know I said Keiseki House is chock full of unsavory types, but you might run into a friend there." Jiraiya smiled, "A friend of mine."

Gaara and Naruto exchanged wary looks while Haku canted his head, hoping to extract more information, "Which friend?"

"You'll know this friend when you meet 'em. If you make it look like you're deliberately in search of someone, then that might be counterproductive…Let him come to you. I gave him the head's up." Jiraiya explained, "I never had any intention of letting you traipse into a lion's den solo just because Zabuza demanded it like a whiny bitch. If anything goes haywire, you'll have some extension of help."
"I appreciate that, Sensei." Haku gave his master a small bow when they stopped at the entrance of the village gate. From a sentinel post above on the gate, Temari drifted down after sighting them.

"O-kay." Naruto loudly expelled a burst of anxiety, stepping forward to pull Haku into a hug, "Don't do any dumb stuff that requires rescuing. You hear me? Also…come back soon…" His smile tilted between joy and heartbreak.

"Please try not to worry, Naruto. I've gotten good at infiltrating dangerous places." Haku assured him with a squeeze, and he moved to Gaara who was dawdling on the periphery, "I know you're not quite so worried, Gaara."

"You do?" With his famously flat expression, Gaara insisted, "This is my worried face."

"So very fretful." Haku appreciated the Kazekage's subtle humor, and gave Gaara a warm scrunch about the shoulders as well. "Both of you be well, and stay far away from our enemies. Sensei," He said pointedly to Jiraiya, "Be on your guard."

"From now on, I am in a semi-permanent state of on-guardedness. More vigilant than even my last decade of paranoia and freelance investigations." Jiraiya gestured moodily, "I oughta have a funeral for my leisure time and carefree days, since those are dead and gone… But I guess you punks are worth it.” When he grinned, Haku smiled back at him.

Haku turned to pass through the behemoth walls of the gate where Temari was waiting. He could hear Naruto's mutters as he moved on: "I'm not choked up—I'm not!"

Temari fell into an easy step beside Haku, "I'll escort you close to the country border, but no further."

"You don't have to—"

"Sure I don't, but for my own peace of mind I will. Every time we part it's been so abrupt… there's no harm in dragging this one out."

"Ah, well I can’t disagree with that." Rather genial despite the occasion, Haku found himself smiling more. He noted Pua hopping in the gap between him and Temari, paws touching down gingerly over hot desert sand.

In companionable silence, they moved westward, further inland over gentle slopes that were being rearranged by intermittent, yawning winds. Haku would take a northwestern route to his destination, out of desert and into rocky, pine-swathed mountains.

His eyes darted to Temari beside him, whose churning energy was barely concealed beneath her otherwise impassive affect. He suspected that he could prompt her to share some of her cares.

"Temari…"

"Mm."

"You can tell me what you're thinking."

"I don't know if I should." Her eyes were trained forward when she spoke, "It's the first time I've thought about…things like this. I'd come off as a killjoy."

"You won't." Haku vowed, "I live with one of those, and he is absolutely superlative in his worst qualities. Whatever you have to say can't be as bad as what Zabuza routinely spews."
"Ha! Well…" She folded her arms and smiled, "I thought…what I want…might not be good for you. Might not work for you…"

"And what is it that you want?"

"For you to— eventually...stay. With me, here. But that's—"

"I intend to." Haku offered the plain truth.

"But," Temari repeated, "That's not necessarily going to make your life as a shinobi easy."

"Why would I care if my life is easy?"

"If you lived here, how would you use Water Ninjutsu?"

"I wouldn't." He found the simple answer digestible. She did not.

"What a waste! You can't be serious." Temari gestured at him like he had copped out, "That's a part of who you are! And you'd just squander it here in the desert...at most you'd do fun tricks in a sink or tub if you stuck around."

"That's fine. I would still be content to live with you and Gaara."

Temari was not taking kindly to his line of thinking, "Maybe you should stay in Leaf. So you don't have to sacrifice—"

"It doesn't make any material difference to me what kind of jutsu I am using. Not to sound conceited, but when I take the time to, I can develop new jutsu. I have before." Haku wanted to laugh at her angry face, "Why do you think that trade-off is so terrible?"

"When Gaara lived in Leaf, he couldn't use the full scope of his powers."

"He was still perfectly happy. And capable." Haku could testify.

"But when he came here, it was different. Everything was at his disposal, and he could be a Kage. Considering that he was literally in his element."

"Temari, forgive me, but this is a trivial concern."

"Think of what you could be, elsewhere." She suggested, hands pointing out the dry barrens all around them.

"I don't want to." Haku turned his chin up, "I have no anxiety about what it costs to have a life with you. Were you worried about that?"

Temari gave no response, stewing in silence.

He let the quiet persist. It wasn't as if he couldn't understand where she was coming from: that it could be considered unnatural to immigrate to a place where one of his elemental natures was scarce. Not that he would let that become a disadvantage; Haku had since learned to depend on other skills. But, he supposed, maybe Temari had thought further ahead. If she had entertained the idea of children— and a father to them he might someday be, how could they be taught if they dwelled in the desert, if the Hyōton were passed down to them?

It felt ridiculous to think of such a thing. That likely was not what she wanted, or was even remotely what Temari was trying to infer by this conversation. Haku glanced down to his rabbit loping beside
hikesh as they hiked, ‘You’ve made me think of such strange things now, Pua. I never thought you’d put me in such a predicament!’

Haku fished for other possible concerns Temari had, "If that were the only thing I would have to renounce while in Suna…it would be a pittance to pay. To be with you." He could tell she was watching him from the corner of her eye, "To have to travel, conduct secret missions, and be away from you…well. That's much more difficult, and that's the price I'm paying now."

She turned her face away as her cheeks pinkened, "Nice of you to say that…"

"It's true."

"Though you might just…hate living in Suna. It's not relaxing. Have you ever had to rush home before a sandstorm rolls in, and Gaara's not around to stop it? Gotten stuck in one?" Temari aired some of her complaints, "How about when there's a food or resource shortage? And water rations are required, meaning that even if you stink after a mission, and the council declares an emergency cap on daily limits—sometimes you can't bathe. Plus, every other place you'd like to be is a two day's journey at minimum, even the Tide Village."

"Ah." He was nodding, "Where is the part where you tell me something that changes my mind?"

Temari balked at him.

"Every village has its pros and—"

"My dad would've disliked you." Temari imagined, "Not that it matters what a dead man thinks. But I swear he haunts the house, and if you lived with us he might—"

Haku gave his head a shake and listened as Temari circumlocuted her actual fears. He tried to reason with her, "Your-? Haunting? Temari, that's nonsense, and if it happens to be true, what on earth would stop us from living in a place of our own?"

"I'm just—"

"Why not tell me what actually makes you think…" Haku leveled his gaze with hers, "It wouldn't work?"

Again, Temari was not very prompt with a response as she wrestled with whatever was rankling at her. They scaled a tall outcrop of basalt and stopped at the peak. Temari waffled for a time before looking at him again, "I…just haven't started to believe that you actually want to."

He smiled softly, "Feel free to start."

"If it were that easy-! I…still…don't know for certain that you'll be back. That you won't end up in a ditch, bash your head and forget all of this, get captured or blackmailed—that you might find someone you like better." Temari confessed the cynical ideas that had been dogging her, "Because of what you're doing, I've got to be a little skeptical of everything. You burned me once and I can't forget that. I wouldn't do that to you…I don't think I could."

Haku's face fell as the words sunk in.

"I've never needed to fall back on anyone thanks to my dad's stubbornness—that quality rubbed off on me. I always looked out for Kankuro and my team, and now Gaara…I've led squads and I answer to councils. If things get fucked up, I have to deal with it on my own." She blinked her eyes hard, refusing to cry, "If I could choose who I want to catch me when I finally go down, I want it to be
you. So say that's what I choose. Am I as good as caught? Is this where I put my trust even when it is one of the hardest things for me, to do that?"

Between their feet, Pua had slumped sideways and begun eating some mystery desert grass. Temari held Haku's stare and watched him process the mental sledgehammer she had deployed. She drew the line in the sand here. If he bungled it, or expressed any doubts of his own, Temari expected that she may never see him again, or something close to it. After having laid all of her cards on the table like this, she had promised herself she would only do it once.

Haku's fingertips slid beneath her hands, enfolding them in his own as he spoke, "You are all I need."

'Ah shit, he didn't bungle it.' She puffed her cheeks slightly, now so sentimental that she was almost sick of herself. It had been a gradual transformation, converting her into sappy dreamer with a tough-looking exterior. Wow, Temari thought. She actually ate this romantic hooey up.

"I've had plenty of time to learn what I don't need." Haku clarified, thinking back to when he had rashly parted from Gaara's group when they had originally set out for Suna years back, "Though if I'd listened to you from the start, it would have saved us much time."

"Thank you for finally admitting that." She wore a satisfied smirk.

"Oh, not at all. I should be thanking you for humoring such a stupid person."

"Heh! You wouldn't be the first one I've put up with." Her mood improved.

He bent to kiss her and Temari angled herself into him, thrilled to put her hands on him, and that he was dressed like some faraway land's prince. Hake palmed the side of her face and relished the feeling for as long as he could. She could have confidence in him. He could hand-deliver every single reason she needed to be sure that he would return, and hold her, kiss her just like this. She could fall and never know the ground, because he would be there.

"I will…" Haku promised her, "Be back as soon as I can. Or rather, it would be quicker and more efficient to meet you in the middle."

"The Tide Village is perfectly suited for a casual date night."

"Didn't you say you have a vacation property there?" Haku recalled.

Temari nodded, "I already put a slip with the address in your travel bag. Of course, I would've told you to burn it if you'd messed this up."

"I am not," He kissed her, then continued, "Messing anything up."

"Mnn." She believed it and tilted her head up for another kiss.

The greatest misfortune of the moment was that the day would not wait, and Haku had to move on and reach the cover of foothills beyond the Land of Wind by nightfall. He set out after fond parting words and lingering touches. Temari took flight on her fan, following Haku for a distance as her shadow trickled on the ground beside his own. Near the border, she turned 'round as she had said she would.

And Haku's heart felt so light and free through dark footpaths and valleys, climbing up and up. His rabbit was a sheen of white on the first mountain's spine, and his own spirit a glowing blue.
It was a full day's journey before the towering peaks and faces of the Land of Mountains crowded the skyline.

Autumn cold had set in fully here, frosting the ground and dimming the sky above tall, murky conifers. Streams rolling down divots in rock were ruthlessly chilled to the touch. Haku camped beside a rushing brook overnight, huddled up with his rabbit, and was woken by a sunrise that pierced the dreary landscape, assailing his eyelids. He refilled a canteen, checked his inventory of valuables for sale, secured weapon holsters, and then reviewed his instructions.

'It is key that I do not give vital information about myself in a place like this. And Zabuza said it would be inevitable that people will ask.' He recalled as he hiked on, 'Those attending this auction are incredibly well-connected with contacts and information channels. However unlikely it is that someone recognizes something about me…I have to ensure that no one knows what village I am affiliated with.' The premise seemed easy enough. He looked so totally other at the moment, and could act as ambiguously as he wished. The trick was, hopefully, not encountering anyone he knew at this event.

Jiraiya had advised, 'If you see or sense Orochimaru there, leave. I don't care if you walk out with the money or not. Don't use your Cursed Seal, obviously. Actually...don't use any Seals if you can help it.' And also, 'Try to stay away from the really foreign people. Some of them have more mercenary ambitions than most shinobi, and what's worse, you'll probably have no idea what they are until it's too late.'

He was no xenophobe, but Haku could not help but be rattled by such an assertion about the exotic folk he might encounter. What could they possibly want? Wasn't he going to this place to sell some heirloom jewelry and baubles to make a swift profit? 'If other transactions take place here, I don't want to know about it…'

Pua seemed to be in excellent health and kept pace very well over the final ridge. On the far side of a mountain, terraced from top to bottom with tree cover and gigantic, glacier-deposited stones…there was a glimpse of a magnificent estate. Between pine boughs Haku could see the genesis of a network of buildings so immaculately constructed that it seemed a mistake to place them in such difficult terrain. Sprawling, walled gardens with flowers that seemed sprung from dreams—copper and gold gilded roofs, replete with statues and enormous shachihoko…white stone, massive timber beams supporting a house that could fit an emperor and all of his court.

As Haku drew nearer, he could then see a few visitors climbing up the winding path from the mountain's bottom, proceeding to the front gate of Keiseki House. He too made his way there and instructed Pua, "Get past the retaining wall and then go to one of the gardens. Wait for me there, Pua. Do not attract anyone's attention, alright?" His rabbit obediently did as she was told, disappearing into the bramble of the forest.

Stepping lightly down the slope, Haku finally arrived at the entryway of the estate, and was acknowledged by a well-dressed greeter, "Good morning, sir. Are you here for the exhibition and auction? If you did not reserve in advance, and intend to sell any merchandise today, please follow the signs to our appraisers' office. They'll help set a starting price and confirm the authenticity of your goods."

"Thank you." Haku then asked, "What time does the auction begin?"

"You're quite early! The exhibition begins just after noon with a banquet and refreshments. The auction is scheduled for 4:00 this afternoon."

Haku thanked the greeter again before moving on over a cobbled walkway hedged with flowers,
ficus, and fruit trees. As prospective buyers moved leftward up a staircase into the building proper, Haku followed a directory towards a ground-floor office on the right, entering on that level to find servants scurrying about the place. A man in a suit spied him from across the room, and beckoned with his hand. Haku crossed the lavish space to a counter equipped with lamps, velvet trays and delicate tools. He was taken off-guard to be greeted by a handshake, as opposed to a traditional bow.

How are you today, good sir?

Ah. Oh gosh. What was the business language here again? Haku kept his breathing steady as he realized that he could not understand the appraiser at all.

The suited man detected Haku's reluctance and then tried again in Nihongo, "How are you today, good sir?"

"Oh! Very well, thank you."

"I apologize. Many of our vendors speak Hanwen at this event." The man adjusted soft gloves on his hands, "How can I help you? What sort of product are you offering today?"

And on that cue Haku presented the remaining treasures that Zabuza had stolen from a rich dignitary in the Land of Water. If the appraiser, who introduced himself as Kunizo, found the items at all suspicious, nothing in his face or actions suggested it in the slightest. He methodically turned the pieces over in his hands one by one, examining each with a glass eye piece, searching for identifiers like creator, age, metal, geography, occasionally jotting notes onto a pad.

After what felt like fifteen minutes or so, Kunizo tapped numbers into a calculator and then scratched totals down. He worked with virtually no verbal feedback to Haku. When the appraiser picked up an ornate collar necklace, he gave a pressing look to Haku, "This is hard to price."

"It is?"

"It could be priceless, in today's market. It may be worth keeping, as this will only increase in value over time. Jade is extremely valuable and sought after, and you won't see many pieces at the exhibition nearly this fine. These here?" Kunizo pointed out smaller stones set in the metal with a tweezer, "These are sapphires. And here, diamonds." He pointed out the row of inlaid gems, "This gold is a high carat weight, and the mix of green jade with mutton fat jade is guaranteed to draw every eye here. You could ask whatever you wanted for it and be sure to sell…"

"How much for the rest?" Haku wondered, as if he had any reason to keep an heirloom piece.

"This here," Kunizo motioned over a velvet tray of jewelry he'd examined, "Altogether, could fetch between 500,000 and 800,000 Ryo. Offers may go slightly higher. I have each piece priced and they will be categorized accordingly on the exhibition floor. This tea cup…” He motioned to a jade teacup, "Could fetch 600,000 by itself, considering its age and condition, but there are many others available like it today. The necklace…” Kunizo exhaled, thinking, "15 million Ryo, easily. In the future, much more."

"I intend to sell it today."

Kunizo smiled, "Not interested in an investment, I see. But that's well enough, considering its rarity and exquisite craftsmanship. This bracelet," He pointed out, "Is counterfeit. It is not permitted to be sold here."

Haku smiled and extended his hand, "Thank you for telling me. I can give it to a young girl at home who would like it."
Kunizo returned the fake bracelet to Haku, sorted the rest, and hovered his pen over the pricing sheet, "Your name, sir?"

"…Yuki Haku."

Kunizo took down the details, "Selling as a proxy, or yourself?"

"Myself." He could not implicate Zabuza.

"Very good. The auction will begin promptly at 4 o'clock. Would you like to make these items," Kunizo indicated the tray of less valuable jewelry, "Available on the exhibition floor? Should you set a maximum price that is met or exceeded, you can permit an automatic sale my office will transact for you. The jade cup and necklace are better suited for auction bidding."

"I would prefer that, yes." It sounded like the best way to save time.

"Very well." Kunizo finally smiled a fake, close-mouthed smile that almost reflected goodwill. He seemed to have picked up on the fact that Haku was not the handshaking type, and instead bowed slightly, "Please follow that staircase at the edge of the room to our exhibition upstairs, Yuki-san. It won't be completely set up until noon, but please make yourself comfortable in our atrium or gardens if you wish. An attendant will bring you anything you ask, if you wear this." He handed Haku an amber stone pin, "To indicate you're a vendor. They are treated with preference."

Haku bowed in kind, "Thank you, Kunizo-san." He fit the pin to the front of his vest and carried on upstairs.

How surreal. He had no idea that the politician in the Water Country who had been traveling with a pathetic excuse for a guard, could have the gall to carry such expensive valuables where a shinobi like Zabuza might stray into his path. Though that dignitary had escaped with his life after being ambushed and robbed, he had probably wept every night since. That's what Haku imagined, at any rate.

To his surprise, it was already quite crowded on the palace's main level, and it was only morning. Many guests must have arrived days in advance and secured accommodations. Haku supposed those must have been more high-profile visitors.

He tried not to whip his head wildly around to take in his surroundings. The ceilings must have been 15 meters high, with two levels above the main floor railed off so that guests could look down on the atrium he stood in. Skylights poured morning sun into the space.

Flowering trees grew from recesses in the wood floor, and a large koi pond with charming masonry and stonework had gathered many delighted guests who tossed feed into the water. He reminded himself he was still indoors, though so many natural aspects had been incorporated in the home's interior. Haku calmly surveyed from the edge of the atrium, mapping the wood beams, terraces, stairways, exits and corridors in his mind's eye.

Had he not been warned that awful people would be present, Haku might've assumed this to be a glamorous, enchanting venue. It was unlike anything he had ever seen in great shinobi nations.

On the north side of the atrium, he found huge wooden doors into which mythological creatures had been carved. Beyond that was the sprawling exhibition hall, filled with glass cases of all sizes, demarcated by the types of items being sold. Haku peeked in but did not enter. He could see antiques, jewelry, historical artifacts, texts, books and scrolls; ostentatious, rich costumes set on full body mannequins—all facets of aristocratic bliss and indulgence. He slipped away from the heavy
doors and crossed back toward an exit, where gardens awaited beyond the stone steps.

Haku marveled at birds perching overhead in the eaves of the roof, narrow beams and nestboxes deliberately placed there to house them. Peafowl roamed without borders. Finches, cotingas, and topaz swooped to land on garden keepers stooped in flowerbeds, pestering them for treats. When he glanced to a fence on his left that supported fronds of wisteria, a modest, brown lyrebird perched there and observed him. Haku stared at it and then gaped when the bird reproduced the sounds of a koto, the first movement of a song it had heard and committed to memory. It was a pure mimic of the instrument.

'This is absolutely…' Haku wandered around and thought, 'The most gratuitous place in existence.'

He kind of loved it.

It catered to his appreciation of nature and the arts. Fine pottery and sculpture abounded. The building itself was a masterpiece. By God, if he hadn't vowed to live a humble life, he might've worked his way into this circuit if he had known of it.

Being born to impoverished farmers had certainly lowered his chances of ever seeing a place like Keiseki House, but Haku supposed all odds could be conquered, even those worse than his own. He had even thought for only a moment that he ought to keep the priceless jade necklace for himself, and to return one day when it had doubled in value.

That, of course, ignored the short-term consequences of electing such an investment. The lack of a sale could mean less funding to attract the rebels Zabuza was desperate to recruit. A lack of shinobi forces meant less of a chance of retaking the Mist Village, and ousting the Akatsuki there. To that end, such a choice could negatively impact Gaara and Naruto.

So Haku had only been tempted for a moment, and the idea passed when he thought of the people he loved and what threatened them.

He spent the morning in the wilds of the garden, silently reuniting with Pua there as she lounged in the clover beds, gorging herself. Watching his voracious pet made him hungry too.

Haku requested something for a meal, anything simple like rice and fish, but nothing was simple here. He was led by a servant to a veranda that overlooked the garden and its circus of birds, and at a small tea table he was served a pretentious meal that even a daimyo could get flustered over. Haku savored every bite as he watched two peacocks in the garden challenge each other, fanning their tails in an attempt to curry favor with a neighboring peahen. Shortly after noon, he was refreshed, delighted, and prepared to explore the estate more. The exhibition was underway.

Haku left through the vast garden's opposite end, into another sector of the house where he discovered a lofty room outfitted with the most boggling formations of stones and minerals that could be extracted from the earth. Gigantic quartzes of all colors as tall as human beings, some unrefined and others polished. Obelisks of striped onyx stood nearly the height of the ceiling. Agates, citrine, lazulite, azurite, rutile of all sizes, bismuth crystals grown to uncanny volumes… Polished faces in petrified wood, endless rows of fossils, geode halves that could house a grown person, if one chose to climb inside the jagged crystal. Truly, nothing was simple here. It was all too much. No normal collector would know what to do with such superfluous mineral curiosities.

Keeping to himself as collectors fawned over the displays, Haku circled the room twice, choosing his favorite stones and gems before noticing a corridor perpendicular to the mineral exhibit. No one had come from or ventured into the hall, though signs pointed out that the show continued into the passageway. He treaded through the corridor and immediately noted how it was unlit. Devoid of
lamps or windows. It was completely enclosed, and as he ventured further he realized why.

Shortwave ultraviolet lamps were positioned all about the rectangular room Haku arrived in, setting the fluorescing specimens within aglow. A dozen pedestals on one side of the room displayed impressive, spherical stones polished to a high gloss, radiating different colored light. On the room's opposite side, spheres of immense size were seated on a dais, emitting a jade-green glow. It was as if celestial bodies had been pulled down from the sky to be put for sale.

"Quite something, aren't they?" A voice came from the dark.

Haku was puzzled when he squinted around, unable to spot another occupant. Rather than assume he was contacted by a ghost, or that he'd gone mad, he replied politely, "These are magnificent! What are they?"

A presence appeared beside him, setting Haku's hairs on end when he got an explanation, "These are Yemengzhu, luminous pearls that came from a mine in the Kingdom of Han."

"Perhaps a misnomer? These are no pearls." Haku pointed out, trying to discretely get a look at the other guest.

"Right. This is fluorite and it will glow unassisted in the dark. My family has always said that simply touching it will bless you with years of luck." The voice sounded amused, "You should touch this one if you plan to sell anything. You'll make a better sale."

"You think so?" Haku patted the giant orb, "Isn't there a story that says dragons gather these?"

"There is and they do." The voice chuckled, "I am a dragon."

Surprised again, Haku turned to see the specter in the dark and beheld a man about his age, dressed in a fine tang suit. He was faced away from Haku, eyes settled on the largest sphere, arms folded. He was smiling.

"I don't suppose dragons can afford these, then?" Haku quipped.

A laugh in reply, "Hardly. What my parents have at home is small and cherished. Why would I waste 205 million Ryo on Yemengzhu so preposterously large—? When the smaller is just as lucky?"

"I would think the same." Haku agreed.

"There's more exhibition to see. I've been here a few times before, but the glowing hall is what I gravitate to." The young man said, "Care for a tour? Mister—?"

"Haku."

"This way, Haku-san." He moved to the far end of the room, "I am Huo."

Haku smiled in fright and simultaneously began to sweat more. No, surely not that Huo, the one his friends had spoken of? Not the dangerous one that used Tao Arts. Not that one.

Out in the light, passing through the gem hall once again, Huo stopped at a table of jaspers that came in every color of the rainbow. He then took a closer look at Haku, assessing him, and his narrow eyes widened slightly, "Hanbok."

"I didn't think it was too formal." Haku reasoned playfully, trying to be as friendly as possible. So his odd attire had become a conversation starter. Wonderful.
When Huo spoke again, it was in another language, *What family are you from? Do you speak Joseon-mal?*

"Ah…” Haku was crestfallen by the codeswitching, "I don't understand."

"Dressed like that, I thought you were from Joseon. I don't speak that language so well. Hanwen is my mother-tongue." Huo explained, "You are from neither Han or Joseon, nor Sindhu, no…not with your look." He scrunched his face to make a determination, "Your Nihongo is perfect."

"Perhaps because I," Haku moved down the table, "Am from Nihon."

Haku heard a clatter as a piece of jasper was picked up from a tray, and he detected a spike of movement. He turned quickly and caught the rock thrown at his head.

Huo was startled that he hadn't knocked the pretty boy in the hanbok senseless. His mouth pulled into a half-smile, "Ninja."

"Huo-san, has anyone ever told you it's rude to throw goods that are for sale?" Like a scolding mother, Haku dared take Huo's hand and placed the jasper in it, "Put that back or they'll call you a thief."

Oddly, Huo did just that. He followed Haku as they proceeded through the gem exhibit to the next, where large art installations were arranged in a gallery.

"Several of these are my father's." Huo noted, eyeing the submissions of contemporary, three-dimensional art, "My adoptive father. I wondered if he would be here today, but he is selling through an agent again."

"Do you not see him often?" Haku examined the sculpture; some kind of beautiful, polished resin of transparent to opaque white tones, forming a human eye. Within the pupil (a hollow feature) was a butterfly carved from crystal. Haku could not think about what the art was trying to convey, but rather, what did it say about the man who made it? And what his son thought of him?

"It's been a long time." Huo acknowledged, "I imagine they would like me to come home, after I've been gone for so long…but my obligations no longer allow me to see my parents in Iwagakure."

"If they are involved in the arts, is that why you are here? Hoping to see them?" Haku guessed.

Huo smiled ruefully at the observation, "They are also collectors. But I didn't have much of a hope that they'd travel this far. Besides, I have other business to attend to here."

"I am sorry to hear that you must stay parted from them." Haku could actually lend a bit of sympathy, "I know how difficult that can be."

Huo raised his brows, "Oh? Can you relate to…being part of a despised clan?"

Haku was not sure how to answer that as they walked beneath an archway made entirely of seashells.

"That your birth parents believed things that were fundamentally wrong, and refused to recant those beliefs. Then when they were killed, you were an infant spared from bloodshed, and given to a childless, affluent couple who were overjoyed to have you?" Huo continued to stare at his father's eye sculpture, "And that you loved them deeply, but knew the sins of your birth parents weighed on you, so you agreed to atone for them? And learned from a master who showed you the true way?"
"...no, I...can't relate to those particulars."

"No? That you couldn't stop the witch who perpetuated those evils in your clan, stop her from returning life after life, or secure the weapons that could stop her? That she and her lackeys dishonored you? Tried to kill you? That you fought for your freedom and learned who your true friends are, in spite of it all?" Huo added, "And that you won't fail again?"

Like a deer in headlights, Haku stood there and understood why people were afraid of Huo.

"Then, Haku-san..." Huo treaded towards the westward exit, to a veranda outside of the house, "You don't know how difficult it was. At all."

When Haku did not initially follow, Huo was surprised. Haku thought it comedic. Did he not realize how he made other people feel? He seemed to be perfectly relaxed again, motioning for Haku to follow, "It's tea hour. Don't just stand there. There's no better tea in the world than what's served here."

How supremely odd it was to sit at a tea table with someone who swung wildly from mood to mood. Haku sat and made conversation, attempting not to say anything triggering or suggest that he understood Huo in some way, because clearly Huo didn't like that. They had an appreciation for the arts and history in common, which didn't require deeply personal information, thank goodness. And yes, the tea was an experience. They downed large pots of Dragon Well and Master Mountain Silver Needle teas consecutively.

Disregarding tact, Huo eventually asked, "Which clan are you from?"

"That's not something I feel at ease talking about in a place like this." Haku wanted to steer away from the subject. It wasn't his clan, after all. He knew he was descended from the Yuki clan, but they had no actual claim to him, and vice versa. Was there any use in explaining that?

"I am of the Sa Gou, the Sasagainu clan, as it's called here. Though my clan is virtually nonexistent, these days." Huo dangled his heritage as if to indicate there was no harm in doing so, though no one really believed that. He was just too cavalier about, well, everything, Haku figured.

"Is that right?" He delayed with a sip of tea.

Huo motioned to refill their tea cups, "Come now, don't be a coy tiger. If you have claws then reveal them. Shinobi need not hide who they are."

"It depends on the shinobi."

"You're not a native of Iwagakure. Not Kumogakure either, judging by your complexion."

"How can you be so sure?" Haku was bemused.

"I can be so sure. I am well versed and well-traveled."

"How unfortunate for me.' Haku thought.

"What do you think I care about such trifling information?" Huo scoffed, "If a Kamizuru clansman or descendant of the Senju sat here, what more would I do other than tell them to fuck off?" He reasoned, "And you are neither of those."

"I suppose...it would be announced at the auction anyway, since I am a vendor." Haku recalled, "Yuki is my family name."
There was a silence as Huo sipped tea and stared unseeing into the gardens, as if the name had dissipated into thin air and been wasted on him. Haku did not truly expect anyone to be familiar with such an obscure, reclusive clan anyway.

"No wonder." Huo muttered.

There was a moment in which Haku nearly went into full cardiac arrest, astonished that someone could actually recognize the name or perhaps know more about it. Know more than he did.

Haku probed carefully, "Oh, so you've heard of us?"

"Your situation is not so different from my own, then. From one member of a diminished clan to another." Huo acknowledged and added, "It would explain while you are here to sell goods. Times must be hard."

Haku nodded wearily in an attempt to play along.

"Those wars in Hidden Mist did the Water Country's clans no favors, yours least of all. Are you still nomads?"

Nomads! Haku wanted to exclaim, but he had to contain himself. "At present, yes." He supplied answers he hoped Huo could believe.

"What a shame. My comfort for the loss of your leader. I see you've been named after him. I suppose Kahyō took up the mantle in his place?" Huo began to drop names and again, Haku wanted to pitch a fit as he was presented with incalculably rare information.

"You know her?" Haku inferred Kahyō was a feminine name.

"Not very well. Her brother is that big man, Rahyō. We've met before. As far as I know, they are the only warriors in your clan brave enough to show their faces internationally." Huo smiled wickedly, "The rest are timid and talentless."

"Do you wish to insult me?" Haku cautioned him.

"I don't. It's curious to see someone young like you here. How were you trained? You must be… especially gifted." Huo supposed.

"To be homeless and scraping by to survive…I've learned that I have to relentlessly better myself."

"And that you did." Huo agreed.

Though he would've paid any insane price to do so, Haku could not keep the subject on the Yuki clan, try as he might. It was too treacherous to navigate conversation as if he knew them, and not give any hints to Huo that in fact he did not. Huo had only gleaned superficial information about the clan in his brief encounters with them, but the nuggets of information he shared made all of the difference in the world to Haku. He was named after the leader of the Yuki clan! He had relatives he could now name and search for. He could confirm the clan was transitory, most likely without a permanent residence.

'And what would it have taken...to actually wring this information out of Zabuza?' Haku thought darkly.

Conversation returned to their opinions on the mineral exhibit and the art gallery, and Huo suggested that Haku visit the vintage fashions gallery at least once before the auction was in full swing.
"Few here actually come for the gemstones, clothing or, really, any cultured exhibit that Keiseki House has to offer. It's sad." Huo sniffed, "Year after year there seems to be less interest. These rich fools care not for their roots or ancestry."

"Then what does capture their interest?" Haku wondered.

"The weapons." Huo stated simply, "Have you seen that exhibit? It's a disgrace. So small and specialized. The technology gallery too, enthralls them. All of modernity and the future excites them like schoolchildren— money burning a hole in their pockets."

Raising his brows, Haku noted, "I don't think I've seen those exhibits yet."

"No?" Huo clacked his cup down, "Let's go look. So you can see the absurdity for yourself."

They rose from the table to re-enter the building, moving eastward through doorways and corridors, bypassing the atrium and arriving at the most crowded gallery of all. Indeed, the displays were fewer as Huo had said. Only a single glass case contained what Haku considered relevant shinobi weapons. A few chokuto swords shined; hilts and guards inlaid with unnecessary gold and gems. Beside those were jian and rare assassination weapons more commonly found in the Kingdom of Han. Aside from those, there was nothing at all that a ninja could be interested in.

There were display stands on tables crowded with people, allowed to touch and examine whatever was for sale. Small devices controlled by tactile screens, lightweight in the hand. Huo lifted one to ridicule it.

Haku was dubious over the contraption, "What is that?"

"A mobile. They're all the rage in Orbis, Euroa, and Sindhu. Han and Joseon are producing these and advancing them, as all of society becomes obsessed." Huo roughly dumped the device back on its stand, "It's for civilizations that lack jutsu, and can't comprehend a division of shinobi who can communicate thoughts and orders through their minds. Or Seal complex ideas, physical matrices and energy for outcomes that," He jabbed his thumb at the mobile, "No little screen can perform."

"Well, shinobi are not the sort to proliferate in this world. They've kept to the great villages and lands of Nihon." Haku reasoned, "Other nations need to find ways to progress and improve themselves too."

Huo turned for the gallery's exit and reasoned, "They're all brainwashed. You'll see."

Haku wished to linger, "Huo-san, do you mind if I stay here a while to look around?"

"Do as you like. I have to meet with my master and prepare to bid for auction items." Huo bowed respectfully to him, "I appreciate your company today, Haku-san. Perhaps we will meet again later this evening."

Though it felt sort of wrong, Haku smiled at him, "Thank you for showing me around, Huo-san. Take care."

Once Huo had vacated the modern gallery he detested, Haku allowed himself to be more inquisitive about the world's technological offerings. He dithered over displays, poking his face between shoulder-to-shoulder crowds. The "tech" here, or so guests referred to it, was top of line as far as they were concerned. It wasn't like the cathode ray tube televisions that some shinobi villages had around, landline telephones that were gradually being introduced, or radios that ninja squads relied on (though those were advancing rapidly as well.)
This was something else. These communicated through transmissions, through air, faster than radio waves. These things were bright screens and convenience and a network of intelligence and communication that so far shinobi were oblivious to. Or perhaps not. Maybe some villages were aware of this tech, and wished to harness it?

Haku puzzled over a row of box-like machines that were sleekly designed, had few inputs and sparse blinking lights, internal fans whirring to keep them cool. "What are these?" Haku asked another guest.

The man chuckled at him, "Have you ever seen something like this? It's the newest hardware for servers. Something like 100 terabytes, my brother said."

"Terabytes." Haku repeated. He glanced around, wondering if there was material to review that actually explained all of this.

His drifting eventually brought him beyond the small and medium screens, past the recondite hardware and accessories, and to displays with curious products that could be handled. When Haku stopped at the standing table in a free space, he met eyes with another guest on the opposite side.

'…Rock Lee?!' Haku could not believe it.

No, he couldn't.

What the devil would Lee be doing in such a grandiose exhibition that did not overlap with his ambitions in any way? Haku made a quick determination he was not looking at Lee, however this person was in most every way the spitting image of him. The eyes and prominent brows, the dark hair, complexion and facial features, down to the physical frame and body type— though this man was most certainly older and was dressed to the nines. Furthermore, he'd noticed Haku wasn't blinking.

"…ēn…?" The man said uncertainly.

"Ah, I apologize." Haku reinstated his manners, "I just thought…I knew you from somewhere?"

"Maybe you do!"]The man was instantly cheerful, "If you noticed any new cinema posters, then maybe. I just wrapped my last shoot."

"A film star? Here?" Haku acted surprised but was not even remotely.

"Celebrity." The man corrected with a sparkling white grin, "Damn, I thought I wouldn't be recognized out here. Nǐ huì shuō Hànyǔ ma?"

To the best of Haku's knowledge, he'd been asked again if he spoke Hanwen.

"No, I don't."

"Méi wèn tí. You really don't know who I am?" The man pouted, "Just a vague thing, eh? Well I am much bigger in the west, so that's not unusual. Nihon has no taste at all."

"If that were so, local nobles would not be throwing their money away in Keiseki House." Haku disagreed.

"Right, right!" The man laughed, "Then let me indulge and introduce myself as an ordinary man, then, to a non-fan. The name's Wan Kam." Again, Haku had to deal with an informal hand shake as opposed to bowing, but he was quickly getting used to it.
He replied in kind, "I'm Haku."
"Xìng huì, xìng huì!" He was very friendly, in spite of slipping in-between languages.
"Have you ever been to one of these exhibitions before, Wan Kam-san—?"
Wan Kam flicked his hands disdainfully, "No, no, no... honorifics... ugh, that's so stuffy. I won't be calling you Haku-san or whatever they say around here."
"Ah." This level of informality was weird, Haku thought. The whiplash could have been caused by speaking to Huo, who was very formal in his speech... while also being shockingly rude.
"Yeah, I've been here a few times." Wan Kam confirmed as he perused the display table, "Every other year or so, I like to come back here."
"It is an irresistible place." Haku agreed, "You're from the Kingdom of Han?"
"I am. I live and work there now, though I used to..." Wan Kam lifted an item from a display to turn it over in his hands, "Live in the Fire Country, for a short time."
Oh.
This was not a cosmic coincidence.
This person was probably related to Lee. Very closely related. Haku was sure of it.
Wan Kam flagged down a passing servant, "Ah! Xiǎojiě, qǐng gěi wǒ lāi yī bēi hóngjiǔ—" He amended his order when he considered Haku was present, "Èr bēi! Èr bēi hóngjiǔ. Xiè xie!"
The young woman nodded politely and scurried off, and Wan Kam explained, "I ordered us something to drink. It's afternoon now."
"You're too kind. I didn't need anything." Really, Haku thought, alcohol was not going to help him get through this.
"Don't be so polite." Wan Kam waved the display product in his hand, "Nice outfit. Are you from Joseon?"
"Thereabouts."
"I'm no good with Joseon-mal. There's plenty of people here who'll speak it, though." He changed the subject, "So! Have you come here to see these?" Wan Kam indicated the for-sale item in his palm.
"I can't say that I have. What is it?" Haku asked.
Wan Kam flipped his hand with ease and pressed the barrel to Haku's forehead, a sharp twinkle in his eye, "It's a pistol."
"A what?"
"A gun! To kill people with!" Wan Kam explained merrily, drawing the weapon back, "Much quicker than the old-fashioned weapons people use out here."
Haku rubbed the tender spot on his forehead, alarmed by Wan Kam's disregard for boundaries.
"Sorry, Haku. Didn't frighten you there, did I?"

"Ignorance shielded me." Haku admitted.

"Heh heh! Someone from Joseon who doesn't flinch at guns..." His smile grew shadowy, knowing, "Don't you try to fool me, young fella. I know what you are."

Haku was undaunted, "What am I?"

"A ninja, of course. I've met those types. Like I said, I was stuck in the Fire Country for a while."

Wan Kam spun the pistol in his hand, "Got out of that dump as soon as I had the chance..."

"Should you be toying around with that?" Haku now had a greater respect for the weapon.

"Nah, none of these are loaded on the exhibition floor. If you want to try them out you have to go downstairs to the firing range and be supervised. I like this model," Wan Kam explained, "I'll be buying it today. And another. Can't wait to see what else the auction has to offer..."

"Is this what people are interested in?" Haku tried to veil his disgust.

"Oh sure! That and the tech. It's funny because Nihon really doesn't have systems to support all of this stuff yet. Tch! As if they'd work on infrastructure while they're busy waging war with their shuriken and caltrops!" Wan Kam snorted with laughter.

Unwilling to even pretend to smile, Haku reserved his reply and let his eyes scan the room again. Maybe he would glimpse Huo and his associates, or find some reason to excuse himself.

"You know..." There was a lilt of caution in Wan Kam's voice, "You don't want to get near that one...Sasagainu Huo."

Haku gave Wan Kam an unimpressed look as the man played with a different model of firearm.

"Ha! I'm one to talk, right?" Wan Kam jokingly positioned the gun under his own chin, then set it down again, "I saw you come in here with him. Guess he doesn't seem any more threatening than the rest of us...but I've heard a thing or two. Huo's a fanatic. He believes in some pretty crazy things."

"Such things were briefly discussed." Haku granted.

"Did he make you a believer?"

"There are few people in this world who make me believe in anything." Haku wagered, "And he isn't one of them."

The attendant returned with two glasses of wine, and Wan Jam gratefully accepted them. He passed a glass of the red vintage to Haku, raising his cup in a small toast, "Then bless the few you believe in! And damn the many you see straight through." He took a gulp after that while Haku hovered, unsure of how to interact with someone he saw little reason to trust.

"Huo isn't wrong about everything he says. I've overheard him years back, prattling on to his companions and whatnot. The Tao is a part of this world, and he does understand its path and purpose in the Three Realms, the convergence of spirituality and karma..." Wan Kam acknowledged, "And it's true that some folks can take advantage of Tao Arts...and cultivate powers or immortality. But the balance of the Tao will exact a price for those things. I bet he and his pals hate paying the steep prices for the gifts they so badly want to have."
"Are Tao Arts inherent to some people…only a privileged few?" Haku asked a question that he'd thought of back in Suna, "Or is anyone able to learn?"

"Wouldn't you like to know?" Wan Kam smiled above his wine glass.

"It'd be silly not to ask."

A titter of squeals and excitement interrupted them, and Haku sidestepped a gaggle of young women who had spotted Wan Kam and rushed up to him, fawning over him in Hanwen. His debonair cooing seemed to placate as the group ordered themselves, throwing up v-signs with their fingers to pose for photos. Some wished for autographs and some exchanged contact numbers. One particularly attractive girl lagged behind her peers as Wan Kam whispered something in her ear, and Haku did note how her eyes flicked to the egress of the room where accommodations for guests were located. She had been instructed where to appear that night, he supposed.

Once the girls had moved on, Wan Kam came to stand beside Haku, facing away as he clapped his hand on the young man's shoulder, "Listen up, Mr. Shinobi…"

Haku could detect the man's phony congeniality evaporating.

"I think you and all of your kind are trash. And the people who live in your ramshackle shinobi villages are trash too. You can repeat the cycle of war, ceasefire, rebuilding, and fucking it all up until the end of time while the rest of this planet moves on without you. I learned that long ago. I wait for no one." Wan Kam seemed joyful in his condescension, "You're not worthy of Tao Arts and you'll never learn. You're as pretty as you are dumb, so next time, you swat the gun out of the other man's hand, got it? Bèndàn."

When he patted Haku's shoulder again, Haku batted his hand away, hatred creeping into the soft lines of his face.

"Ha! What an expression. The sneer of a true non-fan. Been a while since I last saw that…" Wan Kam swirled wine in his glass and sauntered away, "Don't you dare fuck up my evening with your shinobi nonsense."

Haku walked calmly out of the gallery, down an attached corridor towards a far garden exit. He picked up speed to pitch the drinking glass out of an open window and into greenery. Flushed from his ears down to his neck, Haku simmered in anger. What a poisonous man.

How? How could such a person be related to Lee? Or be divided from him? Wan Kam was a product of affluence and drama, instead of sparsity and martial discipline, in Lee's case.

The foot traffic of guests began to flow towards the interior, bound for the auditorium where the auction was to take place. Gradually, Haku worked his way there, but could not stomach the prospect of being seated near any of the people he had met earlier. He stood near the back of the room to observe. The auctioneer at the front podium was robotic with his smiles and introductions, thanking sponsors and partners, and leading off with the sale of a gigantic, flawless diamond displayed in a case. It was also projected on a screen behind the podium.

Frantic bids began, curious sign language and bobbing cards directed the auctioneer's attention, while vendors and non-participant guests stayed on the peripheries to watch. The diamond, and many fine gemstones featured after it, sold for a scandalous sum, and numbers seemed to blur together as new items were offered. Old literary works, books, and texts fetched impressive bids. Those offerings were followed by an ancient urn adorned with historical paintings and poetry, various screens with classical artwork on each face, modern and antique master paintings, impressionistic sculpture.
Indescribable, small technologies whose function Haku was uncertain of were also hot-ticket items. Then a sequence of precious jade ornaments, pottery, and other items were introduced. The collar necklace Haku had put up for sale was brought out in due course.

"This piece is estimated to be less than one hundred years old, and possesses stunning cut diamonds and sapphire embellishments. The green and mutton fat jade incorporated in this necklace have no rival that can duplicate such exquisite beauty. Originally crafted in the Kingdom of Han, this piece has called Nihon home for some time now…" The necklace was briefly described before the auctioneer announced, "Bidding will begin at 15 million Ryo. Do we have fifteen—? Ah, thank you. Sixteen—?"

The numbers ticked up and gave Haku a high, half shocked that bid cards were being raised to signal interest. Could anyone tell this was an ill-gotten piece of jewelry? Did no one care? How many other items here were stolen? Haku began to wonder. Bids exceeded 21 million and began to slow.

"Thank you. Do we have twenty-two? Twenty-two for this magnificent work?" The agent fished for a higher price, scanning those gathered with beady eyes, "Is there— ah!" He noticed a single bid card rise up, which Haku zeroed-in on as well. It was Huo who making the offer. Haku's stomach did petrified flips.

"Thank you, young sir! Twenty-three?" The auctioneer continued, "An offer of twenty-three? Thank you!" He acknowledged a man who seemed to hesitate, but his offer was trounced when a woman raised her card, "Ah! Twenty-four, thank you ma'am. Do we have twenty-five? Anyone here for twenty-five?" Bidding had halted entirely, "Going once, is there twenty-five? Twice…and— sold. Thank you!" The woman in a cape adjusted her fur collar, dithering as her companion leaned over to whisper congratulations.

Immediately afterward, the jade cup Haku had brought was also sold quickly for 700,000 Ryo. And that was that. He had accomplished his task as promised and maybe in those moments, far away in the Land of Water, Zabuza's palms started to itch now that he had become a richer man. Haku slipped silently from the auditorium to get air in the atrium, where crowds were slightly less dense than they had been.

He flagged down an attendant and requested a glass of water. Nearby on a bench beneath a mango tree that grew between slats of the wood floor, Haku sat down and gathered his thoughts. 'I think I can return to the appraiser's office for payment. I don't know how long that will take, but I'll leave as soon as they money is in hand.'

He considered again how Zabuza would feel about this, 'He never did care about getting rich, now that I think of it. He's never used money to secure himself luxuries or shelter. Not that that'd be very wise, considering his wanted status.' Haku concluded, 'If this plan works…and we do secure the cooperation of rebels that have been supporting Terumi Mei…what will his life be like afterward? I know what I want for myself. But maybe Zabuza will pursue wealth and an easy lifestyle after all the trouble he's gone through. He even told me he doesn't know exactly what to do, once the goal is accomplished.'

Really, Haku thought, Zabuza would make a terrible rich man. He'd probably forget to buy himself a home and just spend money on prostitutes incessantly.

A different server stopped by Haku and bowed in greeting before extending her hand, "Good evening. A gentleman asked me to give this to you."

Puzzled, Haku reached out and accepted a small, velvet pouch. She departed before Haku could ask any questions.
"What in the world…?" Haku mumbled to himself as he fiddled around, opening the pouch and finding it to be empty. He prodded and flattened it to make entirely sure, but indeed, he'd been given an empty sack. "Is this an insult?" He frowned to himself. What was the purpose? Was he missing another cultural nuance here, so that Wan Kam could call him bèndàn again?

On a whim, Haku turned the pouch inside out and discovered characters embroidered in the fabric. The words read: Make this flat and then fold it in half, then in half again. Squash it in your left hand…and then see what happens!

Certainly this was a joke. Just so some mystery person watching him could observe as he made a fool of himself, following nonsense instructions. But Haku's gut instinct did not quite agree. There didn't seem to be any kind of shinobi Sealing technique or otherwise on the pouch…but there was an intention present. Not quite malicious, and not quite trustworthy. Haku folded the velvet bag as instructed and squeezed it in his fist. When he opened his hand again— his skin could tell first— the bag had become something else. A piece of cardstock, no larger than the bag had been.

He felt a little nauseous. He hadn't imagined it. He had performed a magician's trick, made ever the more wild when Haku flipped the card and read the words on the reverse side: Huge fruit bowl.

'There is NO WAY,' Haku reaffirmed as he glanced around, 'One object just BECOMES something else. Material and all. And the words! What on earth— if it were POSSIBLE, it may as well have been a detonator for a bomb.' He flushed his head space with chakra in the hope a Genjutsu had caught him unawares, but no. He was untampered with. Haku squeezed the business card between the pads of his fingers, searched for any hint of velvet. It was well and truly paper. How could his perceptions betray him this way?

When his eyes fell upon the banquet area, Haku recalled the fruit bowl message. It so happened the banquet was abundant with produce. He stalked over to the dining area, shoulders tensing, and stopped once the large fruit bowl in question came into view. It was situated on an oak table banquette, and a lone man sat at there, his face turned downward, attention fixed on a mobile-type product. Haku had half a mind to ready senbon needles between his knuckles as he approached. The man seemed totally heedless. He had a cut up orange on a plate in front of him, and tapped away at the screen in his hands. Haku cleared his throat to get attention.

The man looked up and Haku beheld a rather handsome fellow, middling in age. He smiled so that the corners of his eyes scrunched with crow's feet, "Sit down, Haku."

Flabbergasted, he refused to sit, "I've had enough of people speaking to me as if we're old friends. Who are you?"

"Sit, good grief. I'm just trying to work this thing out. Gotta set up passwords and junk." The man typed with a tiny keyboard on the screen, "This'll be unsupported back at home, but I guess I can use it sometimes when I travel and have connectivity."

Warily, Haku sat on the bench but kept a wide berth from the occupant.

"Orange?" The man offered without looking up again.

Haku glanced at the plate and asked, "How did you…do that? With the pouch and card?"

"Hm. Well." The man put the mobile down and stretched his arms, "Firstly, it wasn't two objects I gave you. It was one."

"Don't be ridiculous."
"Really! Look!" The stranger lifted the mobile and pressed it between his palms flat-ways, obscuring it for a moment before it transformed into a round, white porcelain ornament. He set it down on the table, "Go on and touch it. It's real."

Haku dared not. He must've been losing his mind.

The man sighed, a bit disappointed. He lifted the now-ornament to work it between his hands again, changing it back into a mobile. "It's easy to fear the things you don't understand. But trust me, this is a pretty innocuous trick of mine. I would've gone a different route if I intended you any harm."

He tapped the central button on the mobile and lit up the screen. When he held it up for Haku to see, there was a cartoonish depiction of Gamabunta in the background, beneath a military time clock reading.

A gasp stuck in his throat as Haku realized who he was speaking to: one of Jiraiya's old students!

"You're…Namba?" Haku asked.

"Yes, I am Namba. Now kindly keep your voice down." He too lowered his volume, "It can hurt to say too much out loud here."

"I had no idea if— Sensei said that—"

"I know he gave you some kind of warning that you'd find a friend here. It would work out better if you weren't actively looking for me, because…I don't want anyone actively looking for me." Namba smiled pleasantly, "Though I am very pleased to make your acquaintance, Haku. Sensei wrote to me and told me all about you…and Gaara and Naruto, of course."

All of the sour feelings that Haku had accumulated from his social interactions that day began to flake away, replaced by elation and curiosity. A veteran! A contemporary of the Fourth Hokage! What should he say?

"It's excellent to meet you." Haku smiled back, "It's a relief. I thought that no one trustworthy could be found here."

"Generally, no. Our meeting would be the rare exception to that rule. As it is, I'm technically not here. Not on official business, anyway. The Raikage would never allow me to investigate a place like this." Namba explained, "But I am inclined to help Sensei and Tsunade-sama when I can keep quiet about it."

"Oh yes, Hidden Cloud. You live there." The information was drifting back to Haku.

"It hasn't been easy. I've been treated like some backstabbing traitor for nearly two decades, even after I married, had children, and completed missions in Cloud. I suppose they'll always suspect I want to run back to Konoha, but what for?"

Namba began chomping on orange slices, "I don't have to betray either of the villages I love to see them do better. Try as I might to promote that concept…some will nevertheless doubt me."

"Are you involved in diplomacy or councils-?"

"You bet. Heh heh! If you get into that kind of work, don't expect them to come up with nice nicknames for you. When it's my turn to speak, someone usually retorts with a "Leaf Scoundrel" or "Toad's Wart" or "Ass Clown" thinking I can't hear them chiming in from the back of the committee." Namba chewed more fiercely, "Such is life. I can tolerate it. It's when they try to insult my kids that my fangs come out." His eyes flashed dangerously.
"I've thought of doing something similar in my life. Settling down in Suna, possibly."

"Sensei mentioned that. A lateral transition in which an alliance already exists is bound to be easier."

Though it had taken a while, a frazzled-looking server darted over to Haku and presented him with a glass of water. He bowed apologetically, as if he'd lost track of Haku in the room after he'd wandered off. Haku sipped the drink gratefully as Namba ordered some sort of coffee beverage. After that, he re-thought his order, "I probably don't want all that acid in my stomach, but I just can't resist…"

"Namba, how did you change the mobile into an ornament?" Haku just had to know.

"Oh yes! Well…" He rubbed the corners of his mouth with his thumb, collecting orange rind bits, "You have a Kekkei Genkai yourself, so you understand what most needs to be understood. Though…my family has no history with this power. I'm the first to have it." Namba gestured at himself, "A genetic anomaly occurs and then…boom. New technique. If you think on it, most bloodline gifts resulted from mutations that were favorable, that, coupled with jutsu or affinities that clans already strived to work with. Then, those clans selectively bred to increase the frequency of characteristics they wanted to express. It's just much weirder when you're the first one expressing your anomaly. Or call it a quirk, if you're a Horikoshi fan."

"I can understand that." Haku agreed with the gist of it, "It doesn't seem like a fusion-type ability."

"It isn't. Not as far as I can tell…but tampering with the physical composition of things…by way of Yang element…very teensy increments I'm talking about here—it's something like that. I call it Revise." Namba filled him in, "I can't revise anything big. I can work on objects about a meter or less in length, but beyond that it wipes me out…or I can't get the composition right and it'll come out wrong. Super wrong. Most of the time I can't change things back when I mess them up that bad."

Eyes goggling, Haku listened about the strange ability Namba possessed.

"Also, I don't revise anything organic or alive. Ever." Namba nodded to himself, "Not to say that I couldn't change something small that was alive…but reconstituting matter even in tiny increments hurts something that can feel. I tried to revise a mouse once when I was younger…and when it started screaming I couldn't go on with it. I vowed never to try it again."

"That is fascinating." Haku yielded, "Even so…an ability like that could be incredibly valuable to espionage and object-focused missions."

Namba tried not to be too haughty about it, "I do tend to get top marks there. Everyone has a specialty."

"By that line of thinking…I might assume you came here for something." Haku reasoned.

"My, my, you are sharp." Namba was delighted, "Indeed. I wouldn't come here without a good reason. You saw the first segment of the auction, yes? Up until you made your own sales?"

"I did."

"Did you notice anything strange?"

"I…don't think so." Haku thought back on it.

"Good!" Namba said sunnily. He accepted his coffee drink when it arrived, nipping at the foam top before he went on, "What you and probably everyone else overlooked was a bid made during the
introduction of those old texts and scrolls. I don't think many people came here looking for ancient records or literature. They want jewelry, technology and weapons," He took a deeper sip of his drink and a line of foam clung above his lip like a mustache, "And the uninformed would never suspect a powerful weapon hidden within a scroll."

Haku pointed to his own mouth to indicate to Namba that he was now mustachioed. Namba removed the foam with a swipe of his tongue and went on, "A Tao Weapon was sealed in one of those scrolls."

Again, Haku endeavored not to shout in disbelief when he heard the news. He kept his voice down, "Did anyone know? Was it sold?"

"Someone certainly knew that Chōten was disguised among those old scrolls. No appraiser would be able to deduce exactly what it was, given its unique Sealing properties." Namba said quietly, "But Dintei Bi knew, and he was the one that won that bid. It's as good as his."

Now would not be an opportune time to scream, Haku thought, or overreact to the fact that he had been lollygagging about as a top-ranked criminal made a strategic move. He only knew so much, after all. Though he had heard enough from Jiraiya to know that Bihokokuni was not someone even a Kage would choose to oppose one-on-one, and that Bi likely colluded with Orochimaru and the Akatsuki to some extent.

"Yeah. 12 million Ryo bought Chōten, if you can believe it. And they mistakenly labeled it a Taoist text. Bi won that bid, but what he'll actually be picking up tonight is this—" Namba pulled a book from his tunic sleeve.

Icha Icha Paradise.

"Oh. O-Oh…" Haku was deeply concerned, "Did you—" He whispered, "Swap them?"

Something in Namba's grin echoed Jiraiya's mischief. Dear God it was true. He absolutely was a student of the Toad Sage, and Haku could not deny it after seeing such a dastardly smile.

Muffling a wild chuckle, Namba gulped his coffee again and then said, "I did it very carefully! I disguised Icha Icha as the scroll that Chōten was contained in—I had a good look at it in the gallery and could replicate it. As for the real Chōten…” He handed the smutty book to Haku, "I gave it a new dust jacket."

Haku muttered, "You do realize that if he finds out there will be pandemonium-!"

"No one is going to find out, Haku. What I revise does not convert back to its original form until 48 hours have passed. Or, if I've set instructions for it to change back. Or! Until I manually change its appearance. We'll be long gone by then."

"How does this not conflict with the object's original properties? Do you know for sure this scroll will still summon a weapon once it changes back?" Haku hissed.

"I am damn sure it'll work just as it's supposed to when it changes back."

"Then tell me this," Haku ventured further, "Will the copy of Sensei's book, as you've revised it, be able to produce a fake weapon? If Bi tries to summon from it?"

"Well…no…" He downed the last of his drink, "It'll be a dud."

"A summon won't work?"
"In reality it's merely a book. It won't have any Tao Arts or anything attached to it. It's just a lump of matter, linked to protocols I design." Namba twiddled his fingers for emphasis, "I can't create any kind of property that doesn't already exist in the object I affect. Certainly not a Tao Art! But it's a moot point, currently."

"So we need to get this out of here as quickly as possible." Haku concluded.

"That goes without saying." Namba concurred, "And I need you to transport it."

"No." Haku said flatly.

"I have no discreet means of getting this to the Hokage." Namba countered, "You do."

"I did not come here to engage in a high-risk retrieval, or provoke a ninja who is wanted dead by every nation!"

"Half the battle was showing up. Besides, Bi's cronies are probably going to notice when I leave this banquet and follow me out of here. It'll give you the chance to escape while their attention is on me."

Haku wondered, "Is this what Sensei had planned for me as well? To retrieve this?"

"He might've suggested it as an extra credit project for you."

"I will have his head." Haku took the fake book and concealed it in the layered folds of his vest.

"That's a good sport." Namba commended him, "I understand this is an imperiling inconvenience, but you have my word that Bi won't come after you tonight. Even if I have to face him myself, I'll make sure he doesn't follow you. Alright?"

"That doesn't necessarily make me feel better." Haku admitted, "You could be killed."

"Could be." Namba nodded.

"Why would you agree to this? You have a family waiting for you to return."

"I know..." Staring out into the atrium, Namba was quiet for a moment before he went on, "There are many problems...many loose ends, still dangling after the last war. Even the previous wars. And some of those things can rip the foundations right out from under the villages I care about. If Minato were still alive, I know he'd be working tirelessly to stop these things. Now that he can't, I know that I must. Because I'm his friend." Namba smiled sadly, "I had the chance to live and be happy. If I need to give that up, I know I have a good reason to."

Haku surveyed the room in silence. He'd have to wait for the lump in his throat to pass. He could relate to those feelings perfectly.

"Anyway, the auction is ongoing. Now is the time to move. Go to the appraiser's office and collect your money." Namba advised, "And then disappear. Many are going to be up all night partying here and celebrating their excess. While they do, you run and, hopefully, I run."

"Alright." Haku accepted the plan.

"Thank you." Namba breathed a long sigh, "I apologize for complicating things. I hope you know that the Hokage has been searching for this weapon for a long time. With it out of the markets, it means Bi will have none of the Tao Weapons he's been searching for."

"How many are there?"
"Three. They're all in Hidden Leaf." Namba explained, "The only other person who can wield them lives there."

Haku accepted the information with a nod, and briefly free-associated to Tenten and her mastery over Bukijutsu. If any soul seemed fit enough to wield such weapons, it would certainly be her. Though that was only intuition talking and not concrete facts, Haku knew. In time, he'd probably find out who in Leaf stood opposed to Bi's faction.

"Goodbye for now, and be cautious." Namba bid Haku farewell as he stood from the table, "I'll take a short while to try to figure out this Tube app." He tucked back into his mobile device, looking like every other face-in-screen patron in the palace.

With not a moment to lose, Haku backtracked through the grand building toward the appraiser's office downstairs. There was an accumulation of vendors and appraisers independent of Keiseki House cramping the space. It was excruciating to wait in a short queue to be seen by a clerk.

"Are you here to confirm your sales?" A woman in a suit asked Haku, once he was finally able to reach the counter.

"I am." He provided his name, "Yuki Haku."

"Ah yes, one moment. An agent already came by to pick up those auction items for the winning bids. One of your pieces on the exhibition floor has yet to receive any—"

"Unfortunately, I won't be able to stay this evening. I've been called away on short notice." Haku fibbed, "Is there any way for me to leave that lingering piece here?"

"Certainly, you can donate it to the Keiseki House, if you like. Or leave it for sale to return at next quarter's auction."

"I'd like to donate it." It was the fastest solution.

"How generous of you." The clerk bowed her head, "Thank you, Yuki-san. The other pieces on the exhibition floor met their minimums, for a total of 785,000 Ryo. Please allow me a moment to calculate. Do you have account information to wire this to?"

"I do not." He was trying to be even-keeled and not tap his foot as if he were in a rush.

"If you prefer a cash payout, there will be a 2 percent fee." The clerk tapped on her calculator, "On your winning bids, 25,485,000 Ryo, that would be assessed a fee of 509,700 Ryo."

He could not even be upset about that. It was a mere papercut of a setback monetarily, if it meant he could be out of here with both the money and stolen Tao scroll in hand. Haku agreed to the fee and the clerk continued processing, tapping out numbers, and she ripped a page from her transaction pad to hand him the carbon copy receipt. Another clerk had to watch her count out the packets of money notes to ensure no mistake was made, and double-count it down. Each stack was re-strapped afterward.

"Thank you for visiting us and come again soon." The clerk bowed again after presenting the payment over the counter, and Haku echoed the pleasantries before exiting the bottom stairwell, and then sending a diversionary Shadow Clone back into the house. He would have it keep watch from high rafters and the eaves of the roof, in the hope it could detect a problem if indeed Bi's group realized they had been swindled.

Like a trespassing cat, Haku slipped through a hedge of ficus, through a servant's footpath below an
adjoining building and then leapt up. He scaled the gigantic house to cross over the roof, dropping
down to the other side and into the garden where he had last seen Pua. His rabbit was still there of
course, loafing around. Haku ducked down into the cover of flowering bushes, thankful for the
absence of any humans in the garden.

"What a day it's been, Pua… I knew it was right to bring you. I need help." Kneeling, Haku
retrieved spare tool summoning scrolls that he had primed, and first pulled the fraudulent *Icha
Icha* paperback out of his vest, laying it down on parchment, "This must be brought to Tsunade-
sama immediately." With a hand sign, Haku contained the *revised* Tao scroll for Chōten into the tool
scroll. He also jotted down a note to the Hokage explaining what she would find, then rolled up the
tool scroll and fitted it to the harness hidden beneath his rabbit's bandana.

Next, he took the obscene pile of money he had walked out with and sealed it into the other tool
scroll. He tucked it away in his vest again, trying to take deep breaths.

"Pua," He rubbed a spot between her ears as he instructed, "Take the scroll I gave you directly to the
Hokage, in the Leaf Village. Don't stop for food or for any distractions until you arrive. Do you
understand?"

"Yes!" She chirped.

"Very good." He gave her a final, loving pat, "I'll be with you again soon."

The rabbit licked and nibbled the back of his hand to declare her love in return, and then scampered
into the dark of the garden.

What crazy fortune had led him to plunder Keiseki House on two accounts; once for selling stolen
treasures, and again for thieving a treasure right out from under a buyer's nose. Haku hardly could
fathom even signing up for the first task, and yet, he thought as he snuck into a much larger, anterior
garden, that may as well have been his luck as the child of destitute farmers.

In the dark, he took care not to scare up any creatures or sleeping peafowl. He was feeling confident
that he would make a clean getaway until the sound of steps followed him across a red footbridge.
They stopped when he did. Haku looked over his shoulder and spied two young men, hesitating on
the far end of the walk.

"You're that Yuki guy." One of them spoke up. He was the taller of the pair, dressed in Han-style
clothing.

Beside the stranger was a shorter teenager, a lookalike who could be the brother, in fact. He tugged
on his companion's sleeve and kept his voice down, "Qin, come on. Just don't. You don't know for
sure—"

"I am." Haku turned around to face them fully, maybe 10 meters away from the duo, "And who are
you?"

Qin cleared his throat, "Kuang Qin! And my bro, Ga-Fen. We're patrons of Keiseki House…"

"Qin, quit it." Ga-fen hissed, and then muttered something in Hanwen.

"I saw you talking to that trashman from Hidden Cloud. I have it out for him. Thinks he's so
smart…" Qin was grinding his teeth, "You better not be an accomplice of his!"

are paranoid. Stop wasting time out here!"
"He might've taken it."

"How? You didn't see it happen."

"He was talking to that freak."

"No one in the Sect is concerned. Don't you think they would've—?"

"I'm not gonna ignore my instincts." Qin rubbed his nose and looked back toward Haku, "I think you have something that belongs to us. If you don't want trouble, you'll give it back."

"You're the one looking for trouble." The frigid temperament he often took on around Zabuza settled in his features, and Haku narrowed his eyes at the blathering teens, "I have nothing of yours."

"Turn out your pockets, then." Qin spat, ignoring his brother's protest in Hanwen.

Haku turned his back on the pair and warned, "Return to your party while you can."

There was a shuffle of feet as Ga-Fen attempted to hold his brother back; Qin was spitting mad, "Yeah? While we can—? You fucking cut-sleeve! I'll go back after crushing your head—!"

The piercing sting of killing intent silenced Qin and halted him just a few steps onto the footbridge. Ga-Fen quivered a few paces behind his brother, goggling as the feeling seared through them both like a liquid firebrand of hate.

In the past, Haku had experimented with condensing and weaponizing his worst emotions when the Cursed Seal had been a viable option. Though he was not a proponent of scare tactics and cheap shots, training with Zabuza had further demonstrated to him the utility of freezing an enemy where they stood. It drove home a point that few words could adequately capture; that he wouldn't be fucked with. That they didn't stand a chance. Most importantly, Haku had experienced his all-around worst day of socialization in recent memory, and could inject exactly how he was feeling into the two unprepared snitches.

Qin's knees were knocking as he tried to rustle up some nerve, "No way that y-you're... innocent. Definitely... up to something..."

Ga-Fen's breathing was shallow and he was unable to communicate with his brother beyond soft squeaks of terror.

"I told myself that I wouldn't create a mess in my wake, after leaving Keiseki House." Haku slowly turned and pressure mounted on his targets, "Why did you have to change my mind?"

Qin remained convinced, "...y-you s-stole—"

"Stole what? I am no thief."

"I know... he switched it. H-He was watching..."

With a sleight of hand Haku readied two senbon between his knuckles, "If you insist on harassing me, I'll respond in kind."

While Qin sputtered, the pair of needles were pitched past him and sunk into his brother's kneecaps. Ga-Fen screeched and collapsed down to the boards of the bridge, more terrified than he was hurt.

Surprisingly, the sight tripped something in Qin, and he regained mobility in his leaden limbs, "Don't
"you fucking touch him!" He charged forward, teary-eyed and salivating, profoundly frustrated by the stranger he had to confront for Chōten.

Haku reacted to Qin's attack as he fired sooty dust from his sleeves by way of Earth Style technique, and in a single movement, Haku pulled a jet of pond water from beneath the bridge to consume its inferior element, soddening and splaying Qin spread-eagle on the wooden planks. With no mercy left in reserve, Haku snapped open his war fan and burst a small gale on Qin and Ga-Fen, who went a-tumbling back to the far end of the walkway.

Harried, Qin wheezed and regained his feet, yanking on Ga-Fen as he pulled the needles from his knees and winced, realizing the effects on his nerve endings still lingered. "Together, come on!" Qin growled, "We can take him together!"

"What for-?" Ga-Fen rasped.

"You have to trust me. We can't let him leave."

"You could be completely wrong about this!" No sooner had the words left Ga-Fen's lips, his brother jerked and slackened, eyes rolling back into his head. Qin fell forward onto his face, and it was then Ga-Fen could see Haku stuck needles into the back of his brother's neck.

"He was just confused! What did you—? Why did you do that?" Ga-Fen shrieked, bending over to take Qin's pulse, which was decidedly absent to the young man's horror, "Did you...kill him?"

Taking catlike steps, Haku raised more senbon to take aim, "I have had enough of you people."

"H-Hey, wait! I won't say anything!" Ga-Fen teetered and fell to his backside as he recoiled, patting his unresponsive sibling, "It was a mix-up, right? Just forget it! I've got to help—"

"I never said I wasn't involved. I just assured him I wasn't the thief." His glare was compassionless, "Since he knew more than I'd like anyone to know...I ought to quiet you too."

Ga-Fen's pupils shrank as he stared up at the throwing spines, about to be plunged who knew where as Haku poised himself. The jig was up. He had his brother to thank for their unwitting demise.

Or, he thought that was the case even as a figure darted out of a stone statue's shadow, and kicked Haku clear to the other side of the bridge. The senbon clattered uselessly out of his hands.

Haku had to collect his wits as he rolled back to his feet, watching none other than Huo bend down to examine the Kuang brothers. He was scrutinizing Qin's injury, and carefully pulled the needles out of his teammate's neck. Qin did not come to.

"Is he dead?" Ga-Fen was distraught, "I didn't know what to do..."

"It's Shinjutsu. It can produce a death-like state, but he should wake up later." Huo assessed and asked, "Can you use your Guanyin Hell Song to pacify him?" By him, he meant Haku.

"No, my legs are messed up..." Ga-Fen wobbled to his feet, hauling Qin's arm over his shoulder, "I'll take Qin back to the Sect and tell Master!"

"Tell him what? That you provoked an attack?" Huo scoffed, glancing back at Haku, "Haku has every right to defend himself."

"He doesn't!" Ga-Fen had learned otherwise and declared, "He admitted it! That he helped steal
Chōten.

Huo went silent.

"That shifty-handed clown must've given it to him, must've swapped our scroll with something!"

"Bi-sama's scroll." Huo corrected, "Why would he? He knows nothing of the Tao and can't use it."

"He has a reason. Look at what he did to Qin! He doesn't want anyone to know. Ain't that guilt?" Ga-Fen reasoned.

Huo rose up from his crouch and rested a hand on his hip, cocking his head at Haku. He was ruminating on the matter. He then motioned for Ga-Fen to move it, "Return to the Sect. I will make him return Chōten."

"Huo…"

"I'm not a pathetic weakling like you. Will you stay and burden me with protecting you again?" Huo huffed at him, "I won't repeat myself."

Tension seized Haku's muscles as he watched Ga-Fen obediently hobble away with his unconscious brother, and Huo appeared truly aloof when he extended his open hand toward Haku, making a give it here motion.

"I have to believe that if you willfully attacked my friends, then you do have something to hide. Ga-Fen thought you had Chōten. Well, do you? Don't be foolish. Give it to me and all is forgiven." Huo assured him, "I like you well enough, Haku. If you were tricked into some scheme, I wouldn't blame you for participating in a heist here if you thought it might improve the station of your clan. You Yuki miscreants are desperate enough to do the craziest things…"

"I don't have anything to give you." Haku tried to recall the layout of the giant garden, prepared to rush toward the nearest exit, "I don't have it."

"Lying tires me." Huo drawled.

"I don't have it, Huo."

"Were they mistaken? No. I doubt it." Huo frowned, "That Tao artifact is of prime importance to my Sect and my Master. You are neck-high in peril and I offer you the opportunity to peaceably disengage yourself from this situation."

"I understand, but I have nothing to give you. I don't know what you're talking about." Haku tried to play the ignorance angle, even if it was a bit late for it. Huo seemed to think he was stupid and manipulable, like everyone else did around here.

"This is the last time I pity a pauper." Huo decided. He melted down into the shadow of carved masonry that framed the rails of the footbridge.

Haku had thought his eyes were deceiving him. Naruto had said that Huo was known for moving through shadows, an ability that had made the most recent Chunin Exam in Konoha calamitous. His eyes darted in every direction, dismayed that lantern light and the glow of the house cast hundreds of shadows throughout the garden. He would never know from which one Huo would reappear. His most educated guess was that he would be attacked from the rear, where blind spots lurked on the edge of his peripheral vision.
And true to form, movement from behind tweaked Haku's senses and he turned, spinning to block the incoming strike. A stone *paffed* against his *jeogori*. Terror flumed through Haku's veins as he realized Huo had tossed a rock from the shadows to distract him—a repeat trick. So simple! Haku braced for the ruthless kick that *did* connect with his back and flattened him again. From there, several strikes battered him, sending Haku spinning. Huo was quick, illuminated by lantern-light, melting in and out of the dark.

In the seconds after Haku gathered his wits to bounce up and block punches to his head and torso, Huo's face twisted with something akin to exasperation. He didn't want a serious fight. He wanted to pummel Haku down without mortally wounding him. Then he'd pluck the contentious item away from him and march off with a clear conscience. Huo had no qualms with killing, but he was the sort to ask: *What was the use in killing someone you actually got along with?*

Not to mention, Huo had no idea that Chōten was not actually on Haku's person. It had been sent away with a ninja rabbit into the deep of the night, and there was no way Haku was ever going to confess to that. So a fight it was—a struggle far more serious than even Huo realized. After Haku had been thoroughly bruised, he'd managed to stick Huo with three senbon needles while his guard was down. Huo backed away and unstuck himself, tossing the needles into underbrush, clicking his tongue angrily that Haku had *the gall* to try to immobilize him. Nearby, Haku slowly hauled himself to his feet again, pressing a hand to his bruise-splotched face.

"Ridiculous." Huo sneered, "Truly ridiculous. Have you any idea who you are challenging? Your tricks won't work on me. I can counter Shinjutsu. I can control *all* of my meridians. Don't be stubborn."

"I don't think you understand…how desperate my situation is." Haku charged forward with speed; a complete miss once Huo dove into a shadow.

Huo reappeared beneath the bridge, emerging from the dark to stride across the pond, "Desperate? No circumstance of yours will have ever been as desperate as the moment you decided to cross *me*, Haku. If you take a single step more, I will not hesitate."

The threat had not even completely left Huo's mouth by the time Haku was fleeing at full-tilt speed. He sought to position himself somewhere darker in the garden, where light could not cast shadows. It was his only fighting chance, he thought, catching glimpses of Huo chasing him in a fury. A shining array also briefly illuminated itself around Huo in what Haku could only assume was a Tao Art. 'Oh. Perfect.' He felt his heart folding up like origami paper, courage wavering.

Within striking distance of Haku, Huo turned to wheel around in a meteoric kick, and Haku lashed out with his war fan at the last second. Huo was knocked airborne, whipping through night air and tree branches before crashing into the magenta fronds of a rhododendron below. Consequently, he wrenches himself out of the shrub and tore the damn thing out of the ground with freakish strength, hurling it angrily in Haku's direction.

When Haku blocked the plant projectile with a burst of Wind Release, Huo instantly closed the gap and swept Haku's legs out from under him. The first blow came, then the second, third, fourth, and fifth in rapid succession. Haku could hardly track the punches and palm blows Huo delivered. At some point during the hand-to-hand tumult, Haku's fan was dropped in the garden clover.

"How desperate…" Huo asked as he ducked under Haku's Taijutsu, retaliating with a Long Fist punch, "Is your situation now?"

Haku struck the garden wall, wheezing, tasting blood in his mouth. Somehow, he was quick enough to side step the next swing Huo threw at him, shattering a span of the rampart when the blow missed.
They were far enough from the house and lit paths for Haku to assume that Shadow Step was not presently a threat. He’d endured enough of Huo's Taijutsu to anticipate a few of his go-to attacks, though he seemed to be getting more creative with his combinations. Huo bounded off of the wall for a heel-drop kick while Haku was staggered, dizzy and bloody.

An abrupt Ninjutsu counter caught Huo as Haku completed hand signs, "Needle Jizō!" The black surge of Haku's hair was unavoidable, snaking, billowing into a spire to surround him with razor-sharp points. Huo crashed into the counter and his Tao barrier ate the impact with charged energy, protecting him from impalement. Likewise, Haku was also perfectly defended by his technique.

Huo's aggressive brand of curiosity was on full display as he pounded ruthlessly on the hair-spike mass, since he could afford to with a barrier that prevented bodily harm. He tried to upend Haku, searching in vain for a weakness to exploit, "What is this…porcupine defense?" He was puzzled, maybe even impressed. Huo back-flipped away to conserve the cultivation energy stored in his barrier.

The moment Huo's guard lowered, Haku took advantage, "Needle Hell!"

What had seemed like a defensive jutsu was now offensive, firing a million-dart rain of hair at Huo. Each needle struck a golden ripple in the spherical barrier Huo employed, like blinking fairy lights whittling away at his defense. He'd never seen such a bizarre technique. It did thoroughly hamper his Wushu strikes, Huo granted as he slipped away into the cover of garden foliage. However, Haku’s odd hair techniques seemed to render him immobile, and so were not conducive to his escape.

'H's going to make a break for it and drop his defenses.' Huo smiled to himself, 'And my defense can move with me.'

Doubt was cast on Huo's prediction when sharp hair spikes wound all through the garden, manipulated by sublime chakra control or perhaps some other-worldly ability. Huo jolted in surprise, dodging backwards from the continuing needle hair technique, wrenching past a young sapling's stuck branch that bent and snapped back as he escaped. He watched the branch pass through the creeping hair, alerting him to the fact that it was illusory. Fuming, Huo dispelled the Genjutsu that had caught him, 'That was well-woven for me to miss it! Overstating his capabilities in an illusion to fool me!' He gave chase again.

Free from his spike defense, Haku had reunited with his tessen and unleashed a timely windstorm, thrashing plants, leaves, and garden creatures alike that scattered in all directions. Huo was elated.

Without hand signs, Huo exhaled flames from his mouth; a terrible, blinding solar-flare that lit the dark landscape and fed on the Wind Nature that Haku had contributed. The decorative brook that cut through the garden and beneath the footbridge was the sole means of escape Haku had, dropping into the water to be fully submerged as fire feasted on everything above. Even the water was uncomfortably heated, hissing steam at the surface. Underwater, Haku propelled himself just short of the red bridge before surfacing.

Again, Huo was upon him, a black, lithe silhouette against the blaze consuming the periphery of the garden, spreading towards the grand house. Light and heat tongued the air and shadows danced. Close-quarters snaps and eye-spinning blows resumed in a frenzy. His thoughts matched the rhythm of the struggle, and Haku registered as he flitted and blocked that Fire Tao Arts were Huo's ace for fighting at night. If no shadows existed in full dark, he could manufacture them with fire. Huo moved as freely as ever, and Haku cursed his brainless move of relying on his Wind Nature, 'I was even told that he relied on Fire Techniques!' Zabuza may have said something like Quick hand, slow mind to sum up his mistake.
The perfectly timed kick to the solar-plexus that Haku would have landed only met Huo's defensive Tao Barrier, which absorbed the shock with energy and glimmer of light. Like everything else, that technique would expire, right? Huo could not plan much further on how to dismantle the shield, because his arm was caught and twisted, his torso pushed one way as Huo tripped his legs in the opposite direction to off-balance him. *Paff*, Haku's back hit the dirt, and his hands splayed to push himself up again in a rebound. Meanwhile, Huo charged down with an elbow-strike, cracking violent force down on Haku's left hand and shattering bones.

Had anyone in the house heard him scream, there was no indication of it. Servants at the rear of the house were scurrying to helplessly toss basins of water on the garden fire until someone came along who could properly douse the threat. They hadn't even noticed one young man pinned beneath another on the far bank beyond the bridge, screeching in pain.

Haku squirmed as Huo sat his full weight down on him, like a hunter on a captured beast, "You stupid fool." His hand slipped beneath the first fold of Haku's *jeogori*, sliding down into clothing in search of something. A signal of horror blinked through all his nerve endings, deadening the pain in his broken hand. Haku watched as Huo lifted a tool scroll, examining it archly and wondering, "Did you hide Chōten in here?"

Not quite. Chōten was in a different scroll, being transported via rabbit to the Hidden Leaf Village. Furthermore, Haku could not admit that Huo was holding almost 25 million Ryo needed to fund rebels for a coup on Hidden Mist. Haku's panic carried in a trill, "That isn't what you're looking for!"

Huo slowly ground his foot on Haku's broken hand, cutting off his speech as he shrieked in pain. "It's not?" Huo was abruptly calm and patient again, inquiring, "Where is it?"

"...I...I...d-don't...have it..."

"Then what is this?"

"—it's—!"

"Scurry back to your clan, and do not cross the Dintei Sect again." Huo warned him as he stood, illuminated once more by firelight. He raised his free hand and willed the flames still, extinguishing them. Frantic servants of the house stared stupidly at the garden's sudden lack of an urgent fire. They inspected the area again in puzzlement before retreating inside to report the phenomenon.

In no conceivable scenario would Zabuza forgive such a failure. Such a setback would derail most of their other plans, and there was no other way to so easily come by funding to coerce mercenaries. And so, as Haku flooded his broken hand with chakra from his own Palm Healing jutsu, he slipped his legs beneath him to sway and stand. The beat-down had felt familiar— felt like when Jiraiya had thoroughly whooped him, *'But the more time I spent facing Sensei, the better I got at countering him...'* Huo's tactics had not been so different.

The bright idea came. If Huo thought him a stupid fool, then he'd better use that to his advantage. He attacked once more with Wind Release, lashing his tessen and pouring chakra into the technique. It unleashed a veritable hurricane at Huo's back as he walked away. Never one to be caught pants-to-ankles, Huo spun, deadly quick, exhaling his Fire Tao Art in his usual counter to absorb the Wind Nature. And oh. Were his eyes deceiving him? It seemed Haku's hand was functional again, helping him form hand signs.

A perfectly timed Water Jutsu launched from the brook to meet the wind-and-fire hellstorm behind
the house, devouring the empowered Fire Nature faithfully. Huo uttered a yelp and was swallowed by the surge. The raging torrent rose up to the height of the roof for a few wild seconds, water smashing him into the side of Keiseki House and nearly drowning him there before the technique waned. It was mortification repeated— much like what he'd experienced at the Chunin Exam in Konoha.

'This garden is already ruined...' Haku reasoned as he froze over the surplus water swamping the courtyard with his Kekkei Genkai. Trees were iced top-to-bottom, waves along the building's outer walls frozen upright in cold crescents, icicles hanging from boughs and roof eaves… Huo gaped at the sight as he ordered himself and stepped onto solid ice, his breath puffing vapor into frigid air.

"…the Hyōton…" Huo grinned, "It's true. I'd thought you'd fibbed about that as well— being one of those Yuki chickens…"

He could not dignify that with a response. Any doubts Huo had about him were to his advantage, or so Haku hoped. Huo charged over the slick surface of the ground, steady on the ice as he closed in to batter Haku once more with Taijutsu. His solid punch met nothing but air, an insult to Huo's eyes as he witnessed Haku disappear into a mirror-like surface of ice beneath his feet. He was there, and then he was everywhere— reflected in a myriad of ice mirrors melded into the landscape.

"Ahh, and who taught you this?" Huo was amused, fire-breathing recklessly at each reflection, searing ice wherever he could as he flitted in the dark yard. Flames failed to stick to any kindling that was by then damp or frozen. Until the space dried out, Huo could only slip through shadows nearest to the house, where light glowed from windows. He Shadow-Stepped until he caught up with Haku as he exited an Ice Mirror, though it seemed to be a deliberate encounter.

Haku blocked several of Huo's recycled Wushu blows, anticipating them, and when Huo's frustration mounted his ferocity increased, forcing Haku to counter once again with Needle Jizō. Damage and defense clashed against the orb of light that guarded Huo, and he leapt backwards to retreat from the spikes, reassessing, "Hmph! And that! Where did that come from? What members of the Yuki clan know how to travel through ice? Those dolts! Since when?" He growled, "Making hair a weapon? None could be so clever. You're too well-taught. All these tricks…"

"I am largely self-taught." His confidence was rebounding, and Haku was compelled to boast, "Though I've had quite a few skilled teachers outside of my clan."

Huo nearly caught him in a blindingly fast pounce, and his kicks smashed the nearest mirrors with incomprehensible force before his Fire Tao Art followed. Haku was in one mirror and out another, but he was caught again, and this time Huo's soul-crushing jab struck true. Haku was bent in half from the blow, the force of it rattling the air as Huo connected…and what Huo thought was his opponent revealed its true composition; a Shadow Clone. Or worse, a Shadow Clone imbued with Haku's Ice Nature, and the horrid thing emulated its maker's earlier porcupine defense by ballooning out into a ball of ice spikes.

The damage had whittled Huo's Tao barrier more than what he could tolerate, infuriated as he wrenched himself away from the frozen urchin with a struggle, "What sick mind—?"

He felt himself patted down from behind, a gentle touch that didn't warrant his barrier's protection. Haku stole back his tool scroll and ducked beneath Huo's retaliating round kick, disappearing into another Ice Mirror before they came to blows again.

"You HAD BEST," Huo announced with crazed eyes, "Rethink your actions, Haku, for I am so weary of these games." He exhaled fire that was fortified with resentful energy, and it tinged green to Haku's infinite surprise, decimating and melting down the Ice Mirrors nearest to Huo.
At this rate, Haku thought, he'd be wasting chakra to create more mirrors if Huo could simply destroy them. Yet, his mirrors had been an invaluable means of escaping harm and keeping up with such a fast enemy. He had to go on the offensive somehow. Haku crouched on the far side of the garden, his eyes glued to Huo's glowing, fiery presence while he retrieved a scroll from a holster strapped to his leg. The Master Scroll was intended for last-resort situations, though Haku felt his current plight applied. He summoned Nuibari and spun it several times over his right hand, letting it wake up for him.

"How shameless." Huo snorted, "I come here with no weapon of my own and you dare—"

Nuibari nearly stuck him through the back, rattling his barrier from behind. Haku had pitched the needle sword through an Ice Mirror and directed it to exit from a sneakily made Ice Mirror behind Huo. Of course, Huo was further incensed by the deceitful tactic, "Ack! What's this?" He was growling as he dove away from Haku's ranged needle sword, evading the thin razor wire that was strung around by the blasted thing.

"...Sewing Needle?" Huo acknowledged what kind of weapon Haku was wielding. At the last possible moment, he phased through a shadow before Nuibari could sail through the air and pierce him—and the sword moved freely through an Ice Mirror that Haku had created previously. Trajectory altered by the dimensional warp, Nuibari exited from another random mirror and soared for Haku. He merely reached out his hand and the sword landed neatly in it, obedient.

Huo indeed knew many things, for he recognized Nuibari for what it was. Huo managed to catch Haku in close-quarters once more, snarling furiously as they fought.

"Desperate! Ha! So you were desperate enough to become a Swordsman of Mist? You really are a lowly criminal, Haku!" Huo jeered, weaving away from Nuibari's swipes, responding with whirlwind kicks and locks, "Only a reprobate does such a thing! Ugh, I can't believe I socialized with the likes of you!"

"And you are no such criminal?" Haku spat, their footwork sliding and skidding; a Long Fist punch grazed his side as Nuibari punctured Huo's upper arm as his Tao Barrier weakened—then they darted apart.

Huo's fire breathing could maintain a comfortable distance between him and his target, until he found another shadow to move through. Several times he ambushed Haku this way, often prompting Haku to dash through an Ice Mirror to escape. Twice more, Nuibari was able to breach Huo's failing Tao Barrier, though it only split skin in glancing blows as Huo bent and contorted himself out of harm's way.

The deadlock of exchanges grew fevered as Huo sought a means of immobilizing Haku with a crippling blow, his movements growing erratic. He couldn't seek out his Sect and request help. He had to deal with this nuisance on his own! There was no explanation for how a member of the Yuki Clan could be formidable in battle, or adapt to his fighting style so quickly. This was no amateur, for sure, but Huo was at a loss for what exactly Haku was in actuality. He fit no mold.

He had to prove himself. He had to dispose of this threat and reclaim what belonged to his Shifu.

In a wild charge, Huo got in Haku's face and allowed his forearm to be pierced, narrow point perforating, wire sewn through his flesh as he kept moving, getting a grip on Haku's hand to force the blade down—and Nuibari cut its own wire free. Haku was kneed in the gut with such force that he flew, tumbling over the icy ground. He barely escaped through an Ice Mirror that Huo smashed after him with a battering-ram blow, shattering other mirrors he could find in the garden until at last—Haku flashed at the far end of the bridge and he had him. Superior speed got
him there, and Huo's combination had him dead to rights, clobbering Haku in the head, face and chest before his knees were kicked to buckle him. As Haku spilled to the ground, Huo leapt to come down with a spinning kick to crush more of his bones. Instead, he broke a Shadow Clone apart in a puff of smoke.

Boards of the bridge had splintered apart, dust and flecks drifting in air. Huo swung his head left and right to look for the escaped rascal. It was an agonizing moment of uncertainty, his breaths heavy for several moments prior to him thinking to look upward. He had good instincts, at least. Haku had dove down from a mirror suspended much higher in the air, plummeting at a rate such that Huo could not even blink before he'd be struck.

In his hand was a dense, spiraling orb of blue chakra, and Haku pitched it down at Huo with a cry, "Rasengan!"

It was all so familiar—the volume of destructive, spinning chakra grinding him into the ground and dissolving the last bits of his Tao Barrier. The residual energy of the blow clobbered him, leaving him spread-eagled, and it aggravated some of the old complaints of his body from the last time he'd been hit and wounded with such a technique. Huo was able to push himself up to his hands and knees in the dust cloud, his brain tilted madly with a sensation of déjà vu and bile rising in his throat. How could it have happened again? By another's hand!

For Haku, it had also been a familiar experience. He had employed many of the strategies he had needed to use against Jiraiya to win their sparring match. In compensation for his efforts, Jiraiya had bequeathed several techniques to him. It was only prudent to make use of what he'd been taught.

To Haku's dismay, Huo staggered to his feet, trembling as he turned to face Haku. He was seething.

Haku reached his hand up toward the Ice Mirror he'd used for his ambush and Nuibari fell free of it, returning to his hand. Huo's deranged laughter rang in his ears.

"That." Huo slurped saliva back into his mouth, sick with fury and disbelief, "That. Is from Leaf. I know plenty of other lands, but that…I know from a first-hand encounter."

How had Huo's small eyes blown so wide? Haku felt a wave of killing intent so fresh that it nearly had him stuck, and it was an endeavor to keep his limbs loose as all of him wanted to clam up in response to the roiling hatred Huo ached to pin him with.

"What a picture you paint for me...you try to hide what you are and what you're doing...but I think I know." Huo tilted his head, his teeth peeking out from between his lips, "A down-on-his-luck mercenary joins the Seven Swords...but accepts tasks from any paying village. So that's how it is? You agreed to deliver Chōten to Hidden Leaf. And as thanks you receive training there—to learn that damned jutsu!" Strings of spit flew from his mouth as he roared, "Like that BITCH USED TO HUMILIATE ME!"

Maybe it had been too optimistic to think a direct blow with Rasengan would have put Huo down. Certainly, his application of the technique could never be as dense or as damaging as Naruto's version of the jutsu, or even Jiraiya's when he used Senjutsu. Fear dripped down Haku's spine as he watched Huo unleash a torrent of energy in some kind of Tao Art that illuminated him—a corona of power that glowed gold, green, and vermilion; his Phoenix Tao Art exerting pressure on the air around them. Huo's braid lashed wildly behind him as he stared at his quarry, possessed.

It was enough of a cue for Haku to make break for it when Huo raised two fingers in half a Ram Seal, concentrating, and then erupted in a Fire Tao Art from his mouth and every pore in his body. The area of effect was monstrous, a violent green heat incinerating the landscape, vaporizing
remnants of ice, and catching the back half of the house alight— just a hair's breadth short of an explosion. Haku had thrown himself off of the rampart of the property and dropped into forest, eyes trained upward to witness the thunderhead of flames rolling through the air as he fell. He would be a charred skeleton if he'd been foolish enough to stay.

Burning debris floated down, catching a few pine boughs on fire. His mad rush through wilderness liquefied the contents stomach, breathing haggard as Huo closed in on him with unthinkable speed; a bright comet in the dark. Haku could barely dodge the strike when Huo struck down and gouged a giant pit in the ground. Seamlessly, he stood and formed hand signs for Ninjutsu, not allowing Haku an inch to escape.

"Stone Press!" He had uprooted more than 20 square meters of earth, a deep piece of rock that rose up beneath Huo's feet as he flipped and hurled the slab at Haku.

Haku narrowly avoided the crashing jutsu by sliding into a ditch, however the fragments of the *Stone Press* broke apart and pelleted him in the back and head. As he'd feared, when he popped out of the eroded ditch on the mountainside, Huo's fist met his stomach immediately. From there, his mind ceased to register what was happening. It was the precipice of death. The cracks and fractures, the ruthless twists and snaps— metacarpals, wrists, arms, shoulders, ribs, cheekbone, vertebra, hips and legs: nothing was spared. Even if he had trained nonstop in Taijutsu from youth up until that moment, Haku knew he still would never have stood a chance against the brutality inflicted upon him with Fènghuáng wushu.

When all was still again, Huo lifted him up by the collar of his hanbok, calm and inspecting him like a broken toy. The light radiating from him helped Haku see, though his vision was swimming with spots. His hands weakly tried to pry at Huo's grip.

"Beg." Huo demanded.

A sputter escaped Haku's lips with a trickle of blood.

"Beg for your two-faced, thief life, Haku." Huo callously tossed him to the rock and pine litter, watching him limply roll.

His faculties were short-circuited by waves of pain, breathing laborious and coming in rasps. If he stayed for a few moments more, his life was absolutely forfeit. On the off-chance his legs worked— oh! By some miracle he'd wobbled to his knees...though he could never run away fast enough. Huo would catch him; grab him by his loose hair or tattered hanbok and reel him in for a killing blow. It'd take guts to escape. It would take something that Huo couldn't counter, but what was beyond his control at present? Haku struggled to mold chakra and focus. The night air out here was cool and humid. His attempt to condense water with a hand sign went unnoticed by Huo.

Huo's attention was faced away, looking up the slope toward Keiseki House as screams and frantic activity responded to the fire on the other side of the rampart. The damage was regrettable. He raised his hands to tamp it down, but it took significant effort for him to suppress the Fire Nature that was consuming the exterior of the estate. Once that was done he looked back and saw Haku had hauled himself inside of a pitiful Ice Mirror— his last ditch trick. Huo laughed in earnest, "What do you think you're doing?" He stalked closer, "Return the scroll to me and appeal to my mercy. Cry. Curse me. Scream out your clansmen's names. But don't be so stupid that you think you can fight!"

When Haku did none of those things, Huo's temper flared once more, and he rushed with a running kick that shattered the mirror into specks. Within the scattering, frozen detritus, in what Haku called the *white dimension*, he had enough chakra to stretch the trail of fragmentized ice with a manipulated tendril of Yang element. It formed into the *Ice Path* he had first created under Jiraiya's
guidance. Matter compressed so that he soared through the kaleidoscoping, tiny mirrors, and shot through an ice-dust trail before Huo's disbelieving eyes. The warp trail escaped into the dark of the wooded mountains and Haku dared not exit. He took the risk and moved through the far dimension's space to relocate in his proper reality, where Huo bayed like a bloodhound and pursued.

All sensation was dulled by adrenalin and the need to put distance between himself and this horrible place. The field of view from within the distending, light-prism path only afforded Haku short glimpses of Huo pursuing by foot at his top speed, keeping up. Where shadows were born from beams of moonlight, Huo bridged himself between them. His roaring tapered off when he decided to hunt in silence. At the edge of the mountain ridge, Haku's Ice Path continued on into open valley air as land ended in a sheer drop. Stubbornly, Huo descended into the valley to follow him along the ground.

The ache of fear, of not knowing if the chase would ever end, pushed him—willed him to plunge his chakra into the technique. He might have celebrated the fact that he was flying, Haku thought, if he ignored the fact that whenever he descended he'd be killed on the spot. Unknowable stretches of time passed. Pain crept back. His vision was failing.

Below, the Land of Mountains had given way to the Land of Earth, and then to the eastern reaches where the coast lay beyond. Haku told himself as the sun rose that Huo was no longer there. That Huo wouldn't be able to follow a flickering trail of ice and light through the clouds all night. The hard reality was that he couldn't keep it up. He would have to surrender and thank fear for its heavy dose of motivation. By dawn, nothing was left. His conscious mind closed up shop. Haku let the jutsu lapse and plummeted from the sky, hair and robes whipping, wind whistling in his ears.

He'd fallen for quite a while before he groggily cracked his eyes open, and then realized he was plunging to an alternative, certain death. Haku allowed himself a hoarse scream as tree tops grew dangerously near, scrounging the last dredges of his chakra and concentration to make a hasty Ice Path. He flashed through the trail, approaching the slopes of a new mountainside, through branches bushy with leaves, and finally met the earth again. Dropping only a meter off the ground, he thanked his lucky stars when he hit moss and weeds...though he'd nearly fallen onto a fence.

Weary, Haku peeked at his surroundings while prostrate, surprised that he had reached some vestige of civilization. Or...not really. Chance had delivered him into the fenced grounds of a large Shinto temple on a mountaintop. He was behind the *honden*, the main hall of the temple's cluster of buildings; in dim morning light, God only knew where. He could not even care if Huo found him like this, 'I can't move. I'm exhausted.' Every part of his body seared in pain, with a few odd exceptions that he could attribute to numbness or nerve damage. Haku was acutely aware of multiple, horrific breaks in his left leg. Certainly his other limbs were worse for the wear, but judging from the number of fractures in his worst leg, Huo might've taken sadistic pleasure in repeatedly attacking his injuries. Broken ribs made every little movement of his torso a nightmare. The taste of iron in his mouth—he'd been punched and his teeth sliced open his lip, crusted over with dried blood. His arms, hands, and back...he was in disrepair. Defenseless.

'*Sleep. I just need sleep. I'll stay here until I have enough strength to use the Palm Healing jutsu.'* His most serious injuries were the ones that made it difficult to close his eyes, breathe, and relax. Haku was acutely aware of multiple, horrific breaks in his left leg. Certainly his other limbs were worse for the wear, but judging from the number of fractures in his worst leg, Huo might've taken sadistic pleasure in repeatedly attacking his injuries. Broken ribs made every little movement of his torso a nightmare. The taste of iron in his mouth—he'd been punched and his teeth sliced open his lip, crusted over with dried blood. His arms, hands, and back...he was in disrepair. Defenseless.

'...whatever kami resides at this shrine...please.' He closed his eyes, 'I wish for safety. Whatever you can give a wretch like me...' Haku had been agnostic for most of his life, but if convenience and faith intersected somewhere, he had likely landed *smack* at the crossroads.

He was unconscious for several hours. Daylight was bright and direct overhead by the time he heard
murmuring voices. Well, he reasoned, if those sounds were quiet and confused it probably wasn't Huo.

Haku cracked an eye open. A nettle of weeds obscured the view, but he could see the faces of the head priest and shrine maidens stealing a look from around the corner of the building at him. To say they were surprised was an understatement. They debated among themselves: Who is this? What happened to him? Is that a hanbok? So, some kind of foreigner? Look at all that blood! Was he in a fight?

They elected to be careful, their conversation carrying far enough for Haku to hear, "We've had too many attacks here by Iwa nin, so why take a chance on this stranger? It could make for trouble. Let's have a ninja investigate."

Oh great. They were going to ask a local shinobi to inspect him.

He slept some more.

The next thing he knew, a wet nose stamped his forehead. Haku drowsily opened his eyes and beheld a massive dog sniffing his hair. The animal eventually backed off. Then, two fingers attached to a person beyond his peripheral vision poked the carotid artery in his neck, proceeding to gently feel along his arms and the back of his neck. Haku shifted weakly and croaked, "Please don't mind me. I just need…a bit of rest…and then I'll be on my way."

"Doesn't look like it, fella." It was a woman's voice, "Your injuries are pretty bad."

"I can heal myself…once I have a bit more chakra." He strained to look up at whoever was leaning over him, "Please tell the shrine attendants I am very sorry for the inconvenience."

"Oh psh!" She was amused, "The shrine keepers were concerned, that's why they asked me personally to check on you. Besides, my son is more of a bother around here! You're nice and quiet. And you said you can use Healing Jutsu, huh? Good news." The kunoichi carefully righted him to his back, "So can I. If I have your word that you don't mean anyone in Shincha harm, I can help you. How does that sound?"

His sincerest answer, "That sounds wonderful."

With the deal struck, the woman beckoned over the watching priest and asked him to assist with lifting Haku. Due to the seriousness of his injuries (and frightening yelps of pain) the pair ended up carrying him like a horizontal log, and delivered him to the shamusho, the priest's living quarters and office. One of the shrine maidens had arranged a few drop cloths on the tatami floor to prevent blood from smearing, and Haku was set down carefully.

"Let me bring some water and a washcloth, Rin-san." The priest hurriedly exited the small building and ushered the maidens along. Though just barely, Haku registered the name of the woman who was scanning his body for injuries with the System Survey technique.

The large dog took a seat beside Haku, sniffing inquisitively, "Something beneath the blood and sweat…I've smelled before. But I don't know what…"

Haku jerked in surprise, "It speaks!"

"Relax." Rin pushed him back down.

"That's a ninken!"
"I know. Sesshu is my trusted partner." Her smile was tilted with worry, "Try not to move anymore."

Healing light began to work fractured ribs back together and Haku laid flat, eyes closed again, thoughts running wild in his head. A talented medic-nin here, in the middle of nowhere? With a ninja dog companion? He just had to ask, "Excuse me, Miss…but…are you from the Hidden Leaf Village?"

Her hands stilled in their work.

"I don't mean to pry." Through slitted eyes he could see tension tugging at Rin's face, "That village has—"

"What's it to you, stranger?" Rin never approached the subject carelessly.

That seemed like an affirmative. Also, how in the world could this gigantic dog lazing about beside him, with its capability of speech to boot, not be the product of breeding from Leaf's own Inuzuka clan? Haku had taken enough risks in the last 24 hours to perhaps take one more.

"I am from Hidden Leaf." Haku outed himself, "I'm Haku, one of Gama-sennin's students."

A small gasp escaped her, and Rin's hands did a frightened dance over him after hearing such an explanation.

"Oh, so that's what I smelled." Sesshu supposed.

"...Haku?" She knew the name and felt like panicking, attending a bit more diligently on worrisome leg fractures after she'd addressed torso injuries, "Yes…I've heard that name. Gaara's teammate."

"Yea—" He tried to acknowledge that statement but instead hissed in pain as Rin worked.

"Well, that explains it. This outfit threw me off…but I guess those working for Jiraiya-sama have to dress up strangely to avoid suspicion." Rin smiled ruefully, "My husband does too, when he's on assignment."

The priest returned with a basin of water and a cloth, and Rin thanked him before he saw himself out. She blotted bloody wounds while Haku's mind spun, putting these meager facts together. Her husband was working for Jiraiya? Since Haku had heard the official list of spies working covertly for the Toad Sage, he deduced that Rin was talking about Obito.

"My family isn't living in Leaf right now, but we're going to have to return there soon. Things have gotten dangerous." She explained, adding, "Please keep this to yourself, Haku. We've been trying to lay low. When I was told you were behind the temple, for a minute I thought you might be Kirin."

"...oh..." He wondered in a weak voice, "Who is Kirin?"

"He's a shinobi who's been stalking my family for quite a while, but...he doesn't seem to have any malicious intent. He's supervising us, as if he's warding away threats. My son told me that he keeps Sound ninja away from this town."

"That's...unusual." Haku offered.

"You're telling me. Every day I fear he might snap and hurt us...but he just...watches."

He didn't like the sound of that. Was Jiraiya aware of this situation?

"What luck you came to Shincha! If you'd gone any further, no one would've been able to help you.
And if you'd ended up further west, you'd be detained by Iwagakure." Rin reasoned, "Now do you mind telling me how you ended up in this state? This wasn't the Akatsuki's doing, was it?"

"No, no…it…was an unexpected task that Jiraiya-sensei put me up to."

Rin ground her teeth, "Really? He needs to stop doing that to his subordinates. My husband almost got killed on his last mission and Gama-sennin had the audacity to show up late for the upheaval."

"If he could, he'd be everywhere at once. Please don't think badly of Sensei." Haku told her, "He did his best to reach Obito-san in time."

"—eh! How do you—?"

"I've been told about the other spies working for Sensei, since I'm one myself now. I…only know as much as I need to know." He waffled slightly on that because, well, he unfortunately knew too much about Obito. He did not want to speak carelessly on the subject of the Uchiha Clan.

"I see." Rin relaxed again, her hands glowing as she addressed other wounds, "It's alright. I don't think badly of him. Much of what goes wrong…is beyond our control anyway."

"You said you want to return to Konoha." Haku prodded at the subject, "Do you have…any family to talk to there? Or a place to live?"

"I've been corresponding with my big sister. I think she'd be happy to help us transition back."

"Oh! That's good." He sighed a little, hoping not to be obvious, "Speak to her as much as you can. Many things…have changed in the village." For one thing, the Uchiha Clan did not exist anymore. Not that he ought to be the one to speak such a terrible truth aloud.

"I'm sure they have since I left so long ago." Rin figured, "I've changed a lot too. I hope…my old friends…still accept me. Accept me and my family." She shook her head and then resumed her Palm Healing jutsu, which had flickered out while she was distracted, "How's the leg?"

"Which one?" He wanted to laugh. Everything was broken.

"Left leg, I mean."

"Not excruciating, but I can tell it's still not quite right."

"I did some touch ups, but I'll need to set it. Please hold tight for a bit while I fetch some of my supplies, alright? How's your breathing?"

"Somewhat better."

"Good! Sesshu, look after him."

The dog didn't even twitch on the mats, unruffled by the events that had taken place.

Haku laid there in silence. So he'd fallen straight into the care of an ally. That was prodigious good fortune. He'd spent every last drop of his luck just to get away from Huo. He'd also beseeched the kami of a random shrine for help, though he wasn't so convinced his salvation was thanks to that spur-of-the-moment prayer. It felt like something else was at work. A nebulous tug on his spirit, one that he could not exactly place, but sometimes when he woke from deep dreams he could describe it.

'Because I have something important to live for, I will resolutely work for it and dedicate myself to it.' Once he had learned his course, Haku strove to achieve the end goal, particularly since his efforts
now defended the lives of his friends. *There are times, though...* ‘He shut his eyes, breathing slowly, *It feels like...*I’ve done this before. *Dedicated myself to something.*’ But he couldn’t have, of course. He was only just coming of age and entering the fray. The fight ahead could be a long and bitter one, and there were no struggles behind him, save for the tragic fates of his parents.

When in the Water Country, the *been-here, done-this* sensation could get overwhelmingly strong. He’d noticed it happening more often. A feeling of having been to certain places— having certain experiences before. He’d been living as an outlaw for too long, Haku assumed.

"Hello!"

Haku turned his head and beheld a young boy tottering through the door with a heavy basket. He politely removed his shoes before crossing to the tatami floor.

"Hello." Haku greeted in kind.

"I'm Yuma. Mama sent me up with our lunch basket since we were gonna eat, but then she got called to the shrine. She says you can eat with us." He *plopped* the basket full of food down, then dropped down to his butt beside Sesshu.

"Oh, how very nice. Thank you—" Sheepishly, Haku told him, "I'm afraid I can't move at all right now, so I don't know how I could join you for a meal..."

"Whoa. You have got a lot," Yuma frowned at Haku's ragged look, "Of ouchies."

"A lot." Haku agreed.

"I'm also supposed to tell you...Mama might take a bit longer since she was gonna try to find you some clothes too." He gestured at Haku, "Your dress is all torn up."

"Yes, I know. It's called a hanbok."

"Want me to put blueberries in your mouth?" Yuma offered, "So you don't have to move."

"I'd hate to distract you from your lunch, Yuma-chan."

"It's fine." He began fishing around the basket, "What's your name again?"

"Haku."

Because he couldn't wait, Yuma shoveled a handful of blueberries into his own mouth from the container, chewing when he spoke again, "Nice to meet ya."

What a messy kid. He was exceedingly friendly, though. Haku felt further scandalized as the child dropped blueberries one by one into his open mouth, and he endeavored not to choke. There was no doubt in his mind that the "cute little kid" of Obito's that Naruto had described was this one, treating this bird-style feeding like a game.

"How about some meatballs? Oh— Sesshu, this is for you." Yuma distractedly set a container on the floor for the dog, and then plucked meatballs out of a lunchbox with chopsticks. Judging by sight, Haku supposed they were small enough to consume without accidentally lodging in his airway. Yuma clumsily dropped a sauced meatball on his face.

"You know...maybe this isn't a good idea. I'm not that hungry." Which wasn't true. He indeed was hungry, but Haku wasn't feeling so enthusiastic about eating after Yuma five-second-ruled the fallen
meatball from the tarp and back to his mouth. He had sort of forgotten how gross children could be. It was a moot point, however, since he was a foul sight himself.

"Sorry about your face, Haku-san. I'm not supposed to talk to strangers, but it sounded like Mama knew you...so do you wanna hear about my school? And my jutsu? Oh! And I can tell you about the garden too— I helped it grow a lot this year." He air-dropped another meatball, "Are you a ninja? Can you tell me about your missions?" A gasp, "Do you know my Dad?"

"Slow down, please."

Again, Yuma took the opportunity to shovel several more lunchbox morsels into his own mouth.

"There are...only a few things I can tell you." Haku offered, "I'm not supposed to talk to strangers either."

"That's okay, then."

"Good. Well, where to start?" Haku took a moment to think, "I grew up in the Hidden Leaf Village with my two best friends..."

That evening, far to the west in the Land of Mountains, Huo returned to Keiseki House empty-handed.

The stink of the burned garden and rear porch of the estate wafted all through the grounds, and Huo searched vainly for signs of his Sect, though he was already quite certain they had abandoned the auction house. Shame gnawed at his guts. He had given it his all last night, but Haku had slipped through his fingers and into the night sky as nothing more than a shimmer of ice dust. How could he have known the whelp had such a trick up his sleeve?

He left the estate and traveled northwest up mountain slopes, out of the cover of the pine wilderness, and beyond exposed faces of rock and plateaus. His limbs ached. The skin of his knuckles had split open, raw from hitting Haku so many times, 'I never should have let him take that scroll back. How could I let my guard down?'

The answer was already clear to him. At first, he had not been serious about stopping Haku at all. He'd taken quite a shine to the dignified rogue. Their interactions had been pleasant and thoughtful, unlike most of Huo's exchanges over the last six months. He'd endured failure and struggle repeatedly. Lost Susumajin to that witch, had his treasured sabre broken apart, been beaten and interrogated by an enemy village, lost contact with his parents, and had been labeled a nukenin, officially, by Hidden Rock. The auction was supposed to be a relaxing, elegant affair, and an easy victory for his Sect. Another victory for Hidden Leaf to snatch away.

The thought stuck like a needle in his brain and Huo was incensed again, punching apart a column of limestone that shattered and skipped down the slope. It tore open the worn out flesh of his hand again, bleeding fresh.

No. How stupid could he be? Expecting to make an authentic friend? Of course Leaf would worm its way into his path again and ruin that. The only source of friendship he had ever had were the Kuang brothers, though their support felt more like hero-worship than the respect of peers.

Then, at the top of the mountain pass, he finally spied a small red sparkler fizzling on a bluff. It was a telltale signal that he was close to the group, who marked the trail for him to reunite with them. Huo scaled the ridge, stamped out the sparkler, and crunched across gravel tiredly, revealing himself to those seated and lounging at the edges of the stone patch. Near the center, a tea pot was set atop a flat
stone beside the tree stump Bihokokuni was seated on, who poured a cup for himself. On the ground was a charred book. He did not bother looking up when he greeted, "Huo."

At the edge of the yard, Koinyu glanced over his shoulder while rummaging through his travel bag. His eyes went a little wide, trying to get a read on why the Sect leader's most gifted pupil had been gone overnight.

"Do you have the new *emeici* or not, bolts for brains?" Another Sect member grunted at Koinyu, "Give 'em here."

Koinyu passed over the needle weapons he'd stored in his bag, "You only paid me half for these, Tsunetane."

"Right. Because I bought some very nice company last night. I'll pay you next week."

"Tch." Koinyu's eyes scanned the space again, stopping briefly on Huo as he sat across from his master and accepted a cup of tea. He then looked around at the other occupants, shouting out to them, "Jué, Yu; you both owe me half for what you bid on yesterday."

"Yeah, yeah…" They waved him off.

"Kanshou, you owe me the full amount for that new jian…"

The man didn't fuss and instead fished around his satchel for money notes.

"Liang, Takami, and Sō, you all paid me in full yesterday, so you're off the hook…" He rattled off debts, "Huo pays for himself, like always…Cheng?" Koinyu scowled at a final Sect member on his immediate right, "Did you get anything?"

*Besides your mother's fat ass?* Cheng snarked in Hanwen, which incited an uproar of laughter from the group. Bihokokuni raised his hand to quiet them all again, not keen on giving away their position to any ears in the mountain range.

After a moment, Cheng hurled a wad of money notes in Koinyu's face. Since Koinyu was more *shinobi* than anyone else, lacked most Tao talents others did, and played double-agent for Orochimaru, he tended to receive poor treatment from Sect members. He put up with the treatment stonily.

"Where are Qin and Ga-Fen?" Huo asked at length.

All went silent.

Bihokokuni tipped back the last sip from his tea cup and set it down, rising to cross the tract of gravel and overlook the valley from the cliff's edge. "Before that," He spoke with his back to Huo, "Where is Chōten?"

Put on the spot, Huo ignored onlookers and steeled himself when he answered truthfully, "It escaped in the hands of a thief."

"And was retrieved?"

"I…" He felt many gazes watching him, "I pursued, but the culprit escaped."

"Very well." Bihokokuni accepted the explanation with ease, "Where was the scroll being taken?"

Huo felt his tongue stick in his mouth, finding it harder to reply, "To…Hidden Leaf."
The murmurs started. How are they doing this? How can Leaf have all three Tao treasures in its possession? Surely they could not be so well-informed?

"That thief was a match for you, I see." Bihokokuni glanced over his shoulder.

"He was no match. He barely escaped with his life." Huo spat, "A no-account swordsman with *The Seven*, a young one. He's one of those Yuki degenerates—Yuki Haku."

"Why was he accepting a mission from Hidden Leaf?"

"I do not know."

Koinyu chimed in with a grin, "Because he's *from* Hidden Leaf, you silly child!" He laughed at Huo, "Did you decide to trust him because he *seemed* like a sympathetic stray? Hidden Leaf adopted him when he was orphaned, so I hear. Not even wanted by his own clan! Orochimaru has had that boy marked for quite some time! He's as clever as they come."

"You shut your disgusting mouth, you insect." Huo rounded on Koinyu.

Packing away the collected money notes into his rucksack, Koinyu kept smiling, "Does my disgusting mouth remind you of your shortcomings, Huo? Should you speak like that to someone who laid the Copy Ninja flat on his back, and pilfered Hidden Leaf's cemetery—?"

"You're proud for a coward." In a flash of shadow, Huo was in front of him, glaring eye-to-eye with the braggart, "You'd be dead without Shifu's *Shadow Gate* to retrieve you. Worthless louse."

"You must give Leaf so much credit because they defeat you time and time again." Koinyu could not relent, his eyes gleaming with satisfaction. He'd practically invited Huo's fist to his shirt collar, dragging him to his knees.

Huo bared his teeth, where a few gleamed gold in the daylight, "Your cultivation is pathetic—your Tao Arts unfit even for the dime store sales bin—!

"Why," Bihokokuni had turned around and asked, "Do you take pride in your cultivation level, Huo?"

Silence prevailed again, and the other members of the Sect discreetly fidgeted in their seats among stones. Huo's hand loosened and Koinyu wriggled away, lifted up his pack to retreat several steps.

Huo explained himself, "Tao Arts are an invaluable tools—"

"They are tools. They were her tools." Bihokokuni acknowledged, "We are shinobi. Sworn to defeat Tian Tian and her faction with their own heretic arts. It is the only way to counter them, you understand this." He folded his arms behind his back, "We adapted the discipline she founded to cut her down with it, as Lord Indra asked."

Nearby, Cheng and Yu muttered ecstatically while listening to the mission statement: Deliver the ultimate insult. Give her a taste of her own medicine.

"Just as he asked." Huo agreed in a soft breath.

"Your cultivation energy is too high. You depend on Tao Arts too much." Bihokokuni observed, "It was you who burned Keiseki House."

"Haku was—!"
"Could you not defeat him with your Ninjutsu? Your Taijutsu?" Bihokokuni pressed.

"I fought him fairly, for the sake of our Sect! Why should the methods matter?" He was careful not to raise a disrespectful tone with the Sect Leader.

"Why should it matter?" Koinyu echoed in a shriek, astounded.

"The methods matter, Huo, because dedicating oneself to cultivation means that one is no better than Tian Tian herself, the deviant." The Sect Leader was perfectly calm as he illustrated the point, "She harnessed chakra that was given to us from the Shinju, and she selfishly enriched herself with the cultivation qi of this world as well—a student of two conflicting schools…and then renounced Ninshu altogether. Will you do the same? To hoard power that isn't yours? Power that should be returned to Lord Indra?"

Huo swallowed the lump in his throat. He could not deny that he often relied on Tao Arts, even though doing so was principally discouraged by his Sect unless absolutely necessary. He flaunted his unique abilities. He took pride in something that the witch once took pride in, long ago. So indeed, what did that make him in the eyes of his Sect? Many here only used the bare minimum of Tao Arts, most especially in efforts to stymie targeted ninja villages that had no hope of countering them. Huo used his techniques as a matter of course, for whatever the occasion. This habit had not gone unnoticed.

"All that we do…aspires to return to Indra what is rightfully his. This is our way. Not for the sake of any Ōtsutsuki eminence other than he. The rest are false, pliable…and take pity on the ignorant."

Murmurs of agreement started up again, and Huo dared glance around at Sect members he had always thought himself superior to. His philosophy had taken a backseat to improving himself, shirking the communal goal of the Sect. Maybe his peers could be struck down in a fight against him, but was he a worthy servant when he acted in his own self-interest? No one here thought so.

"I bet your jindan is nearly as developed at Bi-sama's." Koinyu jeered, "I bet you have more cultivation energy in your body than shinju chakra! You'll stop aging before long—try to make your sword fly-!"

Huo whirled around and tried to cuff Koinyu in the face, but Cheng caught his wrist to restrain him, preventing a brawl. Huo shook free and began pacing.

"It's nothing like that!" Huo's humiliation was cresting, eyes glassy, "Me? Rely on those aberrant techniques! For what? You would accuse me! When I risk my life over and over to confront our enemies?"

"Huo," Bihokokuni drew his attention once more, "Each time, you have failed."

His heart crumbled to dust in his chest, trickling down into the acidic pits of his stomach. Those words had left his Master's mouth. For all to hear. He stood in silence and tried to overcome the apex moment of dejection, of being taken to task for his repeated disappointments.

"Shifu," He swallowed his pride and dropped to his knees, "I beg your forgiveness. I will not lose my way. Everything I do is for the Sect and for Lord Indra's awakening."

"You are forgiven." Bihokokuni crossed over to his teapot again to pour a new cup. Huo rose and ignored the titters of amusement from those watching. He asked once more, "Where are Qin and Ga-Fen? Did they not accompany-?"
Bihokokuni flicked his fingers, signaling to Takami and Tsunetane to handle it. The two ninja stalked off into bramble and boulders beyond the gravel patch, leaving Huo to stare dumbly. When they returned, Qin and Ga-Fen were boneless, floppy and unresponsive, and were dragged into the clearing and roughly tossed to the ground. Huo bolted over to them and crouched down to examine them. Their throats had been slit.

"You may have them." Bihokokuni granted him.

Shaking, Huo frantically tried to make sense of why his friends had been killed. They had committed no offense! They had frequently found reliable shelter and resources for the Sect each time they relocated. They had forsaken their lives and responsibilities in Hidden Rock to help him. Why had they been disposed of? He rolled each boy over to slide their eyelids shut.

Koinyu and a few other Sect members snorted in amusement.

"You laugh." Huo launched to his feet, tormented, "The deaths of your own comrades are entertaining?"

Kanshou spoke in a deep voice from beside a withered tree, "They were never a part of us."

"They were a liability!" Yu agreed.

"Just your young, dumbass tag-alongs from Hidden Rock." Cheng explained it for him, "If they were caught and interrogated they'd only slow us down. Like you did. We cut the dead weight while you were gone."

"Who did this?" A furious sheen of tears glinted in Huo's eyes.

When no one answered and Bihokokuni sat leisurely sipping tea, Huo looked to each one of those smirking, unremitting faces. Finally, when he settled on Koinyu, the man could not keep up his façade. His shoulders began to bounce as he laughed wildly, "Ha, ha, ha! Who do you think?"

Huo was on him in an instant, screaming as he beat Koinyu into the dirt, frenzied in his violence. Sect members scrambled to pull the two apart. After several seconds of tussling Bihokokuni demanded they knock it off, as if it were some casual scuffle. It took four men to hold Huo back as Koinyu limped away angrily, leaning on Takami as they put distance between themselves and the outraged disgrace.

Writhing, Huo escaped the grip of other Sect members, hocking and spitting at them, "All of you act without a shred of honor! Complacent in the murder of juniors!"

Shouts of protest, "They weren't even disciples! They were useless!"

"Enough." Bihokokuni's voice pierced the clamor.

Huo faced his Master, "Do you tolerate the—?"

"I ordered it." The truth came in a deadpan statement from their leader.

Going still again, Huo swallowed and blinked, trying to make sense of this horror.

"We've no time for rescues or unnecessary clashes. The weak aren't welcome here." Bihokokuni told him, "I wanted to give you the opportunity to redeem yourself, Huo. Your strength is promising. Your follow-through is not. Koinyu succeeds at most every task I give to him—"
Blatant disrespect dripped from Huo's interruption, "He's a murderer with no honor!"

"Be that so, he hasn't failed me."

"I will retrieve Chōten, with your leave."

"You will fail again."

Crazy-eyed, Huo screeched, "I won't!"

"I will make it so that you cannot fail again." Bihokokuni assured him.

Recognition flickered on Huo's face as he pieced his situation together, and immediately called upon his Phoenix Tao Art, preparing himself as Bihokokuni drew the dao from the scabbard at his side. It was all a crock of shit, not that any of them knew it. Huo was exhausted from his time fighting at Keiseki House, and he could not defend himself for more than a few minutes before his technique expired.

"No student's achievement has ever rivaled yours. But please don't give your Master any more grief." Bihokokuni placated him, "In death, you will never disappoint me."

"I could never do anything while dead." Huo retorted, "So I refuse."

"You're wrong about that." Bihokokuni corrected him.

All around, Sect members shrank back in bewilderment as their leader prepared to root out their most gifted trouble-spot. They knew better than to interfere.

Huo struck first and had his blow reflected back at him, rebounding off of Bihokokuni's Reversal Array. He was splayed on his back for a moment, heaving himself back to his feet with effort.

"We shall contribute to a powerful technique that can stall any force that might rise against Lord Indra's will." Bihokokuni spun the dao in his hand, raising half of a Ram Seal to focus cultivation qi instead of chakra, "The dead can be controlled with cultivation, but it is an imperfect practice. With Forbidden Ninjutsu, one can exert full control over corpses, and even command them to use techniques they used in life. Only one question remains…"

Huo scoured the space for the nearest shadow, prepared to make an earnest run for it.

"…and that is…can a corpse controlled in this way use Tao Arts?" Bihokokuni wondered.

Oh. So that was the meaning of this nonsensical betrayal. It was to experiment with some kind of Reanimation Jutsu that Huo had heard whispers of, based on Koinyu's machinations with the Snake Sennin. He was going to be used to test if Tao Arts were viable after death. 'That's what he thinks!' Huo had little left to lose.

He dashed through a long shadow at the edge of the bluff, disappearing into the dark. In the same moment, Bihokokuni had let go of his dao as it was suspended in the air, manipulated by qi. With his will and a thought to direct it, the sabre flew into another shadow, and within that realm, connected with its target. Huo was stuck front to back on the blade, falling backwards—back into daylight. He hit the ground with a puff of dust.

Unruffled, Bihokokuni crossed the patch and pulled his sword free, ignoring Huo's helpless rasp.

"You will be much more than you are now— you shall become a valuable tool in his service. Do not
fret, Huo. Your karma will be restored. Your pain will end.” He struck down with the sabre's point, down through his student's heart, "Embrace vacancy and the void."

That principle of the Tao— of empty space and non-action— was one Huo had hoped to grasp in life, not in death. Once he had gone still and his light went out, Sect members spoke quietly again, in concert with their leader's mantra.

*Emptiness.*

*Emptiness.*

*Emptiness.*

Chapter End Notes

Did that last bit f**k you up? It hurt a little bit to put it to paper. Or, word-processor, in this case. Don't join cults, kids! Thank you for reading and let me know what you thought in the comment box below!

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